

Philosophy as Spirituality

The Way of the Kyoto School

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IN THE FIRST OF A series of talks delivered on Basel radio in 1949, Karl Jaspers described philosophy as “the concentrated effort to become oneself by participating in reality.”¹ For the historian of the Western intellectual tradition, the description may seem to exaggerate the importance of only one ingredient in the practice of philosophy, but it applies well to the group of Japanese thinkers known as the Kyoto school. Their pursuit of philosophical questions was never detached from the cultivation of human consciousness as participation in the real. Drawing on Western philosophy ancient and modern as well as on their own Buddhist heritage, and combining the demands of critical thought with the quest for religious wisdom, they have enriched world intellectual history with a fresh, Japanese perspective and opened anew the question of the spiritual dimension of philosophy. In this article I would like to focus on this religious significance of their achievement.

It might be thought that the philosophy of the Kyoto school is inaccessible to those not versed in the language, religion, and culture of Japan. Read in translation, there is a certain strangeness to the vocabulary, and many of the sources these thinkers take for granted will be unfamiliar. They presuppose the education and reading habits of their Japanese audience, so that many subtleties of style and allusion, much of what is going on between the lines and beneath the surface of their texts, will inevitably be lost on other audiences. Still, it was not their aim to produce a merely Buddhist, much less Japanese, body of thought, but rather to address fundamental, universal issues in what they saw as the universally accessible language of philosophy. That is why their work has proved intelligible and

accessible far beyond Japan, and why it is prized today by many Western readers as an enhancement of the spiritual dimension of our common humanity.

Opinions differ on how to define the membership of the Kyoto school, but there is no disagreement that its main pillars are Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945) and his disciples, Tanabe Hajime (1885–1962) and Nishitani Keiji (1900–1990), all of whom held chairs at Kyoto University. Similarities in interest and method, as well as significant differences among the three, are best understood by giving each a brief but separate treatment.

Nishida Kitarō: The Quest of the Locus of Absolute Nothingness

For Nishida the goal of the philosophical enterprise was self-awakening: to see the phenomena of life clearly through recovering the original purity of experience, to articulate rationally what has been seen, and to reappraise the ideas that govern human history and society with reason thus enlightened by reality. Since reality is constantly changing, and since we are part of that change, *understanding* must be a “direct experiencing from within” and *articulation* of what has been so understood must be an internalized, “appropriated”² expression. Accordingly, Nishida’s arguments are often *post hoc* reconstructions of a path of thinking he had traversed intuitively, led as much by a Buddhist sense of reality as by the Western philosophies he was absorbing.

He is said to have been struck one day while on a walk by the buzzing of a fly near his ear. Lost in his thoughts, he only “noticed” it later, but this confirmed in him the ordinariness of the experience where things happen and are later noticed according to biased habits of thought. “I heard a fly” brings the event to mind, but in the process distorts it into a relationship between an “I” and a “fly.”³ The event itself is pure actuality. Somehow, he saw, actualities constitute subjects and objects, but then mind is immediately distracted to analysis and judgment, never to find its way back to the purity of the original experience. To recover that purity would be to unfetter mind from the distorting constraints of being reasonable or of communicating the experience to those who did not share it. This does not mean that mind leaps free of the senses to some privileged inerrant state, but simply that within the limits of its skinbound, bodily existence, mind reaches what can only be called a kind of boundlessness.

This idea of experience prior to the subject-object distinction was Nishida’s starting point and courses through the pages of his collected works like a clear stream. In the opening pages of his maiden work, *A Study of the*

Good, Nishida calls it “pure experience,” borrowing a term from the American philosopher William James. His attraction to the idea, however, stems less from James, or indeed from any Western thinker, than from his own Sino-Japanese tradition. We read, for instance, in the eleventh-century Buddhist *Record of the Transmission of the Lamp* that “the mental state having achieved true enlightenment is like that before enlightenment began”; or again, the great Noh dramatist Zeami (1363–1443) comments on how the *Book of Changes* deliberately omits the element for “mind” in the Chinese glyph for “sensation” to indicate a precognitive awareness.⁴ Such was the tradition out of which Nishida stepped into his study of philosophy and forged what he was later to call his “logic of locus.”⁵

The Logic of Locus

In its forward, rational construction, the process of restoring experience to its purity—the aim of the logic of locus—may be described graphically as a series of concentric circles.⁶ The smallest circle, where the center is most in control of the periphery, is that of a judgment where something is predicated of a particular subject. (Japanese does not suffer the ambiguity of the term “subject” here as Germanic and Latin languages do, where the grammatical subject is easily confused with the subject who makes the judgment.) Thus “The rose is red” is like a small galaxy with the rose at the center and redness revolving about it like a planet. Nishida interpreted Aristotle’s logic of predication as focused on the subject, which provides a stable center of gravity for its attributes and the comprehension of which grows as more and more attributes are given orbit about it. Nishida sought for his own logic the same solid foundation that Aristotle’s “subject that could not become a predicate,” provided, but without the metaphysical nuisance of “substance.” To do so, he reversed the emphasis by following the predicates. In other words, he shifted his attention away from expanding description or analysis of the object to releasing predication from the subject-object framework in order to see where the process itself “takes place.”

