

## *Engaging with the Japanese Philosophical Tradition of Engaged Knowing*

BRET W. DAVIS

Loyola University Maryland, USA (BWDavis@loyola.edu)

Thomas P. Kasulis. *Engaging Japanese Philosophy: A Short History*. Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 2018, pp. 784, hardcover USD 76, paperback USD 36. ISBN 978-0-8248-6979-3.

*This review examines the main topics and the main thesis of Thomas Kasulis's Engaging Japanese Philosophy. The book covers the entire fourteen-hundred-year history of philosophical thinking in Japan, with a focus on seven key Buddhist, Confucian, Native Studies, and modern academic philosophers. The author's main thesis is that Japanese philosophers have predominantly aimed at an existentially "engaged knowing" rather than the kind of objectively "detached knowing" that has come to dominate modern western and—by colonial extension—most of modern Japanese academic philosophy.*

**Key words:** Japanese philosophy; intellectual history of Japan; Japanese Buddhism; Japanese Confucianism; Native Studies; Nishida Kitarō; Watsuji Tetsurō; Kyoto School

This monumental volume is the crowning achievement of a pioneer western scholar of traditional and modern Japanese philosophy. It is not a short book, but is certainly very engaging. Remarkably, this seven-hundred-plus-page tome is a page-turner. Covering the entire history of philosophical thinking in Japan, from the early seventh to the early twenty-first century, the breadth of the book is breathtaking. Even more impressive is the clarity and depth of its philosophical engagement with the material. I recently used this book in an undergraduate seminar on Japanese philosophy, and my students enthusiastically commented on its lucid and engaging style.

One could accuse the book's subtitle of false advertising. The author justifies his appellation "a short history" by pointing out that, in order to write an engaging introduction to the long and rich history of Japanese philosophy, he had to be selective in his focus (4–5). Specifically, he chose to focus about half of the book's pages on seven philosophers: Buddhist philosophers Kūkai (774–835), Shinran (1173–1262), and Dōgen (1200–53); Confucian philosopher Ogyū Sorai (1666–1728); Native Studies philosopher Motoori Norinaga (1730–1801); and modern philosophers Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945) and Watsuji Tetsurō (1889–1960). The inclusion of Buddhist philosophers from three of the most prominent schools (Shingon, Zen, and Shin or the True Pure Land School), along with one Confucian, one Native Studies, and two modern philosophers among these focal figures provides the reader with a balanced and representative selection of some of the most interesting and influential figures in the history of Japanese philosophy.

In between chapters devoted to these seven figures are chapters that provide informative overviews of the philosophical—and more broadly intellectual and cultural—history of Japan. In these chapters Kasulis not only elaborates on the context in which his seven focal figures lived and thought but also introduces the key ideas and arguments of dozens of other philosophers. Alternating between these in-depth and overview approaches, the fifteen chapters of the book

together enable the reader both to see the big picture and to delve into the most interesting details, like a bird who soars above the landscape in order to get a general lay of the land, and periodically swoops down to feast on its most tasty offerings. While I might have suggested “A Selective History” rather than “A Short History” as a subtitle, I found the alternation between the two approaches to be masterfully conceived and executed, and, as a result, the book is both illuminating and engaging.

Kasulis is not only an insightful philosopher; he is also an excellent storyteller. Carrying the reader across vast distances in time and space, while paying careful attention to differences in historical and cultural context, Kasulis consistently treats his seven focal figures as *philosophers*, that is to say, as rigorous thinkers attempting to fathom and articulate universal truths, as thinkers who are just as worthy of both empathetic and critical engagement as are major philosophers from the western traditions such as Plato, Aquinas, Heidegger, and Quine. Kasulis ushers readers into the hearts as well as the heads of these Japanese philosophers; he enables them to take the pulse of their emotions as well as to grasp the rational movements of their minds. In the end, he enables the reader not only to understand the formulation of their thoughts in their historical and cultural context, but also to reiterate and respond to them in our own.

