



Plato's distinction in the *Meno* between "opinion" and "knowledge" has been a constant reminder in the Western philosophical tradition of the need to critically examine the habits of thought we inherit from our environment or develop on our own without proper reflection. As easy as the distinction is to understand, the transition from opinion to knowledge is something that can never be accomplished once and for all and that no one can accomplish for another. Insight always casts shadows of oversight; neither common sense nor deep thinking is free of infection by tacit assumptions that cloud the mind.

If the distinction itself is not epoch specific or culture specific, the attempt to execute the transition from one to the other is invariably bound to particular times and places. It comes as no surprise that similar notions are to be found in the philosophical tradition of the East. The opposition that Buddhism sets up between "conventional thinking" and "truth," for example, relies on the same experiences of knowledge being accumulated, transmitted, assimilated, and appropriated by individual minds. It also recognizes, more radically than Plato had, that in the end there is no way for us to shake our minds completely free of conventional thinking and opinion.

Broadly speaking, in both traditions the shift from conventional opinion to true knowledge is typically treated as a transformation of underlying *forms of thought*, not just an exchange of one set of ideas for another. As such it requires a kind of meta-knowledge, a knowing how we come to know. The encounter of philosophies East and West, however, raises a question about the form of this meta-knowledge itself: could it be that the *form of the forms of thought* structure the

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appropriation of insight in such a way as to exempt certain fundamental biases of conventional knowledge from consideration? The straddle of traditions in which this question arises is rather more common among philosophers in the East today than it is among their Western counterparts. There is more at play here than the post-colonial reactions of a slighted tradition against the dominant one. The "outsiders" perspective of the East on the West also stimulates affinities with counter-traditions in the West and with attempts to rescue them from neglect. Nishida Kitarí and the circle of thinkers who have come to be known as the Kyoto School are a good example of the kind of serious challenge to the cultural bias inherent in the

form of the forms of Western philosophy. This challenge crystallizes in the notions of nothing and nowhere.

### from causation to location

*Nothing comes from nothing.* This belief, though impossible to prove, lies at the heart of the Western philosophical tradition. Western philosophy began with distilling questions about the natural world from the reigning mythologies of the Greek world, but in doing so it maintained a fundamental orientation to etiology. The guiding question “Where do things come from?” was already there at the roots; philosophy’s revolution was to reject the traditional answers about the generative powers of the gods. By the time Aristotle has completed his review of his philosophical predecessors, “cause and effect” had become an abstract logical pattern of explanation. This pattern allows for the identification of individuals – a-toms, things that are “not dual” – and their underlying “substances” as a basis for clarifying causes as *things* and effects as *other things*. This division of reality is so tight that even if everything said to be a cause is also the effect of something else, there is nothing in the world exempt from the pattern, nothing that is the effect of its own cause.

This pattern carries over from the world of nature to the human mind as a substance with individuality capable of becoming a cause for effects on the world, both on the substantial world of matter and on the unsubstantial world of ideas. This pattern came full circle with Kant’s elevation of cause and effect to the level of an innate structure of thinking. The individuation of the things of the world and the atomization of the person were fixed not in reality but in the way the lens of the mind was ground so as to be incapable of thinking otherwise. Not even the skepticism of Hume about the “reality” of the connection between causes and effects could undo this pattern. Even if our idea that the best way to explain what makes things individual things is to show how they come from other things turns out to be a fiction forced on us by the attempt to make sense of memory about the passage of time, the basic question “Where do things come

from?” passes by unchallenged. Or again, even if the idea of substances is substituted with the idea of a process defining the individual as a distinct combination of vectors on a field of force – as is the case, for instance, in Whitehead – the heuristic remains. The emergence of experimental methods in the natural sciences, of course, fits into this same model of giving the primacy of explanation to cause, thus reinforcing the primacy that it already had in philosophy. When all is said and done, Western philosophy, by and large, wants to know where things come from, what the conditions are for individual things to hold together and not fall apart, and whether this coherence and integrity exist only in the mind or reflect reality as such.

This same pattern of thought is reflected linguistically in the sanctification of propositional logic in the form of Subject-copulative-Predicate. It is hardly mere coincidence that the grammatical subject and the ontological subject share the same word in Western languages. The subject is the causal “lord” of the sentence, so that every proposition given in a passive tense can be restated in the active tense. Thus, nothing is self-caused in the world. The causes may be unknown, but the assumption is that someday they may be. In a word, the conventional wisdom of Western thinking is that *nothing comes from nothing*.

