

The Kyoto School of Philosophy and its Genealogy

A Prominent Group of Philosophers in the History of Modern Japanese Philosophy



Kitaro Nishida with staffs and students around 1913
(K. Nishida, *"Nishida Kitaro Zenshu, Vol.14"*, Iwanami Syoten, Tokyo (1951))



Landscape of the department of literature in the end of the Meiji period

IN 1906, the College of Letters was founded at Kyoto Imperial University, and lectures began in the department of philosophy. Kitaro Nishida (1870-1945) was assigned to Kyoto Imperial University in 1910, and Hajime Tanabe (1885-1963) was invited to the university as an assistant professor in 1919. The two professors mentored many capable philosophers at Kyoto Imperial University, and a group of philosophers known as the Kyoto School was formed.

What is the Kyoto School? It is difficult to clearly answer the question. However, an appropriate answer would be that the Kyoto School was an intellectual network of philosophers directly influenced in a personal and scholarly manner

by the two prominent philosophical scholars mentioned above, Kitaro Nishida and Hajime Tanabe.

The reason it is appropriate to describe the Kyoto School as a “network” is because its members were very closely related and profoundly influenced by each other. The relationship or influence is not a unilateral one, such as that of teacher to student. Even the students had a significant influence to their teachers’ thoughts. In addition to being inspired their students, Nishida and Tanabe also criticized and influenced each other.

In that sense, the Kyoto School may be described as a craft workshop. However, unlike craftspeople,



Member of the inaugural class of the literature department

the Kyoto School philosophers encouraged mutual criticism. Tanabe openly attacked Nishida's thought, and their students developed their own views, refuting Nishida and Tanabe's thoughts. Through such mutual criticism, a lot of distinctive ideas were generated.

A creative relationship that allowed for mutual criticism was built as Nishida taught his students the importance of classical literature, whilst simultaneously encouraging them to have their own views independent of the classics. In other words, Nishida urged his students to study not as researchers of philosophy, but as actual philosophers themselves. His approach produced many distinguished philosophers, notably the Zen Buddhist philosophers Shin'ichi Hisamatsu (1889-1980) and Keiji Nishitani (1900-1990), the Marxist philosophers Kiyoshi Miki (1897-1945) and Jun Tosaka, (1900-1945), and Torataro Shimomura (1902-1995) who produced outstanding works in

the areas of scientific philosophy and cultural history.

Another distinctive characteristic of the Kyoto School is that the philosophers developed an original brand of thought largely influenced by the Zen Buddhist concept of "nothingness," which was in direct contrast with Western philosophy. While Western philosophy was rooted in the philosophy of "being", the Kyoto School of philosophy developed an original perspective which stood between the Western philosophy of "being" and the Buddhist conception of "nothingness."

In 1995, a new chapter was added to the history of Japanese philosophy with the establishment of the Japanese Philosophy Course in Kyoto University's Faculty of Letters. The Japanese Philosophy Course aims to carry on the tradition of the Kyoto School and develop their thoughts further. However, the nature of the curriculum differs



Kitaro Nishida (1870-1945)

Nishida Kitarō was the most significant and influential Japanese philosopher of the twentieth-century. (from the WEB site "stanford encyclopedia of philosophy," <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nishida-kitaro/>)

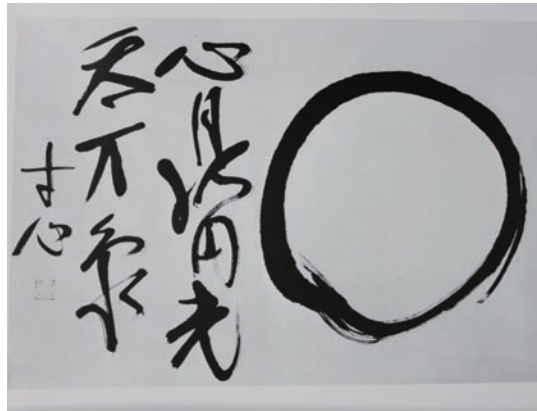
The Kyoto School (Kyōto-gakuha) is the name given to the Japanese philosophical movement centered at Kyoto University that assimilated western philosophy and religious ideas and used them to reformulate religious and moral insights unique to the East Asian cultural tradition.



Nishida's article on the first page of the primer issue of a philosophical magazine in April, 1916

from the studies of Nishida, Tanabe and their students, as the Kyoto School itself is a subject of research.

Nearly seventy years have passed since the end of World War II, and we can now examine Nishida's and Tanabe's work from the perspective of classical philosophy. This distance enables us to study the Kyoto School as a research subject from a wider perspective, examine its implications in the context of modern philosophy, and discover what it can contribute to current issues and circumstances.



A calligraphy that was drawn by Nishida in 1935 [Nishida Kitaro Ibokusyu Henshyu Iinkai, ed., "Nishida Kitaro Ibokusyu", Toeisha, Inc., Kyoto (1976)]

Another important role of the course is to promote collaboration on Japanese philosophy studies between Japanese and international researchers, as there was previously no platform for such discourse. In the past, diverse research activities were independently conducted without close collaboration or mutual criticism, which inhibited their progress. The course is anticipated to promote discussion among researchers in Japan and overseas, and contribute to the formation of a network for research into Japanese philosophy.

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WEB www.bun.kyoto-u.ac.jp/en/

www.bun.kyoto-u.ac.jp/en/departments/div_of_philosophy/japanese_philosophy



The Kyoto School Archive

Handwritten manuscripts by Kitaro Nishida are available on the website: Kyoto School Archive. The archive also contains thousands of digital images including works by Hajime Tanabe.

As the archive includes an imaged-based search engine, user can search for specific words in the images of handwritten documents.

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WEB www.kyoto-gakuha.info