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Looking for the universal through the particular and vice versa: Japanese studies and study of Japanese philosophy in the 21st century

When I first began my Japanese studies back in the late 1990s, Japan was still on everyone's lips, even though the years after the economic bubble began deflating had put a stop on the seemingly unstoppable march of the Japanese economy. Meanwhile, its national image was still better known for its history than for its contemporary culture, so less manga and more samurai, so to speak. Still, it was the waning of Japanese economic growth that seemed to happen at the same time as its soft power grew. It has been interesting to follow how Japan has become so popular in the West over the past 20 years, both as a destination for travel and as an exporter of its culture, and when I look at how China seems to have nowadays taken hold of a similar economic position as Japan had in the late 1980s, I sometimes wonder if it will be able to pull off a similar feat with its soft power that Japan has done.

But while cultural power is an interesting phenomenon for academic study itself, it alone is hardly enough to justify the contribution of a whole field of area studies, even if it might be what ushers the aspiring students in through the doors of academia. To consider the relevance and importance of a whole field of studies, we need to look further into what it contributes to our understanding of the world, our relations with each other, and, ultimately, our self-knowledge. What is markedly Japanese, after all? Japanese history, economy, politics and culture provide relevant cases for many areas of study, while its thought and traditions provide their own particular viewpoints into philosophy and scientific theories. Progressive advance of science, whether humanities, social, or natural, is based on common contribution towards an increased understanding of the world, and this requires both contributions that illuminate particular situations of the world and contributions to a fuller picture of the world as a whole.

Social sciences and humanities have two different ways of knowing that structure their approaches as either based on universal principles or as derived from different contexts. Although these can be seen as incommensurable approaches in some sense, we can equally see them as complementary, with the universal gaining explanatory force from its application in particular contexts and the contextual being meaningful against the background of its wider, universal context. Area studies like Japanese studies often represent this kind of deeper contextual analysis within a wider framework of academic effort towards universal understanding, by bringing the universal to interpret the particular and reflecting the deeper analysis of the particular against the canvas of the whole world. While disciplines like anthropology, sociology, and education may look into cases

from different cultures, they generally lack the deeper contextual understanding of the culture they are studying, or if they the culture in question is their own, the questions asked in research are conditioned by different historical backgrounds.

In this sense, it is regrettable that area studies are often near the chopping block in many universities, where arguments about the universalising effects of globalisation gain ground with little concern for how that globalisation actually takes place at the ground level, in particular contexts. After all, it is universities that should work toward contextualising and deepening our knowledge of the world, so it is necessary to understand that context goes both ways: it is both universal and particular. Neglecting the study of either inevitably results in an unbalanced understanding of the world.

Japanese philosophy as the ground for the global and the local

My own specialisation lies in the discipline of philosophy, with modern Japanese philosophy, intellectual history and history of philosophy as the focus. It is difficult to find a better example of syncretic melding of Japanese and foreign traditions than what is offered by this particular field of study, so it might be instructive to spend a moment reflecting what we can learn from it.

What is referred to as Japanese philosophy is often understood as the discipline established in the Meiji period on the basis and as a part of Western academic philosophy, but it can also be viewed as Japanese contribution to the building of a wider frame of reference for a world philosophical effort by incorporating influences from Japanese intellectual traditions and creatively integrating them to the academic discipline of philosophy. In fact, Japanese philosophy has a long tradition of pioneering cross-cultural philosophy dating back to Nishida Kitarō and the growth of the Kyoto School of philosophy in the early 20th century. Nishida and other Kyoto philosophers discussed issues like cultural identity, differences in traditions of thought and the grounds of knowledge for decades prior to these issues being picked up in any clear form in Western academia. It would, certainly, be a mistake to claim that these are in some way produced by some essential feature of Japaneseness, but it would be equally untrue to claim that the influence of Japanese history and its melding of philosophical traditions did not work to shape a culturally particular position that has been able to articulate its own unique viewpoint in terms of a global philosophical effort to understand the world, society and our place in it.

Nowadays, the tide has turned and where in the late 19th and early 20th century many Japanese were studying Western philosophy, now in the late 20th and early 21st century many people outside of Japan are studying Japanese philosophy. This has widened this particular academic field onto a global stage. In many ways, this effort is built on work in history of philosophy and comparative philosophy, both by studying the works of pioneering Japanese philosophers, their own sources and bringing these into a dialogue with contemporary currents in philosophy departments and other academic disciplines around the world. It is also heartening to see how interest in Japanese

philosophers and philosophical traditions has been extending across multiple language barriers, growing beyond the confines of European and US universities and coming into contact with philosophers from Latin America, Middle East, and elsewhere in Asia.

Looking at the potential contribution of Japanese philosophy to philosophy in general, we can note how Japanese approaches to philosophy can be instructive in many cases by emphasising mindfulness towards a more syncretic approach to practicing philosophy by engaging with different traditions of thought and understanding how their argumentative lines converge with and depart from each other. This style of doing Japanese philosophy is, of course, equally accompanied by its substantive contributions to a wide range of philosophical debates, from questions of being and nonbeing or knowledge and meaning to issues of political philosophy, aesthetics, ethics, and culture.

