The Religious Philosophy of the Kyoto School
— An Overview —

James W. HEISIG*

While it seems clear enough that the thought of the "Kyoto School" belongs to the history of philosophy, indeed to the *world* history of philosophy, there is some difficulty defining its membership and placing it historically. In the West, the term is now broadly taken to refer to the intellectual tradition centered on the figure of Nishida Kitarō 西田幾太郎 , Japan's first original philosopher, who died in 1945 at the age of 75. Nishida was succeeded at Kyoto University by his disciple Tanabe Hajime, who died in 1962 at age 77. The "School" thus formed was carried on by another of Nishida's disciples, Nishitani Keiji 西谷啓治 , who will be 90 in February (1990).[1] These are the three pivotal personalities, and it is through a sort of "triangulation" 三角地点 of their respective positions that one can be said to operate within the tradition of the Kyoto school.[2]

Among the living figures federated to their circle, perhaps the best known in philosophical circles are Tanabe's principle disciple and a successor to Nishitani, Takeuchi Yoshinori 武内義範 , and Ueda Shizuteru 上田閑照 , a disciple of Nishitani who held the chair

---

* An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the international Conference on "Metanoetics" held at Smith College in October of 1989, and will appear in a collection of papers from this conference, *The Religious Philosophy of Tanabe Hajime*, edited by T. Unno and J. Heisig, forthcoming from Asian Humanities Press.

[1] While Nishida and Tanabe held chairs in the department of philosophy, with Nishitani the chair moved to the department of religion.

[2] The term is Takeuchi's; see TAKEUCHI 1981, p. 198.

of Religion at Kyoto until 1989, conceding it then to Professor Hase
Shōtō 長谷正当 .

In Japan, one is more likely to hear in philosophical circles of
"Nishida Philosophy" (where we may place Nishitani and Ueda) and
"Tanabe Philosophy" (which Takeuchi is more closely affiliated with).
These lines are not tightly drawn, and the term "Kyoto School"
would really be more suitable, were it not for certain unpleasant
connotations that the term has come to bear because of post-war
criticisms of the role of the Kyoto philosophers in supporting Jap-
anese nationalism.

As nearly as I can determine, the term *Kyōtō-gakuha* 京都学派 was
introduced in 1932 by Tosaka Jun (1900–1945), the year after the
Manchurian incident, which soon became a symbol for Japan's in-
cipient policy of expansionism in Asia. For Tosaka the term pointed
to a "hermeneutical, transhistorical, formalistic, romantic, phenom-
enological philosophy" — in short, a bourgeois ideology (YAMADA
1975, pp. 280–81). The number of thinkers he associated with the
school was restricted to Nishida, Tanabe, and their immediate dis-
ciples,[3] and the political ideology he wished to attach to the name
was one of "racial philosophy" and the "philosophy of total war."
In time, the list of thinkers associated with the school by pro-Marxist,
anti-nationalist thinkers like Tosaka grew. In any event, the appel-
lation stuck, fairly well flattening out philosophical differences as
mere detail. Even Tanabe's eleventh hour call for a "metanoetics"
to purge philosophy of its tainted innocence was viewed as coura-
geous only in the sense that a dive from a burning ship can still
be an act of courage for one who cannot swim. Only in later years
would a serious attempt be made by those of the same persuasion
to tell the story in fairer detail, albeit without departing the initial
judgment.[4]

After the war the major figures of the Kyoto School survived with
only minor bruises the furious attacks against all remnants of

---

[3] These latter included Miki Kiyoshi 三木 清 (1897–1945), Kōsaka Masaaki 高坂正顕
(1900–1969), Kōyama Iwao 高山岩男 (1905 –), and Nishitani Keiji (1900 –).

[4] Yamada thus distinguishes in his book between figures on the "right" like Tanabe and
Kōsaka, figures in the "center" like Nishida and Nishitani, and figures on the "left" like Miki,
noting how everything left and center, however, gradually turned more and more to the right
(38–106). The account of IENAGA Saburō (1974, pp. 1–176), which centers its attention on
Tanabe but also looks at the other key figures in the Kyoto School, is much more sensible and
free of animus.

"imperialist philosophy" by Japan's strong emerging left, to resurrect and clear their name in the mainstream of philosophical and religious academia. While something of the stigma remains, the role that Western interest in the religious philosophy of Nishida, Tanabe, and Nishitani has played to minimize it is not insignificant. Still, as more and more details of Japan's disastrous flirtation with nationalist expansionism are known and more and more study is undertaken into the diffusion of ideology and the role of Japan's intelligentsia in the process, there are those among Western historians who resent what they see as a camouflage of retreat into religious questions.[5]

This is not the place to untangle the threads of what can only look from the outside like a hopeless face-off between side-swipers and side-steppers, the one trying to apportion blame, the other resisting the effort. One longs for good debate and discussion of the issue, but so much is still so fresh to living memory, and so much resistant to a simple policing of history in the light of current events.

Permit me recourse to a story from the Chinese classic, *Zhan guo ce* 戰國策 , to illustrate the choice I have made and then move on. It seems that a certain Ji-liang who, hearing that his master, the Lord of Wei, intended to launch an attack against the capital city of Handan, interrupted his journey and rushed back to the palace. Dusty and disheveled, he threw himself at the feet of the Lord of Wei, and eager to convince him that he would not become a true leader by trying to enlarge his kingdom at the expense of others, told his lord this story:

> I met a man in Daxing Mountains. His chariot was facing north and he told me that he was going to Chu. "But if you want to go to Chu," I asked him, "why are you headed north?"
>
> "I have a good horse," he told me.
>
> "Your horse may be good, but that does not make this the road to Chu," I replied.
>
> "I have plenty of provisions," he retorted.
>
> "However great your provisions, this is still not the way to Chu," I insisted.
>
> "Ah," but he replied, "my charioteer is first-rate."
>
> "The stronger your horse, the better equipped you are, the

more skillful your driver," I told him, "the further you will end
up away from where you want to go" (*Anli Wang* 7/2).

Read as a parable about the failure of the Kyoto School, the meaning
is transparent. However respectable their research, however deep
their philosophical reflections, it is to no avail if it is headed in the
direction of a warring ideology. What purpose can it serve to look
the horse in the mouth, examine the provisions, and test the driver?
If the direction is wrong, what can be right?

There is a second, more sympathetic reading that I would invite
the reader to consider. Careful study of the works of Nishida, Tan-
abe, and Nishitani is as rewarding as can be for those eager to lay
the foundations for a world philosophical forum and point the way
to a self-conscious religious pluralism. But that requires a sense of
where these thinkers were headed—which is clearly *not* in the di-
rection of a philosophy of war or nationalism or imperialist expan-
sionism. Simply by being equipped with the tools to see how even
noble philosophic and religious aims and disciplined thought can
be perverted at their weakest point (in the present case, Japan's
inexperience at assuming a role in the modern world after two
centuries of isolation) is no guarantee that one has grasped their
fundamental orientation. I do not mean to claim that the Kyoto
philosophers are as innocent as, say, Nietzsche was, of the way his
thought was twisted to the ends of patriotic nationalism; but only
that what guilt there is does not belong among the fundamental
inspirations of these three thinkers. Familiarity with the texts cannot,
I think, yield any other conclusion. The irony is that in a sense,
the failure of Japan's nationalist aims was a victory for the true
aims of the Kyoto philosophers, calling them less to a laundering
of their image than to a return to their fundamental inspirations.

There are other ironies in the fire, but to pull them out would
distract us from the task that still remains to be done. For without
some rudimentary poetic sense of what the adventure of philosophy
is all about for the Kyoto philosophers, there is much that invites
misunderstanding or trivialization. Unfortunately, such insight is not
as close to the surface of the texts as one might expect. More often
than not it hides in the empty spaces between the lines, which the
Japanese—who came rather late to writing, about a millennium after
Western philosophy—value as ultimately a more reliable way of "lov-
ing wisdom" than the written word. I do not mean to say that there

is anything more exotic or mysterious about the Kyoto philosophers than there is about, say, a Plato or a Boehme or a Heidegger. I only mean that their surface language and allusions to sources can be deceptive in the sense of hiding what is distinctive about their starting point.