As reported by his students, he would then draw a second circle on the blackboard surrounding the first, opening the field for other predicating judgments. The galaxy of particular judgments is now seen to rest in a larger universe where the original, grammatical subject has forfeited its position of centrality to the thinking subject who makes the judgment in the first place. This is the locus of reflective consciousness. It is not the world; nor is it even experience of the world. It is the consciousness where judgments

about the world are located—indeed where all attempts to know and control reality by locating it within the limits of the thinking processes of human beings find their homeground.

The predicate “red” is no longer bound to some particular object, and particular objects are no longer limited by their satellite attributes or the language that encases them. Everything is seen as relative to the process of constructing the world in mind. The move to this wider circle shows judgment to be a finite act within a larger universe of thinking.

This gives rise to the next question: And just where is this consciousness itself located? If mind is a field of circumstances that yield judgments, what are the circumstances that define mind? To locate them deeper within the mind would be like Baron Munchausen pulling himself out of the swamp by his own pigtail. Recourse to the idea of a higher subject for which ordinary consciousness is an object is a surrender to infinite regress. Still, if the notions of subject and object only set the boundaries for conscious judgment, this does not preclude the possibility of a still higher level of awareness that will envelop the realm of subjects and objects.

To show this, Nishida drew another circle about the first two, a broad one with broken lines to indicate a location unbounded and infinitely expandable (though not, of necessity, infinitely expanded), a place he called “nothingness.” This was his absolute, deliberately so named to replace the absolute of being in much Western philosophy. Being, for Nishida, cannot be absolute because it can never be absolved from the relationships that define it. The true *ab-solutum* had to be—as the Japanese glyphs *zettai* indicate—“cut off” from any and every “other.” Absoluteness precludes all dichotomy of subject and object, all bifurcation of one thing from another, all individuation of one mind or another.

Thus “defined” by its unboundedness, this place of absolute nothingness is the locus of salvation, of deliverance from time and being. It is the fulfillment of the philosophical-religious quest where the action of intuition and consciousness take place without an acting subject and in the immediacy of the moment, where the self working on the world yields to a pure seeing of reality as it is. It is the moment of enlightenment that is right at hand in the here-and-now, all-at-once-ness of experience. The final circle is thus one whose circumference is nowhere and whose center can be anywhere. The image was taken from Cusanus, but the insight behind it was there in Nishida from the start.

In fact, over the years Nishida employed a number of idioms to express self-awareness at the locus of absolute nothingness, among them: “appropriation,” “acting intuition,” “seeing without a seer,” and “knowing a thing

by becoming that thing.” In his early writings he is somewhat inhibited by Neo-Kantian epistemological conundrums, but he advances steadily to an integrated view of how consciousness takes shape, with a Hegelian emphasis on its embeddedness in the historical praxis of a bodily agent. He comes to see knowing not as the activity of a self-empowered subject but as “acting intuition” in which the very idea of the subject grasping objects has been superseded. This intuition is no longer a spying on reality as the ultimate “other,” but a participation in the self-actualization of reality itself. In other words, awareness of the unbounded, absolute character of nothingness which arises out of reflection on immediate experience is not meant to detach the subject from the real world but to insinuate its presence still deeper there. “True reality,” he writes, “is not the object of dispassionate knowing.... Without our feelings and will, the actual world ceases to be a concrete fact and becomes mere abstract concept.”⁷

This idea of participating in reality by overcoming the subject-object dichotomy was given logical form by Nishida in a deliberately ambivalent formula that can be read “an absolute self-identity of contradictories” or “a self-identity of absolute contradictories.” The Japanese apposition allows for both and he made free use of the *double-entendre*, depending on whether he wished to stress the radical nature of the identity achieved or the radical opposition of the elements that go into the identity. A further ambiguity in the formula, less transparent in the texts, is the qualification of the identity as a *self-identity*. For one thing, the identity is *automatic*. It is not induced from without, nor is it forced on a stubborn, resistant reality. It takes place when the limitations of the narrow circles of subject-predicate and subject-object are overcome. Here “identity” refers to the way reality is, minus the interference of reflective mind, and the way the mind is when lit up by reality. At the same time, the true identity of reality is not independent of that of the true, awakened self. It is not that the self is constructed one way and the world another; or that the deepest truth of the self is revealed by detaching itself from the world. The apparently absolute opposition between the two is only overcome when the individual is aware that “every act of consciousness is a center radiating in infinity”⁸—that is, out into the circumferenceless circle of nothingness.

In all these reflections Nishida is pursuing a religious quest, a summation of which he attempted in a rambling final essay, “The Logic of Locus and a Religious Worldview.” We see Nishida, on the one hand, at pains to clarify the roots of his logic of locus in Buddhist thought; on the other, to clarify his understanding of religion as not bound to any particular historical tradition. Religion is not ritual or institution, or even morality. It is “an event

of the soul” which the discipline of philosophy can enhance, even as religion helps philosophy find its proper place in history. This “place” is none other than the immediacy of the moment in which consciousness sees itself as a gesture of nothingness within the world of being. For consciousness does not see reality from without, but is an act of reality from within and therefore part of it. This is the fountainhead of all personal goodness, all just societies, all true art and philosophy and religion for Nishida.

