

On the Problem of the Universality of Modern Western Philosophy Conceptual Framework: The Japanese Case

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Abstract

Many years the academic community has been discussing issues of a universal metalanguage as the general conceptual framework of modern social and humanitarian research, especially of philosophy. The article questions the claim that the language of Western philosophy was already accepted as a unified tool in the 20th century. The peculiarities of perception and further application of Western philosophical terminology in Japan in late 19th – first half of the 20th centuries are investigated here as a factual evidence base of argumentation. Special attention is given to examples of translation and interpretation of some concepts of Western origin, such as metaphysics, ethics, logic, substance, subject, etc., as observed in the works of eminent thinkers Nishi Amane, Inoue Tetsujiro, Nishida Kitaro, and Watsuji Tetsuro. The paper provides examples of new original concepts (as they did not have Western equivalents) developed by modern Japanese philosophers, such as Kimura Bin, Hiromatsu Wataru et al. The author concludes that the general conceptual framework that modern philosophy operates with is a very dynamic and open system, capable of transforming in different cultural contexts and in keeping with newly emerging issues that require analysis. The article identifies factors that provide philosophical communication between different cultures at the conceptual level, that is, the presence of a common circle of problems and presence of partial overlap between the key concepts. The author poses the problem of the emergence of new approaches and ideas in a situation of “conflicting interpretations,” or incomplete equivalence of similar notions when used by the parties in a dialogue, casting doubt on possibility, necessity and reasonability of exact reproduction of meanings and “complete domestication” in other cultures.

Keywords: language, conceptual system, intercultural communication, dialogue, Japanese philosophy, Nishi Amane, Inoue Tetsujiro, Nishida Kitaro, Watsuji Tetsuro.

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К вопросу об универсальности понятийного аппарата современной западной философии: японский кейс

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Оригинальная исследовательская статья

Аннотация

Уже не первый год в академическом сообществе обсуждается проблема существования единого метаязыка, общей понятийной рамки современных социогуманитарных наук, прежде всего философии. В статье приводятся аргументы, позволяющие подвергнуть сомнению утверждение, что в XX в. таким единым языком стал язык западной философии. В качестве фактологической доказательной базы аргументации исследуются особенности восприятия и дальнейшего применения западной философской лексики в Японии XIX – первой половины XX вв. на конкретных примерах перевода и осмысления понятий западного происхождения, таких как «метафизика», «этика», «логика», «субстанция», «субъект» и др., в трудах видных мыслителей эпохи – Ниси Аманэ, Иноуэ Тэцудзи-ро, Нисиды Китаро, Вацудзи Тэцуро. Также приводятся примеры создания современными японскими философами – Кимуруй Бином, Хиромацу Ватару и др. – новых оригинальных концептов, не имеющих западных аналогов. Автор приходит к выводу, что общая понятийная рамка, которой оперирует современная философия, представляет собой весьма динамичный и открытый механизм, способный трансформироваться в разных культурных контекстах

и с появлением новых проблем, требующих осмысления. В статье предпринимается попытка установить факторы, обеспечивающие философскую коммуникацию различных культур на понятийном уровне, а именно – наличие объединяющей проблематизации и хотя бы частичное пересечение смыслов ключевых понятий. Автор ставит проблему появления новых подходов и идей в ситуации «конфликта интерпретаций» или неполного совпадения значений одноименных концептов, используемых сторонами диалога, подвергая сомнению возможность, необходимость и правомерность требования абсолютного копирования смыслов и «вживания» в другие культуры.

Ключевые слова: язык, понятийный аппарат, межкультурная коммуникация, диалог, японская философия, Ниси Аманэ, Иноуэ Тэцудзиро, Нисида Китаро, Вацудзи Тэцуро.