* * *

Biographical outlines of the lives of Nishida, Tanabe, and Nishitani are available in introductions to translations of their work, or in standard philosophical references works, and need not detain us here. Our task is rather to try to put ourselves in a position to acquire a "knack" for what they were doing, which is precisely the way Nishida counseled his students to study Western philosophy in order to make it their own.[6] It begins with a recognition of the relative novelty of the philosophical disciplines in Japan when compared with the West.

To say that philosophy is new to Japan—just over a century old— does not mean that it enjoyed a normal infancy. It was denied the natural aging process that produced Western philosophy as we know it. Fully twenty-three centuries earlier, the Greeks on the coast of Asia Minor, pressured by the advance of surrounding civilizations, had sought to break free of the confines of a mythical world-view and describe the world and its origins in natural, realistic terms. Within a century there emerged metaphysical principles which crystallized the critique of mythical anthropomorphism into conceptual terms and widened the way to an objective study of nature. This confrontation between the world beyond of the gods and the world of nature here below set an agenda to philosophy that continues to inform vast areas of Western culture.

The Japanese, in contrast, entered the world of modern philosophy standing on the shoulders of post-Kantian preoccupations with epistemology, scientific methodology, and the overcoming of metaphysics. Despite the remarkable advances that the study of philosophy made in Japan's institutions of higher learning, and the more remarkable fact that it took them only one generation to produce

[6] See NISHITANI 1984, pp. 97–98. An English translation of this work by Yamamoto Seisaku and myself has been completed under the title *Nishida Kitarō*, and should be published in the near future.

their first original philosopher in the person of Nishida Kitarō, they
did not inherit the problem of where to locate literal truth and
where the symbolic, or of how to deal with the progressive triumph
of reason over myth and science over religion. Indeed, there was
little symbolic theory or rationalist demythifying in their past to
lend such a concern any of the emotional surplus it had in the
West. One might say that in Japanese Buddhism — especially in the
Zen form with which Nishida was most familiar — there is a sponta-
neous sense that in matters of the heart, literalness is pathological.
It was this very failure to be moved by one of the major motive
forces of received philosophical tradition that laid the ground for
his own fresh and original contribution.

Another element not to be overlooked is the considerable mach-
inations that the Japanese had to go through to translate philosoph-
ical works into their own language. In absorbing new ideas, they
often preferred not to draw on terms from their own intellectual
history and thus force assimilation, but to learn a foreign vocabulary
and let it seep into the culture naturally. As ponderous and un-
attractive as this new vocabulary was, the etymological transparency
lent to it by the Chinese characters made it more immediately sug-
gestive than the Greek and Latin terms which philosophy has tended
to adopt for its technical terminology have been to the West.

When borrowing words from Western languages, the Japanese
typically take their flat, surface meaning only. They have no way
to turn inside and unlock the door to associations of feeling or
history through literature. One is disappointed, if hardly astonished,
to see how little feeling Nishida had for the prose and allusions of
the philosophers he read in French, English, and German.[7] But
once the thought received Japanese expression, however formidable
the terminology, new doors are opened. Well before Heidegger's
works were translated into English, and even while the battles over
how to render his wordplays into acceptable idiom were waging, the
Japanese proved their natural affinity for his attempts to disclose
the wonderful world within worlds of language. Among the Kyoto
philosophers, Nishitani's writings stand out for his ability to do the

---

[7] Nishida's German was best, followed by English and French. This predilection for reading
Western philosophy in modern European langauges was shared by Tanabe and Nishitani and
impressed strongly on their disciples, so much so that Miki once wrote an essay aimed against
the revilers of reading in translation. See NISHIDA 1974, pp. 117–20.

same thing. Still, even Nishida's and Tanabe's heavy prose show at every turn the working of linguistic associations peculiar to Japan and its intellectual history.

All of that by way of introduction. I would now like to single out a number of ideas central to the Kyoto School, most of which have their origins in Nishida's work.

Self-awareness

If there is one notion that seems to run like a golden thread throughout the entire, rich tapestry that Kyoto philosophers have woven, it is that of *jikaku* 自覚 or self-awareness.[8] Indeed, it served Nishida as a critical tool for resisting the self-understanding being urged on Japan from the outside world: the understanding of self and world in terms of scientific theories of knowledge or philosophical ontology. It strikes me as a stroke of great originality on Nishida's part that he did not simply seek to *preserve* Japan's traditional self-understanding in the face of the onslaught of foreign ideas and ideals, but to submit it to the rigorous critique of philosophy. The idea of self-awareness gave him a foothold from which he might straddle two previously alien worlds to this purpose.[9]

In his lectures, Nishida is said time and again to have described his aim more concretely as seeking a rational foundation for Zen (NODA 1984, pp. 101–102).[10] For East and West alike, the project was counter-cultural. On the one hand, the idea of using religious

---

[8] SUEKI Takehiro has gone to great pains to show how Nishida's philosophy can be read as a "system of self-awareness" in his elaborate four-volume study (1983–88). There are those, like Kōsaka Masaaki, who have seen Nishida's concern with *jikaku* as no more than one stage in his development (1965, pp. 62–64). More to the point is UEDA Shizuteru's attempt to see the notion of *jikaku* as a fundamental inspiration informing all of Nishida's work, a notion that found its depth in the Zen of pure experience (as *kaku*) and its breadth in the reasons of philosophy (the dialectical unity of self and world). For a simplified account see UEDA 1981, pp.78–79.

[9] It is in this sense that I am inclined to understand many of Nishida's statements supposedly showing him up as a right-wing nationalist. For example, we read in the Foreword to his book *From Working to Seeing* (1927, p. 6):

> There is obviously a great deal to admired and learned from the splendid developments in Western cultures that have found being and goodness in the form of things, but is there not something latent in the ground of Oriental cultures that our predecessors have nurtured for thousands of years, something which sees the form of the formless and hears the voice of the voiceless? It is not enough that our hearts seek such things out; I wish also to give philosophical moorings to this desire.

belief or practice as a foundation for philosophy is something the
West has resisted vigorously, or at least tried to relegate to the
realms of theology. On the other, protagonists of Zen in the East
had brandished their irrationalities and paradoxes around like a
sword that cut through the presumption of rationalism and protected
them from outside criticism. Nishida set out to give a rational foun-
dation to Zen from outside of Zen, and in the process to put phi-
losophy to work when it was still no more than an infant on all
fours.

In philosophical circles, *jikaku* — a not uncommon word in modern
Japanese — was already being used to translate the Western notion
of self-consciousness. But for Nishida, it also served as a fitting
philosophical equivalent for Buddhist "enlightenment."[11] Its meaning
is contained in a rather subtle double-entendre, both of whose mean-
ings fly in the face of the usual meaning of self-consciousness — which
is why it is best translated as *self-awareness*. It does not refer to
awareness of oneself as a conscious being in the midst of the world,
as a subject that exists in a realm of objects. Rather, it begins
precisely where such self-consciousness exhausts itself.[12]

In its first meaning, *jikaku* refers to an awareness of a self other
than the everyday self, a "true self" that *is* and yet needs to be
realized by being awakened to.[13] Awakening to this self means that

[10] Nishida himself practiced *zazen* for ten years in his 30's. In his writings, however, Zen
does not appear with anything like the regularity one might expect; overall, references to Zen
hardly outnumber those to other Buddhist traditions or even Christianity.

[11] *Jikoishiki* 自己意識 is also used by Nishida in early writings when he means to draw at-
tention to what he considers the limitations of the classical understanding of self-conscious-
ness, or its variations in Kant's transcendental ego or Husserl's eidetic consciousness. There
is, of course, no question of confusing such a Buddhist term for "enlightenment" with the
meaning of the European enlightenment. Indeed, it is the precise opposite of the latter. For it
is not a matter of waking up to the symbolic nature of religious belief (both in theology and
philosophy) and letting the scientific spirit go ahead untrammeled, but of transcending the
dichotomies of such thinking.