Countering this conventional wisdom is a strain of spiritual or religious wisdom, reaching back to antiquity, that sees another world liberated from causality. This world is exempt from the effects of time, interrelation, and change. It is, as Hegel taught us to put it, “absolute,” absolved of the demands of time and space. The final mystery, the highest reality is a causeless cause, an unmoved mover, a divine realm. In other words, dualistic thinking is rooted in the spiritual insight that *everything comes from nothing*.

In East Asia, the dominant pattern of thinking that governs the framing of relationships between the conventional and the spiritual, and also assigns the esoteric tradition its proper role, is different. Obviously, the modes of thought that rule scientific inquiry, technology, manufacturing, economics, and to a large extent international

relations, in the West are no different from those of the West. There the sanctity of cause-and-effect thinking is upheld with no less confidence and enforced with no less rigidity. But when it comes to the dominant “philosophy,” there is a fracture that is more marked and more a part of ordinary life than the esoteric fractures of the West. This break shows up in a variety of forms, conscious and unconscious, liberal and conservative – everything from debates on overcoming modernity to reactions against the pressures to conform to Western culture, to outright nationalism.

Despite the circulation of Western critiques against East–West thinking as anachronistic, the dominant mode of thought in a country such as Japan recognizes that the differences are far more primary than the arguments against them. The mode of thinking one needs in order to function in the culture and language of Japan – and, it is my impression, in those of its closest neighbors – is not “Where do things come from?” but “Where are things located?” It is not the question of the *whence*, which seeks to explain the present as the repository of past causes, that is dominant but rather the question of the *where*, which seeks the conditioned context within which things “take place,” the landscape that allows for meaning and meaninglessness, harmony and disharmony, intimacy and isolation. Cause and effect are not denied, they are only denied primacy.

This pattern of thinking is reflected in the structure of the Japanese language, which gives precedence to the environment of discourse over the copulating of subjects and predicates. Even clear statements of cause and effect, in order to make full sense, need to adjust to this mode of thought. The truth or falsehood of a proposition is known less through the parsing of propositions into its logical components than in the awareness of the placement or displacement of elements within their native context. Rather than a concern with the conditions for the possibility of separating causes from effects, the chief epistemological concern of philosophy becomes locating the wider context within which narrower contexts are located, much the same as the map of a town is located in the map of a province, and that of a

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province in the country, and so forth. The conventional wisdom, if we may state it as such, is that *nothing takes place nowhere*. Instead of the stability of objective *being*, the concern is with contingent *location*. Nothing can be both true and real without its context. Causality itself is contextual; it, too, takes place, and it is the understanding of that place that makes it ultimately meaningful.

As is the case in the West, the conventional wisdom is offset by a spiritual or religious insight that recognizes the opposite: *everything takes place nowhere*. Here the final mystery of life is not sought in another world but in the all-encompassing context of all contexts, a nothingness at the core of all things.

## nishida's logic of *basho*

As dramatically different as these two modes of thought appear in their fundamental orientation and their way of balancing conventional and religious dimensions, neither side is entirely without affinities in the other. If the philosophies of the East have had to accommodate models from the West in the process of modernization, philosophies of the West have long been accompanied by traditions that compromise the cause-and-effect mode of thought, sometimes very seriously. And while much of this compromise has been catalogued as “esoteric” in the West, the attention it attracts in the East is not detained by the dismissal. On the contrary, it is precisely in this counter-tradition that points of contact have been sought. To rehearse the history of this mode of thought, even in its broadest outlines, is more than the scope of a short essay allows. Instead, I would like to focus on a single thinker who represents a watershed in Eastern philosophy precisely by attempting to maintain the Eastern mode of thought while wrestling with perennial problems of Western philosophy: Nishida Kitarī (1870–1945).

