Migration of people and texts, shaping and transiting ideas: A philosophical case study about Nakajima Rikizo's (1858-1918) *Kant's Doctrine of the 'thing-in-itself'* (1889)

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Introduction

In line with the conference's general theme, this presentation seeks to introduce an approach for examining the interrelation between individual agents and the creation and circulation of knowledge between Japan and Western contexts during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. More specifically, it aims to contribute to the study of influences and counterinfluences by tracing the trajectory of a core philosophical concept—the Kantian "thing-in-itself"—taking as its point of departure Nakajima Rikizō's (1858–1918) PhD dissertation, *Kant's Doctrine of the "Thing-in-Itself"* (1889).

A Philosophically "Promising Japan"

In 1893, writing from Tokyo—the city where he was then residing as a professor of philosophy (Wenzl, 1957, 75–76)—Ludwig Busse (1862–1907) published an essay that was a hybrid between a review of Nakajima Rikizō's doctoral dissertation and his own reflections on the enduring controversy surrounding the Kantian thing-in-itself. In this text, the German philosopher laments the lack of academic attention paid to Nakajima's contribution, arguing that Nakajima was the first Japanese scholar to make an independent scholarly contribution to this Kantian problem. For Busse, this demonstrated that the "promising Japan" was not only achieving success in many other areas of knowledge, but also in the field of philosophy (Busse, 1893).

Busse's reflections point to the need to examine the relationship between individual agents and the creation and dissemination of knowledge between East Asia, Europe, and the United States during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Illustrating these processes of interaction through an examination of the trajectory of a central philosophical concept—the Kantian thing-in-itself—as treated by the Japanese philosopher in his doctoral dissertation constitutes part of the motivation for this presentation, which forms part of a broader ongoing research project.

People and Ideas: Travel and Luggage

In his essay *Kant in the Meiji Period* (2020), the historian Miyanaga Takashi (1943–) explains that the first Kantian work to enter Japan, in 1863, was brought as part of his luggage by a German merchant, Carl Ernst Boeddinghaus (1834–1914). The book in question was *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (1798), and it later passed from the hands of the merchant to those of Professor Chōzō Mutō (1881–1942) (Miyanaga, 2020, 5–6). This episode is, of course, anecdotal; at the same time, however, it aptly illustrates the movement of ideas through material objects such as books. It is, of course, a different matter to analyze the reception of Kant in Japan than merely to trace the physical arrival of Kantian volumes.

First, as is well known, foreign professors of philosophy played a crucial role in the universities founded during the Meiji Enlightenment. At the same time, intellectual exchange was fostered through Japanese students who traveled to Europe and the United States for academic training, and in several cases—such as that of Nakajima—to pursue doctoral studies in philosophy. Focusing on this generation of young students and, in particular, on the contacts that took place in New Haven, where Yale University is located and where Nakajima defended his doctoral dissertation, the peak period for the arrival of Chinese and Japanese students in this American city occurred during the

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1870s and 1880s. This phenomenon has been studied in depth by Professor Yung Ying-yue (2015).

Second, with regard to the migration of people and texts, Sweet proposes a historical-sociological explanation for the movement of philosophical works, namely as a consequence of war, processes of colonization, evangelization, and commercial or intellectual relations, among other factors (Sweet, 2009, 41). A less obvious but equally important cause relates to the deliberate introduction of foreign philosophical ideas through political and institutional programs within a given society and culture. According to Sweet, this intentionality characterizes the approach of the reformers and bureaucrats of Meiji Japan (Sweet, 2009, 42).