RORTY's complaints about the captivity of Western philosophy by epistemology in *The Mir-
ror of Nature* would have sounded self-evident to the Kyoto philosophers, even though they
chose to work their way through the philosophy after the Kantian revolution.

[12] I now consider it a mistake to have gone along with "self-consciousness" as a translation
in some earlier works of the Kyoto thinkers, because of the connotations of this term in West-
ern thought are too strong. For example, I think *Intuition and Reflection in Self-Awareness* to be
more in the spirit of the meaning of Nishida's 自覚に於ける直観と反省 . See NISHIDA 1987.

[13] NAKAMURA Yūjirō (1984, pp. 66–71) finds a cognate here in Jung's distinction between
"ego" and "self," the former referring to mere self-consciousness, the latter to self-awareness.
The comparison is only superficially correct, and breaks down as he carries it further into its

consciousness "sees" itself as an event in reality even as it "sees through" any attempt to set itself over against the incessant change and interdependence of all things that are in the world of being. It is not ordinary consciousness, which sets itself up as a knower of the world to be known and hence puts itself in a position to change it, but a sort of consciousness of being conscious in the world. In this sense, as NISHITANI points out (1984, pp. 146–48), self-awareness is not the awareness of a self set up in opposition to another, but of a true self in which self and other are no longer two. The transformation of ordinary consciousness into self-aware-ness — an overtly religious event — is the primary fact that Nishida seeks to ground rationally through the discipline of philosophy.

The more Nishida learned of the history of philosophy, of course, and the deeper he threw himself into its stream, the more he realized that there were cognates to be found in the West for the notion of a self that loses itself in being aware of itself, and hence that there was no need to assume its strictly Buddhist quality. His task gradually came to take the shape of making the knowing, feeling, experiencing self of ordinary consciousness the maidservant of self-awareness — hence inverting Western philosophy as he met it.

The second meaning of the double-entendre of self-awareness can be stated simply: it is an awareness that unfolds itself spontaneously and out of itself, not the result of conscious technique. It is a *self*-awareness, not an achieved one. Its attainment is not the result of a disciplined attempt to mirror the things of life objectively in "reflection," and hence to *lead* awareness to the world, so much as an attempt to *follow* awareness to a point where self and world are one.

Compared with Nishida, Tanabe's understanding of *jikaku* developed slowly through his early writings on Kant and Hegel. In his later writings, he used the notion deliberately to stress his differences from Nishida, but the basic meaning, and the fact that it had to do with the goal of philosophical thought, were never questioned.[14]

---

psychological ramifications. It would seem more accurate, and useful, to trace the idea in the West directly to Nietzsche, beginning with the third of his *Untimely Meditations*.

[14] I touch directly on this question in a paper on "The Self that is not-a-Self", to be published in the forthcoming collection, *The Religious Philosophy of Tanabe Hajime* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1990). Johannes LAUBE finds the notion of *jikaku* (which he distinguished from *Selbstbewusstsein* by writing it *SELBST-Bewusstsein*) "one of the Tanabe's most difficult terms" (1984, pp. 27–28).

In contrast, Nishitani's most explicit treatment of the notion of *jikaku*
as such are contained in his positive assessment of his debt to
Nishida, even though it is in his own writings that the association
of philosophy with the rational grounding of enlightenment is the
clearest.

Pure Experience

If the notion of self-awareness carries Nishida's search for a rational
approach to religious enlightenment, it is the notion of "pure ex-
perience" — namely, experience prior to the distinction of subject and
object — that carries his esteem for the Zen experience into the world
of logic.

Given the aim of putting Western philosophy to work in the quest
for a rational grounding to Eastern enlightenment, it was obvious
to Nishida from the start that a logic of substantial subjects and
accidental predicates was not up to the task. A different set of forms
for thinking, one that would reflect the "spontaneous self-unfolding
of reality *in self-awareness*" and not be tied down to the subject-object
dichotomy were called for. In order for things to be related to one
another in any form, one needs some sense of *where* separation and
unification take place. Since Nishida was predisposed to see separa-
tion as the work of conscious discrimination, any appeal to a "uni-
versal" of thought to provide a principle of unification would have
been like Baron von Munchausen pulling himself out of the swamp
by his own pigtail. It seems to me that his whole philosophy was
the search for a concrete logical universal that would escape this
dilemma. I would distinguish five elements that combine — more or
less like ascending "stage of thought" — in his philosophy to resolve
this problem.[15]

In the first place, we have Nishida's idea of *pure experience* — that
is, immediate experience in which the subject-object dichotomy has
been overcome, and with it the primacy of the word over silence.
To put the matter somewhat crudely: in contrast to Western

[15] Japanese historians of philosophy have subjected Nishida's development to a dizzying
array of schemes. SUEKI lists several of the more important ones in the opening chapter to his
Nishida Kitarō. Less important than sorting them out is the fact that Nishida himself viewed
his work as a series of transitions from one standpoint to another, each adding new shifts of
new vocabulary without departing from earlier insights. In this sense, the genealogy of his
ideas is more transparent than that of Tanabe or Nishitani.

philosophy after Kant, which seeks to draw unreflected language out of its initial naivete by uncovering its tacit presuppositions, only then to restore that language as the higher and purer *logos* of a post-reflective naivete, Nishida would see the role of disciplined reflection as recovering and enhancing the silence of experience for a higher self-awareness, at which point the tools of reflection and language drop away like crutches whose purpose has been served. Pure experience is not in any sense a naive realism, nor even the radical empiricism it was for William James, but a way of describing philosophically the cultivated achievement of self-awareness.

As a logical universal, pure experience makes unified consciousness the norm and relegates discrimination and distinction to an ancillary role. That is, it is both a universal category of thought that encompasses all other modes of thought and also a continued and very real achievement of mind. In Hegel's terms, which Nishida does not hesitate to use, it is a "concrete universal."

Pure experience is the best known idea of Nishida's best known work, *A Study of Good*, his first philosophical monograph. It is not for that reason the best understood. As Nishitani points out in a brilliant study on that work which is as much a statement of his own mature thought as it is a careful reading in the hindsight of Nishida's later work, the adoption of the concept as a logical universal is difficult on two counts. As pure *experience*, it sets aside the traditional assumption that objectivity in truth is a function of reason; and as *pure* experience, its sees the truth as a function of cultivated "appropriation" (NISHITANI, 1984, ch. 6). If reality and self-awareness are one, and if that one is rational, then the rational principle is one of a unity attained in consciousness. This is the experiment in thought that the term *pure experience* was meant to represent.

Acting Intuition

Now an idea of pure experience as a unifying principle of the universe (bringing together the objective world and the subjective world) and one which contains its own moral imperative built into it (the search for true self) looks suspiciously like a psychologistic reductionism. Not unaware of the criticism, Nishida had two ways to go.

The first was to look more closely at the dynamism that moves

reality before it gets carved up into matter and consciousness. He
was attracted to the vitalism of his time in general and to Bergson's
idea of an *élan vital* in particular, but chose himself to speak of
"need" (or perhaps better, the "desire") that reaches its culmination
in self-awareness. This, he felt, would help make it clear that pure
experience and the true self are not the exclusive property of the
human world, even though human consciousness provides the anal-
ogy for talk about the universe in general. Unlike European phi-
losophy, Nishida did not draw directly on evolutionary theory for
his insight, perhaps because unlike the Christian West, Japan's re-
ligious mythologies were not directly threatened by the findings of
science. There was no opposition to, indeed something of a Buddhist
sense of *déjà vu* about, the idea that when a scientist looks through
a microscope at an atom, what has actually happened is that the
atom has finally reached the point that it can look at itself.