Absolute Nothingness

Nishida’s idea of absolute nothingness, which was later to be taken up and developed by Tanabe and Nishitani each in his own way, is not a mere gloss on his logic of locus. His descriptions of historical praxis as “embodying absolute nothingness in time,”⁹ and religious intuition as “penetrating into the consciousness of absolute nothingness”¹⁰ are intended to preserve the experiential side of the logic and at the same time to assert a distinctive metaphysical position. But at a more basic level, the idea of nothingness itself is the stumbling block for philosophies which consider being as the most all-encompassing qualification of the real, and which see nothingness as the class of everything excluded from reality.

In his search for the ultimate locus of self-awakening—the point at which reality recognizes itself, through the enlightened consciousness of the human individual, as relative and finite—Nishida could not accept the idea of a supreme being of ultimate power and knowledge beside which all else was no more than a pale analogy. He conceived of his absolute as an unbounded circumstance rather than as an enhanced form of ordinary being. The “locus” of being in reality could not itself be another being; it had to be something that encompassed being and made it relative. Being was by its nature a form of codependency, a dialectic of identities at odds with one another, defining one another by each setting itself up as non-other. As the totality of all such things, being could not be an absolute. Only against the all-embracing infinity of a nothingness could the totality of the world in which beings move exist at all.

At the same time, Nishida recognized that “God is fundamental to religion in any form.”¹¹ This left him with two options: either to redefine what religion, and particularly Christianity, calls God as absolute nothingness; or to show that the absolute being is relative to something more truly absolute. Nishida found a third way: he took both options. Nishida’s God was an “absolute being”-in-“absolute nothingness.” The copulative *in* here is meant to signal a relationship of affirmation-in-negation (the so-called

logic of *soku-bi* which Nishida seems to owe more to D. T. Suzuki than to the Buddhist sources on which Suzuki drew). The two terms are bound to one another by definition. In the same way that there cannot be a creator without creatures, or sentient beings without a Buddha, Nishida writes, there cannot be an absolute being without an absolute nothingness. On the one hand, he insists that the absolute is “truly absolute by being opposed to absolutely nothing.” On the other, “the absolute is not merely non-relative.... It must relate to itself as a form of self-contradiction.”¹²

Even his clearest remarks in this regard are something of a logical tangle and continue to perplex his commentators.¹³ Insofar as I have been able to understand the texts, Nishida’s reluctance to absorb God without remainder into absolute nothingness seems to stem from his need to preserve the element of pure experience in awakened selfhood. Metaphysically, he refused to pronounce on God’s nature or existence. But “dropping off body and mind to be united with the consciousness of absolute nothingness”¹⁴ is also a religious act, and one that transforms perception to “see eternity in the things of everyday life.” As such, it is an engagement of one’s truest, deepest self with a radical, absolute otherness. Nishida recognized this basic “spiritual fact” to be the cornerstone of religion, articulated in God-talk or Amida-talk as nowhere else in philosophical history. In other words, if the absolute *in itself* is “absolved” of all dependence on the relative, there is yet a sense in which the absolute *for us* must be nearer to our true selves than anything else can be. The very nature of absolute nothingness was bound to this contradiction: “In every religion, in some sense, God is love.”¹⁵ It is also the point at which logic must finally yield to experience, and hence where Nishida’s perplexing prose can best be read as a philosopher’s bow to religion.

Clearly Nishida’s notion of absolute nothingness is different from the “beyond being” (*ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας*) of classical negative theology. If anything, his idea of locating nothingness absolutely out of this world of being may be seen as a metaphysical equivalent of locating the gods in the heavens. His point was not to argue for an uncompromising transcendence of ultimate reality, but to establish a ground for human efforts at self-control, moral law, and social communion that will not cave in when the earth shakes with great change or life is visited by great tragedy. True, the personal dimension of the divine-human encounter (and its reflection in Christological imagery) is largely passed over in favor of an abstract notion of divinity not so very different from the God of the philosophers that Pascal rejected. In general, Nishida alludes to God as an idiom for life and creativity minus the connotations of providence and subjectivity. But for one so steeped in the Zen Buddhist perspective as Nishida to have given God

such a prominent place in his thought proved to be a decisive ingredient in opening Kyoto-school philosophy to the world.

On the whole, Nishida's "orientalism" is restrained to an ancillary role in his philosophy. Zealous disciples, less secure in their philosophical vocation and lacking Nishida's religious motivation, have been preoccupied with finding in him a logic of the East distinct from that of the West. Nishida himself did not go so far. Rarely, if ever, does he set himself or his ideas up as alternative or even corrective to "Western philosophy" as a whole. He was making a contribution to world philosophy and was happy to find affiliates and sympathetic ideas, hidden or overt, in philosophy as he knew it.

That said, his attempts to return the true self awakened to absolute nothingness to the world of historical praxis rarely touch down on solid ground. Even the most obvious progression from family to tribe to nation to world is given little attention. In principle he would hardly have rejected such an expansion of the self (though it must be said that during the war years, he came dangerously close to describing Japanese culture as a kind of self-enclosed world with the emperor as the seal of its internal identity). But this was not his primary focus, and in fact he never found a way to apply his search for the ultimate locus of the self to the pressing moral demands of his age. The bulk of his reflections on the historical world concerns general structures of human acting and knowing in time rather than the relation of particular nations and cultures to universal world order. The attainment of the true self ultimately lies beyond history; it happens in the "eternal now." Even the most immediate existential fact of the I-Thou relationship is assimilated virtually without ethical content into the abstract logic of the "self-identity of opposites" in which the I discovers the Thou at the bottom of its own interiority. These questions provided the starting point for the contributions of Nishitani and Tanabe.