Nakajima, along with the other twenty-one students who arrived at Yale between 1870 and 1887, came from families that belonged to the upper class or elite of Japanese society at the time (Yung, 2015, 150–151). These families, in particular, descended from samurai clans that had supported the emperor and played a key role in promoting the Meiji Restoration. Regarding the motivations underlying their study trips abroad, the common factor shared by Nakajima and his fellow Japanese students was, in Yung's words, the desire to help build the future of Japan at a time of continuous change in the international environment (Yung, 2015, 153). In many cases, this motivation influenced their choice of field of study, as these young students considered whether the knowledge they acquired would be useful for the Japanese state (Yung, 2015, 156), often placing national interests above their own individual intellectual inclinations. This helps explain why, upon returning to Japan, most of them went on to occupy positions of significant responsibility: as academics who educated the next generation of Japanese university students—as in the case of Nakajima—, or as diplomats and bureaucrats, or as managers within major business and financial conglomerates (Yung, 2015, 158–160).

Thing-in-Itself, Causality, and Existence: Nakajima and the Neo-Kantian Reading of the *Critique*

In the first part of his dissertation, Nakajima systematizes the doctrine of the thing-in-itself. Relying on extensive quotations from the *Critique of Pure Reason*, he reconstructs the conceptualization of the thing-in-itself in the *Aesthetic*, the *Analytic*, and the *Dialectic*. This expository section is largely descriptive and remains relatively flat, functioning primarily as a summary of Kant's text.

What is more relevant for our purposes—and what I will outline here—are Nakajima's reflections on the categories of causality and existence in light of the concept of the thing-in-itself.

a) Thing-in-Itself and Causality: Nakajima's discussion appears in the fourth section of the first part of his dissertation. There, he sketches a broad intellectual landscape by engaging with several philosophical figures who raised objections to Kant, beginning with G. E. Schulze (1761–1833). As Nakajima notes (1889, 43), Schulze and those who followed his line of reasoning denounced an apparent inconsistency in Kant's system: on the one hand, Kant claims that the thing-in-itself cannot be the foundation or cause of phenomena, since the category of causality is merely subjective and lacks extramental application; on the other hand, Kant appears to affirm that the noumenon is the cause of the phenomenon, as seems to be suggested in the *Critique* (KrV, B 345; Kant, 2000, 293–294).

Nakajima understands this point as presenting what appears to be the most blatant contradiction in the *Critique*, and thus as a major challenge for neo-Kantian interpreters, who sought strategies to resolve this tension within the Kantian system. Leaving aside the detailed discussions surrounding the solutions proposed by figures such as Benno Erdmann (1851–1921) or Kuno Fischer (1824–1907), it suffices to note that their approach consists in arguing that there is, in fact, no contradiction. According to this reading, when Kant asserts that the transcendental object is the cause of

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phenomena, he employs the concept of cause in the sense of causality through freedom (Nakajima, 1889, 45).

For our purposes, however, it is more illuminating to focus on the dialogue Nakajima establishes with the interpretation proposed by Friedrich Albert Lange (1828–1875) in his influential *History of Materialism* (1866; 1873–1875; 1880). According to Lange (1880, 212), ancient metaphysics derived the concept of causality from pure reason and illegitimately applied it beyond the limits of human experience. Hume, by contrast, derived causality from experience and confined it to that sphere. Kant, in Lange's view, defended causality as a fundamental concept of pure reason and as the basis of experience, while simultaneously maintaining that beyond the bounds of reason it is meaningless. Lange himself went a step further, arguing that the thing-in-itself is merely a limiting concept (1880, 215), grounding this position in the claim that "The idea of cause is rooted in our organization, and is, in point of the disposition to it, prior to all experience. For this very reason it has unlimited validity in the sphere of experience, but beyond it absolutely no meaning" (1880, 212).

For Nakajima, the problem with Lange's response lies in the fact that it confines the idea of causality to subjective organization while simultaneously treating it as *a priori* with respect to experience, without ultimately accounting for its epistemological function. Nakajima's critique can be summarized as follows: if experience leads us to the existence of a limiting factor—the thing-in-itself—then explaining the existence of this limit requires a cause. Consequently, one cannot maintain, as Lange does, that causality is prior to all experience while at the same time absolutely necessary for it. At this juncture, Nakajima appears to align himself more closely with a Humean than with a strictly Kantian position, and he explicitly accuses Lange of circular reasoning.