The leading figure in the current of thought known as the Kyoto School, Nishida's project was to construct a bridge across the East–West divide and lay the groundwork for a more inclusive definition of what constitutes “philosophy.” Far from seeking to dilute the differences, his aim

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was to clarify it, convinced that greater traffic between the two worlds was preferable to the far simpler task of synthesizing the two at a higher level of abstraction removed from the actual reality of different modes of thought:

Must we assume Western logic to be the only logic and the Eastern way of thinking simply a less-developed form of it? [...] Willing as I am to recognize Western logic as a magnificent systematic development, and intent as I am on studying it first as one type of world logic, I wonder if even Western logic is anything more than one special feature of the life of history [...] Things like formal, abstract logic will remain the same everywhere, but concrete logic as the form of concrete knowledge cannot be independent of the specific feature of historical life. (Nishida, *Problem* 1173–74)

From this standpoint Nishida sought to rephrase the fundamental questions of philosophy by offering what he called a “systematic account of self-awareness.” By this he meant more than a particular state of consciousness or consciousness of consciousness. What he sought was nothing less than a vision of reality awakened to its own fundamental unity. In a word, his aim was to raise the Buddhist experience of “enlightenment” to the status of a metaphysical principle. A substantial literature on the subject is already available. Here I would like to focus on two pivotal concepts around which his thinking revolves and on which he sought to engage Western thinking: absolute nothingness and *basho* or place.

In his maiden work of 1911, *An Inquiry into the Good*, Nishida took a lead from William James to see reality as “pure experience” and thus to eliminate the subject–object dichotomy from his starting point. The strategy created a problem for Nishida. On the one hand, he wanted to tackle the epistemological problem of how the conscious mind maintains its unity; on the other, he could not dismiss the ontological problem of an urge or desire in reality itself that moved the mind to its unity. In short, if he was to speak of “self-awareness” without turning it into a merely subjective achievement, he had to broaden the notion of consciousness beyond the framework

of the thinking “I.” The loosely argued, almost aphoristic style of the work provided Nishida with a question that would occupy him for the rest of his life. In fact, for the next six years he threw himself into neo-Kantian thought in an attempt to understand how conscious self-knowledge is possible, only to emerge at the end to reiterate the need for an impersonal “will” or nonobjective, nonsubjective force at the ground of reality. Nishida regarded much of Western philosophy’s preoccupation with an absolute divine being as pointing in the same direction, but he was unable to accept the Christian idea of a God creating and ruling the universe from without. The only true absolute divinity, “God the greatest and final unifier of consciousness,” would have to be more like the “nothingness” that Eastern thought had so long relied on to fulfill the functions that “being” had performed in the West since the time of the ancient Greeks (Nishida, *Inquiry* 161).

Meanwhile, Nishida’s students and colleagues had begun to question the distance of his thinking from the realities of history. Somehow, the living individual wrapped up in the epoch-specific conditions of the social order and yet faced with moral choices that reach beyond that conditioning seemed to have been left aside in favor of abstract accounts of self-awareness. Nishida resisted the implicit call to engage Marxist thought directly. Instead he tried to see through the questions being raised to a more basic problem: how to locate universal ideas in concrete life, exposing their failures yet preserving their truth. To do so, he would have to relate the absolute of nothingness to the specific judgments that guide the mind through daily life. In other words, self-awareness would have to be seen as a process that begins in relative, rudimentary consciousness and broadens out to encompass the absolute ground of reality. Two novel ideas showed him the way.

First, he suggested that the idea of self-reflection obliges us to invert the basic pattern of the proposition inherited from Aristotle in which a predicate (universal) is contained entirely within the subject (specific individual) to see the sense in which the subject (*what* exists) is contained within the predicate (*where* it exists).

This idea of mutual containment led him to break from the idea of assigning abstract predicates to concrete, passive, substantive subjects. Restoring the primacy of the predicate, he argued, could be shown to mirror the structure of self-awareness as such. In the same way that the universal predicate “individuates” itself in individuating the concrete subject, the conscious self that reflects on itself constitutes itself as a thinking individual.

The complexities of this strategy aside, the notion of propositional “containment,” in which the universal is a container and the particular the contained, led to a second insight: the idea that everything that is, insofar as it is, is located in a place (*basho*). To understand anything about individual things, those things need to be placed in a limited context that grants them their individuality. And that context, in turn, can only be understood against the broader horizon of a place that contains it. Now in terms of ordinary propositional logic, these “places” would be identified as “universals” of judgment, which, carried to its limit, might allow one to think of the universal of all universals as “being” itself, thus linking the propositional to the ontological. Nishida took a different direction. Since his principle was not with “being” but with self-awareness, he needed to account for a process of the unfolding of self-awareness that would, eventually, reach an open, unlimited expanse to enfold “being” as well. Only such an ultimate *basho*, which is not so much an ontological principle like God as a backdrop against which all principles exist and work, could serve as an absolute ground for the individual located in the historical world. Conversely, only knowledge of that ground could satisfy the urge to self-awareness that reality imposes on individual consciousness.