The second tack open to him was to look more closely at the
way in which the mind actually sets itself up on an Archimedean
point outside of the world, imagining that its knowledge gives it
objective truth, and hence outlining the process by which this can
be reversed. Particularly attractive for this latter direction was
Fichte's idea of the *Tathandlung* (that all *data* about the objective
world are ultimately the *capta* of consciousness). There was promise,
Nishida felt, in the attempt to see the ground rules of logic as
actually a projection of the ego's consciousness of itself. On Fichte's
model, the principle of identity is based on the ego's positing of its
own existence (*A* is *A*), and the principle of the excluded middle
on its positing of the world of the not-ego (*A* is not *B*). Fittingly,
Fichte had also seen that only in the moral insight that there was
a single dynamism behind the world could this split be healed in
true self-awareness.

Although Nishida's very earliest writings are full of hints about
the former approach, many of which found there way into *A Study
of Good*, he chose the latter course, landing himself in a dark tunnel
of epistemological conundrums that he escaped from only with con-
siderable difficulty.[16] The positive outcome of his tortured reflections
was to provide a larger context to the two orientations by means

---

[16] This was the tortured book *Intuition and Reflection in Self-Consciousness* (NISHIDA 1987).
I originally sanctioned the title, but would now prefer to call it "Self-Awareness," for reasons
described above.

of the idea of acting intuition, the second of his universal principles of logic.

If we may gloss over the course of the argument and look at the results, acting intuition is a conceptualization of the conversion in a *jikaku* way of looking at the relation between the self and the world.[17] On the face of it, acting and intuiting seem to represent two distinct but equally human ways of relating oneself to the world. Nishida's aim was to show their correlation in consciousness and then to suggest that self-awareness is cultivated by inverting that relationship.

As a subject, I relate myself to the world—indeed I posit myself there—by acting on it, whether bodily or mentally. As mental action, this is reflection in which (*pace* Fichte's *Tathandlung*) the ego seeks to mirror the world, including itself, in itself.

Meantime, as an object in the world among other objects, I am acted upon passively by a dynamic that transcends me. This is what I experience as need or desire, and what in the mental realm Nishida refers to here as intuition. If reflective action invents the dichotomy of self and world, intuition discovers a unity there. It is part and parcel of all thinking, from everyday perceptions to artistic imagination and religious awakening.

Action and intuition are thus not opposite modes of being there for the choosing, but correlative components of consciousness. In all knowing, there is not only an active, reflective grasp of things but a passive intuition in which one is grasped by things. But for their synthesis to function as a logical universal of self-awareness, a conversion must take place. It must not be a matter of allowing mental intuition completely to overwhelm mental action, but of cultivating a new relationship in which intuition becomes active and action becomes passive. In other words, intuition has to be deliberately *cultivated* as a way of acting on the world, participating in the world's dynamic by expressing it in creative form, without interposing the subject-object dichotomy on it. Acting intuition thus amounts to purging the self of its Fichtean ego; as Nishida says, it is like a "seeing without a seer."

Nishida describes this conversion of self-awareness as "knowing a thing by becoming it" where one "becomes a thing by running up

---

[17] I am drawing here on the helpful account of YUASA Yasuo in his book, *The Body* (1987, pp. 50–52, 65–72).

against it."[18] In acting intuition we know not by allowing ourselves to be a passive object before that which is to be known, but by actively casting ourselves out of our subjectivity, identifying with things.

Put in terms of will, we might say that acting intuition represents a purging of subjective wishes in order to become at one with the will (the universal need or desire) of reality. In a word, it is a conversion from the everyday self to the true self.

If this is a provisional answer to the self-enclosed psychologism of the universal of pure experience, the tendency towards a contemplative distancing of the self from concrete action in the world and human society remains. Nishida would try to set this right in his later works, but not until Tanabe had launched a frontal attack on the notion.

Nishitani, meantime, was persuaded that Nishida had corrected his tendency to psychologism with his logic of place (NISHITANI, 1984, p. 91), to which we shall turn presently. While he does not often use the term *acting intuition* himself except when speaking directly of Nishida, he has made the idea of "knowing a thing by becoming it" a central theme in his mature work. Already from his early philosophical work, he was preoccupied with an analysis of subjectivity (a multivalent term in English which Japanese does a much better job of distinguishing) aimed at breaking through the Western notion of the ego that knows a world of objects.

In a later study on European nihilism, Nishitani reads the history of modern Western philosophy as a series of struggles to set up and knock down the idea of two worlds, the sensory and the supra-sensory. In his now classic work, *Religion and Nothingness*, these same echoes of Nishida's acting intuition reverberate on all sides as he struggles to delineate a conversion to the world in its "true suchness," a world that is neither subjective nor substantial (NISHITANI 1982, pp. 125–28).

Though you would not know it from my paraphrase, Nishitani's work shows a buoyancy of expression, an unabashed use of the Zen tradition, and a gift for concrete examples that make it stylistically Nishida's and Tanabe's superior. This is the sort of originality that shows up less in major innovations of thought than in a making

---

[18] The English translators of Yuasa's *The Body* miss the point here by rendering this as "becoming a thing and exhausting it" (p. 70).

intelligible and tangible much of what his predecessors had left in the abstract. Without Nishitani's genuine feel for the heart of the philosophical problems that Nishida and Tanabe were dealing with, I have no hesitation in saying that the term "Kyoto School" would have little of the currency it now enjoys.

Absolute Nothingness

If the cultivation of acting intuition is a way of engaging oneself with things in such a way as to forfeit one's status as the mere passive subject of intuition and to deny the world its status as the mere object of intuition, it is clear that the "action" involved is not a manipulation of matter but a transformation of perspective towards reality. Until Nishida could come up with a universal that would include reality, the psychologism of his earlier writings was not fully overcome. It is here, I think that we have to see his reasons for introducing into philosophy the idea of Oriental nothing to replace the universal of being.

Nothing is not as alien a notion to our traditional Western modes of thought as we might think. Obviously, we know what it means that things that *are* pass away into things that *are not*. We have all at one time or another felt the reality of absence or loss, where there was once presence and meaning. Who among us does not know the enchantment of imaginary worlds? Or again, do we not commonly speak of the potential of things to be something other than what they are as "real"? And where would philosophy be without the ideals of the so-called "intelligible world"—ideas like freedom and love? Indeed, in one form or another, the reality of nothing is a necessary counterpart to our idea of being. If things could not *become*, if they could not *not be*, how could we talk about them *being*?

What the Kyoto philosophers have done, under Nishida's initial inspiration, is to draw the insight into nonbeing out of the realm of the privative and restore it to the level of being as the notion of *nothingness*, and then to elevate it above being as *absolute nothingness*. In a late work, Tanabe makes the point clearly:

> All science needs some entity or other as its object of study. The point of contact is always in being, not in nothing. The discipline that has to do with nothingness is philosophy. Religion encounters nothingness and overcomes it in faith, art in feeling; but it is only philosophy that deals with nothingness in *knowing* from the

academic standpoint. Since Aristotle metaphysics has been defined
as the study of existence as such, of being itself; but if being is some-
thing that can only be known concretely through the mediation of
nothingness, it is more fitting that we should define philosophy in
terms of nothingness, paradoxical as this may look at first.[19]

Once given philosophical status, of course, the idea of absolute
nothingness soon took on a role in philosophical thought altogether
unfamiliar to the West, and it was only natural that its cognates in
the Buddhist tradition would guide the course of speculation for
Nishida, Tanabe, and Nishitani.

The place of absolute nothingness in Nishida's overall scheme is
best left for a consideration of his logic of place. Here I would only
add a comment on the peculiar designation of nothingness as an
absolute.

On the one hand, of course, to make nothingness an absolute is
to see it as a logical universal that embraces all of reality much as
being has done in classical metaphysics. Moreover, if we follow Hei-
degger in seeing ontology as basically *ontotheology*, and if we further
recall that the introduction of the idea of the *Absolute* into philosophy
came with Schelling and Hegel, it is clear that absolute nothingness
is being suggested as an Oriental cognate for the Western notion
of God.[20]

On the other hand, absolute nothingness is not primarily an on-
tological principle, since that would make it subsidiary to the realm
of being, but a principle of self-awareness (see HASE 1989). As such,
it is not a state of being or the absence of such a state, but a
transcending of the perspective of being. This does not make it
powerless or inactive. Quite the contrary, it is the dynamic ground
of being. To see how this functions, we have to look at the logic
that Nishida devised as a context for this notion.