In a sense, then, we can see how a Japanese tradition of creatively integrating influences manifested itself in the way it came to do philosophy, in its philosophical style, bringing together its own traditions with the questions and categories of modern academic philosophy, and producing through that its own contribution to philosophical analysis and reflection of the humans, society, and the world, which in turn have come to be studied by scholars outside of Japan. This neatly embodies the cycle of creative globalisation and localisation that is characteristic of our increasingly compressed world and that positively contributes to the growing understanding between cultures.

Looking at the field of Japanese philosophy and its study abroad, it is clear that it also faces challenges that are in some ways more severe than average in the context of Japanese studies. The primary issue is, of course, the presence of a language barrier that restricts foreign scholars' access to primary and secondary Japanese sources. Despite the increasing number of scholars conversant in Japanese and a smaller number fluent enough to overcome the increased difficulty of reading philosophy in Japanese, not to mention dealing with premodern texts, the number of scholars who are able to directly grapple with the original texts remains limited.

It stands to reason that good quality translations are the key to widening the audience conversant in Japanese philosophy. Some might argue for the problems of incommensurability in translation, but this is mostly unnecessary mystification; after all, not nearly all philosophers read Foucault, Hegel or Kierkegaard in their original language, but manage quite well by working with the readily available, excellent translations. Fortunately, the amount of available translations from key Japanese philosophers has been increasing year by year, but on the downside, this is a labor-intensive task that relies on both the availability of capable translators and funding for their efforts, both of which tend to be in short supply. Additionally, the number of scholars focused on Japanese philosophy has been growing noticeably in the past couple of decades, and even if there could be more primary text translations, these scholars have been doing a great deal of work on the other central component necessary for the diffusion of the ideas of Japanese philosophers, namely engaging them through

their own work and bringing them into contact with other philosophical traditions and philosophers, arguing from, with, and even against their thought. There are also a number of Japanese philosophers working in a more international context, like Karatani Kōjin, but many still remain focused on work within the context of Japanese academia rather than actively fostering connections abroad.

Although some important philosophers and their core works have been already translated or their ideas have been otherwise introduced to a wider audience abroad, there are still a great many less well-known philosophers whose thinking could enrich the contemporary understanding of philosophical debates against which the better-known philosophers articulated their views, aside from their own substantive contributions to philosophy. To mention one such example, the Kyoto School founded by Nishida Kitarō and his colleagues and disciples has been at the centre of much of the Western analysis of Japanese philosophy since the 1980s, but both the available primary translations and academic analysis have focused by and large on Nishida himself, Tanabe Hajime, Nishitani Keiji and the school's associate Watsuji Tetsurō. Meanwhile, other members like Miki Kiyoshi, Ueda Shizuteru and others have received by comparison little or almost no attention despite many of them having had long and productive careers in philosophy. Here a case in point - aside from the long career - might be Tosaka Jun, a student of Nishida and Tanabe who originally coined the term 'Kyoto School'. His marginalisation is doubly unfortunate, since he both represents a very different, outspoken Marxist approach to philosophy amidst the general social conservatism of the more famous Kyoto School members, and unlike them, he remained staunchly critical of the wartime ideology, state pressure and self-censorship, to the point of eventually being imprisoned by the ultranationalist government for sedition and perishing there in 1945. His published works represent a valuable testament of resistance and a different light on the philosophical efforts of the Kyoto School, but sadly they have attracted little attention even from scholars interested in the wider context of the Kyoto School's thought.

There is also a need for deeper contextual analysis of the Japanese philosophers' works through a combination of intellectual history and history of philosophy. While philosophy often may wish to approach the texts it reads as evaluated based on their argumentative merits, this represents merely one approach to reading and understanding the text. Furthermore, from the viewpoint of Japanese studies, it means ignoring the particulars of the Japanese historical context that worked to produce that text, often disregarding how these texts were not written in vacuum, but as contributions to ongoing debates, arguing for and against other philosophers and their views while seeking to develop something uniquely their own. Understanding this context is necessary for grasping the development of their thinking, its historical roots and how it might be brought into a fruitful dialogue with contemporary philosophical currents.

Although interest in Japanese philosophy abroad has been steadily growing since the 1980s through the pioneering work of dedicated scholars like James W. Heisig, John C. Maraldo and Thomas P.

Kasulis, what has been particularly encouraging in the past few years have been the establishment of academic networks like International Association of Japanese Philosophy (IAJP) and European Network of Japanese Philosophy (ENOJP) that have brought together both junior and senior scholars working in the field both outside and inside Japan, laying groundwork for growing dialogue within the field. My own personal experience of ENOJP has introduced me to a loose but welcoming community of scholars that is seriously engaged in intercultural and comparative philosophy, supporting each other through raising the visibility of their academic efforts and by providing platforms for disseminating their works, both through publications and annual conferences.