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Introduction

The departure point for writing this article was a discussion held at the Institute of Philosophy of the Russian Academy of Sciences, where A.A. Krushinskiy thus formulated the problem: does the West European conceptual matrix currently have the status of a single conceptual space, and does it play the role of a trans-civilizational language in philosophy? The most reasonable way to solve this problem should be close study of the conceptual apparatus that modern philosophers operate in different countries. Therefore, the objective of this study is to consider examples of the perception of the Western philosophical language in Meiji Era Japan (1868–1912) and its application in modern Japanese philosophical discourse.

The author hopes to give an answer to the questions whether the language of Western philosophy really serves today as a uniform metalanguage, and whether such a philosophical metalanguage is possible at all, what the boundaries of its application are, and how rigid the framework it creates is, and whether a single conceptual apparatus is a major factor generating meanings - process and intellectual exchange in the modern world.

General approach to the problem

We start with general remarks that should not be overlooked when considering this problem.

In reality, there are no sterile conditions where only the Western or only the non-Western set of categories is used. Such a situation is impossible, especially in the modern world. There are no isolated static systems. Besides, Western philosophy itself is far from homogeneous.

Philosophizing is a process of questioning, ongoing reconsidering that happens through dialogue and involves criticism as an integral condition for the existence of philosophy. It is appropriate to recall the approach of Paul Ricœur, who considered the history of philosophy and philosophy itself as communication processes, in which “both older and current opinions interact, no matter whether close in spirit or radically opposed to each other” [Vdovina 2008, 6]. In this regard, one cannot but take into account the fact that Western philosophy itself embraces so many trends and is constantly changing, transforming and enriching its language. Even the concept of “philosophy” as such has endured a number of interpretations. The problem of a common philosophical language is a problem that cannot be considered outside the context of intercultural communication, or problems of interpretation and understanding. In the process of intercultural communication, the message of a representative of a certain culture, formulated in a set of concepts generated within the same culture, will inevitably be re-interpreted by a recipient, based on his/her own cultural perspective and understanding of the key concepts through the tradition to which they belong. In this

case, inevitably, in one way or another, an aberration of meanings will occur.

Specifics of the reception of the Western philosophical conceptual system in Japan of late 19th – early 20th centuries

In the last third of the 19th century, due to the efforts of Nishi Amane (1829–1897), the Japanese got acquainted with Western philosophy, when the first translations of philosophical concepts into Japanese appeared, including the very concept of “philosophy.” Despite the fact that most of these concepts had no analogues in the Japanese language, the characters used for their translation bore certain meanings associated with the Japanese cultural worldview. Since Japan’s intellectual tradition was formed through interaction of the components of several Asian religious and philosophical teachings, traces of nearly each of them can be found in the new translations of philosophical vocabulary.

In translating Western philosophical terms semantic components, and sometimes whole expressions were borrowed from the Chinese classical Confucian books *I-Ching*, *Zhōng Yōng*, *Li Ji*, *Lún Yǔ*, etc.

Originally, Japanese thought was not aimed at developing systematized metaphysical teachings and therefore, the corresponding terminology did not emerge. The very concept of “metaphysics,” as used to this day, was constructed during the Meiji period as a term borrowed from the definition of *Tao* as “existing outside of bodily forms”, from “Commentary to words attached” (“Xìcí zhuàn”) of *I Ching* (zhang 12). Thus, metaphysics was called the “science of what transcends forms” (*keijijogaku* 形而上学), while maintaining a certain connection with ancient Chinese ideas about *Tao* as “the path of Heaven and Earth.”

The concept of “ethics” (*rinrigaku* 倫理学), which came into use thanks to Inoue Tetsujirō (1855–1944) [Ejima 2015, 137], incorporates the character *rin* 倫, which was used to indicate the main social relationships in Confucianism: between the sovereign and subjects, father and son, husband and wife, older and younger brothers, and friends, originally mentioned in *Mencius*. Thus, from the very begin-

ning, the concept of “ethics” in Japan assumed human relationships at the basis. Subsequently, one of the most prominent philosophers of Japan, the author of the famous book *Ethics* (1931), systematically substantiated the understanding of ethics as a science of relations between people, based on an understanding of human existence (*ningen sonzai* 人間存在) as a dialectical unity of individual and social components [Watsuji 1962].