Tanabe Hajime: Locating Absolute Nothingness in Historical Praxis

Like many of the young intelligentsia of his generation, Tanabe was attracted to the vitality and originality of Nishida's thinking. But his was a temperament different from Nishida's. His writings show a more topical flow of ideas and a passion for consistency that contrasts sharply with Nishida's creative leaps of imagination. If Nishida's prose is a seedbed of suggestiveness where one needs to read a great deal and occasionally wander off between the lines to see where things are going, Tanabe's is more like a mathematical calculus where the surface is complex but transparent. Nishida's work, it has been said, is like a single essay, interrupted as often by the

convention of publishing limits or deadlines as by the end of a thesis. One problem flows into the next, not in the interests of a unified system of thought but in pursuit of clarity about the matter at hand. Tanabe—and for that matter, Nishitani also—were more thematic and produced essays that can stand on their own and be understood as such.

When Meiji Japan opened its doors to the world in the mid-nineteenth century after two hundred years of cloister, it immediately inherited intellectual fashions that had been nurtured during the European enlightenment and the explosion of modern science. Not having been part of the process, Japan was ill-prepared to appropriate its results critically. That the road should have been a bumpy one, very different both from the West and from its Asian neighbors, is understandable. As Japan was going through its restoration to the community of nations, the countries of Europe were struggling with the idea of national identity. National flags, songs, and other more ritual elements aside, we find for the first time a widespread concern with distinctive national literatures and philosophies, along with national psychologies. The human sciences, all in their infancy, were caught up in this fascination even as they tried to monitor it. While the cosmopolitan spirit of the enlightenment struggled to survive this test of its roots, the natural sciences and technology proudly marched in the van of a transnational, transcultural humanity. Throughout it all, Japan swayed back and forth between a total infatuation with the superior advances of Western culture and a rigid determination to carve out for itself a unique position in the world.

Nishida suffered this ambiguity as a man of his age. While he never sought translation of his thought into foreign languages, he did recognize the need for ties with the contemporary world of philosophical thinkers. To this end, Tanabe was sent by Nishida to study in Europe, where word of Nishida's work had already stirred interest. Whereas Nishida could calmly pen German phrases here and there in his diaries and skim through English and French books without the fear of criticism at home, the young Tanabe had to struggle with the daily life of a foreigner clumsily making his way in a tongue and culture he had so far only admired from a distance. In the course of time, a certain resentment seems to have built up in him over Nishida's insistence that he pursue neo-Kantian thought. His own interests turned him in the direction of phenomenology, but on returning to Japan he was met with a request of Nishida for a major paper on Kant for a collection celebrating the two hundredth anniversary of the latter's death. Its composition was a turning point for Tanabe.

In his essay Tanabe argued that Kant's third *Critique* lacked an impor-

tant ingredient that Nishida's philosophy could supply. Specifically, he tried to wed the idea of self-awakening to Kant's practical reason in order to shift the foundations of morality away from a universal moral will in the direction of absolute nothingness. On the one hand, he saw that awareness of nothingness could provide moral judgment with a telos outside of subjective will. This "finality of self-awareness," as he termed it, could provide "a common principle for weaving history, religion, and morality into an insoluble relationship with one another." On the other hand, it dawned on him that Nishida's true, awakened self effectively cut the individual off from history. On completion of his essay, he turned to Hegel to fill the gap. In time he realized that Hegel's absolute knowledge was lacking content, and he set out to think through the possibility of praxis in the historical world grounded in the self-awareness of absolute nothingness. Nishida, for his part, was hard at work on his logic of locus, but Tanabe was not persuaded that it would solve his problem. During this period he developed his dialectic of "absolute mediation" as a way of establishing the bond between absolute nothingness and the historical world.¹⁶

Philosophical questions aside, two things should be noted with regard to Tanabe's attempts to draw the philosophical vocation closer to the historical world. First of all, the tendency to be abstract that Tanabe criticized in Nishida was very much his own problem. In fact, on his own account he recognized "a flaw in my speculative powers" as responsible for his abstractness.¹⁷ Secondly, Tanabe's genius, as apparent as it was to his students, was no match for the overwhelming presence of Nishida, towards whom he took an ever more critical position even as he continued to measure his own philosophical progress as a Japanese working primarily with Western sources against Nishida's contributions. As Nishitani recalls, the dialectic that he was advancing "seems to give us a mirror-image of Tanabe himself desperately struggling to escape the embrace of Nishida's philosophy."¹⁸

Absolute Nothingness and the Logic of the Specific

On the occasion of Nishida's retirement, when the academic world was piling accolades on its first and greatest world philosopher, Tanabe wrote a self-serving piece deviously entitled "Looking Up to Nishida." Leaving Nishida to his logic of locus, Tanabe (who now held Nishida's chair at Kyoto University) prepared the way for his own "logic of the specific" by protesting that "the religious experience that goes by the name of the 'self-awakening of absolute nothingness'... belongs outside the practice and language of philosophy, which cannot put up with such a complete lack of

conceptual definition.... Religious self-awareness must not be set up as the ultimate principle of philosophy.”¹⁹

The religious bent in Nishida’s philosophy was fed by his many years of sitting in *zazen* and his ongoing contact with Buddhist and Christian thinkers. Tanabe’s religiosity was more bookish. No less than Nishida, he shied away from turning the philosopher’s trade against organized religion and tried to get to the heart of religious and theological thinkers, but his religiosity was a more solitary one. No diaries and few letters remain to let us suppose otherwise. The irony is that Tanabe is remembered as the more religious figure because of a postwar book on penitential philosophy in which he criticizes the profession he had devoted his life to, himself included, for its moral timidity.

