Contemporary Meaning of Reading Plato in Japan and Asia Surtitre

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Dilemma of the universality of philosophy

Philosophy, a universal intellectual activity of human beings, represents an activity pursued in different ways according to space and time, or in different cultures, traditions and languages. Nevertheless, philosophy, as the pursuit of truth, must be universal. But what does the universality of philosophy mean? To consider this question, I suggest that we go back to Plato.

In the contemporary world, I find it crucial for all human beings to share in philosophy to confront the difficult situations of the 21st century: philosophy has to deal with political, social, cultural, environmental and moral problems worldwide. Philosophy may not give us direct answers or immediate solutions, but we must maintain faith in the possibility of philosophy for living well together. In this paper I investigate the possibility of philosophy as a universal pursuit by examining a particular problem relating to modern Japan. Japanese intellectuals, since the mid-nineteenth century, have studied philosophy as the essence of Western civilization; they have faced the dilemma of philosophy. I show that Plato set a starting point for the dilemma and also that Plato provides a key to creating new philosophy beyond that dilemma.

First, let me explain what I call the dilemma of the universality of philosophy, before looking at the particular case of Japan. Universality means validity or applicability in all places and times, and we normally regard this as the essential feature of the natural sciences. The laws of nature, discoverable through scientific research, represent universal truths. Today scientists working all over the world accept a set of basic principles and engage in research on this basis. They even use the same numerical formulas for presentation and publication (mostly in a common language—English). On the other hand, we know from the history of science that the sciences have developed in the particular context of the West upon particular assumptions. However, scientists in a laboratory or research institute rarely stop to recognize the historical background nor do they have to (in contrast to historians
and philosophers of science who believe in relativism in terms of paradigms); because they deal in a universal science, its history or background does not affect their actual research. It does not matter whether theories come from Greece, India, the Arab world, America or elsewhere, as long as the theories are true.

We know that many basic assumptions of science have specific origins. For example, the project of investigating simple principles and laws in the universe comes from a particular view of the world, often associated with the idea that the universe was put in order by the hand of god. The strong assumption that mathematical order underlies the whole phenomena originates in the Pythagorean–Platonist tradition, which laid the basis for modern science. By contrast, although Chinese thinkers, too, assumed a well-organized universe, they did not appeal to mathematics; they supposed a flexible universe of Li and Chi, without being mathematically analyzable. We inherited the project of mathematization of nature from Plato. Moreover, Greek philosophers in collaboration with specialists developed the scientific methods of definition, analysis and hypothesis, as well as the deductive system. Atomism came into being in response to the Eleatic argument concerning the indivisible and unchangeable One Being. René Descartes’ principal attempt to separate mind and body, a revived effort to demonstrate the immortality of the soul, repeated Plato’s own endeavor in the Phaedo. Scientists rarely recognize such historical background of modern science, since the universality of science need not take them into account except from a purely historical interest. Indeed, the particularity or historicity of Western science does not contradict the universality of science.

By contrast, the universality of philosophy is far from self-evident. Scholars have widely recognized the difficulty in integrating ideas and thoughts so different in space and time. Cultural relativism remains strong, particularly in social sciences and humanities (outside the department of philosophy), and people tend to think that values and ways of seeing the world vary considerably from culture to culture. On the other hand, many philosophers show less sympathy for relativism and find it difficult to defend or advance it theoretically. But it remains uncertain whether philosophies of different backgrounds are commensurable or communicable (or even translatable) on a universal basis. Between the two attitudes toward the universality of philosophy, a dilemma arises: whether one assumes universality or not, one fails in doing philosophy, particularly in cultures outside the West.