The hieroglyphic designation of a number of concepts passed from ancient Chinese philosophy unchanged. For example, the Chinese concept of *daode* 道 德 (literally “path and grace”) was organically integrated into Japanese philosophical vocabulary at the early stages of its formation and has survived to this day as the equivalent of the “morals,” “morality” concepts.

The concept of “logic” in the Japanese language also appeared due to Nishi Amane, who in 1874 published the first work on formal logic in Japan, *Chichi keimo* (“Logic and Enlightenment”) [Nishi 1960, 390–450]. Initially, he borrowed the equivalent of the concept of “logic” 致知 学 (literally “the science of extending knowledge to its utmost end”) [Sino 2014, 104] from the Chinese classical book *Dàxué*, where “extending knowledge to its utmost” appears as one of eight stages leading to the achievement of the “three great foundations” of the Confucian path: “to illustrate illustrious virtue, to establish kinship with people, and to stay with the highest excellence” (cf.: [Perelomov 2004, 78, 91-94]).

The composition of a number of philosophical terms contains key concepts of the neo-Confucian philosophy: “nature,” “principle,” “heart-consciousness,” etc. Thus, to denote the concept of “essence,” the terms “true nature” (*honsho* 本性), as well as reason (*risei* 理性), common to both Neo-Confucianism and Buddhism, were often used.

Buddhist terms and words used in Buddhist books were used, for example, to translate the concept of “causality” (*inga* 因果), which also renders the meaning of *karma* (the effect of actions on subsequent life and future rebirths), and the individual “I” (*ga* 我,

jiko 自己), which retained the semantic connotation of egocentrism and illusion, etc.

The terminology associated with the study of consciousness in Buddhist philosophy can be found in Japanese translations of the classics of German philosophy and works of Japanese philosophers of the 20th century. The notion *siki* 識, corresponding to the Sanskrit term *viññana* in Buddhism was chosen as equivalent of the philosophical concept of “consciousness,” which was also used in translating works of Western philosophy, and therefore, the use of this term in the new context could not be free from meanings inherent in *viññanavada*. The concept of “self-awareness” (*jikaku* 自覚) used in modern Japanese philosophy, is graphically equivalent to the Zen Buddhist term which means *comprehension of one's own true nature*, which is the nature of Buddha.

Thus, the perception of key concepts and ideas of Western philosophy and, above all, its main areas such as ethics, metaphysics and logic, by Japanese philosophers of the Meiji (1867–1912) and Taisho (1912–1926) Epochs proceeded place via mediation of Chinese philosophy and Buddhist teachings.

Ongoing philosophical dialogue with the West

Western philosophy in early 20th century largely acted as something alien, or *alter ego* for Japanese philosophy and many other national philosophical discourses.

Some concepts of Western philosophy remained as concepts of Western philosophy for the Japanese, although Japanese equivalents had been found. For example, if we look at the concept of “substance,” it has been characterized as a concept used by a number of Western philosophers as well as by the followers of Charvaka-Lokāyata in India. This is the case because the idea of substance was alien to the Japanese, for it contradicted their Buddhist worldview. The concept of substance in Japan in the positive sense was interpreted mainly by Marxists. This explains the lack of uniformity in the translating this concept into Japanese. Nishi Amane began to use the term *jittai* 実体 (“true body”) as an equivalent to this concept. He distin-

guished between substance and its attributes [Nakahata 2018, 30]. In their Dictionary of philosophical terms *Tetsugaku jii* (1881), Inoue Tetsujiro and Ariga Nagao proposed the concept of *honsitsu* 本質, which means “original essence,” and also *taikyoku* (Chinese “*tàijí*”) 太極 – “the Great limit,” i.e. the ultimate state of being [Inoue & Ariga 1884, 121], a term that first appears in the *Commentary to the Words Attached* (*Xici Zhuàn*) (zhang 11) of *I Ching*. Speaking about Spinoza’s understanding of substance, Inoue used the word *hontai* 本体, the meaning of which most likely corresponds to the *original//true essence*. Most Japanese philosophical concepts of the 20th century denied substance as existing in the phenomenal world, probably due to the deeply rooted Buddhist principle: “interdependent origination,” which rejects the very possibility of unchanging and independently existing substances. In this regard, the concept of non-substantiality appeared – *mujittai* 無実体 [Sueki 2018, 24].