Tanabe’s contribution to Kyoto-school philosophy as a religious way, as I have said, cannot be separated from his uneasy relationship with Nishida, which stimulated him to look closely at some of the questions Nishida had skimmed over in his creative flights and which also gave him the foundations for doing so. From Nishida he received the idea of approaching religious judgments in terms of affirmation-in-negation, as well as the conviction of absolute nothingness as the supreme principle of philosophy. Further, like Nishida, he did not consider anything in Japanese language or thought a final measure of what was most important in his philosophy. These attitudes he passed on, passionately, to the students. Finally, like Nishida he never argued for the supremacy of any one religious way over any other. What he did not take from Nishida, however, was a conviction of the primacy of religious experience as an “event of the soul” which philosophy may or may not try to explain but can never generate. For Tanabe, there is no unmediated religious experience. Either it is appropriated by the individual in an “existentially philosophic” manner or it yields to the specificity of theology, ecclesial institution, or folk belief.²⁰

Tanabe’s search for his own philosophical position began with a meticulous rethinking of Hegel’s dialectic as applied to a philosophy of absolute nothingness. Along the way he became convinced that for nothingness to be absolute, it was not enough for it to serve as a principle of identity for the finite world from a position somewhere outside of being. It must be a dynamic force that sustains the relationships in which all things live and move and have their being. He could not accept the idea that the historical world in which opposites struggle with one another to secure their individual identities is being driven inexorably towards some quiet, harmonious, beatific vision in absolute mind; neither could he feel at home in the private awakening to a true self within. Precisely because all things without exception are



34. Nishida Kitarō, age 46 (1916).



35. Tanabe Hajime, age 72 (1957).



36. Nishitani Keiji (1900–1990), age 89.

made to struggle with one another for their individuality, the dialectic is an absolute fact of being cannot be accounted for within the world of being alone. Only a nothingness outside of being can make things be the essentially interactive things that they are. But the reverse is also true: "Insofar as nothingness is nothingness, it is incapable of functioning on its own. Being can function only because it is *not* nothingness."²¹

If nothingness allows the world to be, awakening to this fact serves as a permanent critical principle in all identity, whether in the sense of a lofty philosophical principle like Nishida's self-identity of absolute contradictories or in the sense of the ordinary psychological self-composure of the individual mind. It is the fire in which all identity is purged of the fictions of individuality and substantiality that mind attaches to it, leaving only the pure awakening to that which has itself no conflict, no otherness: nothingness. This purification of the mind was Tanabe's test of religious truth. In its terms he appreciated the great figures of the Buddhist and Christian religious past.

The logic of the specific is testimony to the fact that Tanabe never made peace with his own tendency to distance himself from the historical world in the way Nishida did. Many of the latter's young disciples had turned the sharp analysis of Marxism against Nishida's fixation on self-awareness, but to little avail. Tanabe, in contrast, from his critical reading of Kant, had come to see that the subject of consciousness is not a mere individual who looks at the world through lenses crafted by nature for the mind without consultation. It is also a by-product of specific cultural, ethnic, and epochal conditions. In its purgative function, the awareness of absolute nothingness demands that even our most treasured theories be seen as bundles of relationships not within our control. We cannot speak without a specific language nor think without circumstances with a history. We are not individuals awakening to universal truths, but stand forever on specificity, a great shifting bog of bias and unconscious desire beyond the capacity of our mind to conquer once and for all. Nothingness sets us in the mire, but it moves us to struggle against it—never to be identified with it, never to assume we have found an identity of absolute contradictories that is not contaminated by specificities of history. This "absolute negation" is the goal of religion.²²

Philosophical Metanoia

The problem for Tanabe was to salvage a meaning for self-awakening in this logic of the specific and not resign oneself to the cunning of history. It was not a lesson he taught himself in the abstract but rather one that was forced

on him by his own injudicious—and probably also unnecessary—support of state ideology at the height of Japan’s military escapades in Asia. The logic that he had shaped to expose the irrational element in social existence was now used to set up against the “clear-thinking gaze of existential philosophy” something more engaging: the “praxis of blessed martyrdom” in a “war of love.” Proclaiming the nation as the equivalent of Śākyamuni and that “participation in its life should be likened to the *imitatio Christi*,”²³ Tanabe lost touch with the original purpose of his logic of the specific.

While these sentiments frothed at the surface of Tanabe’s prose, a deep resentment towards the impotence of his own religious philosophy seethed within him, until in the end it exploded in the pages of his classic work *Philosophy as Metanoetics*. It was no longer enough to posit absolute nothingness as a supreme metaphysical principle grounding the world of being. It must be embraced, in an act of unconditional trust, as a force liberating the self from its native instinct to self-sufficiency. The notion of faith in Other-Power as expressed in the *Kyōgyōshinshō* of Shinran (1173–1262) gave Tanabe the basic framework for his radical metanoia and reconstruction of a philosophy from the ground up.

