Toward a Critical Non-Humanism in Postwar Japan

Jay HETRICK*

Abstract
In this article, I argue that the infamous discussions around “overcoming modernity” that occurred in Japan in 1942 shared Michel Foucault’s conceptual conflation between humanism and modernism. That is, these discussions were not only declarations—in line with other postcolonial struggles of the time—against the dominance of the West politically and culturally. Philosophically, the programme of overcoming modernity can be understood as a set of discourses on anti-humanism that, in some ways, foreshadow those we find in Europe two decades later. In the case of the Kyoto School, the anti-humanist standpoint arose quite naturally from the particular philosophical history of Japan, combined with the fact that the philosophers in this school were close readers of Nietzsche and Heidegger, anti-humanists avant la lettre. For Sakaguchi Ango, whose ideas were very much opposed to the Kyoto School, a critique of the human was developed from his enthusiastic embrace of Jean-Paul Sartre. Ultimately, I argue, we need both the Kyoto School and Sakaguchi in order to understand the theoretical foundation for the various forms of critical non-humanism we find in contemporary Japanese art, philosophy, and culture.

Keywords: Sakaguchi Ango, Kyoto School, Michel Foucault, subjectivity, non-humanism

H kritičnemu nehumanizmu v povojni Japonski

Izvleček
V tem članku trdim, da so zloglasne razprave o »premagovanju modernosti«, ki so se zgodile na Japonskem leta 1942, vsebovale konceptualno mešanje humanizma in modernizma Michela Foucaulta. To pomeni, da te razprave niso bile le izjave – v skladu z drugimi postkolonialnimi boji tistega časa – proti politični in kulturni prevladavi Zahoda. Filozofsko lahko program preseganja modernosti razumemo kot skupaj diskurzov o protihumanizmu, ki na neki način napovedujejo tiste, ki jih najdemo v Evropi dve desetletji pozneje. V primeru kjotske šole protihumanistično stališče povsem naravno izhaja iz posebne filozofske zgodovine Japonske, skupaj z dejstvom, da so bili filozofi te šole pozorni bralci Nietzscheja in Heideggerja, protihumanistov avant la lettre. Za Sakaguchija Anga, čigar ideje so močno nasprotovalje kjotski šoli, se je kritika humanizma razvila iz njegovega

* Jay HETRICK, College of Fine Arts and Design, University of Sharjah.
Email address: jhetrick@sharjah.ac.ae
Introduction

In the midst of the general postwar movement towards Existentialism in Europe and, more specifically, following Jean-Paul Sartre’s 1945 lecture “Existentialism is a Humanism”, many thinkers began to problematize the conception of the human that had been at the core of Western philosophical discourse for several centuries. This tendency became theoretically robust with so-called French poststructuralism, especially after the publication of Michel Foucault’s *The Order of Things*, Louis Althusser’s *For Marx*, and Jacques Lacan’s *Écrits* in 1966 (which, notably, was also the year in which Sartre gave a series of lectures in Japan (Asabuki 1996)). Although the discourses on anti-humanism were heterogeneous and devoid of any “agreement on a positive definition of an alternative model to humanism” (Han-Pile 2010, 118), they generally entailed “a denunciation both of foundationalism and of an Enlightenment-inspired, progressivist view of history as the result of the actions of autonomous agents” (ibid., 119). Foucault’s target is an idea of the human that he describes as an empirico-transcendental “folding” of subjectivity which, in the Enlightenment, became simultaneously “an object of possible knowledge” as well as “the being through which all knowledge is possible” (Foucault 1994a, 607). He argues, somewhat against the grain of scholarly consensus, that although Renaissance thinkers were “able to allot human beings a privileged position in the order of the world”, they were not yet able to conceive of this particular form of enfolded subjectivity (Foucault 1994c, 318). Crucially, because the human was no longer “grounded upon God’s infinite transcendence”, but was rather self-grounded in its folding upon itself, humanism marked a “threshold beyond which we recognize our modernity” (ibid., 317).

In the following, I argue that the infamous discussions around “overcoming modernity” that occurred in Japan in 1942 shared this basic conflation of humanism and modernism. That is, these discussions were not only declarations—concurrent with other postcolonial struggles of that time—against the dominance of the West politically and culturally. Philosophically, the programme of overcoming modernity should be understood as another set of discourses on anti-humanism that in some ways foreshadow those we find in Europe. As we shall see, in the...
case of the Kyoto School this anti-humanist standpoint arose from the particular philosophical history of Japan, combined with the fact that Kyoto School thinkers were close readers of Nietzsche and Heidegger, anti-humanists *avant la lettre.*

For Sakaguchi Ango, whose ideas were very much opposed to the Kyoto School, humanism was problematized by way of his enthusiastic embrace of Sartre. We need both the Kyoto School and Sakaguchi in order to understand the theoretical foundation for the various forms of contemporary non-humanism we find in Japanese art, philosophy, and culture today. For example, in a particular trajectory of Japanese contemporary art, “it appears to be a perfectly normal and everyday affair to decenter subjectivity” and to affirm a paradoxical “synthesis between subjectivity and objectivity” (Hetrick 2022b, 552). In 1957, Kusama Yayoi claimed that “when I wish to paint a bird, I try to place myself inside the character of the bird and speak as I imagine the bird would speak. I do the same for a rock, a fish, a tree” (Kusama Yayoi, quoted in Hetrick 2022b, 551). Similarly, in 2012 Tanaka Min explained that “thinking of oneself as a center seems inseparable from our typical understanding of subjectivity. But I can shift my subjectivity to something other than a fixed center, for example, to a bowl of rice” (Tanaka Min, quoted in Hetrick 2022b, 551).

I maintain that such non-humanist standpoints are critical in the sense that they actively resist both the collapse into fascist ideology and the withdrawal into humanist, posthumanist, or transhumanist forms of individualism.

Versions of individualist subjectivity can be traced across the spectrum of contemporary Japanese thought and culture, including in the Anpō theorists Maruyama Masao and Yoshimoto Takaaki, the globally recognized philosopher Karatani Kōjin, as well as in the recent social phenomena of *otaku.* Yoshimoto was arguably the most influential thinker of the Japanese New Left. His “End of a Fictitious System” was a key text for student radicals in 1968 and, perhaps more importantly, his ideas were formative for the next generation of public intellectuals, including especially Karatani and Asada Akira. In this text, Yoshimoto expresses his aversion towards any ideology which demands that people “sacrifice the private, serve the public” (Yoshimoto 2005, 1097). His target was not simply wartime totalitarianism but, more directly, the form of democracy advocated by Maruyama as well as the ideology of the

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1 French anti-humanism also has a prehistory, with respect to its own readings of Nietzsche and Heidegger, that can be traced back to at least the 1930s (Geroulanos 2010). Furthermore it should be noted that, in the early years of the postwar period, this embrace of anti-humanism became somewhat attenuated due to a perceived conflation with totalitarian ideologies.

2 Furthermore, Tanaka’s practice might be productively situated within the Foucauldian lineage of ethico-aesthetic cultivation, since he frequently collaborated with the French psychoanalyst Félix Guattari, who developed his own conception of ethico-aesthetics after the later Foucault. When asked about his collaborations with Guattari, Tanaka claimed that he can “translate through my body” Guattari’s theory of de-subjectification (Tanaka, quoted in Fuller 2016, 254).
Japanese Communist Party. He claimed that in true democracy “private interests are the highest priority”, and individuals are therefore more important than the state (ibid., 1098). The subject position he promoted was a form of radical autonomy (jiritsu) in which individuals were given the right to live freely and indifferently to any particular ruling power. However, this critical standpoint ultimately developed into a seemingly apolitical ideology in which Yoshimoto condoned the participation of autonomous individuals in the “super capitalism” of a post-Fordist consumer society. Interestingly, clues to the theoretical foundation of Yoshimoto’s concept of autonomy can be gleaned from an interview he conducted with Foucault in 1978 on the theme of overcoming Marxism. Although it is not clear to what extent Yoshimoto was “a deep reader of Marx” (Hasumi Shigehiko, quoted in Foucault 2024, 182), it seems that he—like his political rival Maruyama—wished to recover a Marx before Engels, that is, a young humanist Marx who was primarily concerned with problems of “the individual will, self-consciousness, and individual ethics” (Yoshimoto, quoted in Foucault 2024, 127). In this interview, Foucault and Yoshimoto reached an impasse because French poststructuralism had vehemently rejected a return to the “young Marx”. For Althusser, Marx’s theoretical revolution occurred precisely in his break from an Enlightenment conception of humanism, which he identified as the moment of Marx’s turn away from the ideology of his Hegelian youth. Similarly, just as Foucault tried to avoid Yoshimoto’s persistent questions about political will in this interview, he tended to avoid the term autonomy—understood as an ontological property of the subject that exists somehow outside of power relations—throughout his work. As we shall see, even after Foucault introduced the concept of subjectivation in 1980, a form of ethical agency is decoupled from Kantian autonomy in the development of critical “techniques of the self”.