Some concepts provoked controversy or rejection in Japan, i.e. served as a starting point for proving their inconsistency.

Thus, one of the key concepts of Husserl’s philosophy - the concept of “intentionality” - was criticized by Nishida Kitaro, Watsuji Tetsuro, and some other Japanese thinkers of the twentieth century. They denied intentionality as a key characteristic of consciousness. According to Watsuji Tetsuro, “what is called intentional activity is nothing more than a product of abstraction, which primarily excludes elements of connections and relationships from our actions, and then represents the remainder as an activity of individual consciousness” [Watsuji 1962, 36].

Formulating the difference in approaches with Western ontology based on the concepts of “being” and “substance”, Ueda Shizuteru emphasizes that regarding the key categories that describe reality, the Kyoto school developed the concepts of “absolute nothing”, “void”, “place”, foregrounding communication and relationships and shifting the emphasis from the substantial to the procedural aspect of existence. He also highlights the ideas inherent in the Nishida’s philosophy of “absolute nothing” – the ideas of “place” instead of “substance”, the “principle of self-contradictory self-identity” instead

of “principle of identity”, “removing the opposition of subject and object” instead of “dualism of subject and object”, a mind that is intrinsic to sensuality, instead of a strict division between reason and feelings [Ueda 2011, 24–25].

Therefore, the thesis that the West European rationality today should be regarded as rationality proper does not have sufficient grounds, if based on the argumentation of the Western conceptual system.

We cannot but state that at the beginning of the 20th century, there emerged a common space of philosophical discourse, where Japanese philosophers actively participated. The basis for this shared space was formation of a common problem field. The problems faced by Japanese philosophers, such as the problem of an individual, a subject, “the Self” and “the Other,” the creation of a new ontology, as well as the problem of overcoming the modernist paradigm of thinking, dictated the need to operate with existing concepts of Western philosophy, to reconsider them and create new concepts. In this respect, there exist some spectacular examples of the ways that Japanese thinkers interpreted the works of Husserl and Heidegger, above of all, “Being and Time,” and how they used the set of concepts of Western phenomenology in order to formulate their own ideas. Frequently, relatively minor concepts used by Western philosophers became central to the teachings of Japanese philosophers, and whole theories were formed around these; for example, the concept of “place” was most likely borrowed by Nishida Kitaro from Emil Lask.

The concept of “subject” was initially missing in the Japanese language. When translated into Japanese, it gave rise to two equivalents – *shutai* 主体 – the existential subject, which includes the component “body, essence,” and the epistemological subject *shukan* 主観, the second component of which is “view”. The latter term often operates as an integral part of the *subject-object* relationship. The former’s graphical prototype was the Chinese word for *emperor*. Although these terms were used to translate the Western concepts of “subject”, Japanese philosophers read their own meaning into this concept. For

example, Nishida Kitaro considers the subject not as a permanent center of cognitive and dynamic activity possessing certain properties, but as something constantly emerging and transforming itself in people's experience [Karellova 2018, 203].

Japanese philosophers of the 20th century proved fruitful in creating theories of the “mediating element,” which resulted in proposing new approaches to a number of problems, from the problem of intersubjectivity to modeling of the historical process. These are the concepts of “betweenness” (*aidagara* 間 柄) by Watsuji Tetsuro [Watsuji 1962, 73], translated into French as *milieu*, the category of “place” (*basho* 場所) by Nishida Kitaro (see: [Nishida 2012]), the theory of “logic of species” by Tanabe Hajime (see: [Tanabe 2010]), the “structure of intersubjective existence” by Hiromatsu Wataru [Hiromatsu 2017], and the idea of “methanoesis” by Kimura Bin [Kimura 2005, 55] et al.