This raises the decisive question: how does Nakajima ultimately resolve the apparent Kantian contradiction concerning causality?

> To sum up; when Kant says that the «thing-in itself» is the ground and cause of phenomena, all that he intends to say is that we must think it as their ground and cause, though we cannot know that they are such, as the category of causation has no application beyond the field of phenomena. When Kant's doctrine of the «thing-in-itself» is thus interpreted, the charge that it is self-contradictory is removed. (1889, 56)

b) Thing-in-Itself and Existence: With regard to the question of the existence of the thing-in-itself, and after discussing several philosophical positions that attempt to resolve this problem—such as those of Schulze or Fichte, who ultimately opt to deny the thing-in-itself—Nakajima accepts its existence only conditionally, assigning it a merely functional or even fictive role. The key point, for Nakajima, is that we *must think* that the thing-in-itself exists, insofar as it is necessary for phenomenal correlation. In this sense, its existence would constitute a form of necessity already acknowledged by Kant himself (KrV, A 30; Kant, 2000, 73–74). As Nakajima puts it in his own words:

> We do not know that the «thing-in-itself» exists, but we must think it as existing. In other words, the category of existence cannot be applied to the «thing in-itself» for it applies to phenomena only. Hence we cannot know that the «thing-in-itself» exists. The category of existence, however, is valid, even when it is not applied to any phenomena, though in that case it produces no knowledge. In short, it is not only possible for us to think by the category of existence a «thing-in-itself» as existing, but we must think «the thing-in-itself» as existing, since it is the correlate of phenomena. (1889, 60-1)

If this line of argument is followed, what becomes apparent is that although Nakajima is reluctant to dispense with existence, he implicitly does so. By following

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Kant's path, he ultimately situates existence outside the domain of philosophy. Preserved as a "necessary presupposition," as Nakajima himself would maintain, existence is reduced to a mere implication.

The Impossible Kantian "Irenism"

Continuing the internal analysis of the dissertation, the next element to be examined concerns what Nakajima identifies as the ultimate objective of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*: its irenic character. That is, Kant's conciliatory effort among opposing philosophical positions, and more specifically between idealism and realism (Nakajima, 1889, 70).

In Nakajima's view, irenism operates throughout the *Critique*. Kant seeks to reconcile Leibniz and Hume; Locke and Leibniz; and Descartes and Berkeley with Reid (1889, 70). Through a brief review of these various mediations—between dogmatism and skepticism, rationalism and empiricism, realism and idealism—Nakajima justifies the centrality of this irenic impulse by appealing to Kant's own text (KrV, A751/B779; Kant, 2000, 597–598). If critique is the tribunal in which conflicts are adjudicated once they arise, Nakajima then asks: what is the driving force behind such irenism?

For Nakajima, that force lies in the distinction between phenomena and noumena. This distinction is meant to orient and, in accordance with Kant's intention, resolve the conflict between idealism and realism. Attributing the concept to Kuno Fischer—though without specifying the particular work in which Fischer articulates it—Nakajima characterizes Kantian irenism, as applied to the opposition between idealism and realism, as a form of "ideal-realism" (*Ideal-Realismus*) (1889, 68).

But does Nakajima himself ultimately accept Kant's reconciliation of idealism and realism? His answer is no. He writes:

> To this most pertinent question we are compelled to give a negative answer. The distinction between Phenomena and Noumena, by means of which this mediation seems to be attempted, is groundless and untenable. It requires no profound thought to perceive that the line drawn between Phenomena as the field of knowledge and Noumena as the sphere of thought only, is not so clear and distinct as Kant maintains. If we accept this distinction, then the realm of knowledge becomes too limited. […] Now it is obvious that, if this definition of knowledge is accepted, the *Critique of Pure Reason* itself is excluded from the realm of knowledge. Why? Because the *Critique* professes to be an investigation of the conditions of knowledge, i.e., the objects which it investigates are those conditions which precede knowledge and make it possible. It follows that the objects with which the *Critique* deals are not knowledge in the Kantian sense but the conditions of knowledge. If so, the *Critique* is not itself knowledge and the distinction which it makes between Phenomena and Noumena is not real. (1889, 97-8)