Yoshimoto followed his logic of radical autonomy to its natural conclusion, and in 2001 stated that those who withdrawal from society should not be “dragged back”, but rather granted the right of individual privacy and left alone (Yoshimoto, quoted in Cassegard 2008, 7). In the same year, Azuma Hiroki published his book about the otaku subculture in order to reveal “the psychological structure of contemporary Japan” (Azuma 2009, vii). Interestingly, one explicit goal of the book was to “resuscitate criticism and theory” (ibid., viii) from the likes of Karatani and Asada who, in different ways, follow Yoshimoto in the use of the rhetoric of withdrawal (Cassegard 2008). Azuma also claims that otaku subculture is not simply a phenomenon specific to Japan, but rather a symptom of our global contemporary condition. Turning an offhand remark by Alexandre Kojève on its head, Azuma argues that in its postwar period of Americanization, Japanese subjects became animalized. This “becoming animal” refers to a form of hyper-consumption that Azuma describes as a primal and un-reflective type of “craving” (Azuma 2009,
86), which is opposed to the more complex type of “intersubjective desire” that is necessary for building “social relations” (ibid., 87). This behaviour is further compared to that of “drug addicts” (ibid., 88), and is specifically conceived as a radically compounded version of the “logic of American-style consumer society” (ibid., 87). This subject position is therefore not “human” in the Enlightenment sense of the term, but should be characterized as an uncritical posthumanism that lacks “self-consciousness” (ibid., 86). The curious continuity between the critical humanism of Yoshimoto and the uncritical posthumanism of otaku—which both support forms of subjectivity based upon hyper-consumption and extreme social withdrawal—can already be detected in the writings of Sakaguchi An-go in his visceral rejection of the Kyoto School’s anti-humanism.

Sakaguchi’s intervention, while not officially part of the discussions on overcoming modernity, occurred alongside them. In terms of Japan’s intellectual history, his writings function as a supplement to these symposia by injecting a spirit of critique into the more general postwar debates on Japanese subjectivity. Sakaguchi employed Sartre in his vehement critique of romantic and quietist images of pre-modern Japan, such as those depicted in the German architect Bruno Taut’s A Personal View of Japanese Culture, which imagines a pure tradition of Japanese aesthetics that only bolstered and emboldened the nationalistic discourse on Japanese uniqueness. In retrospect it seems that Taut, who lived in Japan from 1933 to 1936, merely served as a strawman for Sakaguchi’s critique against that discourse. But Sakaguchi was primarily a writer, and although he helped to introduce Sartre’s literary works to a Japanese audience, he was seemingly uninterested in engaging with Sartre’s wider philosophy. Therefore his critical spirit, while powerful and influential, was not developed into a systematic method. Quite possibly due to the relative dominance of the Kyoto School—and the influence of German thought more generally—“Sartre the philosopher did not catch the eye more than Sartre the writer” until after World War II (WWII) (Kobayashi and Seki 2020, 286). In 1956, Takeuchi Yoshirō published the first philosophical introduction to Sartre’s work in which he implored the Japanese to employ Sartrean thought as a weapon to fight against the many foolish ideas … of the Japanese spiritual climate. We must radically get rid of obscure thoughts, obscure human relationships, and obscure daily behaviors. For this mission no thought is stronger than Sartre’s. (Takeuchi, quoted in Kobayashi and Seki 2020, 287)

Similarly, Karatani claims that there was a basic “opposition between German thought and French thought” that fueled some of the internal disagreements at the “Overcoming Modernity” symposium (Karatani 2005, 104).
Even if his language is itself purposely obscure, it would have been clear enough to Japanese intellectuals that Takeuchi was advocating Sartre’s philosophy in order to develop a method of critique to combat lingering prewar sensibilities: “learn radicalism in philosophical reflection, and in this way, strive to fundamentally get rid of the obscure Japanese reality where collusion is dominant” (Takeuchi, quoted in Kobayashi and Seki 2020, 289). For him, the first critical task was aimed precisely against the type of collusion suggested by members of the Kyoto School at the “Overcoming Modernity” symposium, which was repeated in Nishida Kitarō’s 1944 essay “Theorizing the Kokutai” where he states that, in the ideal body politic “the individual and the whole form an immediate unity” (Nishida, quoted in Heisig, Kasulis, and Maraldo 2011, 1025). Rather than promote a kind of fascist mind-meld, Takeuchi instead follows Sartre in claiming that “genuine human relationships” truly function only through a logic of “conflictual encounter” (Takeuchi, quoted in Kobayashi and Seki 2020, 292).

The German philosopher Karl Löwith, who resided in Japan from 1936 to 1941, also notes the historical lack of a critical attitude in Japanese philosophy, particularly with regard to how foreign ideas have been appropriated. He claims that Japanese thinkers have generally not accounted for “the incongruity of the philosopher’s concepts in contrasts with their own concepts” (Löwith, quoted in Kobayashi and Seki 2020, 288). While not typically referred to as “uncritical”, this tendency has been traced back to the 6th century, at the time when various elements of Chinese and Korean culture were introduced to Japan:

> When foreign ideas or theories have entered Japan, its intellectuals have usually not resisted them as alienating or threatening (as Hegelianism would predict), but instead quite the opposite […] Japanese thinkers throughout history have generally been eager to consume the latest idea or theory from abroad. (Kasulis 2019, 83)

Japanese philosophers have tended to “consume” other ideas by way of three slightly different methodologies: what Thomas Kasulis has called allocation, hybridization, and relegation. Relegation, the most common method we find in Japanese intellectual history, is a form of syncretism that accepts “a new or opposing theory but only by consigning it to a subordinate position within an enlarged version of itself” which usually maintains a more “traditional” view (ibid., 85). We find relegation “in such modern philosophers as Nishida Kitarō”, who absorbed a variety of Western theories, but only “partial[ly] when compared to his own” (ibid., 86). All three methods can be considered uncritical in the sense that, until quite recently, Japan did not adopt a system of logical argumentation comparable to that
of the West. The closest alternative is the logic of soku-hi—“a logic of sameness/difference”—which was developed most fully by Nishida, although “no Japanese philosopher ever developed this idea” into a formal system of analysis and refutation (ibid., 87). It is only in the postwar period, with figures like Takeuchi Yoshirō and Ichikawa Hakugen, that we see the development of a critical method in Japanese thought, which would “shift the intellectual scheme” and thus “help change Japanese society after the war” (Kobayashi and Seki 2020, 285).

An important point to note, however, is that the inherently synthetic nature of Japanese philosophy disallows from the outset any notion of Japanese exceptionalism. The very concepts of subjectivity and critique—which together form the discipline of ethics—came to Japan from the outside, perhaps necessarily so. But this does not mean the discourses around them were simply one-directional and hierarchical. For example, the notion of critique I rely upon here in order to investigate the non-humanist forms of subjectivity put forth by the Kyoto School and Sakaguchi Ango, comes itself from a lecture that Foucault gave immediately following his return from Japan in 1978. Furthermore, Félix Guattari—who builds upon Foucault’s work in interesting ways and travelled to Japan eight times during the 1980s—argues that Japan has become the prototypical model for contemporary forms of subjectivation precisely because it hovers somewhere “between the animist worlds of Shinto and the non-places of a neon hypermodernity” (Hetrick 2015, 138). With this motley cast of figures, I hope to show that the complex problem of conceptualizing a critical non-humanism in postwar Japan means, in simplified terms, laying the foundation for forms of subjectivity that can accommodate a conception of no-self without becoming complicit with totalitarian politics. Ironically, Takeuchi has argued that the “poststructuralist critique of subjectivity can only be reactionary in Japanese culture where a truly modern political subjectivity has yet to be formed” (Takeuchi, quoted in Koschmann 1996, 6). Unfortunately, this claim betrays the reality of the various forms of subjectivity on display in contemporary Japanese art and culture. Furthermore, it betrays the direction of leading-edge Japanese philosophers today, who are very much concerned with the problem of contemporary subjectivation in our post-Fordist and post-Fukushima era, and who are deeply informed by French poststructuralism (Kohso 2020; Sato 2022). Furthermore, such critical non-humanism has much less to do with a transhumanist becoming-cyborg—which should be understood

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4 For a detailed analysis of the logic of soku-hi, as well as an alternative “comparative methodology of the gap” that takes into consideration the kind of conflictual encounter we find in Sartre, see Hetrick (2022a) and Hetrick (2023b).