On the one hand, we see a strong trend in the contemporary world against universality in philosophy. Cultural relativism, as mentioned, prevails in the academic world and elsewhere and rejects any claim of universality as ideology or illusion. It claims instead that theoretical discussion can only exist within a particular culture or in a particular time. Despite its liberal appearance, however, cultural relativism brings about serious consequences, since it rarely happens that pluralistic dialogue between different positions comes to fruitful agreement. In reality, one (stronger) position often forces its own view on the others by ignoring their positions. One even refuses dialogue in the name of “Clash of the Civilizations” or “Remaking of the World Order” by the greatest power. Those who follow different traditions, wherever they live, are excluded from the common ground. Without universality, brute force settles the conflict between different values.
On the other hand, to admit universality again forces uniformity on the basis of Western civilization. If we recognize philosophy’s Greek origins and Western essence on one hand and its universality on the other, then the other ways of thinking become excluded from the domain of philosophy, for the reason that they are “non-philosophy”. From antiquity to the present, scholars have either ignored as non-Western—non-philosophic—or judged according to the Western framework of philosophical thinking, Indian, Chinese, Islamic and Japanese thought and values. In this case universality amounts to Eurocentrism or cultural imperialism. Enforcement may occur even concerning such basic (Western) ideas as human rights, international law, justice, freedom, equality, free market, capitalism, liberalism, individualism and democracy. The contemporary world considers these notions, while formed through the long tradition of Europe and America, as global standards for international politics, global markets, and academicism. Moreover, despite the danger of explicit cultural prejudice, greater perils lie in unconscious elimination of the Other from philosophy. As humans we often fail to recognize our own ideology—West versus non-West—or the conflict between different values and ways of thinking, but we have confidence in their universality and truth in an uncritical manner.

Now that scholars teach and students study philosophy all over the world, we must reconsider the universality of philosophy and how particular history, culture and tradition can form universal philosophy, by avoiding the dilemma. Here, by the term universal, I intend not “the same in all places through all time”, but “universalizable in particular contexts”. For example, consider the universality of the law of gravity in the sense of being applicable anywhere in the universe (gravity on the moon equals one-sixth the gravity on Earth). Although it varies, we never doubt the universality of gravity. Likewise, philosophical ideas differ in each culture, time, tradition and language, but nevertheless we consider them universal so long as we find them comparable, communicable and universalizable. In the case of logic, people tend to accept the universality of epistemology and perhaps metaphysics, but moral and social philosophies, even though they look more controversial, must be similar. How then can we escape the dilemma of the universality of philosophy?

**Japan’s encounter with philosophy**

The question relates particularly and significantly to the Japanese. Many people, both in and outside Japan, still find it uncomfortable to use the designation “Japanese philosophy”. An anecdote reports that Edward Seidensticker, one of the most famous American scholars of Japanese literature,1 used to make a joke in front of his students about the “two great oxymorons” of East Asian culture, namely “Chinese music” and “Japanese philosophy”.2 A prevailing prejudice implies that

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1. His translations include *The Tale of Genji* (1976) and the novels of Yasunari Kawabata, Yukio Mishima, and Junichiro Tanizaki.


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Japan had no philosophy before the late nineteenth century or even before the early twentieth century, although interesting ideas appeared in traditional Japanese thought—Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism and Shintoism. This strange situation, not as clearly recognizable in China, originates in Japan’s drastic encounter with the West in the mid-nineteenth century, an experience that entails the cultural dilemma of philosophy.

Japan closed its doors to the West, except for a restricted commercial relationship with Holland, in the 1630s. In 1853, when American Commodore Matthew C. Perry sailed into Tokyo Bay to force Japan to open the country, the Japanese people began to recognize a huge gap in science, technology, economics and political and military power between their country and the great Western powers. The new Meiji government found it urgent to introduce (or import) Western technology, laws and political systems into Japan. Japanese intellectuals, who had once studied Confucianism and learned some science through Dutch books, suddenly turned to modern science and started to learn it in English, French and German. However, they cleverly did not swallow everything they needed immediately; rather, they tried hard to discover the basis or essence of Western civilization in its entirety. The key they found was philosophy.

