The Reception of Spinoza in Japan

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Abstract
The reception of Spinoza in Japan was affected by the problems of rapid modernization from the nineteenth century onwards: the split of the mind into Western and non-Western. We shall look at how Spinoza’s ideas were received across the four phases of the assimilation of Western philosophy into Japan. Namely, initiation (1860s-1880s), establishment (1890s-1910s), re-appropriation (1920s-1945) and de-ideologisation (1945-present). Although his pantheistic monism was accepted from the outset fairly easily in the Buddhist cultural climate, his philosophy revealed resistant to appropriation by the language of dialectics such as that of the Kyoto School in wartime, which sought Japanese identity in the dialectical self-denial of the borrowed Westernness in the course of the “historical world”. This could provide a clue to understanding the current younger generation’s embrace of Spinoza.

Keywords: modernization, Kyoto School, Western and non-Western, Buddhist climate, self-negation

0 Introduction

I would like to begin by drawing attention to the fact that this paper is the only one in this collection authored by a scholar who hails from Asia. This reflects a certain peculiarity of Japan which I think should be taken into account in order to understand its reception of Spinoza.¹

What makes Japan unique is its history of modernization. This began with the Meiji Reform in 1868, which ended the policy of isolation. From the outset, Japan, unlike other Asian nations, rapidly embraced Western-style modernization. Imperial Japan had ambitions to acquire colonial powers over other Asian nations such as China, Taiwan, Korea, etc., and to join the ranks of Western

¹ There is little literature on the Spinoza reception in Japan. This paper relies heavily on information from Takashi Miyanaga, “Nihon ni okeru Spinoza [Spinoza in Japan],” Shakaishirin 61, no. 3 (2014). For the reception of philosophy in general, see Toru Miyagawa, Kindai-Nihon no tetsugaku [Philosophy in Modern Japan] (Tokyo, Keisō Shobo, 1961); and Takashi Miyanaga, “Seiyō-tetsugaku denrai shōshi,” Shakaishirin 57, no. 1/2, (2010).

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powers already ruling non-European colonies. This policy, known to the Japanese at the time as ‘de-Asianization’, gave modern Japan a twist—dragged into a series of wars, it never succeeded in joining the Western world, nor did it remain one of the pre-modern Asian nations. Its existence was, and perhaps still is, in limbo, between Asia and the West.

As we shall see in detail below, the reception of Spinoza’s thought began very early in this problematic period of modernization.² It is important to remember that ‘philosophy’ was initially imported as part of Western culture. This is why Nishi Amane (1829-1897),³ the bureaucratic scholar who first introduced Western philosophy to Japan, had to coin the neologism tetsugaku for it. Of course, there were scholarly works on Buddhism, Confucianism and classical Japanese literature, but ‘philosophy’ was foreign to them because of their long isolation from Western rational thought. The question of how to make it one’s own will always remain linked to the question of modernization. This helps to contextualize Japan’s reception of Spinoza.

It is therefore sensible to provide a broad overview of the reception of philosophy in Japan in general so that we can situate the reception of Spinoza’s thought in the context. This can be roughly divided into four stages, namely, initiation, establishment, re-appropriation and de-ideologisation:

Phase 1, the initiation phase, refers to the first half of the Meiji era, roughly from the 1860s to the 1880s, ending with the promulgation of the Imperial Constitution in 1889. This is the period of enlightenment, where foreign professors employed by the Meiji government played an important role in introducing philosophy to Japan.

Phase 2, the establishment phase, covers the second half of the Meiji and Taisho eras, roughly from the 1890s to 1910s. The Imperial University (later Tokyo University) was founded in 1887 and remained the core of the academic organization.

Phase 3, which I call the re-appropriation phase, refers to the first half of the Showa era, which falls during the war years from the 1920s to 1945.

Finally, Phase 4 covers post-war Japan, or the remainder of the Showa period after 1945 up to the present day.⁴

Throughout these phases, Spinoza’s name appears in the literature, and not just in passing.