5 “From the publication of Nishida’s Inquiry into the Good up to the present, the Kyoto School has not produced an adequate philosophy of ethics.” (Kasulis 2018, 556)
as “enhancing individual senses or abilities” based upon an idea of human exceptionalism (Murata et al. 2024, 114)—than a more fundamental “unfolding of a space in which it is once more possible to think” (Foucault 1994c, 342):

What frightens me, in humanism, is that it presents a certain form of ethics as a universal model, valid for any type of freedom. I think that our future includes more secrets, more possible freedoms and inventions than humanism allows us to imagine. (Foucault 1988, 15)

Foucault—who provocatively claimed that Sartre remained, in some respects, a “nineteenth-century philosopher” (Foucault 1994a, 542)—speculated, in conversation with the Zen master Ōmori Sōgen, that the future of thought would inevitably occur by way of encounters “between Europe and non-Europe” (Foucault 2024, 156).

**WWII and the Problem of the Japanese Subject**

In the aftermath of WWII, one of the most urgent and heated debates within Japanese intellectual circles concerned the concept of subjectivity. This urgency arose from both the particular “socio-political circumstances and modes of consciousness in the immediate postwar years” as well as the wider “intellectual history of Japan since the Meiji Restoration”. As we shall see, these two interrelated contexts, although specific to Japan, were always negotiated in relation to global trends of thought. In fact, the significance of the term *subjectivity* is itself entirely “bound up with Japanese readings” of European philosophy (Koschmann 1981, 610). The imperative to renegotiate the position of the subject within society was initially driven by a very practical need, which was seemingly universal amongst the Japanese even though a multitude of varying solutions across the political spectrum as well as across academic disciplines were ultimately proposed. On August 15th 1945, “the great Japanese empire collapsed … morally, politically, and economically. The state was completely helpless in the face of popular demands for such essentials as food, clothing, and shelter. As a result, the people were coerced to become ‘individualists’” (Hidaka Rokurō, quoted in Koschmann 1981, 613). This very practical imperative to reconsider subjectivity was complicated by recent memories of the prewar ideology of selfless devotion to the state apparatus. However, the philosophical ground for the ensuing discussions had a complex trajectory that stretched back at least half a century.

During the Meiji Restoration, Nishi Amane proposed that the modern Western categories of objective and subjective were useful for thinking about the
relationships between Japanese systems of thought and those of China and Europe. By the time that Nishi coined a term to render “philosophy” into Japanese, these two traditions had impacted Japanese modes of thought so deeply that they fundamentally transformed the language itself, such that “new words based on Chinese sinographs” and a “Western conception of grammar” were integrated linguistically in ways that are nearly imperceptible today (Maraldo 2019, 337). But it was not until the publication of Nishida Kitarō’s Inquiry into the Good in 1911 that we have the first original work of Japanese philosophy and, more specifically, the first Japanese concept of subjectivity. For Nishida, the concept of subjectivity found in East Asian Buddhism is grounded not upon a transcendent and essential self, but on a transcendental and immanent field of “pure experience” that precedes any bifurcation into the Western categories of the experiencing subject and experienced object. Remarkably, he articulates this idea in terms that are derived largely from Western philosophy, in particular William James and Henri Bergson (Hetrick 2023a, 144). Nishida spent the rest of his philosophical career further refining this seemingly “ontological and resolutely unpolitical” project of overcoming the modern subject (Stevens 2011, 232).

In 1942, following the outbreak of hostilities between Japan and the United States, several of Nishida’s students—who had been grouped together under the appellation “Kyoto School”—participated in two symposia whose ambition was nothing less than renegotiating Japan’s cultural and political relationship with modern Western civilization. Amongst some factions, there was a heightened sense that the notion of “Overcoming Modernity”—the title of the most famous of these discussions—productively dovetailed with concurrent postcolonial struggles that were occurring globally. At the other symposium—entitled “Japan and the World-Historical Standpoint”—Nishitani Keiji claimed that:

Asia has been for Europeans something to act upon, and it is from that viewpoint alone that they have viewed this part of the world. … But Europe is ceasing to be the world. The reason for this decline in global status is the emergence of the colored races. This development appears to have cast a great shadow over the West. (Nishitani Keiji, quoted in Williams 2014, 116–18)

However, the political language employed at these symposia was completely inadequate and sometimes seemed to support the ultranationalist discourse regarding “the military overthrow of Western hegemony in favor of a Japanese hegemony” (Stevens 2011, 234) and, more generally, theories of Japanese exceptionalism. That is, the political dimension was often conflated with supposedly apolitical
discussions around aesthetics and culture. The war was seen as the culminating symptom of a long and deep spiritual struggle, which now sought to rid Japan of the “sickness” of Western modernity. And it had to be fought on two fronts simultaneously:

The war we are fighting today seeks to overthrow Anglo-American power externally, even as it serves internally as medical treatment for a sick spirit weakened by modernization. (Kamei Katsuichiro, quoted in Harootunian 2019, 199)

Such a conflation (and, ultimately, confusion) was perhaps due to the fact that, in an environment where “political and economic liberalisms themselves had been hunted down”, explicit, implicit, and self-imposed censorship occurred to such an extent that “freedom was only realized at an imaginary level”—that is, in “mere” philosophical terms (Karatani 2005, 109). In particular, the language of Nishitani’s contribution to the symposium on overcoming modernity performs this confusion, which is further compounded when we recall that Japanese philosophy has itself been deeply affected and inflected, from its origins, by Chinese and Western languages. This is how we should understand statements like “one of the characteristics of the overcoming modernity symposium was its criticism of German thought” (ibid., 104). Kobayashi Hideo—a Bergsonist who, as editor of the Bungakukai literary journal, was the organizer of the symposium—even went so far as to criticize Nishitani’s paper for lacking “the sensuality of the Japanese people’s language” (quoted in Karatani 2005, 105).

Nishitani begins his paper by explaining that the term “modernity” refers to certain elements of Western culture, as they were appropriated in Japan since the Meiji Restoration. These elements, with all their “discordant divisions”, had “infiltrated” Japanese culture to such an extent that there was a “danger of splitting apart the very foundation of the nation’s unified worldview”. Very quickly we understand that Nishitani’s critique of modernity has to do, more specifically, with a conception of subjectivity that he traces from Renaissance “humanism” to the type of “individualism” that had been exported to Japan during the interwar period (Nishitani 2008, 52–53). This modern individual was symbolized in Japanese popular culture “as new subjectivities like the ‘modern girl’ and the ‘Marx boy’” (Harootunian 2019, 202). Implicit to his argument is the idea that the Japanese subject should be understood with a motto that might be stated as—riffing on Bruno Latour—“we have never been human”, in the technical sense that it cannot be drawn unproblematically from this Western tradition of humanism. This is because it is not based upon an “I am”, an individual ego whose fundamental
cognitive capacity is to think (*cogito, ergo sum*), but rather a no-self (*muga*) that feels in the heart (*kokoro*). Nishitani takes specific aim at the Kantian subject, whose conditions of possibility are the transcendent ideas of God, World, and Soul, which have no real correlate in the immanent metaphysics of Mahāyāna Buddhist thought. The call to overcome modernity, for Nishitani, therefore means first and foremost a reconstruction of the Japanese—but ultimately pan-Asian as well as transhistorical—worldview, starting with the “ethical” task of “looking within ourselves for what remains of subjectivity” (Nishitani 2008, 54). He argues that we will find “true subjectivity”, a “subjective nothingness” that the “post-Re-naissance West” could have never articulated because it lacks the Buddhist logic of “negation-*qua*-affirmation”, which makes possible the proposition: “subjectivity appears as the negation of the conscious self,” the “no-self that destroys the ego” (ibid., 55).

This conception of subjectivity is consistent with Nishida Kitarō’s seemingly “unpolitical” onto-logic—which he calls “contradictory self-identity”—as well as the Mahāyāna view of no-self (Hetrick 2022a). However, it is in the second half of Nishitani’s paper that the more politicized version of Kyoto School philosophy becomes apparent. As some have argued, Nishitani and the other Kyoto School participants of the 1942 symposia “had a more enthusiastic attitude toward Japanese imperialism than Nishida” (Ives 1994, 39). In this regard, there are two interrelated issues in Nishitani’s paper. First, he argues that “only Oriental religiosity” can provide the proper conceptual foundation for the “standpoint of subjective nothingness” he advocates (Nishitani 2008, 56) and, “even in the Orient itself, Japan is the sole country”—with its unique mixture of Buddhism, Shinto, and Confucianism—that is able to do so effectively (ibid., 58). This is because the ethical task of extinguishing the ego is conflated with a “self-annihilation in devotion to the nation” (ibid., 56), an “ethics of service” that has deep roots in “Japan’s traditional spirit” (ibid., 59). Therefore, the ethics of self-cultivation becomes a national ethics that seems to support the discourse of Japanese exceptionalism and, even worse, the fascist ideology of complete submission to the state. Second, although Nishitani specifically rules out the idea of founding “a world empire through conquest” by negating-*qua*-affirming “the standpoint of mere national self-interest” (ibid., 61), he explicitly employs this ideology to further justify Japanese military policy at the outset of WWII: “our activity of constructing a Greater East Asia while fighting the United States and England” has become “a world-historical necessity” (ibid., 60).