It is no coincidence that the heaviest brunt of his penitential attack on overreliance on the power of reason fell on the head of Kant’s transcendental philosophy, but from there it reaches out to a reassessment of virtually all his major philosophical influences, from Hegel and Schelling to Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and Heidegger. Woven into this critique is a positive and unabashedly religious insistence on what he calls “nothingness-in-love” or compassionate praxis in the historical world. The principal model for this ideal is the Dharmākara myth of ascent-in-descent in which the enlightened bodhisattva returns to the world in order to certify his own awakening, but frequent mention is also made of the Christian archetype of life-in-death, which was to dominate certain of his later works.²⁴ In any case, his aim was not to promote any particular religious tradition over any other but to bridge the gap between absolute nothingness and concrete reality in a way that a simple leap of self-awareness could not accomplish. He drew on religious imagery because it seemed to keep him focused on the moral obligation of putting the truth of enlightened mind to work for the sake of all that lives.

As it turned out, the purgative, “disruptive” side of his metanoetics overshadowed the practical, moral side and left him on shaky ground when it came to taking his new “philosophy that is not a philosophy” beyond its initial statement. Tanabe was aware of this, and devoted his late years to reinforcing the foundations of his logic of the specific, fusing elements from Zen, Christianity, and Pure Land in the forge of a loving, compassionate

self-awakening. But when all was said and done, Tanabe, like Nishida, remained aloof from the concrete problems of science, technology, economic injustice, and international strife that were shaking the foundations of the historical world outside the walls of his study. His was to the end a philosophy committed to uncluttering the mind of its self-deceptions, but forever haunted by the knowledge that only in the hopelessly cluttered specificity of history can moral praxis exert itself. The vision he left us is a portrait of his own struggles with the intellectual life: a seamless robe of ideals tattered by experience but not rent, whose weave remains a testimony to the weaver's dedication to the philosophical vocation as a spiritual way.

Nishitani Keiji: From Nihilism to Nothingness

With Nishitani, the philosophical current that flowed from Nishida through Tanabe spread out in fresh, new tributaries. Not only did he carry over Tanabe's concern with historical praxis; he also drew the ties to Buddhism closer than either of his senior colleagues had done and closer, as well, to the lived experience of the philosophical quest. In addition, Nishitani took up in his philosophy two major historical problems, each pulling him in a different direction. He was preoccupied, on the one hand, with facing the challenge that modern science brought to religious thinking; on the other, with establishing a place for Japan in the world. All of this combines to give his writing a wider access to the world forum.

More than Nishida and Tanabe, Nishitani turned his thought on a world axis. He actively welcomed and encouraged contact with philosophers from abroad, and in his final years many a foreign scholar beat a path to his small home in Kyoto.²⁵ He, too, studied in Germany as Tanabe before him, and later was to travel to Europe and the United States to lecture. The happy combination of the publication of his major work, *Religion and Nothingness*, in English and German translation, the rising number of Western scholars with the skills to read fluently in the original texts, and the great human charm of Nishitani as a person, helped bring the work of the Kyoto philosophers to a wider audience. Still, given the trends in Continental and American philosophy at the time this was happening, it was unsurprising that it was the theologians and Buddhologists who were most attracted to Nishitani's work. Only after his death did neighboring Asian countries like Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong begin to show an interest in him and other of the Kyoto-school philosophers. But for all his cosmopolitan sentiments, Nishitani followed his predecessors in showing favoritism towards the West—as had virtually all Japanese philosophers since the Meiji period.

In defending himself against the Inquisition, Galileo presented what has become the central assumption of modern science. "I am not interested," he said, "in how to go to heaven, but in how the heavens go." This dichotomy was one that Nishitani never accepted. Not only had the West got it wrong in separating philosophy from religion, its separation of religious quest from the pursuit of science also seemed to him fundamentally flawed. Anything that touches human existence, he insisted, had its religious dimension. Science is always and ever a human enterprise in the service of something more, but when the existential element is sacrificed to the quest for scientific certitude, "what we call life, soul, and spirit—including God—find their 'home' destroyed." Nishitani's response was not to retreat into preoccupation with the true self, but to argue that only on the self's true homeground do the concrete facts of nature "manifest themselves as they are, in their greater 'truth'."²⁶

In Nishitani the concern with true self reaches its highest point in Kyoto philosophy. He saw this as the focal point of Nishida's work and interpreted Tanabe's philosophy as a variation on that theme. In his own writings he drew to the surface, through textual allusions and direct confrontation with the original texts, many of the Zen and Buddhist elements in Nishida's work. D. T. Suzuki's efforts to broaden Zen through contact with Pure Land Buddhism also reverberate in Nishitani's writings, though not as deeply as they do in Tanabe's. In addition, he turned directly to Christian theology both for inspiration and to clarify his own position as distinct from the Christian one.

But perhaps the single greatest stimulus to Nishitani's broadening of Nishida's philosophical perspective was Nietzsche, whose writings were never far from his mind. The deep impression that *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* had made on him in his university years left him with doubts so profound that, in the end, only a combination of Nishida's method and the study of Zen Buddhism was able to keep them from disabling him. As a scholar of philosophy he had translated and commented on Plotinus, Aristotle, Boehme, Descartes, Schelling, Hegel, Bergson, and Kierkegaard—all of whom left their mark on his thought. But Nietzsche, like Eckhart, Dōgen, Han-shan, Shih-te, Zen poets, and the New Testament, he seems to have read through the lenses of his own abiding spiritual questions, resulting in readings of arresting power and freshness.