1 **Initiation phase (1860s – 80s): the first half of the Meiji era**

This initial phase can be characterized by Westernization from above. “Bunmei-Kaika” (literally, civilization and enlightenment) was the slogan of the era. The Meiji government rushed to introduce Western technology and learning at an early stage. Against the trend of the time to focus only on

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² As for the problem of modernity Japan has had to face, see Christopher Goto-Jones, *Modern Japan: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009).

³ In the main body of this paper, I have systematically put the surname before the given name. This is the way Japanese personal names are written.

⁴ To be precise, Meiji (1868-1912), Taishō (1912-1926) and Showa (1926-1989). Then follows Heisei (1989-2019) and Reiwa (2019-). The Japanese era names are tricky, but useful for representing the mood of the times: Meiji represents modernization and enlightenment, Taishō growing popular and civic culture, and Showa wartime and post-war.
practical knowledge, the aforementioned Nishi Amane, who had studied philosophy and law in Leiden, stressed the importance of philosophy as a general discipline. Had he not been among the bureaucratic scholars sent abroad, philosophy as a discipline might never have been transplanted into the heart of Japanese academia. In response to the slogan, he launched the journal *Meiroku-zasshi* in 1874, which became a focal point for early open-minded intellectuals eager for novel ideas. Nishi was probably the first to introduce Spinoza’s name to a Japanese audience. It may come as a surprise that these first Japanese intellectuals were referring to French and English thought, which was brand new at the time: Mill, Comte and even Darwin. It is interesting that one of these intellectuals, Nakae Chōmin (1847-1901), a liberal civil rights thinker who first introduced Rousseau’s idea of the social contract to Japan, mentions Spinoza and gives a fairly accurate account of his pantheistic monism, albeit probably based on French or British sources, as did other early intellectuals. But this early innovative climate soon changed as government policy shifted from the French to the German model in the 1880s. The Imperial University of Tokyo was founded in 1887, and philosophy in Japan became more and more academically centred on the neo-Kantian style.

It is worth highlighting the fact that Japan’s long isolation spared it from the penetration of Christianity. Japan was permeated with Laozhuang thoughts and Buddhism, which had been introduced from China and assimilated into its own culture over a long period of time. Perhaps this may have been a factor in making it difficult for Japan to access the core of modern Western thought, which would be hard to understand without a Christian background. But this was also the reason why Spinoza’s ideas did not encounter wariness or fear of atheism. His pantheistic monism was accepted without considerable reluctance in a Buddhist cultural climate where the annihilation of the ego is a familiar theme. Earnest Fenollosa (1853-1908), an American philosopher who played an important role in introducing Japanese art overseas, describes the philosopher in his lectures on philosophy at Tokyo Imperial University as “a typical Eastern sage” because of his extraordinary unselfishness.⁵ His lecture had an impact on one of the audience members, Inoue Enryo (1858-1919), future leading exponent of Buddhist philosophy. In his subsequent studies, he became convinced of the similarities between his Mahayana Buddhist philosophy and Spinoza’s pantheistic monism.⁶ From an early stage, Spinoza seems to have had a special presence among Western philosophers, such as to make Japanese intellectuals feel close to him.

**2 Establishment phase (1890s – 1920s): the second half of the Meiji era and the Taisho era**

The second half of the *Meiji* era saw a period of establishment. Thanks to the developing university system, studies and lectures on philosophy in the neo-Kantian style were produced in great quantity. From 1892, the first Society of Philosophy and its journal, *Tetsugaku-zasshi*, made them available

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for publication. As a byproduct of these professorial works, there was a rush to publish introductory books on the history of Western philosophy to make it accessible to a wider public. Although they were usually based on neo-Kantian sources, they often contained their own scholarly reflections which made them more than just adaptations. It is remarkable that references to Spinoza in this period became a systematic part of the history of philosophy.\(^7\) We see Spinoza’s system—substance, attribute, mode, parallelism, etc.—treated in a full-fledged way in these texts. For instance, Onishi Hajime (1864-1900), known as Japan’s Kant, presents Spinoza as “a thinker with an unusual luminous glow” and his philosophy as a combination of Hobbesian naturalism, Cartesian intellectualism and a religious mysticism of his own.\(^8\)

