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# 'Bounds of Ethics' - From the Standpoint of Absolute Nothingness

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## Abstract

In the contemporary world all kinds of culture, thought modes, philosophies and religions are complicatedly active. Social conditions of our contemporary world wear a nihilistic look which Nietzsche (1844-1900) prophesied as a fact, 200 years after his time. In this nihilistic ambience, the whole world seems to be overrun by various crimes neglecting morality and ethics. In such a world we are urged to consider how morals and ethics can be realized. In this meaning the 'bounds of ethics' are considered in regard to the paradigms of different historical epochs as the framework and basis of life, culture and thinking. One of these paradigms, common to East and West, is the one based on being and nothingness: relative being, relative nothingness, absolute being, nihil, and absolute nothingness, which last-mentioned paradigm subsumes the other four. In essence, this paper will discuss how morality and ethics in the paradigm of absolute nothingness can finally act in oneness with religion and overcome nihilism in the contemporary world, even if it acts very slowly.

## 1. Ethics in the paradigm of relative being and its bound

First, it must be noticed that morality is individual and ethics is social. However, in this paper, mainly ethics is discussed, because

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social ethics is possible only on the basis of earnest and sincere individual morality. Now, the Greek term *paradeigma* means here the model which expresses form and character of the same, and the etymology of Latin *paradigma* denotes an example of the change of the form of a word. However, since Thomas Samuel Kuhn (1922-1996), an American historian and a philosopher of science, used the term "paradigm" in his *The Structure of Scientific Revolution* (1962), the term means scientific achievements as model of universally acknowledged questions and answers. However, the term paradigm as used in this paper is similar to the paradigm which T. Kuhn understood as "hermeneutic foundation" in his *Hermeneutic Revolution - Natural Science and the Humanities* (1991).

The term "paradigm" in this paper means the basis and the framework of life, culture, thinking,<sup>1</sup> and the ways of thinking common to each period in East and West. Such use of the paradigm can be found in *Systematic Theology* (1951-63) by Paul Tillich (1886-1965). In *Systematic Theology*, Tillich lets being, existence, life and history in the dimension of philosophy of religion correspond to father, son, kingdom of God in turn, in the dimension of Trinitarian revelation. It therefore seems to me that Tillich considers philosophy of religion and Christian theology from the origin of both of them, namely from abyss as the origin of reason and Christian theology, that is, according to my terminology, from the absolute infinite openness, as he names abyss as the origin of various polarities, in his lectures in Berlin 1920-22/23. In addition to Tillich, Catholic theologian Hans Kueng (1928-) also refers to a paradigm shift in the level of theology.<sup>2</sup>

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1 In this paper "thinking" means both speculation and consideration. Speculation (Latin: *speculatio*) means a substantial, objective, and abstract way of thinking, while consideration means a non-substantial, subjective, concrete way of thinking.

2 Cf. Hans Kueng, *Wissenschaft und Religion - Zur Situation der Nachmoderne*, in *Zen Buddhism Today*, No. 5 (Nov. 1987), 1-14, The Kyoto Seminar for Religious Philosophy.

Now, the case in which the paradigm of life, culture, thinking etc. is relative being is found in the natural sciences before Socrates (469-390 B.C.) and in materialism since Demokritos (ca. 420 B.C.) until now. However, in the general history of the world, one paradigm from the group of four paradigms dominates during any given period not only in genus, species (= nation, ethnic group, and various other groups), but also in the individual, just as P. Tillich classified the stages of anxiety in regard to the times and growing stages as follows: (i) ontological anxiety in antiquity and childhood, (ii) moral anxiety in the middle ages and youth, and (iii) spiritual anxiety in modern times and adulthood.

When the basis of the general history of the world is located in the paradigm "relative being," then this limited phenomenal world is the ground of all thinking, culture and life. In this understanding, the objectified, abstract, materialized world is the ground of human thinking at this stage. Therefore, on the ground of the paradigm "relative being," phenomena are the ground of all nature; but spirit, mind, and heart tend to be forgotten or neglected. Morality to live harmoniously in society or in the world at large tends to be made light of. In addition, morality on the level of nation and individual also tends to be neglected. In this paradigm of "relative being," the human being as an individual is neither opened to existence on the level of the paradigm of "relative nothingness", and the human being is not opened to spirit, nor to heart, nor to mind in the paradigm of "absolute being." Breaking through from the stage of ego to the stage of existence, and from the stage of existence to the stage of life in the paradigm of "nihil," and from the stage of life to the stage of true self in the paradigm of absolute nothingness is not yet possible in this paradigm of relative being.