The fundamentals of Nishitani's own approach to the true self as a philosophical idea are set forth in an early book on "elemental subjectivity." This term (which he introduced into Japanese from Kierkegaard) is not one that Nishida favored, but Nishitani's aim is not substantially different from that

of his teacher: to lay the philosophical foundation for full and valid individual existence, which in turn would be the basis for social existence, cultural advance, and overcoming the excesses of the modern age. Written at the age of forty and under the strong influence of Nishida, the work contains in germ his own mature philosophy.

As with Nishida, the Achilles' heel of Nishitani's highly individual approach to historical questions was its application to questions of world history. In the attempt to lend support during the war years to elements in the Navy and government who wanted to bring some sobriety to the mindless antics of the Japanese Army in Asia, his remarks on the role of Japanese culture in Asia blended all too easily with the worst ideologies of the period, and the subtle distinctions that made all the difference to him—as they did to Nishida and Tanabe caught up in the same maelstrom—earn him little sympathy today in the light of subsequent events. Nishitani suffered a purge after the defeat of Japan and never returned to these questions in print. While he continued to write on Japan and the culture of the East, he did so at a safe distance both from his own earlier opinions and from the relentless pummeling of Marxist critics.

The Standpoint of Emptiness

To Nishida's logic of locus and Tanabe's logic of the specific, Nishitani added what he called the standpoint of emptiness. He saw this standpoint not as a perspective that one can step into effortlessly, but the achievement of a disciplined and uncompromising encounter with doubt. The long struggle with nihilism that lay behind him was far from merely academic. As a young man, not yet twenty years of age, he had fallen into a deep despair in which "the decision to study philosophy was, melodramatic as it might sound, a matter of life and death for me."²⁷ This was to be the very starting point for his description of the religious quest: "We become aware of religion as a need, as a *must* for life, only at the level of life at which everything else loses its necessity and its utility."²⁸

For Nishitani, the senseless, perverse, and tragic side of life is an undeniable fact. But it is more than mere fact; it is the seed of religious awareness. The meaning of life is thrown into question initially not by sitting down to think about it but by being caught up in events outside one's control. Typically, we face these doubts by retreating to one of the available consolations—rational, religious, or otherwise—that all societies provide to protect their collective sanity. The first step into radical doubt is to allow oneself to be so filled with anxiety that even the simplest frustration can

reveal itself as a symptom of the radical meaninglessness at the heart of all human existence. Next, one realizes that this sense of ultimate is still human-centered and hence incomplete. Now one gives oneself over to the doubt entirely, and the tragedy of human existence shows itself as a symptom of the whole world of being and becoming. At this point, Nishitani says, it is as if a great chasm had opened up underfoot in the midst of ordinary life, an “abyss of nihilism.”

Whole philosophies have been constructed on the basis of this nihilism, and Nishitani threw himself heart and soul into the study of them, not in order to reject them but in order to find the key to what he called the “self-overcoming of nihilism.” The awareness of nihilism must be allowed to grow in consciousness until all of life is transformed into a great question mark. Only in this supreme act of negating the meaning of existence so radically that one becomes the negation and is consumed by it, can the possibility of a breakthrough appear. Deliverance from doubt that simply transports one out of the abyss of meaninglessness and back into a worldview where things make sense again, Nishitani protests, is no deliverance at all. The nihilism itself, in the fullness of its negation, has to be faced squarely in order to be seen through as relative to human consciousness and experience. In this affirmation, reality discloses its secret of absolute emptiness that restores the world of being. Or in his philosophical terms, “emptiness might be called the field of ‘be-ification’ (*Ichtung*) in contrast to nihilism, which is the field of ‘nullification’ (*Nichtung*).”²⁹

In other words, for Nishitani religion is not so much a search for the absolute as one of the items that make up existence, as an acceptance of the emptiness that embraces this entire world of being and becoming. In that acceptance—a “full-bodied appropriation” (*tainin*)—mind lights up as brightly as mind can. The reality that is lived and died by all things that come to be and pass away in the world is “realized” in the full sense of the term: one shares in reality and one knows that one is real. This is the standpoint of emptiness.

Because it is a standpoint, it is not a terminus ad quem so much as a terminus a quo: the inauguration of a new way of looking at the things of life, a new way of valuing the world and reconstructing it. All of life becomes, he says, a kind of “double-exposure” in which one can see things just as they are and at the same time see through them to their relativity and transience. Far from dulling one’s critical senses, it reinforces them. To return to the case of science, from the standpoint of emptiness, the modern infatuation with explanation and fact is disclosed for what it is: a sanctification of the imperial ego that willingly sacrifices the immediate reality of its own

true self for the illusion of perfect knowledge and control. To personify or humanize the absolute, to rein it in dogmatically with even the most advanced apparatus and reliable theories, is at best a temporary cure to the perpetual danger of being overwhelmed by nihilism. Only a mysticism of the everyday, a living-in-dying, can attune our existence to the empty texture of the absolutely real.

In general, it may be noted, Nishitani favored the term *emptiness* (S. *śūnyatā*) over Nishida's "absolute nothingness," in part because its corresponding Chinese glyph, the ordinary character for *sky*, captures the ambiguity of an emptiness-in-fullness that he intends. In this seeing that is at the same time a seeing-through, one is delivered from the centripetal egoity of the self to the centrifugal ex-stasis of the self that is not a self. This, for him, is the essence of religious conversion.