The blatant complicity of Nishitani’s rhetoric with state ideology and policy has been somewhat mitigated by the discovery of memoranda which reveal that Kyoto School philosophers, including Nishitani, held top secret meetings at the behest
of the Japanese Navy with the aim of “correcting government policy”, including “toppling the regime of Prime Minister Tojo Hideki, who with the Army had pressed for war with the United States” (Ôhashi 2019, 371). Furthermore, in later writings Nishitani claimed that the real intention of his wartime writings was to “open up a path in thought that might emerge from within the ideas of ultra-nationalism” (Nishitani, quoted in Mori 1994, 316). From this perspective, the project of overcoming modernity has been seen as neither a simple overcoming of the West in favour of the East, nor a simple overcoming of the modern in favour of the traditional but, more fundamentally, an “overcoming of Japan and of the world” (Mori 1994, 319). This endeavour entails, first and foremost, a renegotiation of the seeming dualism between reason and practice through the paradoxical logic of negation-qua-affirmation. Whereas the formation of the post-Renaissance subject in the West can be characterized as being “grounded in rationality” (ibid., 331), as indicated by an emphasis on the cogito, the kind of empty subject that Nishitani proposes to cultivate is based upon heartfelt (kokoro) “practice”, by which he specifically means Zen meditation and chanting. This ethico-aesthetic practice depends on a paradoxical “disassociation from our traditional spirit and a continuation of it. It is a creative continuation of tradition” (Nishitani, quoted in Mori 1994, 331). We will come back to the creative use of tradition for the purpose of subjectivation in the next section. But it must be noted that although we can extract a robust, non-humanist conception of subjectivity from the writings of the Kyoto School, historically their impact upon postwar thinkers in Japan was negligible. This is largely due to the fact that young people—strongly persuaded by the presentations of the symposia, which ultimately “provided a foundation for resignation to death” (Ives 1994, 27)—had come to feel, in the postwar period, that they had been betrayed.

This resentment fuelled a broader suspicion of any form of Japanese exceptionalism in the years immediately following WWII. For example, Native Studies was “virtually a taboo topic in Japan’s academic circles” until the mid-1970s (Fujiwara and Nosco 2021). Later this included various critiques of Zen, specifically with regard to how it might be utilized in the conceptualization of the contemporary Japanese subject. Ichikawa Hakugen—who also criticizes the vestiges of state Shinto in postwar Japan—has argued that following the Meiji Restoration prominent figures in Zen took at best a submissive stance towards official state policy. At worst, some even “helped rationalize, glorify, or even promote Japanese imperialism” (Ives 1994, 16). That is, Ichikawa claims that modern Japanese Buddhism has generally tended to be complicit with “state power and authority”, with “militarism and war” (Ichikawa Hakugen, quoted in Ives 1994, 22). For example, D. T. Suzuki called the Japanese involvement in the 1894 war against China a
“religious action” (Suzuki, quoted in Ives 1994, 17). Ida Tōin declared of the 1904 Russo-Japanese War that the “dyad of sovereign and subject is the intrinsic nature of our country”, and that Japanese subjects should make themselves “of service” since the “imperial wind and the Buddha's sun are nondual” (Ida, quoted in Ives 1994, 18). Hata Eshō celebrated the attack on Pearl Harbor as a “holy day” on par with the “day on which Shakyamuni realized the Way” (Hata, quoted in Ives 1994, 19). Ichikawa makes a further claim that such statements reveal the ethical and political implications that naturally arise from the paradoxical onto-logic of Buddhist metaphysics, which leads to “a mental state that is static, aesthetic, and contemplative” (Ichikawa, quoted in Ives 1994, 26).

It is from this point of view that Ichikawa finds a “parallel problematic” in the late writings of Nishida Kitarō (Ives 1994, 16). We see this most clearly in the concept of acting intuition, one of the major outcomes of decades of persistent philosophical work to “transform and overcome the shortcomings” of his earlier notion of pure experience (Kazashi 1999, 108). Acting intuition, for Nishida, is an ethico-aesthetic standpoint that short-circuits the normal dichotomies between active and passive, subject and object, precisely because one has achieved a state of no-self: We see by becoming things. Acting intuition refers to that standpoint which Dōgen characterizes as achieving enlightenment by all things advancing [...] An activity that is truly selfness is actively intuitive. (Nishida 1989, 102)

This statement, in itself, is indeed “ontological and resolutely unpolitical” (Stevens 2011, 232). Furthermore, I would argue that Ichikawa misconstrues Nishida’s logic of contradictory self-identity, which he takes to entail simply that “non-freedom is freedom”, or that “to become a master of every situation” is “to become a servant of every situation” (Ichikawa, quoted in Ives 1994, 26; my emphasis). There are indeed philosophical issues with Nishida’s onto-logic, but these have nothing to do with the notion that it necessarily produces a quietist or complicit political stance (Hetrick 2023a). Rather, in his 1944 essay “Theorizing the Kokutai” Nishida remarkably eschews the subtleties of his own logic in order to make the claim that “the individual and the whole form an immediate unity” within the body of the state (quoted in Heisig, Kasulis and Maraldo 2011, 1025). Ideologically speaking, “contradictory self-identity had somehow come to signify the Emperor system” (Karatani 2011, 184). This ideological erasure of his onto-logic allows Nishida to then conflate the concept of acting intuition with a complicit political stance and declare that it is only with “a true religious awakening” that “one can submit to the state”: 
Active intuition is to accord faithfully with the facts of national history … to empty the self and return to oneness with the Emperor as the center of the absolute present … to act in terms of the national policy as an individual in the historical world. (Nishida, quoted in Ives 1994, 23)

This statement is of course highly problematic and echoes similar statements made by Suzuki, Ida, and Hata before Nishida as well his younger colleagues Nishitani and Watsuji Tetsuro. In a climate that already lacked a sophisticated political consciousness, it reinforces culturally engrained attitudes that function “more on the register of affect than conscious thought”, which give rise to the feeling that “there is no individually responsible subject, but only a collection of the Emperor’s subjects, and that all morality will be a social ethics of conformity with the group and submission to authority” (Stevens 2011, 239). It is easy to see how this ethico-aesthetic stance, pushed to the limit, might ultimately bolster “fascist lines of the tokkotai” (Michelsen 2013).

But fascism is not simply a totalitarian form of political organization (which, in the case of the Kyoto School, was theoretically supported by their specific use of Hegel). More fundamentally, it names a form of mass subjectivation characterized by an intense paranoid constellation of affects “in our heads and in our everyday behavior” that “causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us” (Foucault 1983, xiii). Remarkably, this idea of a fascism that “penetrates even the small corners of our sensibility in everyday life” was explored in the Japanese context decades before Michel Foucault’s groundbreaking work (Odagiri Hideo, quoted in Koschmann 1996, 65).

We have to struggle with the semi-feudal sensibilities, emotions, and desires that are rooted in our own internal ‘Emperor system’. That is the only way we can negate the Emperor system per se, and the only way that is conducive to the formation of a modern man. (Ara Masato, quoted in Koschmann 1996, 65)

6 Like Nishida and Nishitani’s work, Watsuji’s 1942 book Ethics “can be considered an ontological justification of the Japanese Empire” (Kobayashi and Seki 2020, 291). Furthermore, it was likely that “he was more sympathetic to the government’s ideology” than they were (Kasulis 2018, 526).

7 “The Hegelian influence, determinant for Nishida and the Kyoto School as a whole, will go massively in the direction of its monistic tendency, ontologically totalizing and politically totalitarian.” (Stevens 2011, 240) To be clear, although the Kyoto School’s appropriation of Hegel’s dialectics and philosophy of history is complicated and polyvocal, because their political acumen remained for the large part underdeveloped, the type of political ontology we might extract from their writings is in line with Hegel’s state philosophy (Widder 2015).

8 Or again: “an internal reform in the psychological structure of Japanese society must occur” rather than mere “institutional and legal reforms in the State machinery.” (Maruyama 1963, 152)
Well beyond the question of censorship, this idea seems to be a major reason why—more than discussions on overt politics—the debates within Japanese intellectual circles at this time repeatedly returned to the problem of conceptualizing the modern subject. The resentment felt by young people towards the Kyoto School after WWII was ultimately due to fact that the type of subject position it advocated left no room to “doubt, criticize, and resist the absolutism of the Imperial system”. According to Ichikawa, “the subject with a modern critical spirit was obliterated” and, as a result, “the central ideology of the Imperial Way settled into an *a priori* position relative to the pure experience underlying the individual self, which from the start conditioned that pure experience” (Ichikawa, quoted in Ives 1994, 27). That is, in its attempt to put forth a conception of subjectivity beyond Western humanism, in particular by deemphasizing the idea of a rational *cogito*, the “the autonomy of the critical modern subject was not yet acquired” (Stevens 2011, 232).