To describe the process, Nishida singles out four principal *basho*, drawn one about the other like a series of concentric circles. Each *basho* contains an internal contradiction that gives it its “identity” as what Nishida calls “a self-identity of opposites.” At the same time, insofar as the *basho* is limited, this contradiction compels it to break through to a more encompassing *basho*. The first such circle corresponds to the *natural world*. It provides the enclosing context for the

world of judgments in which universals and individuals are related to each and coincide to form a unity-in-opposition. But this realm of judgment is incapable of accounting for the thinking that creates the judgments without ending in an infinite regress. Nishida was fond of citing Royce’s paradox of drawing a map so perfect that it would include the act of drawing the map, in that very act rendering the map out of date and imperfect. This first “world” is thus subsumed into a second, the *world of consciousness* in which the act of judgment itself is located. In this realm of apperception (as Kant called it), the individual is engaged in the conundrum of self-reflection, that is, the contradiction of self-reflection reflecting on itself like a mirror facing a mirror. This leads to the opening of a third *basho*, the *noumenal world*, in which the self-aware individual that knows itself, the “noumenal self,” is related to a more encompassing noumenal universal. This *intelligible world* rotates on an axis of intuitive insight in which the thinking subject is no longer the central operative. Only an awareness of the fact that reality itself is intelligible can locate the contradiction inherent in the noumenal self. In other words, what we know about ourselves as individuals who know things needs to be located somewhere outside of ourselves in reality. Nishida locates it in a fundamental “will” to intelligibility, which is not itself a subject of self-awareness but the raw urge of reality itself to be understood.

Contrary to what may seem to be the case, Nishida understood these three *basho* to enfold one another not in every higher level of abstraction but in ever more concrete form. As one moves from judgment to self-reflection, to the will to intelligibility, one draws closer and closer to life in the concrete. In other words, the most immediate experience of life occurs not in thinking about life, or thinking about thinking about life, but in the driven, volitional character of thinking. But if this will is not located in a particular historical individual, where is it located? What is its *basho*? Unlike ordinary desires, whose fulfillment or frustration is defined by their object, the will to intelligibility has no proper object. This is what drives us, Nishida

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says, to a fourth locus – drawn with a dotted line to indicate its finality – to mark the final horizon of the realms of being and knowing and willing: the *basho* of absolute nothingness, which is defined as “a self-identity of absolute contradictories” that is itself located *nowhere* and in which the self-aware individual self-awareness is a *no one*.

It is here, as Nishida was to clarify in his late writings, that we may speak in the proper sense of the *world of religion*. Already in *An Inquiry into the Good* he had an inkling that religion has to do with recognition of a desire without a proper object, a “great and unavoidable demand . . . a human being’s goal and not a means to something else” (150). Elsewhere, speaking of the concrete world of immediate experience, he arrives early on at the idea that everything takes place nowhere, in nothingness:

To address this world directly is the task of religion, not philosophy. But in a tentative attempt to discuss it from the standpoint of philosophy, I should like to think of it as the world of absolute free will [. . .] Like our will, which is nothingness while it is being, and being while it is nothingness, this world transcends even the categories of being and nothingness, [. . .] for here being is born out of nothingness. (Nishida, *Intuition* 166)

Fully ten years later Nishida made it clear that he needed to include the world of religion in philosophy (Nishida, *From Doing* 253), although it was not until he had developed his “logic of *basho*” that religion and nothingness became a major feature of his thought. In his final essay he draws on the Western idea of the relationship between human beings and God to characterize this “unity”-in-“absolute contradiction” as an “inverse correspondence” in which each secures its identity the more it is absolutely distanced from the other. What makes an absolute *absolute* is not that it is “cut off” from all relatives (as the Japanese term suggests); its absoluteness as a self-determining “will” has no meaning apart from the proximity-in-distance from it – the inverse correspondence – by which relative beings achieve their identity. When we look at the texts themselves, the influence of what we

referred to above as the “esoteric” counterpart of mainstream Western philosophy stands out in clear relief. It is to this question that we turn next.