Nishi Amane 西周 (1829–1897), a pioneer who introduced Western sciences and philosophy to Japan, sailed to Europe as a member of an 1862 Edo government undertaking. His mission: to study the laws and social sciences of Europe in Holland for a new Japan. Already before heading to Europe, he understood the significance of philosophy as the basis of all sciences. In a letter addressed to his Dutch hosts in 1863, he expressed his intention to study philosophy:

Overigens moet het gebied van wetenschappen bezocht en, hetwelk Philosophie of wijsbegeerte geheeten wordt, maar toch van Godsdiestige gevoelen, die de wet des Onzes Rijks niet toelaat te dulden, verschilt, hetgeen in de vroegere tijden, door Descartes, Locke, Hegel, Kant enz. is gestaafd. Dit ook schijnt zeer moeilijk te zijn om te leeren; daar het echter naar mij dunkt, zal bijdragen tot de beschaving van Ons Rijk, zoo wil ik iets daarvan leeren, alhoewel de korte tijd mij dit welligt zal beletten.5

Nishi knew the names of several modern Western philosophers and clearly recognized the fundamental importance of philosophy for the new Japan. He used the Dutch word wijsbegeerte, a literal translation of the Greek word φιλοσοφία, from which he probably coined a new Japanese word ki-tetsu-gaku (希哲学), meaning “science aspiring for wisdom”. Nishi coined the strange word because he found no equivalent in the Chinese or Buddhist tradition. This shows that he recognized the philosophy of the West as a way of thinking essentially different from what the Japanese inherited from India and China. This impact of the encounter with philosophy showed the direction of modern Japan.

We can compare this with the Chinese case. While Japan closed its country to outsiders, China maintained contact with Europe and introduced Western science through translation by Jesuits, such as Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) and Ferdinando

3. The text is from G. Vissering 2005.
Verbiest (1623–1688). In this way, the Chinese did not feel the effect of a wide
cultural gap. By contrast, owing to the two-century national isolation, the
Japanese experienced shock at the huge cultural distance between their country
and Western civilization. Forced to introduce modern science and technology, they
drew on philosophy as their basis for understanding the other side of the world.
They expected philosophy to serve as the key to the Japanese people’s success; it
would allow them to join European civilization.

Nishi Amane later changed the translation of the word philosophy from the
original ki-tetsu-gaku; he dropped the prefix ki (aspiring) and called it simply tetsu-
gaku (哲学) in his 1874 treatise entitled “Hyakuichi Shinron” (百一新論). This
happened, no doubt, because nineteenth-century European universities and society
bestowed solid status upon philosophy and considered it the queen of the sciences.
People did not expect a Socratic ignorance in school philosophy. In fact, whereas
Nishi initially referred to its Greek origin, Japanese scholars of his age studied most
the Utilitarian, Positivist, Kantian and Hegelian philosophies.

Since then, tetsu-gaku (哲学 as a translation of the word philosophy) has signified
“Western philosophy” almost exclusively. This has caused a strange situation in
Japan. Since philosophy is a universal intellectual pursuit by definition, “Western
philosophy” represents a redundancy, so that most departments of philosophy
in Japanese universities still teach Western thought only, whereas the study of
Chinese, Indian, Islamic, and Japanese thought fall under separate departments.
Representative philosophers known to Japanese people include Western thinkers such
as Socrates, Plato, Descartes, Locke, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger
and Sartre. Just several years ago Kyoto University’s Fujita Masakatsu 藤田正勝
initiated a sub-department of the history of Japanese philosophy. The “History
of Japanese Philosophy Forum” started its activities in 2000. The designation
“Japanese Philosophy” still sounds like an oxymoron to many Japanese, echoing
Seidensticker’s feelings of years ago.