It is here that we finally get to the crux of the debate on modern subjectivity. Given the shared project of developing strategies for negotiating the forms of microfascism, why does Foucault point to the necessary death of the humanist subject—meaning precisely the historical dissolution of the Western *cogito*—while the majority of postwar Japanese intellectuals were inspired by modes of subjectivity that fit squarely within the humanist tradition, which in some cases promoted the idea of Western individualism? For example, the Japanese historiographer Ōtsuka Hisao claimed that “as long as people hold to forms of thought and behavior that are traditional, feudal, or what Marx called ‘Asiatic’, our democracy will be no more than a shell of structure with no soul” (Ōtsuka 1970, 1). Foucault’s position seems close to the Kyoto School when he says that “*homo dialecticus*” is “already dying” (Foucault 2006, 543) and, quite remarkably, that “the universality of the Western *ratio*” reaches its “vertiginous” yet “inaccessible” limit in the “Orient”, which paradoxically also serves as its internal “dividing line” (ibid., xxx). Although Foucault later recanted this Orientalist language, his point is that unreason, as the condition of possibility of the humanist subject, is the very thing that will exhaust it from within. This “thought of the outside” refers to a paradoxical, or transversal, form of thinking—for example, the idea that a line can be both an external limit and internal division—which he associated with an under-conceptualized notion of Asian epistemic regimes.9

9 “Foucault never considered himself sufficiently competent to treat the subject of Oriental forms of development*, even if the question for him remains: “is there a process of subjectivation in Oriental techniques?” (Deleuze 1988, 148). Although some have claimed that this aspect of Foucault’s work is indicative of a certain orientalism, more nuanced assessments explicitly do not ultimately “characterize him as an Orientalist” (Lazreg 2020, 8).
The outside is described as a “void” (ibid., xxviii) that is “absolutely empty” (ibid., 549), but also “intensely vibratory” since its “paradoxes upset the field of representation” (Foucault 2000a, 363). It moves by a logic of “nonpositive affirmation” (ibid., 74), opening onto “a scintillating and constantly affirmed world” that “affirms nothing”, but “reaches the empty core where being achieves its limit” (ibid., 75), ultimately “shattering the philosophical subject” (ibid., 79). Not only does Foucault’s “nonpositive affirmation” echo the Buddhist logic of “negation-qua-affirmation” as presented by Nishitani, but the resulting non-humanist form of subjectivity is also constructed, as in Nishitani, through the work of spiritual practice:

We will call “philosophy” the form of thought that asks what it is that enables the subject to have access to the truth and which attempts to determine the conditions and limits of the subject’s access to the truth. If we call this “philosophy,” then I think we could call “spirituality” the search, practice, and experience through which the subject carries out the necessary transformations on himself in order to have access to the truth. (Foucault 2005, 15)

Although it is true that Foucault’s research on such spiritual practice focuses on the Western tradition—for example Pseudo-Dionysus (Foucault 2000a, 150) whose work, incidentally, has been characterized as a “Christian version of the Heart Sutra” (Conze 1967, 220)—he did express an interest in Buddhist philosophy and, especially, practice. During his second visit to Japan in 1978, Foucault, in conversation with the Zen master Ōmori Sōgen, claimed that a “totally different mentality to our own is formed through the practice and training of Zen” (Foucault 2024, 152), which “attenuate the individual” (ibid., 154). It is in this conversation that he clarifies his earlier essentialist use of the term Orient: “What interests me is the Western history of rationality and its limit. In this respect, Japan raises a problem we cannot escape” (ibid., 153). For Foucault, “rationality constructs colonies everywhere” and, more generally, has created a crisis in thought due to its microfascist and universalist tendencies (ibid.). Finally he, like the Kyoto School philosophers, declares the end of a unilateral Western philosophy: “if a philosophy of the future exists, it must be born outside of Europe or it must be born of encounters and reverberations between Europe and non-Europe” (ibid., 156). It seems clear then that Foucault, like Gilles Deleuze, somehow needed to pass through a notion of Zen in order to construct his ethics (Hetrick 2023b). But we should add that however under-conceptualized their understandings of Zen actually were, their use of it falls outside of Edward Said’s concept of Orientalism, which does not consider discourses about the “Orient” that criticize Western ideologies.
This detour through Foucault ultimately helps us to clarify Ichikawa’s main concern with Imperial Way Zen: that its ideology fundamentally prevents the formation of a critical subjectivity. The immanent telos of Foucault’s entire project is ultimately to overcome the modern, humanist, rational Western subject. His method of critique disallows any ideology—especially a fascist or religious one—from “settling into an a priori position relative to the pure experience underlying the individual self” (Ichikawa, quoted in Ives 1994, 27). This is because the construction of a non-humanist subjectivity is, by definition, transgressive with regard to given relations of knowledge and power. In this sense, Foucault radicalizes Kant’s critical philosophy in order to liberate the political processes of subjectivation from state-sanctioned forms of subjectivity or, in Kant’s words, to “release man from his self-incurred tutelage” (Kant, quoted in Foucault 2007, 29). Additionally, Foucault’s conception of critique disallows any “sort of theologization of man” (Foucault 1968, 20) into an essential, pure, or true self, which appears to be the de facto outcome of Nishida’s description of acting intuition where “a true religious awakening” is conflated with submission to the Emperor (quoted in Ives 1994, 23). Here Nishida essentially repeats Kant’s fundamental error of critiquing the transcendent use of the Ideas (World, God, Soul) only to give them a “practical determination” as postulates of the moral law (Deleuze 1984, 44). But what is Foucault’s conception of critique? An initial answer might be that it is a method which combines the notions of philosophy and spiritual practice as stated above, where truth is understood in the special sense of that which “releases transversal lines of resistance and not integral lines of power” (Deleuze 1988, 95). Critique is therefore a method that both “seeks to determine the conditions and the limits of our possible knowledge of the object”, as well as “the conditions and the indefinite possibilities of transforming the subject” (Foucault 2007, 153).

Interestingly, Foucault gave a lecture entitled “What is Critique?” to the French Society of Philosophy immediately following his return from Japan in 1978. In this lecture, he defines the “critical attitude” as “the art of not being governed quite so much”, of not being “governed like that, by that, in the name of those principles” (Foucault 2007, 44–45). We are asked to rethink critique as an ethico-aesthetics, an “art of existence” in which self-transformation is understood as a “practice of liberty” (ibid., 108). If this sounds too vague or, even worse, as whimsical dandyism, it is because Foucauldian ethics proceeds without given normative rules. In fact, it begins with the “virtue” of exposing a “fundamental illegitimacy” (ibid., 46) within the epistemological framework that gives rise to such rules, a caesura that is precisely its unspoken “limit” or “outside”. In order to define the transversal contours of a specific epistemological framework—“at this particular time, in this section of humanity” (ibid., 56)—we must follow Kant in understanding “critique’s
primordial responsibility: to know knowledge” (ibid., 50). Only then can we hope to “follow the breaking points” (ibid., 62) in an “attempt to desubjugate the subject in the context of power and truth” (ibid., 50). Rather than simply obey seemingly universal moral codes, this type of critical ethico-aesthetics reconstructs such codes in an optional and facilitative way—given the transversal contours of an epistemic regime—in order to reshape subjectivity towards a self-defined mode of existence. In relation to a specific regime and its values, such practices thus tend to appear transgressive since they are anarchically indifferent to the moral law. Here Spinoza’s ethics is historicized such that the question might be rendered as: Given the contemporary order of things, what can a subject become? “In this historical-philosophical practice, one has to make one’s own history in terms of how it would be traversed by the question of the relationships between structures of rationality which articulate discourse and the mechanisms of subjugation which are linked to it.” (ibid., 56)

