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**The human being : when philosophy meets history. Miki Kiyoshi,  
Watsuji Tetsuro and their quest for a New Ningen**

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**Citation**

Brivio, C. (2009, June 9). *The human being : when philosophy meets history. Miki Kiyoshi, Watsuji Tetsuro and their quest for a New Ningen*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/13835>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

## Introduction

All efforts to escape the grimness of the present into nostalgia for a still intact past, or into the anticipated oblivion of a better future, are vain.<sup>1</sup>

This thesis started as an investigation into the ‘how’ and the ‘to what extent’ two twentieth-century Japanese philosophers, Miki Kiyoshi (1897-1945) and Watsuji Tetsurō (1889-1960), contributed to the ideology of the Japanese wartime regime. Their backgrounds were very different; Miki was an intellectual who spent part of his life studying Marxism and who took a very innovative approach in the understanding of the concepts of ‘dialectics’ and ‘class’. Watsuji was a conservative intellectual who strove to design a new national character in the face of the crisis that he perceived ‘Western modernity’ had brought to Japan. In a sudden turn of faith, in the 1940s, Miki and Watsuji’s philosophical systems eventually coincided, when they both came to support Japan’s imperialist enterprise. The main questions therefore were how it was possible that two such different standpoints could philosophically and politically merge in such a fashion and to what extent they were bankrupted when Japan was defeated in August 1945. On a methodological level, this question was reflected in the enigma of whether philosophy and intellectual history were too intertwined to be clearly separated or whether, on the other hand, there was a need for a new methodological tool that could have overcome them both.

I will therefore argue that the answer to these questions has to be found in how the concept of the ‘human being’ (*ningen*) was theorized and developed by Miki and Watsuji throughout their careers. I will argue that their idea of ‘medianity’ that underpins their elaboration of *ningen* is the most profound and fundamental flaw that brought their systems to collapse together with the regime in 1945.<sup>2</sup> I will also demonstrate that victory did not only fail to militarily and historically concretize, but also philosophically. The ‘faith’ that Miki and Watsuji showed in the moral destiny of Japan and that was embodied in the idea of the *escaton* qua victory in the Second World War did not materialize in the way they had envisioned it. Thus, their philosophical systems were destined to failure for two reasons: the human being they created was a representation of what the Japanese nation meant to them and,

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<sup>1</sup> Arendt 2004: xxvii.

<sup>2</sup> I have coined the neologism ‘medianity’ since I could not find any other word that could convey the same meaning. Medianity is not strictly a ‘medium’ or a ‘milieu’ but it rather describes the condition by means of which the human being finds himself in ‘between’ totality and infinity, as in Miki, or totality and particularity as in Watsuji. Since it is a precise ontological location that I have not found expressed in any other thinkers, I had to invent a new word.

furthermore, it was spatially and temporally grounded in a Japanese locus projected towards a visionary future of victory. The Second World War, with the atmosphere of crisis that it brought along, bankrupted Miki and Watsuji's expectations and ideas.

Politically, this Japanese human being was reflected in the Japanese imperial enterprise and, in Watsuji's case, even in the political environment of the postwar period. Despite Miki and Watsuji's personal and intellectual differences, their theorization of *ningen*, their faith in the *escaton* and their idea of medianity made them to politically come together. I will demonstrate that what they failed to do was to stop their systems from going down the road of ultranationalism and imperialism. Instead, they simply went along with it.

In order to support my hypothesis on a methodological level, I will have to employ both intellectual history and philosophy and subsume them in the history of philosophy. As a matter of fact, neither of the two will prove to be sufficiently complete for me to argue that ideas and history could collapse together. On the one hand, intellectual history, with its thrust on the contextualization of the production of a given author, could not fully answer the question of whether author and production could collude with historical reality. On the other hand, the scope of philosophy does not necessarily include the historical milieu or the historical impact certain ideas had. Thus, by sketching the historical and intellectual development of the idea of *ningen* in Miki and Watsuji, I will attempt to address the issue of how it is possible to solve the problem of the relationship between philosophy and history. In regard to the particular historical circumstances of the Second World War, this issue is even more pressing if we want to understand how intellectuals actively participated in the creation of the 'banality of evil' of WWII.