The subsequent Taisho era (1912-1926) is known as a time of maturing civic culture. Although it was not until the 1930s that a Japanese translation of Spinoza’s works by Hatanaka appeared, Spinoza was already well known to intellectual Japanese. We see, for example, Tsuji Jun (1884-1944), one of the central figures of Dadaism in Japan, express his attachment to Spinoza in his writings. He was part of the liberal movement known as ‘Taishō Democracy’, which was destined to collapse towards the end of the era with the rise of ultra-nationalism. In the chaos of the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923, his ex-wife Ito Noe (1895-1923), an anarchist feminist, was killed in the military police headquarters along with Ōsugi Sakae (1885-1923), the leading anarchist of the time.

3 Re-appropriation phase (1930s – 1945): the first half of the Showa era until the end of the war

The third phase of reception refers to the period from the 1930s to 1945, the first half of the Showa era until the end of the Second World War. We should remember that this dark period began with the Great Depression in the 1930s. Imperial Japan was increasingly at odds with the Western powers in its dangerous attempts to dominate China and other regions of Asia, while at home it faced social unrest and the rise of Marxism. The leading intellectuals of the time felt the need for a philosophy that could address the pressing question of national identity: how can we be a modern but non-Western nation? What is a Japan that dominates Asia and yet claims to free Asia and care about Asia? And what does it mean to be a philosopher in the Far East? There was a remarkable change in the intellectual climate during this period, a change from Kant to Hegel, from epistemology to dialectics. While conventional neo-Kantian philosophy seemed hopeless to answer these questions, a Hegelian language of dialectics emerged as an alternative to explaining the course of the suffering modern world and the fate of nation-states. No longer satisfied with a borrowed Western philosophy, they sought a philosophy of their own that would allow them to understand their particularity in the universal history of the world. This is what I call the re-appropriation phase of reception.


\(^8\) Hajime Ōnishi, *op. cit.*
The driving force behind this movement was a group of philosophers known as the Kyoto School, who came to prominence in the 1930s and 1940s.\footnote{Bret W. Davis, “The Kyoto School,” \textit{Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy}. URL: https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kyoto-school/#PolVenMis; Christopher Goto-Jones, \textit{Political Philosophy in Japan: Nishida, the Kyoto School, and Co-Prosperity}, Oxon / New York, Routledge, 2005.} They were strongly influenced by Nishida Kitārō (1870-1945), a former professor of philosophy at Kyoto Imperial University.\footnote{John C. Maraldo, “Nishida Kitārō,” \textit{Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy}. URL: https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nishida-kitaro/#UniDevNis} Nishida is often credited with creating a uniquely Japanese philosophy. Although his writings continue to have a wide readership, the reputation of the Kyoto School is controversial because of its alleged involvement in Japan’s wartime regime. We will only give a brief outline here to show how they dealt with Spinoza in their attempt to re-appropriate Western philosophy. We will look at Nishida and his colleague Tanabe Hajime, another key figure in the Kyoto School.

Inspired by Zen Buddhism, as well as Bergson, James and Husserl, Nishida arrived at the idea of pure experience, which he believed to be prior to the distinction between subjectivity and objectivity. He developed this initial idea into a concept of reality as ‘the place of absolute nothingness’, where conflicting opposites are held together to form what he calls a ‘self-identity of contradictories’. Absolute nothingness, he writes, “transcends all that is, but at the same time all that is arises through it.”\footnote{Kitārō Nishida, \textit{Nishida Kitārō Zenshū}. [Complete Works of Kitārō Nishida] (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1987-89), vol. 9, 6.} Later, in response to Tanabe’s criticism, he turned to the historical world and developed the concept of a dialectical world as the manifestation of absolute nothingness. The world determines itself through ceaseless self-negation, which is mirrored in individual self-awareness as self-negation in the pursuit of the universal. Nishida uses the term ‘nothingness’ because, unlike a Hegelian dialectic, self-negation has no absolute subject that would sublate the opposites into a higher unity. Opposites are held together in a unity—a ‘self-identity of contradictories’.