This is one way to understand Ichikawa’s charge that Kyoto School philosophy was not critical enough, which subsequently bolstered a form of subjectivity that passively adhered to a “suicidal” ideology (Michelsen 2013, 158). Another, analogous, way is to look through the lens of Hakamaya Noriaki’s notion of Critical Buddhism. In response to the increasing rhetoric on Japanese exceptionalism in the 1980s, Hakamaya and his colleague Matsumoto Shirō launched a vehement attack on all forms of Buddhist philosophy—including the Kyoto School—which lacked a critical component. Hakamaya polemically declared that “Buddhism is criticism” and “only that which is critical is Buddhism” (Hakamaya, quoted in Shields 2016, 10). His central claim is that, due to its fundamental onto-logic of emptiness, Mahāyāna Buddhism disallows any suggestion of an essential, pure, or true self, in particular one supported by notions of Japanism or Buddha Nature. His project was therefore to rectify these errors critically, that is, “in the ethical and political—or one might say, modern Western—sense” (Shields 2016, 11). However, Critical Buddhism cannot be understood simply as “Cartesian rationalism or Western Enlightenment humanism in Buddhist guise” (ibid., 12). Rather it “borrows from but is not reliant upon Western philosophy”, while remaining rooted in the Mahāyāna concepts of wisdom and compassion (ibid., 15). For Hakamaya, Critical Buddhism can be defined by three interrelated principles: 1) the onto-logic of emptiness; 2) the ethico-aesthetic of compassion that arises from meditation practice; and 3) the application of critical reflection. The second two principles are necessary in order ensure that the onto-logic of emptiness does not remain a mere object of belief or become reified into an ontological ground, but is rather confirmed experientially through practice and reflection. Hakamaya’s method of critique seems to be as
radical as Foucault’s in the sense that it cuts through any lingering ideological traces that limit one’s “access to the truth” in order to facilitate “the necessary transformations” on subjectivity (Foucault 2005, 15), even to the extent that one must—as Rinzai encouraged his followers—“Kill the Buddha! Kill the patriarchs!” From this point of view, Nishida’s logic of contradictory self-identity is still too dialectical and, while it may be an ingenious way of conceptualizing Buddhist metaphysics in a post-Kantian manner, does not in itself lead to the formation of a critical subject. Rather, as we have seen, it allows for a collapse back into a version of Foucault’s “homo dialecticus” in its death throes (Hetrick 2022a). Furthermore, while it is true that Nishitani Keiji (1999) and Ōhashi Rōsuke (2011) have similarly reconceived the first two principles of Hakama-ya’s Critical Buddhism—emptiness and compassion, respectively—in a contemporary and comparative idiom, their ultimate over-reliance upon the philosophical frameworks of Hegel and Heidegger, however stretched in remarkable ways, seems to have prevented the construction of a critical subjectivity.

We can therefore redefine the project of overcoming modernity—with or without Buddhism, which simply provides a framework for one amongst many possible non-humanist “techniques of the self” or “arts of existence” (Foucault 1990, 11)—as a critical overcoming of the “white, conscious, adult male subject” (Guattari 2010, 157) that has been serially produced and exported around the world to the point where a “certain universal representation of subjectivity, incarnated by capitalist colonialism in both East and West, has gone bankrupt” (Guattari 1995, 3). Just as the very concept of subjectivity was exported to Japan during the Meiji Restoration, the idea of overcoming modernity cannot be seen as an essentially Japanese problem, but rather as the historical outcome of a complex intertwining between East and West that became evident during the mid-20th century. After WWII, the ethico-aesthetic task of reconstructing subjectivity became doubly problematic since one was forced to negotiate not only the overt power relations of classical disciplinary subjection, but also the internal constellation of affects that penetrate the depths of our psyche, controlling us from within.

The struggle for a modern subjectivity passes through a resistance to the two present forms of subjection, the one consisting of individuating ourselves on the basis of constraints of power, the other of attaching each individual to a known and recognizable identity, fixed once and for all. The struggle for subjectivity presents itself, therefore, as the right to difference, variation, and metamorphosis. (Deleuze 1988, 106; translation modified)
That is, non-humanist forms of subjectivation must simultaneously pass through two registers: a surface level of the “active” individual and a more fundamental, seemingly “passive” level of individuation (Lapoujade 2018, 21). This requires a folding of subjectivity onto itself, an “aesthetic existence, a doubling, a relation with oneself” (Deleuze 1988, 101; translation modified). Remarkably, Naoki Sakai argues that this empirico-transcendental folding of subjectivity, which marks the emergence of the modern human, “corresponds exactly” to another doublet Foucault depends upon: between “geopolitical regions” and “categories of thought” (Sakai 2022, 170). More specifically, he argues that Foucault’s conception of the human is ultimately grounded upon a particular “construction of respective Western and Eastern regions with their corresponding ways of thought” (ibid., 159). We see this clearly in a statement Foucault made on the eve of his trip to Japan in 1978—notably, the year of publication of Edward Said’s masterwork—which I believe pre-empts any attempt to categorize his persistent interest in the non-West as Orientalist:

What I mean by the West is that small portion of the world whose strange and violent destiny was ultimately to impose its ways of seeing, thinking, saying, and doing upon the entire world... It’s true that the world has revolted against this West [...] making it lose its pre-eminent position, but that doesn’t take away from the fact that the instruments that have been employed worldwide to diminish the West and shake off its yoke were created almost entirely by this very same West. (Foucault 1994b, 368)

Within the postwar Japanese context in which there was a strong sense of resentment towards the main strands of philosophy, it should not be surprising that we find the aesthetic doubling of subjectivity most clearly expressed in the arts. That is, Japanese contemporary art takes “a central place in the development of postwar culture” (Sas 2011, xv), especially with respect to the “debates on subjectivity” (ibid., xii). Here the rhetoric of overcoming modernity acquires another meaning: the artistic overcoming of modernism with the emergence of the contemporary. As a first step, Sakaguchi Ango employs the instruments of critical thought in an attempt to problematize the imported idea of humanist individualism.

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10 More than resentment from the youth, universities were purged of “professors like Nishitani who were identified as intellectual supporters of the militarist ideology during the war years”. Subsequently, philosophy departments in particular were restructured in order to teach Western philosophy “almost exclusively” (Kasulis 2018, 544).
Have We Ever Been Individuals?

As we have seen, the issue of Japanese subjectivity came to the fore at the precise moment in which the Emperor declared that he was “an ordinary man” (Sakaguchi 2010b, 181). Now one was no longer subjected to an imperial wind from on high, but was forced to become an autonomous subject “at the individual level” (Dower 1999, 157). Much scholarship on postwar Japan has highlighted this imperative, made vocal by intellectuals and artists of all shades, to renegotiate subjectivity in relation to the notion of the individual. On first glance this makes sense, since the locus of power after WWII broadly shifted from the Japanese state to the American Occupation. The ideology of individualism—which, from this point of view, is associated with a particular brand of liberalism and democracy—“gradually seeped out of the meshes of the wire fences that surrounded American military bases”, obliterating Japan’s “traditional” past and laying the foundation for a “post-war without end” (Tōmatsu Shōmei, quoted in Munroe 1999, 16). However, even if new forms of subjectivity were conceptualized in relation to American-style individualism, sometimes they were defined precisely as a reaction against it. That is, a confusion has arisen with the under-conceptualized overuse of the word “individualism”, which in fact has come to indicate a whole range of sometimes divergent ideas. This is not a problem specific to Japan. For example, the type of individual we might extract from the work of Jean-Paul Sartre—as well as other European conceptions of the individual that tended, more so than their American counterparts, to retain a certain level of theoretical and political connection to the avant-garde—can be understood as a critique of the liberal subject, even if we understand both to be contemporary incarnations of humanism. In the following, I discuss the work of Sakaguchi Ango, who attempts to develop an “art of existence” that extends the project of overcoming modernity without collapsing back into the dangerous pitfalls of essentialism. While the mode of subjectivation exhibited in his work is critical of humanist individualism, it ultimately remains within its general theoretical framework. However, Sakaguchi paves the way for more recent interventions by Japanese artists and thinkers who, in different ways, express forms of non-human subjectivity beyond the ideology of individualism.

It has been frequently noted that the writings of Sakaguchi Ango captured the complex mood amongst the younger generation of artists and intellectuals from the immediate postwar period until early phase of Japan’s “Red Years” in the long 1960s, during which his work was carried to the barricades by demonstrating

11 “Scholars have overwhelmingly assumed that Japanese postwar art is about celebrating and engaging with a nascent democracy through expressions of individualism.” (Kunimoto 2017, 17)
students (Walker 2020). The literary critic Okuno Takeo describes the relevance of Sakaguchi’s work for that generation as follows:

Nothing that I read in the course of my life will match the amazing shock I got when I read Sakaguchi Ango’s “Darakuron” in April 1946. In one stroke it freed me, then only 19 years old, from the wartime ethics, ideology, and taboos that had until that point kept me in chains; it was a thunder bolt that showed me a new way of life… It was through that essay that my postwar life as an autonomous subject began. (Quoted in Dorsey 2001, 358)

In order to understand the full importance of Sakaguchi’s postwar essay, we have to read it within the context of his “A Personal View of Japanese Culture”, which was published four years earlier, around the time of the debates on overcoming modernity. Even though he was not explicitly targeting these debates, his essay can be seen as a “fundamental critique” of their general standpoint (Karatani 2011, 186) and, more generally, as offering a view that “absolutely disposes of the concept of ‘Japaneseness’” (Nishikawa 2001, 257). The main thrust of Sakaguchi’s earlier essay is to show that there is nothing pure or essential about so-called “traditional Japanese culture”, about which he provocatively claims to know “next to nothing” (Sakaguchi 2010a, 137). The call from “grim reactionary forces” (Sakaguchi 2010b, 189) to overcome modernity by way of a return to the premodern is exposed by Sakaguchi as futile, since culture is radically contingent and historically constructed: “It does not stand to reason that simply because a practice existed in Japan long ago, it is somehow innately Japanese” (ibid., 139). His own position is modernist in the sense that he advocates the “no frills” aesthetic of a “prison, factory, and destroyer” (ibid., 155) over that of the ancient temples of Kyoto, which might as well be “burned to the ground” in order to construct a parking lot. For Sakaguchi, such an act would not affect Japanese culture in the least (ibid., 156). What caught his attention in Kyoto instead were the rambunctious activities of everyday Japanese decked out in “Western clothes” and “watching kitschy theatre, since “humans love what is human, and that alone” (ibid., 152). His conclusion is that “as long as our day-to-day lives are rooted in human desires … Japan itself is in good health” (ibid., 141).