Not without some disappointment for the reader, the quotation—drawn from the concluding section of Nakajima's doctoral dissertation, in which he rejects the value of Kantian irenism—is almost a carbon copy of a passage from Kuno Fischer's *A Critique of Kant* (1888, 135). This reflects a failure on the part of the Japanese scholar to distance himself from Fischer's position through sufficiently critical discussion. The omission of robust argumentation, and especially Fischer's debatable Fichtean and Schopenhauerian filtering of Kant's three *Critiques*—a filtering that distorts Kant's approach while repeatedly claiming fidelity to both its spirit and letter (1888, 83, 96, 119, 120)—leads us to conclude that Nakajima tacitly adopts Fischer's neo-idealism. He employs it as an unsatisfactory—if not altogether null—argument for the claim that the

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distinction between phenomena and noumena is useless, and therefore that Kant's conciliatory ideal-realism is likewise untenable.

Nakajima's adherence to Fischer's interpretation becomes evident when his rejection of Kantian "syncretism" is juxtaposed with Fischer's own critique (Fischer, 1866, 130), and when the consequences of invalidating the distinction between phenomenon and noumenon are drawn in order to redirect philosophy toward a "reinforced" form of idealism. This is, in fact, Fischer's path: in the confrontation between realism and idealism, he understands critique as their resolution—a position with a distinctly Hegelian aftertaste—provided that the "false" irenism to which such critique might otherwise lead is dissolved. Yet it may be argued that this idealistic resolution ultimately erases Kant's own efforts to clarify that transcendental idealism is not equivalent to Berkeleyan idealism (see the "Refutation of Idealism," KrV, BXL–BXLI, note k; Kant, 2000, 32–33; KrV, B274–B294; Kant, 2000, 246–258).

Conclusion

In another largely overlooked doctoral dissertation, its author Kishinami Tsunezō (1877–1952) refers to the development of philosophy in Japan between 1886 and 1905 as a period dominated by German thought, which permeated nearly every field and fostered an "atmosphere of philo-Germanism [that] took its course in Japan side by side with the national consciousness which encouraged the renaissance of national classics" (1915, 12). Kishinami attributes this expansion of German philosophy to the influence of foreign professors—such as Fenollosa, Busse, and Koeber (1915, 12)—as well as to the periods of study undertaken by Japanese students in Germany and to the suitability of the German governmental model for the political and legal construction of the Japanese Empire.

It can thus be concluded that Nakajima's dissertation, and his discussion of the Kantian thing-in-itself in particular, marks the beginning of the transfer of neo-Kantianism toward idealism in Japan, making it a particularly instructive example for understanding the phenomenon of the migration of ideas.

Nakajima's philosophical trajectory would gradually incline toward more radical forms of idealism, increasingly oriented toward the subjectivist philosophies of Fichte, Hegel, and Neo-Hegelianism, which would also enter Japan through Anglo-American idealism. Nakajima himself played a decisive role in introducing and securing the broad reception of authors such as T. H. Green (1836–1882) (Hirai, 1979, 108).

The spread of German idealism and its Anglo-American variant became even more evident in later generations of philosophers, many of whom were Nakajima's students and disciples and who continued along the path already discernible in the philosophical problematic articulated in his dissertation. The traces of Nakajima's teaching are particularly evident in the early period of Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945) (see Crespín Perales, 2013), especially in the imprint left by Fichte's subjectivist idealism.

The hybridization of epistemology and idealistic ethics that would later shape the Japanese philosophical landscape of the first half of the twentieth century is thus already foreshadowed in the position articulated here concerning the controversy over the Kantian thing-in-itself. Limited space does not allow for further elaboration, but this presentation has aimed to contribute, in a modest way, to completing the history of philosophical modernity in Japan by clarifying the processes through which German idealism and neo-Kantianism were received—processes that would prove decisive for decades to come.

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