If asked about Japanese philosophers, one normally thinks of those of the early
twentieth century, such as Nishida Kitaro 西田幾多郎 (1870–1945), Watsuji
Tetsuro 和辻哲郎 (1889–1960), Kuki Shuzo 九鬼周造 (1888–1941) and Miki
Kiyoshi 三木清 (1897–1945). They studied Western philosophy diligently, and
for this purpose most of them (except Nishida) travelled to Europe. They tried to
create a new Japanese philosophy by combining it with their own backgrounds, such
as Japanese aesthetics and Zen Buddhism. We can still understand their writings
and evaluate them in the context of Western philosophy. On the other hand, their
European counterparts had the expectation that they would present something
esoteric, as the Japanese equivalent of Western thought. We see the expectation
of “non-West” as a typical feature of Orientalism, and this causes a dilemma for
Japanese philosophy: Japanese philosophy means little, either as a minor part of
Western philosophy or as an esoteric and exotic outsider. This represents a particular
case of the previous dilemma of the universality of philosophy.

To escape the dilemma, we must return to the origin of Western philosophy,
whose importance modern Japanese thinkers dimly knew of but had not clarified.

4. Some European philosophers, like Leibniz, became interested in Chinese thought.

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On the shocking encounter of the gap between Japan and Western civilization, Nishi glimpsed the Greek origin of philosophy, but it was only in the early twentieth century that Dr. Raphael Koeber, a German lecturer in philosophy (1893–1914), started to teach Western classics at Tokyo Imperial University. Yet, the spell of philosophy, with which modern Japan has struggled, may point to a new direction for universal philosophy.

**Back to the Platonic origin**

When Nishi Amane introduced Western philosophy into Japan, he knew of its Greek origin. In a draft for a lecture on the history of philosophy written as early as 1862 or 1863, he explained that Pythagoras first used the Greek word φιλοσοφία followed by Socrates as “the founder of Greek philosophy”. For this reason he put the original meaning of φιλοσοφία into his first Japanese translation, but much like his contemporary Europeans, Nishi did not fully appreciate the original Greek meaning of φιλοσοφία.

Customarily, we consider ancient Greece the birthplace of philosophy, where Socrates, Plato and Aristotle nursed it. Western civilizations since then have all in this respect followed Greek tradition and still use words derivative of φιλοσοφία. By referencing its Greek origin, Western civilization has maintained its identity. But it remains uncertain whether the original spirit of philosophy has always been recognized and alive. We know that Western civilization represents a more complex and multifaceted entity than Greek civilization alone. Not surprisingly, then, Western civilization did not always follow the Greek models, while it repeatedly appealed to them.

Furthermore, Greek philosophy itself was not monolithic but diverse and idiosyncratic. In particular, other people of his time and of later generations found the Platonic concept of philosophy, which we normally regard as representing Western philosophy, too controversial or contestable.

By late antiquity, scholars already commonly introduced the concept of philosophy with reference to its birth myth. Diogenes Laertius in discussing the origin of philosophy, in the *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, mentions several traditions other than Greek, such as Persian, Indian and Egyptian, but finally puts forward the origin of the term and starts to trace the twofold tradition of philosophy, namely Ionian from Anaximander and Italian from Pythagoras. He introduces the famous episode of Pythagoras’ calling himself φιλόσοφος, or “lover of wisdom”, for the first time (I.12). Pythagoras is said to have explained that no human being is wise, but the god alone (μηδένα εἶναι σοφόν ἄνθρωπον ἂλλ᾽ ἡ θεόν). While perhaps not an original thinker, Diogenes’ description must represent a common understanding of the origin of philosophy. The academy, at least, strongly associated the notion of philosopher with the Pythagorean tradition; Plato’s pupil, Heraclides of Pontus, a main reporter of the episode, and Plato himself associated the notion of philosopher

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5. Judging from the first instance in Heraclitus, which may well allude to Pythagoras, I believe that Pythagoras originally used the word himself.
with Pythagoreans in the *Phaedo*. But the clearest presentation of philosopher as lover of wisdom appears in the Socrates of Plato, particularly in the story of the Delphic Oracle in the *Apology*, while other dialogues (such as *Lysis*, *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*) offer similar explanations.