## State of the Field

In 1994, Pierre Lavelle's published an article on the political thought of the father of modern Japanese philosophy and founder of the Kyōto School, Nishida Kitarō (1870-1945) (Lavelle 1994). The article sparked quite a debate amongst scholars around the extent to which Nishida's thought, and that of his students, Tanabe Hajime (1885-1962) and Nishitani Keiji (1900-1990), could have contributed to the ideology of the Japanese wartime regime. A number of critics agreed with Lavelle's position that Nishida was essentially guilty of having

supported the government, whilst others proposed the thesis that his religious thought and his philosophical contribution were more important than his politics. The focus gradually shifted from an analysis of the most theoretical and philosophical aspects of the Kyōto School that dealt with the influence of Buddhism towards a more political interpretation of their ideas. Maraldo calls this divide a one ‘between intellectual historians (nearly all denouncing the school) and mostly appreciative theologians and philosophers of religion’ (Maraldo 2006: 376). Only recently, Goto-Jones has taken a difference stand and sought to demonstrate that Nishida’s philosophy was a political one from the start of his career in 1911 (Goto-Jones 2005a).

My choice of focusing on Miki and Watsuji, rather than on Nishida or his two most famous followers, was dictated by the fact that Miki and Watsuji’s concept of the human being presented some striking similarities that were not evident in the production of the other Kyōto School philosophers. In addition, the scholarship on Miki and Watsuji is not as extensive as that on the other members, especially in languages other than Japanese. Methodologically, the few scholars who have studied Miki and Watsuji have usually followed the divide described above. Thus, Miki’s involvement with the Shōwa Research Association (*Shōwa Kenkyūkai*) a government think-tank led by the then Prime Minister Prince Konoe Fumimaro, was, until recently, confined to research which specifically dealt with the history of the braintrust. Since Watsuji’s conservative political orientation was never put into question, the discussion gravitated around the ‘extent’ to which Watsuji contributed to the nationalist ideology of the Japanese government.

Only recently, in Japan, there has been a revival of ‘Miki studies’, with three monographs and one edited volume published in four years (Uchida 2004; Machiguchi 2004; Tsuda 2007; Kiyoshi *et al.* 2008). If compared to the few books that appeared in the 1960s and 1970s, these ones, with the exception of Uchida, engage more thoroughly with Miki’s involvement with the Shōwa Research Association. It might be a sign of the changing political climate in Japan, where Miki’s support for the wartime nationalist regime is not seen anymore as a ‘stain’ in his intellectual career, but rather as an issue that needs to be dealt with. Different from Japan, in Europe and America only a handful of scholars have dedicated parts of their works to Miki. A few examples are Harootunian, Goto-Jones and, to a limited extent, Fletcher (Harootunian 2000a: 293-357; Goto-Jones 2005a: 104-9; Goto-Jones 2006; Fletcher 1979 and 1982). Watsuji’s case is somewhat more nuanced, since some scholars see him as a fervent supporter of the regime (Bellah 1965; Harootunian and Najita 1988: 711-74; Sakai 1997; Harootunian 2000a: 250-92), some have tried to assess his work

in the light of his overall production (Kosaka 1997b; Mine 1998; Arisaka 1996b), whilst others have been quite apologetic (Kōsaka 1962; Yuasa 1981; Berque 1994; LaFleur 2001).

Many issues arise when dealing with political philosophy, in particular when produced in such a context as the one of the Second World War. Notwithstanding, I believe that there has been a major problem in the way the philosophy of the Kyōto School has been approached so far. All the studies mentioned above mainly focus on the question of ‘collaborationism’. Nonetheless, the relationship between intellectual history, philosophy and the production of ideas has yet to be properly problematized. Even a very recent publication from Nanzan University that specifically engaged with Miki and Watsuji did not address this problem at all (Sōgen Hori and Curley 2008). Instead, this volume’s contributors continued along the lines of the ‘philosophers of religion’.

Thus, especially in the cases of these two thinkers, the issue should not reside in their alleged collaboration, their alleged *tenkō* or their alleged political innocence (and, I would argue, *naïveté*).<sup>3</sup> Rather, the issue should be how they both shifted in the direction the Japanese government was heading towards. The ‘divide between intellectual historians and philosophers of religion’ will never be bridged if research will continue to stubbornly entrench itself on these two polarizing positions. Furthermore, not asking the fundamental question of how a given idea in a given philosophical system can transform itself into a political weapon disregards the important role intellectuals had in shaping the ultranationalist ideologies of the past century with their gloomy political and historical outcomes.

## Innovations

In order to solve this enigma, I have decided to approach the study of the concept of the human being in Miki and Watsuji both from the standpoint of intellectual history and philosophy. By tracing the internal development of three fundamental elements, medianity,

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<sup>3</sup> *Tenkō* is a word that denotes the abjuring of one’s own faith in favor of another one. It was first used to describe the Japanese Christian who, in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, were forced by the Tokugawa government to abjure their faith by stepping on sacred images (*fumie*). In the interwar period it was used to indicate those Marxist intellectuals who, willingly or through coercion, had embraced the Japanese nationalist ideology.

*Angst* and religion, which are the theoretical underpinning of the concept of *ningen*, I will show that my approach has more to do with history of philosophy than with intellectual history or philosophy alike.