Sakaguchi’s critique of traditional Japanese culture comes remarkably close to the radicality of Critical Buddhism which would, if necessary, deface reified concepts of the Buddha: “Landscape gardens and tea rooms, like the enlightenment of a

12 “Sakaguchi’s name remained inseparable from the chaos of the days immediately following Japan’s defeat.” (Karatani 2010, 24)
Zen monk, are castles in the air. ‘Wherein lies Buddha Nature?’ one may ask. The answer: ‘In a shit stick’ (ibid., 148). Like many of his peers Sakaguchi was drawn to Western and, particularly, French literature in his youth. But unlike other young intellectuals who had embraced “either Marxism or modernism” (Karatani 2010, 25), he studied Indian and Tibetan philosophy and aspired to become a Buddhist monk. Even at this early point, in the midst of monastic training, Sakaguchi’s thought was focused on developing a critical ethico-aesthetics in relation to Buddhism: “the true path is to start a new life that follows common desires” (quoted in Karatani 2011, 196). Evoking the misty wabi aesthetic of Kyoto temples is not enough since it can never properly express a “critical spirit centered on emptiness” (Sakaguchi 2010a, 150). Like Foucault, this critical spirit is necessarily twofold. That is, one can only develop the capacity to approach emptiness when “practice and thought are unified” (Sakaguchi, quoted in Karatani 2011, 194). And like Hakamaya, “his criticism is eminently Buddhist” (Karatani 2011, 197).

Sakaguchi’s “Darakuron” has been translated as “Discourse on Decadence”, but in order to avoid an easy conflation with late-19th century tendencies in French literature, it might be better rendered as “On Fallenness” (ibid.). In this postwar essay, the critical project of “A Personal View of Japanese Culture” is extended to the figure of the Emperor—who had become a mere “apparition” in the face of historical forces (Sakaguchi 2010b, 181)—as well as to the ideology of the national body (kokutai) more generally. Sakaguchi begins the essay by describing how kamikaze fighters—who were previously understood as “the humble shields of our Sovereign Lord”—had fallen: either scattered “like cherry blossoms” as they plunged to their death or, if they did survive the war, forced to descend to the level of hawking “goods on the black market” (ibid., 175). In the period between 1931–1945, the notion of kokutai became synonymous with the state in relation to “the individual body, which was severely punished for any dissent”. But, more than this, it was an “all-pervasive system of imagery” that served as “something like a state religion, with the mystical Emperor at the apex” (Slaymaker 2004, 12). It has been likened to Foucault’s depiction of the relationship between individual bodies and the king’s body as a symbol of the state before the French Revolution: “the body is directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs” (Foucault 1995, 25). The events of 1945 made visible the fact that the Emperor system, rather than being divinely ordained and therefore beyond the contingencies of history, was simply “another creation of politics” (Sakaguchi 2010b, 184). Without the ideology of kokutai holding their worldview together, the Japanese were forced to discover for themselves the “limitations and restraints of the human condition” without “conjuring up an Emperor”
or “piecing together warrior codes” (ibid., 182). For Sakaguchi, this required a “fall” from the transcendent law to an immanent ethico-aesthetics, which is seen as more fundamental than politics:

The fall is not the result of having lost the war. We fall because we’re human; we fall because we are alive … Only by falling to the very depths can we discover ourselves and thereby attain salvation. Redemption through politics is but a surface phenomenon and not worth much of anything. (ibid., 182‒83)

Notice the soteriological language. Not only is Sakaguchi’s conception of the fall fundamentally informed by Sartre’s Existentialism, as we shall see, but it also offers a “Buddhist critique of culture” (Shields 2011, 227) with an implicit metaphysics that “resembles the Mahāyāna doctrine of emptiness” (ibid., 240). Furthermore, the “refashioned subjectivity and new humanism” it promotes involves the acceptance of temporal decay and historical contingency, which lie at the heart of the Buddhist concept of impermanence. Sakaguchi’s fall can therefore be understood not as a romantic imperative to aesthetic hedonism, but rather as the refusal of any ideological “illusions that were posing as truth” (ibid., 233).

At the centre of Sakaguchi’s new humanism is the ethical imperative to cast away all ideologies that prevent us from “acknowledging our desires” (Sakaguchi 2010b, 191). In particular, he singles out Buddhist inspired forms of “circular reasoning” (Karatani, quoted in Shields 2011, 234), especially when this type of overly-contrived intellectualization attempts to “steer our attention back” (Sakaguchi 2010b, 189) towards tradition:

The conventions of polite society, the taboos on romance, the rules dictating the places of duty and emotion—we should strip ourselves of these fraudulent kimonos and stand with our naked hearts fully exposed. To look long and hard at ourselves as restored to this naked state is the primary condition for a resurrection of our humanity. (ibid., 191)

The goal is to recover a more “authentic” mode of existence, the “great truth about the human condition” (ibid. 192), by falling from the abstraction of the national body towards the physical or carnal body (nikutai). This carnal body was posited by Sakaguchi and other writers of his generation as the fundamental ground of the subject, which alone was adequate to their postwar condition. It was polemically opposed not only to the national body, but also to the phenomenological body (shintai) of philosophical discourse—for example, the body that Nishida employs in his idea of acting intuition—as well as to the more neutral and everyday notion
of the body (*karada*). That is, it was consciously employed in order to contribute to postwar debates on subjectivity from a new perspective. *Nikutai* was understood as “a strategy to attack the established ideal of the human” (Oda Sakunosuke, quoted in Slaymaker 2004, 28) and to attain a freedom beyond the “framework of individualism” (Honda Shūgo, quoted in Slaymaker 2004, 21). This strategy was inspired in large part by the work of Jean-Paul Sartre, who was revered as the “new master” of carnal literature (Sekine Hiroshi, quoted in Slaymaker 2004, 26). In this light, the Existentialist tones of “On Fallenness” become apparent: “It will take an existential gamble, betting with one’s blood, with one’s flesh, with the most basic of screams” (Sakaguchi 2010b, 192; translation modified).

Sakaguchi was instrumental in introducing Existentialism to postwar Japan and, in his comments on Sartre’s short story “Intimacy”, attempted to established a connection between it and Japanese carnal literature: “‘Intimacy’ does not preach one moral word”. Rather, as we read the story, we come to understand that “the *nikutai* itself thinks and speaks … At first glance this is nonsensical, but in fact it is a wisdom beyond sense, and this is its revolutionary meaning” (quoted in Slaymaker 2004, 25). But his unreserved praise of Sartre is problematized when we recognize that he had no “interest in nor even understanding of Sartre’s philosophy” (Slaymaker 2004, 25), which of course provides the basis for both the form and content of Sartre’s fiction. It is true that Sakaguchi’s thought was fundamentally “rooted in praxis or ethics” (Karatani 2010, 30) and he would certainly agree with Foucault that “rationalization leads to the furor of power” (Foucault 2007, 54). This standpoint served him well in the critique of stagnant elements of Japanese theory and practice, including especially those that would come to bolster the type of subjectivity put forth by the Kyoto School. However, at this point we have touched upon an uncritical lacunae in his work that curiously repeats an ambiguity in Sartre’s thought. Following Sartre’s famous 1945 lecture “Existentialism is a Humanism”, young French intellectuals were forced to choose between two possible, and indeed contradictory, interpretations of his work (Alquié 2008). On the one hand, there seemed to be a “pessimistic”, idealistic humanism (Lyotard 1993, 86) and, on the other, an “adventurous”, non-human materialism (ibid., 89). Most postwar French philosophers ended up abandoning, in different ways, “the side of the human in favor of the side of things” (ibid., 88). In fact, what has come to be called poststructuralism—including the philosophies of Foucault, Deleuze, and Guattari—might be understood as a series of attempts to theorize the emergence of the subject from a materialist (or ontological) reading of Sartre’s pre-personal transcendental field. It is clear why Sakaguchi chooses to allow the carnal body to

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13 Notably, Foucault was not only interested in Zen but also in the work of Tanizaki Jun’ichirō, whose fiction is regarded as precursor to postwar Japanese carnal literature (Macey 2019, 237).
speak for itself, but he does so in a way that ultimately betrays the critical force of his project and, consequently, resurrects a concept of the human which is, if not essentialized, reified with an uncritical kernel of “authentic” desire.