[19] The section in which these sentences appear (TANABE 1947, pp. 14–30) read almost like
a paraphrase of the central argument of Nishitani's *Religion and Nothingness*, which was actu-
ally published before Tanabe's book and which I shall treat briefly here under the rubric of
"The Standpoint of Emptiness." Although I have no proof of the fact, Tanabe's whole work
seems to owe a great if unacknowledged debt to Nishitani.

[20] Incidentally, Schelling saw the Absolute as revealed to intuition as the identity of the
knower and the known. As a young scholar, Nishitani translated Schelling's *Essence of Human
Freedom* into Japanese.

Place

The logic of place, the most disputed of all of Nishida's ideas, represents a fourth logic aimed at providing self-awareness with a universal. In fact, it is his first deliberately devised "logic," one in which he sought to relativize the self not only to the world of objects and thought, but also to an ultimate absolute nothingness. In short, it was Nishida's mature attempt at a grand-scale system of the unfolding of the true self.[21]

The *place* of this logic refers as much to where one is coming from as to where one is going. It is not a matter simply of bodily location, though it is meant to include the idea of the body in self-awareness. In its relation to mental activities, it is not simply a kind of spatial metaphor, like the container imagery used to describe consciousness and its contents, but is a kind of symbolic space indicating one's orientation or values, a space that can be sacred or profane. Finally, it has to do with the "positing" of a standpoint; it is the shadow side of the standpoint from which one argues, the repository of tacit assumptions. In short, Nishida's idea of place is a multivalent metaphor aimed at a search for the "locus of self-awareness."[22]

Earlier I suggested that for Nishida's idea of acting intuition, all transformation must be seen as a transformation of perspective, and this is what I see conceptualized in the logic of place. Nishida himself—his students tell us (KŌSAKA 1947, p. 98)—liked to depict his idea of the tripartite logic of place by drawing a number of small circles on a board, surrounding them with a single larger circle, and then adding a final all-embracing circle drawn with a broken line, to indicate his idea of place. The movement from the innermost cluster of small circles to the outermost one, whose circumference is nowhere,[23] describes three phrases.

---

[21] The fascination with system-building is not something inherited from Western thought only. It also had something to do with the pressures of the Meiji period in which Japan found itself asking new questions of itself, among them the demand for giving an account of its intellectual history.

[22] I have drawn here on the exposition of NAKAMURA 1984, pp. 78–85.

[23] In his late years Nishida grew fond of this saying, whose origins lies in a Gnostic idea of the soul. Nishida himself seems to have discovered it in Nicolas of Cusa in the form: "a sphere whose center is everywhere and whose circumference, nowhere."

In the first phase, the subject-predicate model of Aristotelian logic, which Nishida assumed to be foundational for all Western logic,[24] is inverted. Classical logic puts the weight of its judgments on the substantial individual, the "subject that cannot become a predicate." Nishida turned this on its head, putting the weight on the universal which, as a predicate that transcends the grammatical subject, relativizes the existence of the individual. If the judgment, "The flower is red," is put in the service of a philosophy of objective being, it is the flower that is central. But if it is adapted to a philosophy aimed at heightening self-awareness by breaking through the dichotomy of the seeing subject and its seen objects, then it is the redness that is of greater moment. Redness relates to flowers as the nothingness of judgment that relativizes objective being. This is the first circle, where the self "locates" itself after the manner of acting intuition: not apart from things but in the mode in which it becomes things by its perceptual judgments.

The second phase begins when we try to locate our predicative judgments, to ask *where* universals like redness are, against what horizon they become present. The answer, of course, is that they exist only in the nothingness of consciousness. For the being that was taken away from the objects in the world survives as the being of conscious contents, indicated by the larger closed circle. The move from universal predicates to consciousness is thus a further transition from being to nothingness. But while the *contents* of consciousness look to us to be real, pure consciousness without them does not, since there is no way it can become an object to itself. In fact, at this locus, we see that the propositional subject, redness, of which we predicate consciousness, exists only because of the consciousness and could not exist without it. This is the second circle, where predicates turn out to be subjects of consciousness, and consciousness the universal predicate.

The final transition is to the locus that grounds consciousness,

---

[24] Western languages tend to conflate the subject who does the knowing or perceiving of objects with the subject of predicative judgments, which is actually the object in the former sense. Japanese is clear on this point.

We should note that Nishida did not take advantage of conditional, let alone symbolic logic. Even though he was alert to modern scientific quantum theory, and even wrote about it, he never ventured to make use of its logic for his own purposes. In this sense, the contortions Sueki goes through to eke a logic out of Nishida's development are somewhat out of place. See note 8.

the universal of all universals. At first glance, it might seem that the nothingness of consciousness is ultimately real and everything beyond it mere image and fantasy, a reality predicated as universal and embracing the plurality of consciousness. But consciousness itself is only a relative nothingness (one which needs its contents in order to be real). It cannot be grounded on being in any experiential sense, Nishida's argument runs, since that would undo the labors of the first two perspectives and would assume that it could "see" its own ground as a subject seeing an object. The only possible ground that can serve as a locus for consciousness is a final over-coming of the world of being. The logical subject, consciousness, then turns out to be the predicate of a higher reality than being, *absolute* nothingness. It is "in" this insight that the true self is "lo-cated."[25] It is here that reality ultimately "takes place," that it works as one, spontaneously unfolding itself.

Though Nishida does not explicitly speak of this progression to absolute nothingness as stages in a spiritual process, it is clearly set up that way. The logic of place enabled him to organize the whole of the efforts of philosophy—perceptual judgment, phenomenology of consciousness, enlightenment—into a single systematic whole. It should also be clear that the adoption of Western notions of God to help describe absolute nothingness, or to reinterpret the divine in the light of this category, are intended neither to argue for the existence nor the nonexistence of God in the classical Western sense.

Tanabe and Nishitani reacted differently to this logic of place. Tanabe rejected it, as much out of a growing aggravation with Nishida himself as with his own attachment to a "logic of species" that he had been developing around the same time. Nishitani em-braced the final stage as a "standpoint of emptiness," apparently finding the logical apparatus itself of little service. We will have a chance to look at their respective views after a brief consideration of Nishida's final logic.

Dialectical World

The use of dialectic runs throughout the writings of the Kyoto School, surfacing most self-consciously in Nishida's late writings and

[25] The word-play is not Nishida's own, and indeed seems to have been lost initially on some of his disciples. See Kōsaka 1947, p. 99.

remaining close to the surface through most of Tanabe's thought. If it was because of Hegel that Nishida came to the dialectic, it was because of its resonances in Buddhist thought that he stayed with it. The same can be said of Tanabe. Only Nishitani took Buddhist tradition—in particular Zen—as his primary model.

From Hegel, Nishida's dialectical thinking picked up three main traits. First, the dialectic provided a convenient method of searching for deeper insight into things by confronting one's conceptualizations with their logical opposites and then trying to find a unity between the two (as, for example, in his idea of pure experience as a conscious unity of the opposites of subject and object). Second, it provided the theoretical supposition about a single world order which logic only mirrors (as in his idea that there is a basic need or desire behind the functions of consciousness that entails a clash of opposites in will and judgment). Third, it installed a permanent critique of reason into philosophical speculation in the sense that formal logic works in contradictories because reality does not cater to our ideas of it, except we phrase them as paradox (as in his final turn to the identity of contradictories).

Basically there are two carriers of the dialectic in his writings. The first is the Chinese copula *soku* 即 which appears often in Buddhist texts and furnished him with a handy device for demonstrating the "Oriental character" of his philosophy,[26] namely to remove it from the ontology of Hegel and put it at the service of a theory of absolute nothingness.