This ‘logic of nothingness’, as he called it, fascinated his colleagues and students as the key to rivaling or surpassing Hegelian and Marxist dialectics, and thus Western thought. The key figures of the Kyoto School, Tanabe Hajime (1885-1962), Hatano Seiichi (1877-1950), Tomonaga Sanjurō (1871-1951), Nishitani Keiji (1900-1990) and Kōyama Iwao (1905-1993), were by no means fanatical ultra-nationalists. In fact, the Kyoto School even included leftists close to Marxism, such as Miki Kiyoshi (1897-1945) and Tosaka Jun (1900-1945). But all these philosophers shared a sense of crisis: the conflict between Eastern thought and Western civilization had caused a serious split in the Asian mentality and it seemed impossible to establish a proper identity without overcoming this split. Nishida’s solution, as we have seen, was to accept the split as a self-negating mediation in a dialectical movement. The particular, he says, is that which is “universal and yet particular, particular and yet universal, thus containing contradictions within itself and moving dialectically throughout.”\footnote{Kitārō Nishida, \textit{Nishida Kitārō Zenshū}. [Complete Works of Nishida Kitārō] (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1987-89), vol. 7, 205.} Tanabe, the number two of the Kyoto School, took up this line and developed it into what he terms ‘the logic of the species’. According to Tanabe, the individual is not merely opposed to the species, but is an element in the transformation of the species into the kind, mediated by the self-denial of the species. ‘Species’ here means ethnicity, ‘kind’ humanity. Tanabe thinks that Japan must transform...
itself into an agent of universal world history, and that this can only be achieved through a dialectical self-denial of Western modernity, which must embody Asian ethnicity. Tanabe thus radicalizes Nishida’s call for ethnic commitment into a call for a new world order: the current world war was seen as a war for the true destiny of nation-states in the direction of humanity. They believed that they had found the answer to the question of identity: Japan is the nation in Asia that has best retained Asian traditions while adapting Western technology and values. It is Japan that can stand for Asia and stand against Western domination. Their ‘logic’ is tricky, but it can at least be seen as a serious attempt to help the Japanese understand the meaning of the raging war. Needless to say, their logic was eventually used as the ideological basis for commissioning the war.

There are striking similarities between Nishida’s idea of absolute nothingness and Spinoza’s pantheistic monism. And there is no doubt that Spinoza’s philosophy, with its Eastern flavor, was well known to the philosophers of the Kyoto School. Strangely, however, the references to Spinoza among Nishida and his colleagues are not as conspicuous as those to Leibniz, for instance. Few studies have examined the reasons for this, but I suspect that it was because the Hegelian dialectical language was not easily compatible with the philosophy of Spinoza.

This can be illustrated by the case of Tanabe. In his contribution to an international collection of essays commemorating the 300th anniversary of Spinoza’s birth, Tanabe goes further than other Hegelians in his discussion of Spinoza. He challenges Hegelian clichés, such as how Spinozism is essential for initiating philosophical speculation, but that its rigid necessitarian substance, its ‘oriental lingering’, as Hegel calls it, is the limit that prevents dialectical dynamism. After a close examination of Spinoza’s Ethics, Tanabe concludes that, contrary to the cliché, the logic of Deus quatenus (God insofar as), which plays an important role in the Ethics, can only be understood dialectically.