In “A Personal View of Japanese Culture”, Sakaguchi’s attempt to deconstruct and relativize traditional ideas of Japanese culture—which are described as not “true” or “authentic” enough (Sakaguchi 2010a, 156)—places “the essence of the Japanese spirit” beyond the scope of his critique: “we don’t need to theorize on that” (ibid., 140). Again, in “On Fallenness” we are told that a “true” and “authentic human life is predicated upon existence” (Sakaguchi 2010b, 194). Like Sartre, Sakaguchi’s concept of the human is tainted by a notion of authenticity. Sartre himself “tried to avoid reliance upon any positive conception of the self, but by introducing the notion of authenticity, he affirmed the requirement to conform with some notion of the true self” (Bernauer and Mahon 2006, 161). This can be most clearly seen in Sakaguchi’s use of the term furusato, which literally means home, a place of familiarity and comfort. However, in Sakaguchi the term—which we find across his writings as something like an underlying thread—comes to connote almost the opposite: a placeless place of “extreme loneliness pregnant with life itself” (Sakaguchi, quoted in Slaymaker 2004, 111). It is, like the Freudian unheimlich, an unsettling place of return that pierces us in a moment of naked disorientation. It is understood as authentic because the body is pushed up against its own limits, supposedly beyond all ideologies, including romantic ideologies of pure hedonistic excess, which is what theoretically separates Sakaguchi from the typical discourse on decadence. However, there are still unresolved issues with this idea.

The furusato—as the true “topoi of the individual” (Slaymaker 2004, 103)—becomes a kind of abstract container for the falling carnal body in its “search for satori” (ibid., 105). That is, as in Sartre, we have in this conception of subjectivity an almost “theologization of man” (Foucault 1968, 20). There is the hint of a spiritual purity in this carnal descent that is reminiscent of Nishitani’s idea of a “true subjectivity” that is reached through the “falling off of body and mind” (Nishitani 2008, 55), a phrase that both take from Dōgen. While Sakaguchi’s position is philosophically problematic, this association is only superficial. It is therefore absurd to conclude that “Sakaguchi’s idea of authenticity” is “fully in accord with the mainstream wartime logic and ideology” of Nishitani (Dorsey 2001, 347). It is even more absurd to argue that their “conceptions of the nation” are also “the same” (ibid., 375). As we have seen, the power and allure of Sakaguchi’s work is that it completely deconstructs the ideology of the national body and disallows a conception of the subject that is formed through an act of “self-annihilation in devotion to the nation” (Nishitani 2008, 56). Sakaguchi replaces the national body with the carnal body, whose ethico-aesthetic imperative is to “acknowledge our
desires” (Sakaguchi 2010b, 191). But it is precisely these all-too-human desires that get reified as the authentic place of the subject, as somehow natural givens beyond the pale of critique. In this sense, Sakaguchi’s new humanism comes dangerously close to a hyper-individualist “cult of the self” in which one is “supposed to discover one’s true self, to separate it from that which might obscure or alienate it, to decipher its truth”, in short, to acknowledge its authentic needs (Foucault 2000b, 271). By contrast, the goal of critique is “not to discover what we are, but to refuse what we are”, to refuse not only the state, but also “the type of individualization which is linked” to modern structures of power (Foucault 2002, 336). But we will have to wait for subsequent postwar conceptions of subjectivity in order to move beyond Sakaguchi’s veneration of the flesh and to understand desire critically as a radically heterogeneous construction.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the idea of some originary desire or will that is ontologically autonomous with respect to power relations is repeated in the work of Yoshimoto Takaaki who, in turn, enables philosophers like Karatani Kōjin to make similar claims. Even quite recently, we can hear Karatani dreaming of a nomadic non-place beyond the borders of the polis, where the “individual will” has “existed from the start […] free from community bonds” (Karatani 2017, 35). Despite his forays into poststructuralism, he is still dependent upon a Kantian conception of autonomy. Rather than a conception of agency that is coupled to autonomy, poststructuralist theory—and especially the late Foucault—proposes “a new ontology that begins with the body and its potentials, and regards the political subject as an ethical one against the prevailing tradition of Western thought” (Lazzarato 2002, 100). In conversation with Watanabe Moriaki, Foucault reiterates his interest in the practices of “Buddhist spirituality”, which he understands as enacting a form of agency “aimed at de-individualization, de-subjectification, at pushing individuality to and beyond its limits for the sake of freeing the subject” (Foucault 2024, 122). Watanabe replies by claiming that

Japanese spirituality was always expressed through the body... And then in modern Japanese society, which was built on the 19th-century Western model, modernization simply meant adopting the political, economic,

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14 Karatani undoubtedly lifts this idea of a nomadic pre-philosophical space that is anarchically indifferent to the Western polis from Deleuze and Guattari’s book What is Philosophy?, without properly acknowledging so. However, Deleuze’s nomadism is necessary critical—precisely in the manner described in the present article—rather than utopian (Hetrick 2015; 2023b).
social, cultural norms of 19th-century Western society. The Japanese were especially concerned with establishing the Cartesian, Western subject. After the fascists’ antiquated exploitation of the body, the formation of the modern Westernized subject was seen as a liberation with respect to imperial submission and an essential aspect of the country’s democratization. Hence the success of existentialism, which had a longer lifespan in Japan than in France. But one also wonders about the most important shortcomings in the formation of modern individuality. The problem you raise might shed some light on this sort of discrepancy, whose nature is not only historical but also cultural. (Watanabe, quoted in Foucault 2024, 122; my emphasis)

Watanabe further explains the importance of the body in postwar avant-garde art and culture for resisting both fascism and modernization in a way that contextualizes Sakaguchi’s critical reconceptualization of the body: “Some people of the avant-garde believed the bodily practices that persisted within traditional culture was a perfect anchorage point for calling out the political and cultural alienation the Japanese had endured for three quarters of a century during the country’s modernization and Westernization” (Watanabe, quoted in Foucault 2024, 114). However, Sakaguchi’s reification of bodily desire as a type of unreflective craving—so reminiscent of otaku—points to what Watanabe sees as the shortcomings and discrepancies of this discourse. It is interesting that he wonders how Foucault’s ideas might help “shed some light” on this lacuna. It is here that the anti-humanism of the Kyoto School is still very relevant, since it makes concrete Foucault’s somewhat impressionistic intuition that Japanese spirituality might be employed to conceptualize practices of de-individualization and de-subjectification. It is interesting to add that Yoshimoto wrote a long letter to Foucault after a year of reflection on the later’s visit to Japan. He says that in the contemporary Japanese context—perhaps recalling the long shadow that the Kyoto School has cast upon it—the encounter between Buddhism and Western philosophy was still perceived with suspicion and Foucault’s comments on Zen practice had therefore “provoked a lively reaction amongst Japanese intellectuals” (Yoshimoto 1979). Nonetheless, he ultimately seems to confirm Foucault’s conclusions in a brief commentary on Dōgen’s ethico-aesthetic care of the body. Echoing even Foucault’s terminology, he claims that for Dōgen—who, Yoshimoto remarks, was critical of all political and religious systems of power—the realization of freedom through Zen practice is equated with “a dissolution of the distinction between the mind and the body” resulting in a “total loss” of “individual subjectivity” (ibid.).

15 Compare to Foucault’s experience: “If I was able to feel something through the posture of the body in Zen meditation … it is that new relationships can exist between the mind and the body and, in addition, new relationships between the body and the external world.” (Foucault 2024, 155)
Similarly, in An Inquiry into the Good, Nishida describes the ethico-aesthetic experience of muga as involving a self-effacement of the individual will, which in turn demands a new conception of action beyond the dualisms of subject and object, activity and passivity: “There is no fundamental distinction between things and the self, for just as the objective world is a reflection of the self, so is the self a reflection of the objective world” (Nishida 1990, 135). However, the type of ethical action entailed by this experience has not only become politically problematic, as we have seen, it also remains philosophically under-conceptualized throughout Nishida’s work (Hetrick 2023a). This is why we can say that, from “Nishida’s Inquiry into the Good up to the present, the Kyoto School has not produced an adequate philosophy of ethics” (Kasulis 2018, 556). The discipline of ethics, as Foucault makes clear, rests upon robust concepts of subjectivity and critique. We therefore need the both the Kyoto School and Sakaguchi Ango, respectively, in order to piece together the theoretical foundation for a critical non-humanism in postwar Japan.

References


Jay HETRICK: Toward a Critical Non-Humanism in Postwar Japan