Second is his idea of the "self-identity of absolute contradictories," the formal term he used in his late writings to introduce a dialectical universal that would draw the logic of place out of its apparent confinement to the individual self and into the world. Under pressure from his critics,[27] Nishida returned to his earlier Hegelian

---

[26] Honda Masaaki has gone to considerable trouble over these past many years to clarify the Oriental religious meaning of *soku* and suggest its usefulness for Christian theology. A résumé of his efforts can be found in the talks and discussions recorded in *Daijō Zen* 5-6 (1989).

There are numerous translations for the term. Van Bragt chose *sive*; in the Tanabe translation we used *qua*. I now prefer the English term *in* because it seems to capture the sense best. Happily, the Japanese term for being *an-sich* (the essential nature of a thing) is *sokuji*, literally, in (or as)-itself; the term of the *für-sich* (the freedom of a thing vis-à-vis other things) is *sokutai*, literally in (or as)-against.

[27] Principal among them are the critiques of Tosaka Jun and later of Tanabe (which Nishida initially acknowledged and then dismissed as a misunderstanding). See NISHIDA 1929, pp. 410, 460.

inspiration to view self-awareness as an awakening to the correlative relationship of the self and the historical world, each of which affirms itself by negating the other. Not content, however, simply with the assertion that without the self there is no world, and without the world no self, he was concerned with an insight into the higher unity of the two. In one sense, there is no easier assurance that one has reached an ultimately universal concept than by taking care to include everything and its opposite. Nishida clearly wanted more than a logical category. He wanted to describe it as an insight that participates in, or converts itself to, the "inverse correlation" at the ground of the order of things. The point is to achieve a self-identity (a unity of the true self that takes place by itself) by seeing the negation-in-affirmation and the affirmation-in-negation.

Arguably, this did not draw his thought any closer to the demands of concrete praxis in history. Ironically, given its full consistency, indeed its culmination of his former thought,[28] it served to highlight what is perhaps the most fundamental shortcoming of his philosophical system — its systematic tendency to distance philosophy from its role in shaping concrete moral consciousness.

Logic of Species

For his part, Nishitani has used the dialectic as a tool without developing its theory of it — and indeed, he has not spent much time on logic at all. Tanabe's mathematical background and interest in scientific method, in contrast, made him especially alert to logical questions. From his most technical writing to his more popular works, he was not only content to think dialectically but to continually remind the reader that this is what he is doing. On the face of it, Tanabe's differences with Nishida over the meaning and use of dialectic are minor, and Nishida's closest disciples have tended to side with their teacher that they are often based on misunderstandings.[29]

[28] Dilworth has argued this in his important work, *Last Writings: Nothingness and the Religious Worldview* (1987). The opening and concluding essays represent a condensation of the ideas of the one Western scholar who more than any other has struggled to appropriate the uniqueness of Nishida's thought critically into the Western philosophical tradition.

[29] Nishitani is a case in point. See the final two chapters of his *Nishida Kitarō*. I would only note here that so vehement was the division that when the first edition of Nishida's *Collected Works* was published, Nishida's correspondence with Tanabe (over 100 letters in all) were

In general, Tanabe's critique centers on two points. First, he re-
sisted the idea of a final locus for self-awareness that would not set
the self squarely in the realms of practical judgment. Second, Tanabe
stressed the dynamic quality of absolute nothingness in the world
of being, whereas Nishida had put the stress on subjective insight
into absolute nothingness. As we saw above, Nishida tried to remedy
this — at least in formal logical terms — in his final writings. Be that
as it may, each of these critiques is attached to one of the two key
philosophical idea associated with Tanabe's name, namely the logic
of species and metanoetics.

Tanabe's attempt to find a logic for absolute nothingness was more
modest, in a sense, than Nishida's. He had grown weary of the
heights of abstraction and longed for something closer to what he
perceived as the soil of existential experience. Even so, this has to
be understood in terms of the subject matter, since Tanabe's style
quite roundly betrays such purpose. It is not only every bit as
abstract as Nishida's, but its almost arithmetical rigor walks one step
at a time where Nishida is forever taking imaginative leaps. In any
case, Tanabe's aim was to return from the airy realms of the con-
templative to the real world, and he grew short of temper with
relegating it to a minor circle enveloped in the all-embracing circle
of absolute nothingness. He wanted to see absolute nothingness at
work everywhere and in all things.

The logic of species, which Tanabe described from the outset as
a dialectical method, was a first step in this direction.[30] Just as
Hegel's notion of "objective spirit" had filled out the notion of a

---

omitted! Pressures from the academic community had them instated in a later edition.

Whatever the personal and theoretical clashes, the texts themselves seem to support
NISHITANI's conclusion:

> Indeed it is my impression that a close examination of Nishida's philosophy at
> the points criticized by Tanabe reveals in many cases that Nishida's views are sur-
> prisingly similar to Tanabe's own. In particular, their philosophies share a distinc-
> tive and common basis that sets them apart from traditional Western philosophy as
> a whole: "absolute nothingness.". . . . For all the noteworthy differences of termi-
> nology and logical system that separated them, when one looks closely at the core
> of what each was trying to say, the gap that may at first have looked like a vast chasm
> gradually narrows and in many instances even gives the impression of having been
> bridged by identical views (1984, pp. 210–11).

[30] The central ideas of his project are laid out in a late essay translated by David Dilworth
and Satō Taira as "The Species as Dialectics," (1969). The translation is not a particularly good
one, but in fairness to the efforts of the translators, the article itself is more recondite than the
ideas presented there deserve. The work was never completed.

concrete universal for the realm of being, Tanabe's logic of species would do the same for the realm of absolute nothingness (TAKEUCHI 1981, pp. 208–209).

Fundamentally, the project is cut of the same cloth as the Neo-Kantian concern with locating the conditions for the possibility of knowing (or in Tanabe's case, of self-awareness) as lying not only in the transcendental structure of consciousness but also in the variable structures of social convention. It is society, the culture created by particular races, that filters humanity to the individual and brings the individual in touch with the absolute (call it God or absolute nothingness). Race and culture introduce a radical, ineluctable arrationality into every attempt at pure contemplative reason. Tanabe argued that classical logic—by which he meant classical logic as Nishida had used it in his logic of place—had focused on universals and individuals, failing to give sufficient weight to the role of the category of species that falls in between them and prevents absolute knowledge of the one through the other.[31] The principal reason he felt obliged to correct this oversight was to help critical social praxis find a way into a philosophy of nothingness. An added motive, as he writes in hindsight, was to provide a rational context for reflecting on the nationalism emerging in Japan in the late 1930. By setting up a dialectical relationship between the subjective individual and the race, he hoped to argue the case against a simple, unreflected totalitarianism (see DILWORTH and SATŌ 1969, p. 272, note 2).

In any case, by stressing mediation, Tanabe means to stress the intermediary steps to self-awareness. There is, he tells us, more than merely universals that bring together a one and a many in intuition; there are real mediating forces in the world that bring together the human individual and the human race, or the religious subject and the power of absolute nothingness. "God does not act directly on the individual," he wrote. "The salvation of individual is accomplished through the mediation of nation and society which already exist as communities of individuals" (DILWORTH and SATŌ 1969, p. 287). These "communities of individuals" are precisely what he wishes to circumscribe by the notion of species.

---

[31] There are in fact not only shades of this in Hegel's philosophy of religion, but already in the Platonic method of *diaresis* (as found, for instance, in *Phaedrus* and *Sophist*) where the definition of a thing is sought by a moving continually from genus to species, stopping short only when one meets the concrete individual.

Now in order to return from this excursus into the theory of praxis back to the theory of absolute nothingness required the additional step of what Tanabe called "absolute mediation," namely the idea that absolutely everything in existence is mediated, that at bottom it is mediated by absolute nothingness, and that the mediation consists in an absolute negation that opens up into an absolute affirmation. This brings us to the notion of metanoesis.