It should be noted that Kasulis’s designation of premodern—which means, in the case of Japan, pre-Meiji Restoration, i.e., pre-1868—thinkers as “philosophers” is in fact controversial. Ironically, this is especially the case in Japan itself, where the dominant tendency has been to equate “Japanese philosophy” (*Nibon-tetsugaku*) with “modern Japanese philosophy” and to relegate premodern discourses to “the history of Japanese thought” (*Nibon-shisō-shi*). I concur with Kasulis’s challenge to what I call not just “philosophical Eurocentrism” but “philosophical Euromonopolism,” namely the idea that “philosophy” can be found only in the European tradition and its cultural or colonial offshoots. In my Introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Japanese Philosophy* and in a paper published in Japanese after being presented in Tokyo, Nagoya, and Kyoto, I have recently pointed out how, in the late nineteenth century, the Japanese imported not just a Eurocentric but indeed a heretofore “Euromonopolistic” conception of philosophy, and I argued that it is now time to rethink the definition and scope of “Japanese philosophy.”

Kasulis goes so far as to accuse the majority of modern academic philosophers in Japan of participating in their own intellectual colonization. Without pulling any punches, in the concluding chapter he writes:

In many respects, philosophy programs in Japan are even narrower in focus than those of the West. They often teach *no* classes in Asian philosophy alongside western philosophy. [...] [P]rofessional academic philosophers in postwar Japan do their technical work as if they were western philosophers working in outposts of European or American departments of philosophy. [...] Shackled by intellectual and cultural domination from abroad, philosophers in Japan’s philosophy programs have too often been coopted into denying their own philosophical heritage. That is, they have been intellectually and culturally *colonized* (578–79).

While this criticism may be overly harsh, it is not off base. The problem is, in part, due to the unmistakably Eurocentric and even Euromonopolistic connotations of “*tetsugaku*” (the modern neologism used to translate “philosophy”). Scholars working in other academic fields, such as intellectual history or religious studies, are often less colonized and more attentive to what Kasulis is calling and treating as the history of Japanese philosophy.

In any case, Kasulis does recognize several significant exceptions to the colonial rule among modern Japanese philosophers, including, but not limited to, the philosophers associated with the Kyoto School (some of whom taught in the philosophy department and others of whom taught in

the religious studies department of Kyoto University). These exceptional modern Japanese philosophers have stayed in touch with traditional Japanese (especially Zen and Shin Buddhist) philosophy at the same time as they have deeply engaged with western philosophy, religion, and the wider range of western culture that has, since the end of the nineteenth century, been selectively and interpretively assimilated into modern Japanese society.

Most importantly, Kasulis points out, is the manner in which these exceptional modern Japanese philosophers have drawn on the Japanese tradition so as to question not only the ideas but also the methods of modern western academic philosophy. Specifically, they reiterate the traditional Japanese call for an *engaged* rather than a *detached* mode of philosophical knowing and being. This could be said to be the main message of Kasulis's massive work:

Throughout this volume, I have argued that the dominant (but not universally accepted) Japanese epistemological model is that of engaged knowing rather than that of detached knowing. If I am right, we must account for the crucial difference between a self that is primarily viewed as a locus within an interresponsive field of reality as contrasted with a self that is primarily viewed as an objective observer of an external reality. [...] In terms of theories of the self, a pernicious error, according to many Japanese philosophers, is to consider the self as a discrete entity, separate from the world and from others, a detached observer of reality. Instead most Japanese think of the self as an interdependent being in a shared responsive state with other people and the world, an engaged participant in reality (557, 561).

This central thesis of *Engaging Japanese Philosophy* is first laid out in its first chapter, and it is repeated throughout the volume. The refrain of Kasulis's narrative is that Japanese philosophers have predominantly aimed at an existentially "engaged knowing" rather than the kind of objectively "detached knowing" that has come to dominate modern western academic philosophy. Accordingly, Kasulis requests of us readers that we engage ourselves not just with the ideas but also with the ways of doing philosophy in Japan. He argues that we must learn to think like they do if we want to understand their thoughts. Philosophy has not traditionally been for the Japanese, any more than it was in fact for the ancient Greeks (see 576–77), a detached study of objective reality that has no, or only indirect, bearing on our subjective lives. Much more than just a study of the intellectual history of a foreign tradition, *Engaging Japanese Philosophy* thus invites us to reconsider how and why we engage in the pursuit of wisdom.

**Bret W. Davis** is Professor and T. J. Higgins, S.J. Chair in Philosophy at Loyola University Maryland. Along with earning a PhD in philosophy from Vanderbilt University, he has studied and taught for more than a year in Germany and for more than 13 years in Japan. He has published more than seventy-five articles, including "Beyond Philosophical Euromonopolism—Other Ways of, Not Otherwise than—Philosophy" (*Philosophy East and West*, 2019), and seven books, most recently *The Oxford Handbook of Japanese Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2020).