Conclusion

The above examples allow us to draw the following conclusions. It is impossible to discuss any fixed structure of the world philosophy conceptual system. The concepts of Western philosophy are fluid and do not create a rigid framework for today's philosophical thought.

Firstly, they undergo certain transformations in real-life discourse and in the logical and semantic context of other languages. New shades of meaning are often assigned to the concepts, and they begin to play a completely different role in works of a non-Western philosopher, e.g., Japanese.

Secondly, the key concepts of Western philosophy often acquire more than one equivalent in non-Western languages, expressing various semantic aspects and nuances of such a concept.

Thirdly, the presence of a set of concepts of Western origin does not exclude creation of new concepts by non-Western philosophers, and these concepts gradually become an integral part of the world's philosophical processes.

Fourthly, as it happened in Japan, for example, the set of concepts shaped in Western philosophy was widely used to develop ideas of

national culture, in order to convey the ideas back to the West and to globalize them. At the same time, the conceptual framework of Western origin received a new impact for further development in the new context.

No less important is existence of philosophical categories in the common field of problems. It would be more accurate to say that the existing philosophical categories are more likely to set a problem field than to continue as constants for everyone.

The conceptual framework of world philosophy is very fluid and blurred. There exist very general contours of concepts, outlines of meanings, and a significant part of these has Western origins. However, one should distinguish between these general contours of concepts and their conceptualization by a particular philosopher belonging to a particular culture. Therefore, we are only able to make judgments about partial overlapping of the meanings of key philosophical categories.

As a result, strictly speaking, each philosopher builds his own set of concepts and his own coordinate system anew, although at the same time his vision embraces the legacy of many philosophers of various traditions and epochs.

Countries that have developed a domestic market for intellectual literature and obtained the possibility to philosophize in their national language, are more productive and original in creating new concepts. In Japan, it is difficult to be a philosopher without taking into account the legacy of the Kyoto school of philosophy.

Acquaintance with the legacy of the Western conceptual framework is necessary but not sufficient for a philosopher in Japan.

In addition, the ideas of Western philosophers, set forth in a Japanese translation, acquire a new meaning, and are perceived from a different angle. In this context, it is appropriate to mention the statement of the modern Japanese scholar Kohama Itsuo, who put it as key idea on the dust cover of his book *Japanese as the Language of Philosophy*: “If you philosophize in Japanese, then it becomes clear where Descartes and Heidegger were wrong” [Kohama 2018, cover]. He sees the mission of modern Japanese philosophy and

his own mission in “making a radical attempt to discover a new philosophy in Japanese, based on the grammatical structure of the national language overcoming the aporia of Western philosophy that arose due to its logocentricity” [Kohama 2018, cover].

As for the need for complete immersion in another culture, this does not happen in real life; and actually this is not required. In conditions of genuine dialogue, there always remains a share of misunderstanding. However, this is not an insurmountable obstacle to constructive progress in the dialogue. In the process of communication, it is precisely due to new interpretation and reconsideration that philosophy is moving forward. On the one hand, complete immersion is an unattainable super task for a researcher of a foreign cultural philosophical text. On the other hand, the transition to a single system of worldview and logic would mean reduction and depletion of the world picture, and a decrease in creative potential. Interpretation and criticism from the “other” integrates new meanings and often provides additional tools for solving a particular problem.

Misunderstanding and rejection appear sometimes more productive than the desire to fully and unconditionally integrate into a foreign cultural coordinate system. Emergence of new problems calls for creation of adequate tools. The development of Japanese philosophy provides a clear example of openness to the world and successful intercultural dialogue, in which new approaches arise as a result of reassessment of achievements of various cultural traditions and philosophical trends.

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