That which denotes Deus quatenus is universal because it is Deus, and at the same time it is limited to the individual because it is modified by quatenus. Deus quatenus must be the principle of the so-called concrete universal, which is both universal and individual. Therefore, he continues, the temporal principle of individual existence “has the dialectical character of a unity of contradiction between the essential and the non-essential.” In other words, for Spinoza, he says, the individual is “nothing more than an essence that is renewed every moment.” It is easy to see the same ‘logic of species’. But at the same time, he recognizes that such a dialectical reading would undermine Spinoza’s geometrical system, which should have nothing to do with a self-determining negation. He says that it is “incompatible with this dialectical method” that would allow us to comprehend instantaneous creation. Hence, if we want to understand Spinoza, we must go beyond Spinoza by making dialectical use of his contradictions.

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15 Spinoza to Hegel [Spinoza and Hegel], 101-104. This volume was published by the Japanese branch of the International Hegel Society to commemorate the event, which coincidentally took place one year after the 100th anniversary of Hegel’s death. Among the Japanese contributors were some of the Kyoto School, namely Tanabe, Kōsaka and Miki. We see a similar attitude in Miki’s “Spinoza ni okeru ningen to kokka [Man and the State in
We can see why Spinoza’s thought, which should have been of such special interest to the Kyoto School because of its non-Western character, failed to become a useful tool. There was something in Spinoza that resisted dialectical thinking. His ontology is completely devoid of self-negation, which is an essential element of both Nishida’s logic of absolute nothingness and Tanabe’s logic of species. For the conatus or individual essence is for Spinoza nothing but a part of the divine affirmation of being.

Let me summarize what we have seen so far. Spinoza’s ideas became known in Japan in the early Meiji period, during the rapid modernization of the nineteenth century (Spinoza in the initiation phase). They became a systematic part of the history of Western philosophy in a neo-Kantian style in the early twentieth century (Spinoza in the establishment phase). Then came the Great Depression and the Second World War. In the 1930s and 40s of the Showa era, there was a dialectical turn. Philosophers of the Kyoto School invented the logic of absolute nothingness as an alternative Eastern way of thinking. They often compared Spinoza to Hegel and were interested in his thought for its Eastern flavor but were less successful in making it useful for their dialectics (Spinoza in the re-appropriation phase). This was the history of Spinoza’s reception until 1945. In that year Japan lost the war and so began the post-war period.

4 De-ideologisation phase (1945-present): the post-war Japan and the present-day

Finally, we come to post-war Japan and the present-day. I call this phase de-ideologisation phase. The reception of Western philosophy is as active as ever, but the embarrassing feeling of borrowing seems to be gradually fading today. Nearly 150 years after it first arrived, philosophy, once an alien discipline, appears to have become fairly integrated into Japanese intellectual culture.

But this did not happen immediately. For some time after the war, until the 1960s, Japanese intellectuals were under the strong influence of Marxism. The so-called ‘subjectivity debate’ (1946-1949), which involved intellectuals in literature, history and philosophy, revolved around the question of locating individual subjectivity in Marxism. It is interesting to note that the debate, which dealt with the rise of existentialism, drew on the Kyoto School’s concern with self-awakening in the historical world. One of the prominent figures in the debate was Umemoto Katsumi (1912-1974), a philosopher who first studied the philosophy of Nishida and Tanabe and became a Marxist after the war. He argued that the sublation of Spinoza’s pantheistic subjectivity into dialectical materialism is the key task of subjectivity theory, which is nothing other than to fit oneself into the dialectical self-motion of matter.16 Takeuchi Yoshitomo (1919-1991), who later became the first president of the Spinoza Society of Japan, was also committed to Marxism alongside his study of Nishida’s philosophy, and himself went on to study Spinoza.17 Our philosopher was probably seen as one who hinted at the possibility of reconciling Marxist materialism with the individual awakening in the

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actual world. However, perhaps for the reasons discussed in the previous section, namely his dissonance with dialectical language, Spinoza does not seem to have been a prominent figure in the Marxist context.