The conversion from ego in the paradigm of relative being to existence, and from existence to life, and from life to true self is only possible when the ego dies through the self-awareness of true self, common to each person and all nature. Moreover, through the true self common to all nature, ethics for society and world can be born anew. However, the ego in the paradigm of relative being tries to live as closed ego, but not as opened existence. The

existence, by the way, can break through to the stage of nihil through the experience of the death of the onto-theo-logical, namely: the substantial God. This breakthrough is also possible through self-awareness of the true self arising through close application to religious discipline, art, self-discipline applied to - for instance - flower arrangement, tea ceremony, Japanese swordsmanship, archery etc. What we must pay attention to in this area is that self-awareness of the true self should be common in terms of not only individual, but also of genus and species.

## 2. Ethics in the paradigm of relative nothingness and its bound

Protestant theologian Soeren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) in Denmark represents the case where the basis of life, culture and thinking is "relative nothingness." On the one hand, existence, where the ego is detached through love, or death, of others<sup>3</sup> tries to find salvation in the paradigm of absolute being. On the other hand, however, on the way to this salvation, existence falls into anxiety, despair, or boredom. The central issues in this paradigm of "relative nothingness" are evil, sin, and salvation from them. This Kierkegaard named ethics in the stage of existence, trying to return to the life, culture and thinking in the paradigm "relative being," namely the first kind of ethics. On the other hand, he named ethics in the stage of existence that tries to ask for salvation, the second kind of ethics. With the first ethics, evil and sin are neglected, like in the paradigm of relative being. For instance in Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831), evil is looked upon as a service to the good as the whole, and freedom is looked upon as only freedom of God. Moreover, he does not consider the freedom of a human being to evil as nature in God (German: *Natur in Gott*) by Friedrich W.J. Schelling (1775-1854). However, in Kierkegaard's second ethics he inquires into the actuality of human sin. The first ethics -- belonging to the first philosophy with metaphysics like in Hegel, the core of which are immanence and anamnesis (= remembrance), ignores sin, and the second ethics - belonging to the second

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<sup>3</sup> The etymology of 'existence' is *ek-sistere* (Latin), namely to be detached from a closed ego.

philosophy with dogmatics - the core of which are transcendence and repetition, refers to the actuality of sin. In this intersection of the first philosophy with the second philosophy is Kierkegaard's so-called psychology to be found, which inquires into how sin becomes, namely the actual possibility of sin. Anyhow, sin, in the paradigm of relative nothingness, can be only explained, but does not refer to the real becoming of sin. Ethics, in this understanding, in the paradigm "relative nothingness" does not yet arrive at the overcoming of sin, but only explains sin. Morality and ethics in the dimension of species and individual in this paradigm do not yet arrive at the stage of ethics the core of which is the personality of each individual existence. The reason being that the former does not yet arrive at an independent individual before God (German: *der Einzelne vor Gott*), in the paradigm of absolute being. The fact that remains in the stage of only explaining sin, results from the way of thinking on anxiety, which is "the freedom's actuality as the possibility for possibility."<sup>4</sup>

### 3. Ethics in the paradigm of absolute being and its bound

The paradigm absolute being as the framework of life, culture and thinking can be found in the concept "God" in European traditional Christianity and in the concepts of Greek 'idea', *ousia*, "eidos" etc. in European traditional philosophy as metaphysics since ancient Greek philosophy.

First, we can classify the Christian God into the following two kinds of God: (i) Non-substantial self-emptying God (Greek: kenosis, Epistle to the Philippians, 2:7), who is action of love as agape and compassion in itself working in and with each event and is the hayatological God.<sup>5</sup> (ii) Substantial God as object of prayer and as absolute personality with authority who covenants with a

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4 Soeren Kierkegaard, *Der Begriff Angst*, Duesseldorf: Eugen Diederichs Verlag, 1958, 40. Danish Edition: 313.