On the other hand, it remains unclear whether other Greek thinkers had this particular sense always in mind in doing and discussing philosophy. For if we emphasize the epistemological gap between the god and human beings, it might lead us to total skepticism, just as Socrates strongly denies his knowledge about the important things (good, fine, just and so on). In fact, Arcesilaus, according to Cicero, took Socrates as a forerunner of his skepticism. Many others did not share their pessimism about the possibility of acquiring knowledge, but dogmatists incurred the risk of nullifying the original distinction between the wise and the philosopher.

Socrates became the model philosopher in antiquity through the “Socratic Literature”, but people referred to different aspects of Socrates’ life and thought. Dialogues featuring Socrates as the main speaker became popular in the first half of the 4th century BC and maintained a wide readership in subsequent centuries. The Socratic dialogues included not only those of Plato, but also of Xenophon (four extant works), Aeschines, Antisthenes, Phaedo, Euclides and others (all lost). Surprisingly, for example, Xenophon’s *Apology* presents Socrates as a man boldly proud of his own knowledge and justice. On the other hand, in the extant fragments and testimonies outside Plato, notions of philosophy and philosopher were seldom used in portraying Socrates.

A central strategy of Plato’s defense of Socrates contrasts him with the sophists as a model philosopher. Plato severely and repeatedly criticizes the sophists as non-philosophers or sham teachers of virtue and rhetoric, and thereby illuminates the philosopher (lover of wisdom) as being placed between the knower—god—and ignorant human beings, who lack any awareness of their own not-knowing. The other Socratics, who do not seem to have distinguished between the philosopher and the sophist,6 did not use this clear notion of philosopher; Xenophon cared little about the difference between Socrates and the sophists (except one episode concerning the sophist Antiphon, in *Memorabilia* 1.6); Antisthenes, a pupil of Gorgias, produced sophistic arguments; Aristippus and Aeschines became sophists by taking a fee for teaching, and his contemporaries including Aristotle called the former as such.7 We can confirm this general tendency in the top rhetorician contemporaries of Plato, namely Isocrates and Alcidamas, who proudly proclaimed themselves professional sophists and philosophers. The definition of philosopher, in sharp contrast with sophist, must have come from an invention by Plato. Scholars consider his severe and constant criticism of the sophists as aiming to defend Socrates by dissociating him from other thinkers and teachers. As his *Apology* intimates, his contemporary Athenians saw no clear difference between Socrates and other intellectuals (natural thinkers, theologians and professional teachers and rhetoricians) at his trial. Plato’s

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6. Although Aeschines’ *Alcibiades* has Socrates confess his ignorance in instructing the young Alcibiades. For this aspect, see Noboru Notomi 2008.

7. Aeschines’ dialogue *Callias* featured a group of sophists including Anaxagoras along with Prodicus.

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impressive image of the model philosopher Socrates, however idiosyncratic, has created the tradition of Western philosophy.

Some may wonder why we have to stick to the Platonic definition, since many philosophers actually understand philosophy and philosopher differently or in more general ways: why isn’t philosophy an activity open to anyone who desires to know? Yet, we know that Plato firmly opposes this. In *Politeia* V, when Socrates presents the striking idea of philosopher-ruler, he gives the definition of philosopher as a lover of seeing the truth, in stark contrast to the lovers of sight (φιλοθεανός). The latter should clearly be separated from the genuine philosophers. This also reminds us of what Callicles says in the *Gorgias*. He criticizes Socrates’ argumentation as subverting ordinary life (481c) and then insists that, although desirable for young people as part of general education, engaging in philosophy beyond youth is ridiculous and worth a whipping (485a–d). Here, Callicles expresses a common view of philosophy among Athenian society. Isocrates, when commending philosophy as practical wisdom, takes a similar direction. He does not clearly distinguish between a man of wisdom and a lover of wisdom. While rather exceptional and extreme in antiquity, Plato’s extremity or exceptionality by no means contradicts his importance in the history of Western philosophy. Rather, the controversy raised by Plato has advanced philosophy as a universal intellectual activity.