To Miki and Watsuji ‘medianity’ represents the ontological as well historical location of the human being, where the *ningen* finds itself clustered between totality and infinity in Miki and totality and particularity in Watsuji. The theorization of an all-encompassing human being as ‘median’ that represents the unity of subject and object, logos and pathos, body and mind, aimed at overcoming the epistemological division between ‘subject’ and ‘object’. This human being had the particular characteristic of being underpinned by history and praxis in Miki (then poiesis) and history and climate in Watsuji. Nevertheless, it was precisely its grounding the particular history and in a particular climate of Japan that prevented it from undergoing a complete renovation capable of evolving into another kind of possible ‘history’ if not the one of the Japanese nation.

Secondly, Miki and Watsuji developed medianity as a way to respond to the intellectual and spiritual crisis that they perceived as pervasive of Japanese society between the 1920s and the 1950s. The historical crisis was sparked by the uncertain political atmosphere that followed WWI and that gave way to the rising of ultranationalism in Japan.<sup>4</sup> Miki saw it reflected in the ‘irrational forces’ that took over in the form of fascism (MKZ X: 400-2). Watsuji considered it in terms of the dangers that ‘Western’ modernity and ‘Western’ capitalism presented to the pure and ‘traditional’ Japanese culture. He moreover re-witnessed it in the Japanese defeat in 1945 and in the subsequent American occupation that lasted until 1952. Hence, both thinkers interpreted the crisis (or crises) of their time as a sign of the deep and profound historical change that was investing Japan in that period. Thus, medianity not only emerged as a mean for renovation on a philosophical level, but also as a product and an attempted solution to the historical context in which it was born. Yet, if we have to listen to Gramsci who said that, in the time of crisis: ‘the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear’, then it is clear that medianity could have not proven to be a powerful tool in contrasting ultranationalist tendencies (Gramsci 1971: 276). As a matter of fact, we could consider medianity as a ‘morbid symptom’ of the empire to come.

Thirdly, and most importantly, there is the element of religion that appears quite strongly in Miki and Watsuji’s systems. Miki and Watsuji believed that the Japanese victory

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<sup>4</sup> In this respect, Japan, Italy and Germany have a lot of history in common, despite the specific characteristic that each fascist movement took in these countries.

in the Second World War would have materialized in the form of an intellectual *escaton*. At the end of the war, a new, renovated, Japanese *ningen* would have guided the whole of Asia vis-à-vis the European and the American one. The faith that they showed in their nation and their conviction that this was the destiny that Japan was morally entitled to is precisely what caused their idea of the human being to be miserably crushed under the blow of history. It is quintessentially a problem of religious faith, albeit not in sense of theology, but rather in the sense that Miki and Watsuji believed in a religion of the human being with all that that entails, including predestination. Nevertheless, Miki and Watsuji's *escaton* slightly differs in its historical realization. Miki died in September 1945 and was not able to witness the American occupation of Japan and the intellectual and physical reconstruction of his country. His idea of the renovated human being thus died with him and remained, in its characterization, a religious *escaton*.<sup>5</sup> Watsuji, on the other hand, survived the war and went on writing until his death in 1960. Since his ideals were defeated together with Japan in August 1945, he had to propose another model of *ningen* that could face the new challenges of the postwar period. He thus decided to cling to the idea of *betweenness* (*aidagara*) or inter-relationality of human beings. The failure of his *escaton* in 1945 subsequently gave birth to another form of *escaton* that should have seen Japan rising in the new geo-political environment of the Cold War. Watsuji's *escaton* took a political form as well as a religious one, further hampering the possibility of acknowledging the mistakes of the past.

These three elements form the kernel of Miki and Watsuji's philosophical innovations and, together, they reduced their systems to rubbles. I will hence demonstrate how their internal interplay, together with the external force of the historical context, doomed Miki and Watsuji's entire philosophical enterprises to a destiny of bankruptcy. In this way, I attempt to show that it is possible for philosophical systems to clash with history in its unfolding.

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<sup>5</sup> I am not aware of any Japanese intellectual who, in the postwar period, continued the work that Miki had started in his lifetime. This is the reason why I affirm that his human being 'died' with him.

## Structure of the Work

The work is divided in six main chapters. Chapter 1 deals with methodology and contextualizes the production of Miki and Watsuji both historically as well as philosophically. I will show, in more detail, why the methodological approaches that have been so far employed in the scholarship on the Kyōto School refrain from addressing the most important questions that should be asked when dealing with these Japanese intellectuals.