In principle, Nishitani always insisted that conversion entails engagement in history. While he appreciated, and often repeated, the Zen Buddhist correlation of great doubt with great compassion (the Chinese glyphs for both terms are pronounced the same, *daibi*), his late writings contain numerous censures of Buddhism for its "other-worldly refusal to enter into the affairs of human society," for its "lack of ethics and historical consciousness," and for its "failure to confront science and technology."³⁰

In his principal philosophical discussions of history, however, Nishitani tends to present Christian views of history, both linear and cyclical, as a counterposition to the fuller Buddhist-inspired standpoint of emptiness—despite the greater sensitivity of the former to moral questions. Emptiness or nothingness did not become full by bending time back on itself periodically, like the seasons that repeat each year, or by providing an evolutionary principle that points to an end of time when all the frustrations of nihilism will be overturned, as is the case in Christian eschatology. He envisaged deliverance from time as a kind of tangent that touches the circle of repetitive time at its outer circumference or cuts across the straight line of its forward progress. Like Nishida, he preferred the image of an "eternal now" that breaks through both myths of time to the timelessness of the moment of self-awakening. What Christian theism, especially in its personalized image of God, gains at one moment in its power to judge history, it often loses at the next in its failure to understand the omnipresence of the absolute in all things. For Nishitani the standpoint of emptiness perfects the personal dimension of human life by the addition of the impersonal, non-differentiating love, which was none other than the very thing that Christianity reveres in the God who makes the sun to shine on the just and the unjust alike, and who empties himself kenotically in Christ.³¹ Yet here again, we

see Nishitani in later writings reappraising the I-Thou relationship and the interconnectedness of all things, even to the point of claiming that “the personal is the basic form of existence.”³²

In the foregoing pages much has been sacrificed to brevity and a certain forced clarity of exposition. Perhaps only the *ask ēsē* of struggling with the original texts can give one a sense of the complexity of the Kyoto school thinkers. Philosophically, many problems remain with the “logics” of Nishida, Tanabe, and Nishitani. Some of them have been superseded by more recent philosophy; others will benefit from further study and comparison; still others are perennial. The task of formulating philosophical questions as religious ones belongs, I am convinced, among the latter.

Notes

1. Karl Jaspers, *The Way to Wisdom* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), 14. Translation adjusted.
2. These two ideas are present from Nishida’s earliest writings. See his two brief essays on Bergson in *Nishida Kitarō zenshū* (hereafter NKZ) 1:317–27; The idea of “appropriation” (*jitoku*) appears in *An Inquiry into the Good*, 51 (where it is translated “realizing with our whole being”).
3. Nishitani, *Nishida Kitarō*, 55.
4. *On the Art of the No Drama: The Major Treatises of Zeami*, trans. by J. Thomas Rimer and Yamazaki Masakazu (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 133, 136.
5. This term is sometimes translated as “logic of topos,” but the connections to Aristotle which the term suggests seem to conflict with his own position.
6. See *Kōsaka Masaaki chosakushū* 8:98–101.
7. NKZ 1:60; see *An Inquiry into the Good*, 49.
8. *Last Writings*, 54. In order to capture the philosophical sense, the translator has taken some liberties with particular passages. A more literal translation was prepared by Yusa Michiko in *The Eastern Buddhist* 19:2 (1986) 1–29, 20/1 (1987) 81–119.
9. Textual references to this idea may be found in Jacinto, *La filosofía social de Nishida Kitarō*, 208–12.
10. NKZ 5:182.
11. *Last Writings*, 48.
12. *Last Writings*, 68–69.
13. The long-standing debates among Takizawa Katsumi, Abe Masao, Yagi Seiichi, and Akizuki Ryōmin over the reversibility or irreversibility of the relationship between God and the self, as well as the wider debate over the obscure notion of “inverse correspondence” (*gyakutaio*) that appears in Nishida’s final essay, leave little hope of a final word on the subject.
14. NKZ 5:177. The allusion, of course, is to Dōgen’s *Genjōkōan*.
15. NKZ 11:372, 454, 435.

16. *Tanabe Hajime zenshū* (hereafter THZ) 3:7, 78–81.
17. THZ 3:76–77.
18. Nishitani, *Nishida Kitarō*, 167.
19. THZ 4:306, 318.
20. THZ 8:257–58.
21. THZ 7:261.
22. THZ 6:147–53.
23. THZ 7:24, 99.
24. Regarding his relation to Christianity, Tanabe referred to himself in 1948 as a permanent Christian-in-the-making, *ein werdender Christ* who could never become *ein gewordenen Christ* (THZ 10:260). The distinction is more commonly associated with Nishitani, who adopted it to describe his own sympathies with Tanabe's position.
25. See the special issue of *The Eastern Buddhist* devoted to the memory of Nishitani, 25:1 (1992).
26. "Science and Zen," *The Buddha Eye*, 120, 126.
27. *Nishitani Keiji chosakushū* (hereafter NKC) 20:175–84.
28. *Religion and Nothingness*, 3.
29. *Religion and Nothingness*, 124.
30. See NKC 17:141, 148–50, 154–55, 230–31.
31. See especially *Religion and Nothingness*, ch. 2.
32. NKC 24:109.

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