## the mystical quest of divine nothingness

The conventional thinking that sees Western philosophy as evolving in tandem with modern scientific method by and large turns the same skeptical eye on Eastern philosophy as it does on pre-Socratic philosophy, dismissing it as a vestige of an earlier age, an anachronism of some historical interest but out of place in serious philosophical discourse today. With that, an entire intellectual tradition is summarily cast aside, leaving it for popular spiritualities to rummage through for whatever scraps they may find of use. By looking at the kinds of ideas in the history of Western philosophy that Nishida felt affinity with, we get a hint as to why the way to Eastern philosophies of nothingness is impeded by a philosophical tradition that sees “being” as the ultimate positive reality and “nothing” as merely its privative or negation.

The most obvious road for Western philosophy to approach Eastern nothingness would seem to be the apophatic tradition. The logics of negation we trace to Neoplatonism, the Eastern Church fathers, and Pseudo-Dionysius are focused on the limitations of human reason in order to affirm that which transcends our knowing and to abandon ourselves to a “cloud of unknowing.” As a result, the *apophatic* statements commonly yield to a self-consciously symbolic way of talking, to *cataphatic* affirmations about the transcendent uttered in full awareness that they are no more than ciphers pointing to an ineffable mystery. Variations on this pattern run throughout the subsequent history of philosophy and theology, right up to the present. And since they are also everywhere to be found in Eastern philosophies and religions, we have a clear point of entry into Eastern nothingness.

These connections, however, are by and large ignored by Nishida, even when his shift from the *basho* of self-consciousness to the *basho* of the intelligible world would seem to warrant

an allusion. For Nishida and his tradition of philosophizing, there is no disagreement in principle over the limitations of knowledge or the ultimate mystery of reality. It is rather that the transition from literal to symbolic expression is seen as ancillary to a more fundamental concern: the affirmation of ultimate reality itself as nothingness. True, talk of an absolute God transcending the categories of being and nonbeing is to be found scattered throughout the apophatic tradition. But a nothingness that tilts away from nonbeing as a simple negation of being was lacking, or in any case too undeveloped to merit associating with the divine.<sup>1</sup> What attracted Nishida to Eckhart, Cusanus, and Boehme was their intuition, or at least suspicion, of just such a divine nothingness at the ground – or rather, the bottomless non-ground – of all things. Indeed, he was annoyed at how contemporary historians of philosophy in Europe had all but expunged this “mystical” tradition from the picture.<sup>2</sup>

Nishida never drew any particular attention to how the concept of nothingness and its relation to self-awareness differs among the three, or, for that matter, to variations within the “mystical” tradition as such. This leaves us to guess as best we can what it was that attracted him.

For Boehme, the “nothing” that is attributed to the deity is sometimes a mere negation – as when he says that God is born of nothing – and at other times approaches a nothingness beyond being and nonbeing, as when he likens the deity to the oneness of the globe of the heavens. The embodied mind of the human being, in contrast, is by its very nature and operation a compound of opposites, as symbolized by the suggestion that had Adam not been awakened by the creation of Eve he would have remained forever asleep and unconscious of the “divine dwelling place” of the soul within (Boehme, *Aurora* 3: 17, 26, 42; 11: 115; *Way* 5: 17–19). The human spirit and its inner locus are a divine gift, an *ens*, and yet if it can abandon reason and the soul’s dark *centrum* of desires, it can purify its will into a desire without an object, a pure desire for *nothing* – not only in the sense of “no thing” but also of a liberation from the dichotomy between the will and the willed that is the essence of being.

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Here *nothing* is transformed from a pronoun into a noun with a positive meaning, a kind of “everything without any place.” Acting from this *no* place, is to act without a will of one’s own, to resign oneself to pure desire, which elsewhere Boehme defines as God (*Forty* 1: 21). Note the play between the negative, pronominal “nothing” and the positive, nominal *nothing*:

For as soon as you grasp *something* in your desire, and allow it into yourself and take it as a possession, the something is a thing with you, and works with you in your will [...]. If you take nothing into your desire, you are free from all things[;] you are a *nothing* to all things as all things are a *nothing* to you. (*Way* 6: 9)<sup>3</sup>

And when I further say, “He who finds love finds *nothing* and everything,” this is also true, for he finds a supernatural, supersensual abyss that has *no place* as its dwelling and finds nothing that can be compared to it. Therefore one compares it with *nothing* because it is deeper than everything [...]. When I finally say, “He finds everything who thus finds it,” this is also true [...]. If you find it you will come into the ground out of which all things proceed and in which they stand[.]