Chapter 2, ‘The Birth of *Ningen*’, traces the origin of the concept of *ningen* in Miki and Watsuji in the late 1920s. In this part, I will show how the influence of Pascal set the standard for Miki’s elaboration of the human being and the extent to which Heideggerian philosophy contributed to the creation of such an idea. I will furthermore take into consideration Watsuji’s human being in the context of two of his prewar major books: *Climate* and the first volume of *Study of Ethics*. The aim of this chapter is thus to demonstrate that, in the first part of their careers, Miki and Watsuji elaborated a similar concept of the human being that took the shape of medianity.

Chapter 3, ‘*Ningen* and Society’, mainly focuses on the relationship between the philosophy of the *ningen* and Marxism. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, the thrust of Miki and Watsuji’s systems became ‘society’, in particular in the way it had been theorized in Marx’s writings. Here I will reflect on Miki’s original understanding of Marxist philosophy, his idea of the *basic experience* (*kiso keiken*) and the first creation of a societal human being that eschews the concept of ‘class’. I will moreover compare the work of the Hungarian Marxist intellectual Georg Lukács with Miki’s writings. I will thus demonstrate that Miki’s ‘humanistic Marxism’ already contained the seeds of his national human being to come. As for Watsuji, I will analyze his intellectual debate with the Japanese Marxist philosopher Kawakami Hajime on the subject of violence and one of his major pieces on Marxism. Since Watsuji’s human being had, by this time, already been described as Japanese society, I will reveal how Watsuji’s dismissal of Marxism was dictated by his conservative orientation and, at the same time, by the threat that Marxism posed to his *ningen*. In addition, I will engage with the criticism that the Marxist intellectual Tosaka Jun addressed to both Miki and Watsuji.

Chapter 4, ‘*Ningen* and the National Character’, brings together Miki and Watsuji on the subject of the formation of a Japanese national character in mid-1930s and at the beginning of the 1950s. I will show that Miki’s concept of *ningen* transformed itself from ‘society’ to the ‘Japanese nation’ simultaneously with his interest in philosophy of history. In this respect, I will investigate Miki’s attempt to deal with the problem of national temporality through the concept of the *kairos*. This level of criticism will be brought about in conjunction



with Walter Benjamin and Ernst Bloch's critiques of fascist time. In the case of Watsuji, I will consider two of his postwar works, one on philosophy of history and the other on Japanese history, where Watsuji searched for the causes of the defeat in WWII. In the postwar period Watsuji did not essentially modify his thought. He strove to redefine a new Japanese national character that could have faced the challenges of the post-1945 world. Despite the political bankruptcy of his idea prewar idea of his *ningen*, he still had faith in his vision for a successful and powerful Japan in the postwar historical context.

Chapter 5, '*Ningen* and Modernity', contextualizes the works of Miki and Watsuji in the framework of modernity through the concepts of technology and of the 'reverence to the emperor' in the late 1930s and in the 1950s. Miki further expanded his concept of the human being by transforming it into the *homo faber*, or the active, technological *ningen* that coincides with militarized Japan in the midst of the war. He elaborated a theory of technology characterized by the idea that Western, 'mechanical' technology needed to be sublated with the Eastern technology of the 'spirit'. I will show how the renovation of the *ningen* in such a context pushed Miki to grant to the Japanese human being a position of superiority towards the rest of the world. I will draw a parallel between Watsuji's two works on the Japanese ethical thought, one written in 1944 and the second one 1948. In both pieces Watsuji tangentially deals with the problem of *ningen* in the form of the reverence to the emperor as the embodiment of the *betweenness* between the emperor and his subjects and, subsequently, the emperor and its citizens. Similar to Miki, Watsuji was highly critical of the decay that he saw Western modernity contaminating Japan. I will demonstrate that Watsuji, by resorting to the idea of reverence, sought to preserve the alleged 'cultural tradition' of his country. Both in the prewar and postwar period, Watsuji equated the figure of the emperor with the Japanese nation and he constructed his human being as the realization of the *betweenness* between the emperor with his subjects or citizens.

Chapter 6, '*Ningen* and Ideology', focuses on Miki's contribution to the Shōwa Research Association and Watsuji's most highly political works *The Way of the Japanese Subject* and *The American National Character*. In the effort of tracing back Miki and Watsuji's political ideas to the philosophical core of their production, the *ningen*, I will show how Miki and Watsuji came together and how their philosophies conflated with the ideology of their time by means of the framework of the *escaton*. I will demonstrate that the complete faith that Miki and Watsuji had in the Japanese nation resulted in the bankruptcy of the idea of *ningen* concurrently with the military loss of WWII.

In the conclusion, I will argue that the systems that Miki and Watsuji created could have not being modified in the course of their careers, since they were already doomed from their early stages. The nexus between society, nation and empire entrapped in the human being was therefore predestined to blossom in this fashion. In this context, I will propose further questions that will have to be remitted to another work.