Metanoetics

In trying to bring the subject in search of its true self closer to interaction with the historical world, Tanabe had also to show how this relationship was grounded in absolute nothingness. While Nishida's logic of place had shown how the forces of history *take place* in the universal of absolute nothingness, Tanabe was more concerned with showing how absolute nothingness *takes time* in the concreteness of history. For the logic of species also to be a true "logic of self-awareness,"[32] it could not be self-enclosed in the correlative identity of self and world, but neither could the absolute nothingness that encompassed it be merely a logical category. It had to be dynamic, at work as much in the world as in consciousness seeking awareness. This provided the central idea for his idea of philosophy as metanoetics.

One might say that Tanabe's aim in all of this was to reinstate the primacy of religious experience by distinguishing it more clearly from philosophical reflection than Nishida had done. For if philosophy was to reach its terminus in religious insight (self-awareness), then it could not begin from pure experience but only from the radical impurity of insight and experience. The rational hubris that he found in Nishida's philosophy would have to be replaced by a conversion of reason. The conceptualization of this process was metanoetics, a "philosophy that was not a philosophy."

Where Nishida had used Zen as his primary source of Oriental inspiration, Tanabe took up the True Pure Land (Shin) Buddhist tradition which was based on reliance on Other-power and for which Zen was a religion of self-power. In other words, self-awareness would no longer be the work of a self that cultivates itself through

---

[32] According to YAMADA (1975, p. 99), this was in fact the title of a series of special lectures whose contents were woven into the lectures that would become *Philosophy as Metanoetics*.

acting intuition, whose primary symbol is the Buddha-nature that all being possess and need to realize, but rather the work of letting go of the self before the power of absolute nothingness, whose primary symbol is the saving grace of Amida Buddha. Rather than go into further detail here, I would like to pull out what seems to me a tacit structure underlying Tanabe's philosophy of religion and thereby to draw it out of the frame of a debate between the relative merits of Zen and Shin Buddhism.

There are three elements to the attainment of religious self-awareness, all of which show up in *Philosophy as Metanoetics* and still more clearly in his next work, *Existenz, Love, and Praxis*. First, there is the self-negating dynamic of a recognition of the radical limits of the world that we can know and control.[33] This appears in the use of the self-power of reason to advance by tearing reason to pieces (the metanoia of ōsō) 往相 , or what Tanabe calls "absolute critique." Second, there is the Other-affirming dynamic of a recognition of forces unknown and uncontrollable that transcend the power of the self and yet are encountered in human experience (the metanoia of gensō 還相). Third, there is the world of the uniting symbols generated in the true self of self-awareness, where the first two dynamics are related to each other dialectically (the metanoetics of ōsō-in-*gensō*, or of negation-in-affirmation) in religious praxis. There are two kind of symbols Tanabe uses in this regard. For symbols of personal repentance and metanoia (the logic of self-awareness), he draws on the myth of the bodhisattva Dharmākara and later on the myth of Jesus. For a symbols of praxis in the world (the logic of species), he draws on the image from the *Lotus Sūtra* of a mutual correspondence among the Buddha, and later on the Christian notion of the *communio sanctorum*.

Standpoint of Emptiness

Like Tanabe, Nishitani took up the challenge of Nishida's logic of place and forged his own creative response. Unlike Tanabe, however, Nishitani has not put great stock in differentiating his position from that of his teacher or provoking a confrontation. His concern was

---

[33] It is interesting that in the closing chapter of *Existenz, Love, and Praxis*, Tanabe makes considerable use of vol. 2 of Jaspers's *Philosophie*, where the idea of the *Grenzsituationen* is posed.

rather to relocate Nishida's locus of absolute nothingness squarely in the existential struggles of contemporary consciousness through what he has called a "standpoint of emptiness."

If Nishida and Tanabe shared a common philosophical background in Hegel and Kant, Nishitani's major influence has no doubt been Nietzsche. As a young man grappling with the problems of life and unsure where to turn, he once told me, he used to carry *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* around with him "like my bible." Philosophical tutoring in Nishida's circle and the inspiration of Suzuki Daisetsu that turned him to Zen never undid his early affections for Nietzsche. Quite the contrary, they matured into a profound understanding more or less contemporary with the rediscovery of Nietzsche in the West.[34]

Where Nishida had tried to frame an idea of the locus of consciousness from Leibnitz's monadology, Nishitani was closer to Nietzsche's "perspectivism,"[35] understanding the logic of place as a process of conversion from one standpoint to the next. The stages in this process as he lays them out amount to a critique and reinterpretation of Nietzsche in the light of Zen Buddhism.

The basic pattern is laid out most clearly in Nishitani's major work, *Religion and Nothingness*. In outline form, the argument runs like this: The ordinary, pre-awakened self is the ego of self-consciousness that sets itself up outside the world of things as a knowing subject. This is the standpoint of *egoity*. Driven by death and an awareness of the impermanence of all things to see the empty abyss that yawns underfoot of ordinary egoity, one awakens to an initial sense of the vanity of self and world. This is what Nishitani calls the standpoint of *nihility*. It represents a conversion to a standpoint of nothingness, but only a relative nothingness. By facing this abyss of nihility squarely and yet not clinging to it as ultimate, a final standpoint is opened up, the standpoint of *emptiness* in which things appear just as they are, in their "suchness," and in which the true self is seen to reside not in the workings of egoity but in a letting go of ego. The awareness of the relative nothingness of nihility is

---

[34] Walter Kaufmann's *Nietzsche* was published in 1950. In the spring of that same year, Nishitani was delivering the lectures on Nietzsche that form the central section of his book *Nihilism* (an English translation of which by Graham Parkes and Aihara Setsuko is scheduled for publication with Suny Press in 1990 under the title *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*).

[35] Nietzsche speaks of perspectivism as an approach "by virtue of which every force center — and not only man — construes the whole rest of the world from its own viewpoint." See *The Will to Power* (1968), sec. 636.

converted spontaneously and of its own to an awareness of absolute nothingness (see SASAKI 1988, pp. 161–86).

Using this model of religious conversion, Nishitani considers key notions of self and self-nature in Zen Buddhism, as well as their conceptual counterparts in Western philosophy and theology. The logic of the critique he levels against the doctrines of a wholly personal God, the kenōsis of God in Jesus, and even the immaculate conception of the Virgin Mary,[36] appeals regularly to the Western mystical tradition, but in the end rests on his Buddhist strategy of emptying language into self-awareness of the true self.

* * *

Current intellectual pressures in Japan make it almost obligatory to add a word about the "uniqueness" of the Kyoto philosophers. To use the term in its weak sense in which every cultural achievement is unique would be to say nothing very much at all. To use it in the strong sense that it has in certain circles of contemporary Japanese intelligentsia—the quest for an arcana of culturally and genetically bound traits, the argument for whose existence and nature must rely entirely on the intuition of those who possess them—would be to beg all the important questions. I am inclined to recall how Nietzsche warned his fellow Germans in the third of his *Untimely Meditations* that uniqueness is not something one seeks out by rummaging through what one has been given, but something that one makes from it. We are born raw and ordinary; uniqueness is the judgment that others make about what our efforts have wrought. For my part, I am content to try to locate their achievement in context of a world intellectual history in the making, of which the current exchange of philosophies and religions East and West is the coping stone.

The point is not as self-evident as it might seem. In theory, there seems everything to recommend such interchange and little to discourage it. The practice is another matter. To those who occupy as professional fields of study the traditions the Kyoto philosophers

---

[36] In an important essay on "Buddhism and Christianity" composed in 1955, at the same time as *Religion and Nothingness*, Nishitani suggests that the doctrine of *theotokos* (mother of God) and the virgin birth should be extended to describe religious consciousness in general and not restricted to one historical personality. For a résumé of the argument, a critique by Mutō Kazuo, and a discussion of it with Nishitani, see NANZAN 1981, pp. 114–20, 146–48.

straddle, they must look like cuckoo birds hatching their brood in someone else's nest. Are they carrying Eastern eggs to Western nests? Or are they bringing Western eggs to Eastern nests? Whichever the case, there is something kooky about it all.