The student said, “Where is that place where man does not dwell in himself?” The master said, “That is the resigned soul brought to the ground [...]. For insofar as the self-will is dead to itself, it takes for itself the place where earlier the self-will sat. There is now *nothing* there, and where *nothing* is, God’s love works alone [...]. Its office is to press ceaselessly into the something, and when it finds a place in the something that stands silent, it takes it and rejoices in it with its fire-flaming love more than the sun in the world. Its office is to ignite fire ceaselessly in the something and burn the something and moreover immolate itself with it.” (Ibid. 9: 27, 29, 32)

Now if these few passages from Boehme’s writings overlap with Nishida’s ideas of a self-awareness acting without an acting self in a *basho* of nothingness, the connections are exhausted in a handful of references in *An Inquiry into the Good* and a single mention of the *Ungrund* (*Art* 159). Nowhere is Boehme cited as more than

a *bon mot*. The smattering of remarks in Nishida's neo-Kantian essays from 1913 to 1917 and his final essay do not add anything new. That said, Boehme is cited more than Eckhart and Cusanus combined, which makes it a little surprising that no scholar of Nishida's ideas has pursued the matter.

Eckhart proved the more challenging. His foundational idea of a common *Grunt* at which pure *Gottheit*, stripped naked of all imagery and reasoned ideas of God, is indistinguishable from the soul, stripped naked of all ego and individuality desire, must have appealed to Nishida. For Eckhart the *Grunt* was a *no place*, a bottomless *Ungrund*, an inner desert with no landmarks by which to orient oneself to anyone or anything. There insight could at last disengage itself from the world of being and observe, as if in a fleeting spark of light, the birth of the image of God. Eckhart does not hesitate to affirm this *Gottheit* as a *nothingness*, and to do so in terms so positive that it can support his idea of a self-abandonment that includes a renunciation of images and ideas of the God of being:

Before there was being, God was working [...] Dull-witted masters say God is a pure being. He is as far above being as the highest angel is above a gnat. It would be as wrong for me to call God a being as if I were to call the sun pale or black [...] God is neither being nor goodness. (Eckhart, Q 9)

Suppose I say "God is a being" – it is not true. He is a being beyond being and a nothingness beyond being [...] If you then understanding anything of him, he is nothing of the sort. (Q 83)

Mark my words: only above all this [pure power of the intellect] does the soul grasp the pure *absolutio* of free being without a *where*, a beingness deprived of all being and beingness. There she grasps God pure from the *Grunt* where he is beyond all being. (Q 67)

For goodness and justice are clothing in which he is dressed. Therefore, strip God of everything he is dressed in, and catch him stark in his dressing room where he is exposed and stripped down to himself. (Q 40)

God and Godhead are as different as heaven and earth [...] God becomes and unbecomes ... God becomes where all things speak of God [...] When I come to the *Grunt*, the bottom, the river, the source of the Godhead, no one asks me where I come from or where I have been. No one misses me. There God *unbecomes*. (Pf 56)

A highest and most extreme thing one can let go of is to let go of God for the sake of God [...] If my eye is to see color, it must be rid of all color. When I see a blue or white color, the seeing of my eye is the same as what is seen with the eye. The eye in which I see God is the same eye in which God sees me. (Q 12)

If I were not, neither would "God" be. I am the cause of God being "God." (Q 52)

If one turns away from oneself and from all created things, to that extent one is united and blessed in that tiny spark in the soul that neither time nor place have ever touched. This spark contradicts all things and wants nothing so much as God naked, as he is in himself [...] in that simple *Grunt*, in the silent desert into which distinction has never peered. (Q 48)

The same knowing in which God knows himself is one and the same as the knowing of every detached spirit [...] The soul pushes ahead to the *Grunt*, seeking further and grasps God in his oneness and in his solitariness; she grasps God in his desert and in his own *Grunt*. (Q 10)