5 Cf. Thorleif Boman, *Das hebraeische Denken im Vergleich mit dem griechischen*, Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1952, 18-37.

human being and ethnic groups. The former case we will mention during our discussion of the paradigm stage of absolute nothingness. Here and at this moment we will inquire into the latter case, namely ethics in the Christian substantial God and its bound.

As to the substantial Christian God in the Old Testament, there are various covenants between God and a person or ethnic groups: a covenant between God and Noah (Gen.9), that between God and Abraham (Gen.15, 17), the Sinai covenant between God and Israel, through Moses (Exodus: 20, 22-23, 19) etc. These God-given covenants and laws, including the Decalogue, seem to be given to Israel as so to speak God's afterthought after having rescued Israel. However, the laws of the Old Testament are most severe. These laws can be firstly realized through death as a way of atonement, like in the case of Jesus. Jesus and his resurrection in the New Testament is the new covenant from God for those who have faith in God. These events are action, love as agape and compassion like in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5-7) and in a paean of love (1 Cor. 13).

As mentioned above, morality and ethics in Christianity, including Judaism and Islam, are oneness with a religion of love as agape. Laws only, without religion as love, may therefore not realize the covenants. This is the bound of ethics in Christianity with the substantial God. The basis, then, of European traditional philosophy as metaphysics from Plato (ca. 428/427-348/347 B.C.) in ancient Greece to Hegel is the paradigm of absolute being. As a representative champion of this paradigm, Hegel regards individual subjective morals as lower than, and inferior to, the social objective ethics (German: *Sittlichkeit*) in his Encyclopedia (1817). Moreover, social ethics in the stage of objective spirit (German: *Geist*) is overcome by absolute spirit, including art, religion and philosophy. Ethics belonging to Hegel's objective spirit therefore has a bound to absolute spirit, including religion.

#### 4. Ethics in the paradigm of nihil and its bound

As for the paradigm of nihil, Nietzsche stands as its typical representative. Nietzsche declared the death of the Christian God, expounded the thought of a superman, and tried to overcome nihil without God through "the will to power," by embracing destiny (Latin: "*amor fati*"), by which he might overcome eternal recurrence.<sup>6</sup> Nietzsche, who looks upon original life as the will to power, sets out to find that truth in which a human being promotes, maintains, and cultivates life, in his *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886).<sup>7</sup> In this text, he distinguishes sovereign-morals from slave-morals, rather than good from evil. He finds high morality in highlighting the power of life and soul. In his *Genealogy of Morality* (1887),<sup>8</sup> written to supplement and elucidate his *Beyond Good and Evil*, he understood that the distinction between good and evil is grounded on the level of powerlessness and decline. Here, morality and ethics break through to the stage of "the will to power." When morality and ethics before Nietzsche are understood from the standpoint of "the will to power" by Nietzsche, then for him the bound of ethics is the ethics of feelings (German: *Gesinnungsethik*) and normative ethics<sup>9</sup> like in Kant, or ethics which makes much of the result of action, and the relative ethics which thinks of culture and history, like in Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832).<sup>10</sup>

As to the bound of ethics in the paradigm of nihil, one more case should be inquired into. This is the bound of ethics when S.

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6 Cf. Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra* (1833-91), *Werke in drei Bänden*, Hanser, Band II, 275-561.

7 Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, Band II, 563-759.

8 Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, Band II, 761-900.

9 Cf. Eiko Hanaoka, "The Problem of Ethics and God," in *Process, Religion and Society*, ed. Kurian Kachappilly, Dharmaram Publications, India, 2012, 38-53.

10 Eiko Hanaoka, "The Problem of Ethics and God," 38-53.

Kierkegaard says “sin against the Holy Spirit” (Mt.12, 31-32).<sup>11</sup> When one negates the Holy Spirit, then one cannot but fall into the thought of superman, like we find it in Nietzsche. Just this case must be considered as the bound of ethics in the contemporary world. The reason is that the Holy Spirit in the Christian trinity seems to be rejected by those who are not Christians. People except Christians seem to affirm spirituality which is common to all religions. The problem of the bound of ethics in the affirmation of spirituality shall be discussed next, under paragraph 5c. And we must discuss also in which manner not only the Christian Holy Spirit but also spirituality in general is rejected.