While Marxism remained influential alongside existentialism for some time after the debate, some scholarly, solid and high-quality works on Spinoza appeared then that are still referred to today. One of these scholars, Kudō Kisaku, later headed the Spinoza Society for a long time.

These monographs were still operating within background of the German philosophical context, but the climate changed in the 1980s. Spinoza became widely read in the post-1960s French context, developed by authors such as Deleuze and Negri, and so gained a new audience. In 1989 the Spinoza Society of Japan (Spinoza Kyōkai) was founded, and in 1991 it organized an international conference on Spinoza in Tokyo and Kyoto, probably the first of its kind in Japan. Alexandre Matheron from France, Manfred Walther from Germany, and Wim Klever from the Netherlands were invited to spend three days discussing ‘Spinoza and the Political’ with Japanese scholars. As one of those who were present, I still recall the heat of the moment. The global trend towards re-evaluating Spinoza’s Tractatus Politicus was in line with the atmosphere at the time when the direction of post-Marxism was being sought.

Around and since 2000, a new generation of Spinoza studies has emerged. This was followed by series of studies by an even younger generation of scholars. While the influence of Deleuze can be seen in these monographs, Spinoza studies with a background in Anglo-American analytic philosophy began to appear. More recently, essays on Spinoza for beginners by Yoshida Kazuhiko and Kokubun Koichiro have become very popular. A dialogue with analytic philosophy is also emerging. The latest issue of Philcul [Philosophy and Culture], edited by young scholars in Japan, includes a special issue on ‘Analytic Philosophy and Spinoza’. These new generations no longer have a mindset that treats philosophy as something imported. Philosophy is no longer seen as


20 E. g. Tokaharu Kawai’s Spinoza-tetsugaku ronkō [A Treatise on the Philosophy of Spinoza: On the Vital Unity of Nature] (Tokyo: Sōbunsha, 1994), which contains an attempt to redefine Spinoza’s political theory in relation to his metaphysics, reflects this political-theoretical interest of the time.


something unique to the West, but as a universal discipline that can be applied to the problems of any culture, any nation. And Spinoza’s thought is no exception. I think this is a praiseworthy move for Spinoza studies, given that he was a philosopher who was not bound by any ethnicity, religion or ideology.

Finally, we must not forget that these post-war generations were nurtured by Hatanaka Naoshi’s translations of most of Spinoza’s major works. Because of ill health, Hatanaka did not teach at universities, but worked alone during and after the war (1931-1959) to translate almost all of Spinoza’s works into readable Japanese. The quality of his translations is astonishing. They were published by Iwanami Shoten as a series of paperbacks in order to remain relatively accessible to students and general readers. For almost eighty years, Hatanaka’s translations have helped to promote the reception of Spinoza in post-war Japan. But now a new Japanese edition of Spinoza’s complete works is being published by the same Iwanami Shoten, with Suzuki Izumi and Ueno Osamu serving as the editors. Whereas Hatanaka’s translations were based on the Gebhardt edition, the new translations are based on the original sources, such as the Opera Posthuma and manuscripts. Surprisingly, these are selling exceptionally well for academic books. There is no doubt that interest in Spinoza is growing and expanding among the younger generation of scholars and general readers. We have yet to find out why, but they may perceive in Spinoza’s philosophy an airy freedom, a sweeping away of the depressing heaviness of the ego. The reception of Spinoza in Japan appears to be entering a new phase.

References

Philcul [Philosophy and Culture] 8, no. 3 (2023).


So far, we have published in Japanese translations of Ethica in 2022, De korte verhandeling and Renati Descartes Principia Philosophiae with Cogitata metaphysica in 2023, and the volume with De Intellectus emendatione, Tractatus politicus and Compendium grammatices linguæ Hebraeæ as well as Epistolae will appear in 2024. Tractatus theologico-politicus is expected to be published in 2025.


Miyanaga, Takashi. “Nihon ni okeru Spinoza” [Spinoza in Japan], Shakaishirin 61, no. 3 (2014).