In the spirit in which they worked, however, I think we must resist both the judgment that the Kyoto philosophers have reduced philosophy to Buddhism or conversely that they have merely reupholstered Buddhist thought in Western terminology,[37] doing disservice to both. One can no more approach Nishida or Tanabe or Nishitani as Buddhist scholars than as Christian theologians. Their primary context is the philosophical tradition that goes back to the early Greeks and now belongs also to the Orient. To deprive that context of its access to religious thought simply because the religious frame of reference has widened to include Buddhism would be to cut off its legs.

Each in his own way, the philosophers of the Kyoto School have tried to introduce *into their philosophical thought* their own inner struggles with religious "affiliation" in a religiously plural world. Tanabe described his situation as one of both belief and unbelief, clearly in debt to both Buddhism and Christianity, and yet ultimately only able to claim: "I am no more a believer in Shin Buddhism than I am a Christian. I remain a student of philosophy."[38] While recognizing Tanabe's dilemma explicitly, Nishitani words his position somewhat differently. Although he speaks out of the Buddhist framework, he says, he cannot identify entirely with Buddhism, and at the same time, cannot reject Christianity out of hand. He describes his position as one of not a "Buddhist made but in-the-making" and at the same time as a "not made but Christian in-the-making" (VAN BRAGT 1971, pp. 280–81). These are not private statements made outside of the philosophical framework; they are a fundamental inspiration for the Kyoto philosophers.

This does not, of course, do much to answer the question of whether their use of Western philosophy has done any lasting, positive service to Buddhist self-understanding, and vice-versa. This is a rather too large question to pronounce on summarily. On the

---

[37] See, for example, YAMADA's claim that Nishida's philosophy is simply a further subjectification of already subjective Zen intuition (1975, p. 18).

[38] *Existenz, Love, and Praxis*, p. 5. Chapter 1 of his *Introduction to Philosophy* (1949) spells this out in further detail.

one hand, we want to know how this philosophical excursus has fared compared to Buddhism's own rich intellectual history, what lacunae if any it has filled and its major oversights have been. On the other, we have to see what the distinctively Oriental inspirations of their thought does to illuminate neglected corners of Western thought—whether through misunderstanding or superior insight—and what it does to obfuscate matters of little moment. On all these counts, there is much to be said. Happily, one hears more and more voices joining forum to say it.

REFERENCES

Anli Wang 安釐王
  1976   戰國策正解 . Tokyo: Toyamabō.

DILWORTH, David
  1987   *Last Writings: Nothingness and the Religious Worldview*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

DILWORTH, David and SATŌ Taira
  1969   The species as dialectics. *Monumenta Nipponica* 24:273–88.

HONDA Masaaki 本多正昭
  1989   *Bukkyō to kirisutokyō: Kagyaku, fukagyaku no mondai* 仏教とキリスト教—可逆・不可逆の問題 [Buddhism and Christianity: The problem of reversibility and irreversibility]. *Daijō Zen* 大乗禅 5-6: 5-31.

IENAGA Saburō 家永三郎
  1974   *Tanabe Hajime no shisōshiteki kenkyū* 田辺元の思想史的研究—戦争と哲学者 [A study of the history of Tanabe's thought: War and the philosopher]. Tokyo: Hōsei Daigaku.

KŌSAKA Masaaki 高坂正顕
  1947   *Nishida Kitarō Sensei no shōgai to shisō* 西田幾太郎先生の生涯と思想 [The life and thought of Nishida Kitarō], in *Kōsaka Masaaki chosakushū* 高坂正顕著作集 [Collected writings of Kōsaka Masaaki], vol. 8. Tokyo: Risōsha, 1965.

LAUBE, Johannes
  1984   *Dialektik der absoluten Vermittlung*. Freiburg: Herder.

MIKI Kiyoshi 三木 清
1974 *Keibetsu sareta honyaku* 軽蔑された翻訳 [The derision of trans-
lations], in *Dokusho to jinsei* 読書と人生 [Reading and life].
Tokyo: Shinchō Bunko.

NAKAMURA Yūjirō 中村雄二郎
1984 *Nishida Kitarō* 西田幾太郎 [Nishida Kitarō]. Tokyo: Iwanami.

NANZAN INSTITUTE FOR RELIGION AND CULTURE, ed.
1981 *Zettaimu to kami: Nishida-Tanabe tetsugaku no dentō to kirisuto-
kyō* 絶対無と神―西田・田辺哲学の伝統とキリスト教 [Absolute
nothingness and God: The Nishida-Tanabe philosophical
tradition and Christianity]. Tokyo: Shunjūsha.

NIETZSCHE, F.
1968 *The Will to Power*. W. Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale,
transl. New York: Vintage.

NISHIDA Kitarō 西田幾太郎
1927 *Hataraku mono kara miru mono e* 働くものから見るものへ
[From working to seeing], in *Nishida Kitarō zenshū* 西田幾太郎
全集 , vol. 4. Tokyo: Iwanami, 1979.
1929 *Sōsetsu* 総説 [General explanation], in *Nishida Kitarō zenshū,*
vol. 4.
1987 *Intuition and Reflection in Self-Consciousness*. Valdo Viglielmo,
transl., with Takeuchi Yoshinori and Joseph O'Leary. New
York: State University of New York Press.

NISHITANI Keiji 西谷啓治
1982 *Religion and Nothingness*. Jan Van Bragt, transl. Berkeley:
University of California Press.
1984 *Nishida Kitarō: Sono hito to shisō* 西田幾太郎―その人と思想
[Nishida Kitarō: The man and his thought]. Tokyo: Chiku-
ma Shobō.
1990 *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*. Graham Parkes and Aikara
Setsuko, transl. New York: State University of New York
Press.

NODA Matao 野田又夫
1984 *Tetsugaku no mittsu no dentō* 哲学の三つの伝統 [Three philo-
sophical traditions]. Tokyo: Kinokuniya.

RORTY, Richard
1980 *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Oxford: Blackwell's.

SASAKI Tōru 佐々木 徹
1988   *Nishitani Keiji: sono shisaku e no dōhyō* 西谷啓治—その思索へ
        の道標 [Nishitani Keiji: Guideposts to his thought] Kyoto:
        Hōzōkan.

SUEKI Takehiro 末木剛博
1983–88   *Nishida Kitarō: Sono tetsugaku taikei* 西田幾太郎—その哲学
        体系 [The philosophical system of Nishida Kitarō]. Tokyo:
        Shunjūsha, 4 vols..

TAKEUCHI Yoshinori 武内義範
1981   *Tanabe tetsugaku to zettaimu* 田辺哲学と絶対無 [Absolute noth-
        ingness and the philosophy of Tanabe], in *Zettaimu to kami*,
        pp. 196–220.

TANABE Hajime 田辺 元
1947   *Jitsuzon to ai to jissen*   実存と愛と実践 [Existenz, love, and
        praxis], in *Tanabe Hajime zenshū* 田辺元全集 , vol. 9. Tokyo:
        Chikuma Shobō, 1963.
1949   *Tetsugaku nyūmon* 哲学入門 [Introduction to philosophy], in
        Tanabe Hajime zenshū, vol. 11.

UEDA Shizuteru 上田閑照
1981   *Nishida tetsugaku ni okeru shūkyō no rikai ni tsuite* 西田哲学に
        おける宗教理解について [The understanding of religion in
        Nishida's philosophy], in *Zettaimu to kami,* pp. 56–81.

VAN BRAGT, Jan
1971   Nishitani on Japanese religiosity, In *Japanese Religiosity*, J.
        Spae, ed. Tokyo: Oriens Institute for Religious Research.

YAMADA Munemutsu 山田宗睦
1975   *Shōwa no seishinshi–Kyōto gakuha no tetsugaku* 昭和の精神史—
        京都学派の哲学 [The intellectual history of the Shōwa pe-
        riod: The philosophy of the Kyoto School]. Tokyo: Jinbun
        Shoin.

YUASA Yasuo
1987   *The Body: Toward an Eastern Mind-Body Theory.* S. Nagatomo
        and T. Kasulis, transl. New York: State University of New
        York Press.