In such case, people can not but fall into the thought of superman with “the will to power” through the embracing of destiny, *amor fati*. However, a superman who tries to overcome nihil will be able to transcend the distinction between good and evil in morality and ethics, but he can not break through to the dimension of religion consisting in world-loyalty or sincerity like in A. N. Whitehead and K. Nishida, as we will see it later in this paper.

## **5. Ethics in the paradigm of absolute nothingness and its bound**

Representative, as far philosophy of religion is concerned, for this paradigm of absolute nothingness is Kitaro Nishida (1870-1945). However, before coming to the ethics in the paradigm of Nishida's “absolute nothingness,” we should discuss the bound of ethics in the self-emptying God (Phil.2, 7) in hayatology.

### **a) Ethics in self-emptying God and its bound**

First we would like to consider the incarnation of the son of God, who “made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men” (Phil. 2, 7). When the self-emptying God is considered from the standpoint of

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11 Soeren Kierkegaard, *Die Krankheit zum Tode*, Duesseldorf : Eugen Diederichs Verlag, 1957, 233. (Danish edition: 241f.).



the Christian trinity, meaning that father, son and the Holy Spirit are oneness in essence and their functions are different, it can be just as the function in the paradigm of absolute nothingness that Jesus - who is in oneness in essence with God incarnated - neglects his deity, then realizes the death of atonement and finally revives. The reason being that the characteristics of the paradigm "absolute nothingness" are as follows: absolute nothingness means (i) absolute infinite openness, (ii) simultaneously "the eternal now," (iii) the double negation of its own standpoint, (iv) the openness of emptiness or interdependent origination in the dimension of feeling and will, but not of intellect, (v) the absolute presence.

Absolute nothingness now, as absolute infinite openness is the openness opened in the "here and now" as the moment where time and eternity are in oneness. This openness is the openness where the act of emptiness and love as agape, or compassion, is possible. Kitaro Nishida named this openness the "field of absolute nothingness." This openness is "absolute" in the meaning that it can not be opened from the side of immanence as the phenomenal world, and "infinite" in the sense that it is infinitely opened when it is considered from the side of immanence. Then eternal now of above number (ii) and eternal presence of above number (v) also mean openness as oneness of time with eternity. The absolute nothingness as the act of agape and compassion, which springs forth from the double negation of its own standpoint, neglects its own standpoint, and subsumes the other four paradigms (=relative being, relative nothingness, absolute being and nihil). The function, however, of absolute nothingness becomes zero through the first negation of its own standpoint. After the first negation therefore must absolute nothingness negate the standpoint of zero, because there is no function there. Through the second negation of absolute nothingness then love as agape and compassion comes forth. This double negation of absolute nothingness arises at the same time in a moment. And the act of agape and compassion is the core of the act of absolute nothingness. The act of absolute nothingness guides and supports the four other paradigms and their standpoints, which always look upon their own standpoints as absolute, towards the direction into which they should act and proceed.

However, such act in absolute nothingness breaks through the bound of immanent ethics, and religion underlies such ethics. In such act ethics and religion are in oneness, they coincide. Interdependent origination of above number (iv),<sup>12</sup> opened on the level of feeling and will or emptiness,<sup>13</sup> in the dimension of feeling and will, means that each individual in the world mirrors each individual, and that each individual is true self (= "formless self") and acts at the same time. In the world of interdependent origination individuals mirror each other, namely "one is all and all is one" like in Indra's net.<sup>14</sup> When Buddhist "interdependent origination" and "emptiness" are superficially and philosophically revised, they can be expressed as "absolute nothingness", like in K. Nishida. As K.Nishida says, his "philosophy of the field of absolute nothingness" is the superficially revised philosophy of Buddhism, especially of Zen Buddhism. Moreover, interdependent origination can be opened on the basis of feeling and will, like in Nishida's philosophy. The reason is that, on the basis of feeling and will, intellect can arise both in Buddhism and Nishida's philosophy.