As stated in the *Politeia* and elsewhere, Plato’s notion of philosopher points to the Forms—absolute beings—since the philosopher signifies a waking person who clearly observes and investigates them. Thus, philosophy means awakening of the soul to live a true life. Now let me summarize what I take as the essential features of Plato’s notion of philosophy:

1. Awareness of human ignorance,
2. Critical examination of oneself and others,
3. Perpetual search for truth,
4. Pursuit of living well together, and
5. Trust in human inquiry in logos.

These features aim at true universality, for which philosophy must confront and reject relativism. The tension between philosophy and non-philosophy has caused lively and critical activities of philosophical thinking. Among the diverse attempts at philosophy in ancient Greece, Plato played a major role in advancing the creativity and universality of philosophy. He suggests that the possibility of philosophy consists in the attempt to secure universality in a self-critical manner, through human logos.

**Reading Plato in the contemporary world**

The dilemma of the universality of philosophy assumes that Western philosophy stems from a Greek or Platonic origin. However, we have observed that philosophy, while not a simple or monolithic concept, consists in various competing attempts at

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8. This idea is presented and criticized again in *Politeia* VII.
universal. Anyone can participate in philosophy as long as one thinks critically to seek for truth with awareness of one's own limitations. In this sense, no difference exists between West and non-West. If we exclude the latter from philosophy, we merely show intolerance, since Plato's original idea of philosophy needs the Other to engage in dialogue. Therefore, we seek true universality of philosophy through competition and dialogue between different people.

The Japanese scholars who held a strict notion of philosophy as its Greek meaning were bound by Plato's notion. But we should bear in mind that to Plato's contemporaries and to later generations, his idea of philosophy already signified the Other. Japan's encounter with Western philosophy reveals the implication of Plato's philosophy in a purer form. If this is the case, the serious question about the universality of philosophy raised by Japanese thinkers may indicate the very possibility of universal philosophy. Modern Japan met a challenge of the possibility and universality of philosophy and tried to realize it in a full sense. The Other may have the advantage of pursuing philosophy without cultural prejudice. Within the Western tradition, practitioners may not clearly recognize the universality of philosophy; outsiders may see it as such.

In Japan, one and a half centuries after the end of seclusion, Socrates and Plato became the most popular philosophers among both specialists and ordinary people. Plato's dialogues have undergone many translated versions over several decades, and one early translation of the Apology of Socrates (from the original Greek text) by Kubo Masaru 久保勉 and Abe Jiro 阿部次郎 in 1928, has become a best seller of the Iwanami Bunko series. Plato also found popularity in Korea, and both Socrates and Plato enjoy popularity in the Far East. The parallel traditions of reading and learning from the life and thought of classical thinkers in the West and the East enable the two cultures to converse. Socrates and Plato play the same role as Confucius, Mensius and Gautama Buddha in our culture. Reading Plato bridges the cultural and historical gap between the East and the West.

Universal philosophy finds compatibility among different cultures and languages, or rather, diverse traditions can realize it. Unlike the natural sciences, philosophy needs diversity of culture and language. The reason is simply that each of us thinks basically in his or her own language. Philosophical terms used in our thinking belong to a particular language; words, propositions, theories and forms of problems developed in the history in a particular language and tradition. On the other hand, philosophical expressions are not confined to a single language; we translate them into other languages, and they change in history. Moving between different languages and cultures enables us to think in a more universal way. Philosophers develop new thoughts and coin new words for their new ideas through dialogue with people of other times, places, cultures and languages. For these reasons, I believe that studying Plato plays a central role in philosophical dialogue between different cultures.

Plato is, of course, not the only philosopher, nor has he been unanimously agreed upon to be the greatest. But interestingly, Plato has stimulated philosophical thinking in different cultures, in Japan and throughout Asia, as well as in Europe and America. Plato's text offers an influential and thought-provoking focal point for discussion, like no other philosopher in the contemporary world. To read and discuss Plato leads us to common dialogue and universal philosophy.