The work of these scholars and networks is a testament to Japan's deep, creative engagement with its own and Western traditions through its own philosophical efforts that show how Japanese traditions may evolve and modernise without losing their touch with the past. Ultimately, though, we can argue that there is no such thing as comparative philosophy or "Japanese philosophy" aside from philosophy itself, as much of philosophy is fundamentally comparative work. After all, if we can compare Humean and Aristotelian views of causality, in what way is that markedly different from comparing them to the various accounts of causality in Buddhist philosophy? Or if we analyse consciousness through an enactive view of the contemporary philosophy of mind, why should we not consider the similarities such way of understanding consciousness shares with Nishitani's account of the fundamental groundlessness of our field of consciousness? And surely the continental phenomenologists or deconstructionists share at least as much with the non-fundamentalist epistemologies of the Kyoto School than with their analytical colleagues in the Anglo-American academia? Philosophy is a markedly comparative project where each view must be tested, either against other philosophers or one's own views. Limiting the possibilities of that comparison based on assumed incommensurability between cultures not only diminishes the reach of philosophy, but betrays its foundational willingness to engage in continuous debate in order to sharpen its arguments. Looking for truth requires a sense of humility, an awareness of one's place among a number of similar views and rejecting the absolutisation of one's own standpoint. There might not be an ultimate truth waiting at the end of the road, but there are an endless number of problems and viewpoints to consider and evaluate according to our needs. It is the same humility we need when we work to understand other cultures and build bridges between them through inexhaustible curiosity and respect.

Concluding remarks

Roland Robertson's (1992) somewhat awkward portmanteau "glocal" may be less well-known nowadays than it was in the 1990s, but its basic insight still rings true: there is no globality without locality. All global innovations and influences are ultimately absorbed into and shaped by their local counterparts, producing a globalisation that both challenges and affirms the local even as both of them evolve in the process. As Robertson has pointed out, Japan's syncretic ability to take in foreign influences and make them their own offers a great example in a globalising world: it has

demonstrated how a country may take in external influences on its own terms and contribute back to the global culture. There is, of course, a balance here, since while it is vital for a society to be able to absorb and integrate useful influences, it is at the same time necessary for it to be ready to develop or renovate its own society to progressively improve living conditions of all its citizens.

For example, in Japan's case its ageing demographic is a key issue, with the accompanying dilemma of maintaining or even achieving economic growth with a shrinking population. This has opened up the debate over the need for allowing increased immigration in a country that identifies as markedly mono-ethnic. Here the importance of Japanese studies abroad is accentuated for Japan itself, since it can foster interest and appreciation in the country that also extends beyond the confines of the academia. Still, it is instructive to reflect on discussions and interviews with numerous Japanese people, who have seemed by and large welcoming of people who are interested in the country and its culture, but voiced through the lines their concern with cultural change if the nation were to open its doors for more immigration. Meanwhile, the government has already eased its restrictions on work-based immigration, so Japan's ability to absorb and integrate new influences is again being tested.

Here it is perhaps useful to remember that similar struggles with modernity and change have marked Japanese history and its intellectual debates since the Meiji period, and that Japan has come out stronger and more certain of its identity each time. These debates have been formative for Japanese philosophy as a whole, and for example Nishitani (1982) reminds us that, ultimately, achieving our true self means accepting our fundamental, unavoidable interconnectedness with each other. This sentiment should ring true for scholars of area studies in general, as it is in a sense our resposibility to ensure that we keep looking beyond our borders, to foster mutual understanding of each other. In times of growing climate change and increasing inequality followed by a resurgence of nationalism and xenophobia it is even more vital for us to understand that while borders might separate us, they only reflect the thin areas of difference between us, not the depth of humanity that we all share. It is easy to overlook the similarities between people when we concentrate on the differences, simply because those similarities are so commonplace that we find them unremarkable. The respect for intellectual pluralism in area studies does away with this fixation on borders, celebrating rather than censuring the differences, opening a way towards mutual understanding and respect that helps us recall again those similarities that define us much more deeply than the historically conditioned differences ever can.

In the same vein, it can be said that this is an interesting time to be a scholar focusing on area studies, as momentum for accounts centred outside of the West is growing and a more pluralist view of the world is edging aside a Eurocentric approach to studying the global society, replacing it with diversity and pluralist reflexivity. There is an increasing openness to understanding the complexity and depth of the varying forms of social, political and economic change in a radically interrelated world that is jointly constituted by the local and the global. This pluralism is the foundation for area

studies and a view of the world where each tradition has something insightful to say and something more to learn. Aristotle has given us the idea of a friend as a second self, as mirror through which we are able to better know ourselves, the sides to which we would otherwise remain blind, to help us become whole. This is the legacy of area studies, and Japan has been and continues to be such an invaluable friend to us all.

Sources

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