## **b) Ethics in the hayatological God and its bound**

The hayatological<sup>15</sup> God is understood to be formed from Hebrew "hayah" ( English: be), which means non-substantial becoming, event, or God as act, as oneness with becoming, and event, or God, in his answer to Moses' question: "I will be that I will be" (Ex. 3,14).

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12 The term "interdependent origination" originates in Buddhism.

13 Typically, Nagarjuna (ca. 150-250, India) uses the term "emptiness" in his *Mula-madhamaka-sastra* (Japanese: *chu(-gan-)ron*).

14 According to the metaphor of Indra's Net, this net is in the heaven of the world of Satori (=spiritual awakening), there are jewels in each mesh of the net and each jewel in each mesh is mirrored in all the others. Cf. Eiko Hanaoka, *Zen and Christianity - From the Standpoint of Absolute Nothingness*, Kyoto: Maruzen, 2008, 106-110, 351.

15 On hayatology, cf. Eiko Hanaoka, *Zen and Christianity - From the Standpoint of Absolute Nothingness*, 290f.

On the contrary, Greek *einai* (English: be), corresponding to Hebrew "*hayah*", means substantial static being (German: *Sein selbst*, as M. Heidegger said). God in the Greek "*einai*" namely the onto-theo-logical God, and God in "*hayah*," therefore, are very different from each other, or rather opposite. In this meaning, the hayatological God of the Old Testament can be understood as God acting in oneness of ethics with religion, like in God as action of absolute nothingness in Nishida.

### c) Ethics in the field of absolute nothingness in Nishida and its bound

"Pure experience" as the unity of consciousness in the true self, common to all nature in Nishida's first main publication, *An Inquiry into the Good* (1911)<sup>16</sup> is later named "the field of absolute nothingness."<sup>17</sup> The term "field"<sup>18</sup> (Greek: *chora*) in Nishida originates in Plato's *Timaeus*<sup>19</sup> and means the field in which all polarities between e.g. idea and actuality, one and many, mind and matter, time and space etc. are self-identical, namely self-identical in the true self, in the non-substantial field of absolute nothingness. On the contrary, the term "field" (*chora*) in Plato connotes being, that exists with field and becoming since before the generation of the cosmos.

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16 Kitaro Nishida, *An Inquiry into the Good*, trans. M. Abe and C. Ives, London: Yale University Press, 1990, 3-10.

17 K. Hatarakumono-kara mirumono-e (English: From acting person to seeing person), in *Nishida's Complete Works*, Bd. IV, Iwanami Press, 1965: 232, 245.

18 K. Hatarakumono-kara mirumono-e (English: From acting person to seeing person), 209.

19 Cf. Plato, *Timaios*, in *Werke* Bd.7, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 96f. (52d).

A. N. Whitehead, who took suggestion from the "field" (chora) in Plato's *Timaeus*, also used the terms "field" and the "receptacle" (Greek: *hypodochē*).<sup>20</sup> But with Whitehead these terms show the field as something idealistic, or just as an idea formed by absolute nothingness. In the opposition to the field (chora) in Plato and A. N. Whitehead is in K. Nishida the openness, namely abyss as the bottomless bottom or absolute presence, where "heaven and earth have the same root, all things are one body."<sup>21</sup> The difference between the abyss of nihil and absolute nothingness is that from the former only nihil springs forth, and from the latter, namely from absolute nothingness, spring forth love as agape and compassion.

In the former, when the Holy Spirit is rejected, not God-man, but man-God dominates and falls into the nihilistic abyss, without morality and ethics as superman, to whom a human being never arrives without proceeding to the stage of religion. On the contrary, in the latter case morality and ethics only applicable to the stage of immanence are broken through to religion with morality and ethics, which are applicable in both the immanent and the transcendent stage.

Ethics in the paradigm of absolute nothingness, including ethics in the Christian self-emptying God of the New Testament and the hayatological God of the Old Testament, conducts and lures through agape and compassion, springing forth from the double negation, into the world of religion with ethics, or the world of ethics with religion. In this ethics with transcendent religion, in the field of absolute nothingness, can be realized the ethics of non-substantial absolute infinite openness.

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20 Cf. Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, New York: The Free Press, 1967, 187.

21 K. Nishida's *Complete Works*, Band I, Iwanami Press, 1965, 156.