Although Nishida was immediately drawn to Eckhart's *Grunt*, direct references are all but absent after *An Inquiry into the Good*. If anything, he seems to have distanced himself from Eckhart for reasons that are not altogether clear. In what may be his final direct reference to God as an absolute nothingness (an idea first expressed in his maiden work, *Intuition* 81), he disassociates it from any idea of an "underlying ground." And in his final essay, in an obvious allusion to Eckhart, he distinguishes his idea of God from the idea of a *Gottheit* because the latter seems to lack "complete self-negation" (Nishida, "Logic" 24–25). It was left to his second-generation disciples Nishitani Keiji and particularly Nishitani's student Ueda Shizuteru

to restore the connections that Nishida had cut rather abruptly. Still, a number of coincidences of words and phrasing in the passages elected remain to be sounded for deeper affinities.<sup>4</sup>

When we come to Nicolas of Cusa, once again we are not sure what Nishida read or how systematically. At least we have a clearer idea of precisely what attracted Nishida. After a number of passing allusions in *An Inquiry into the Good*, Nishida makes Cusanus the center of a brief lecture on the idea of *coincidentia oppositorum* delivered in 1919. In it he clearly assumes that Cusanus belongs to the “mystical” tradition with its systematic negation of the attributes of God. Further, he finds a tentative affirmation that God is not just *not* being and *not* nothing, and that God’s infinity is not just a negation of finitude. Rather, “God’s essence is, logically, a unity of contradictories, a unity of incompatibles” (Nishida, ‘Coincidence’ 81–82).<sup>5</sup> The remainder of the lecture, however, focuses on the nature of judgment, concluding that the medieval *via negativa* is an expression of the “foundation of all human activity.” It is not until twenty-five years later that Nishida returns to Cusanus to claim that his idea of God is a union of the opposites of “absolute being and absolute nothingness.” But in the same breath he accuses Cusanus of being under the spell of the Aristotelian subject that could not avoid a kind of “mystical tinge” that keeps negation from extending to reality itself (Nishida, “Towards” 40). Nishida’s point is that even if a logic of *basho* is needed to understand Cusanus, one does not find in him an account of the objective world whose absolute is nothingness.

In his final essay Nishida makes mention four times of a metaphor that scholars have assumed comes from Cusanus.<sup>6</sup> Each time he is speaking of the “absolute present” of which each act of consciousness is a kind of “world” within the general “self-determination” of the world in which the world shapes itself by reflecting the individual and the individual shapes itself by reflecting the world. The image he cites of this relationship between the individual and the world is that of an “infinite circle whose circumference is nowhere and whose center is everywhere” (Nishida, “Logic” 6, 25, 88, 94). To be sure,

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one can find something similar in Cusanus, but Nishida would have read enough of the *Docta ignorantia* to know that there are major differences. Cusanus sees the existence of God as the ultimate reality and as requisite for the existence of the world. While he regards negations concerning God as truer than affirmations, at no time does he associate God with nothingness. For Cusanus the existence of God as a supreme being was never questioned. At the same time, his use of the *coincidentia oppositorum*, which he clearly took from Eckhart, entailed seeing every particular thing in the world as a reflection of the whole (an idea that may have influenced Leibniz). From this Cusanus drew his metaphor of God as the infinite circle whose center is everywhere and circumference nowhere. The earth is not self-enclosed and perfect for him, and its moving force (the *machina mundi*) lies only in God. Thus, Nishida’s view of God as a *basho* of absolute nothingness breaks with Cusanus over the latter’s insistence on God’s “being” as the center and circumference of the world. The only point at which the finite, multiplicity of the universe and the unity of God could come together is in a union of the opposites of creator and creature – namely, in the human person of Christ.

If there is good reason, therefore, to distinguish the fundamental orientation of Cusanus’s metaphor of God as infinite circle from Nishida’s idea of God as the infinite sphere of absolute nothingness, Cusanus does lean towards an affirmation of God as nowhere, no one, and nothing similar to what we find in Eckhart. We see this in a positive reading of Dionysius’ remark that God is *omnia, et nihil omnium*, “all things yet nothing of all that is” (*De docta ignorantia* 1.XVI).

The original source of Cusanus’s metaphor of God as a circle turns out to be closer to Nishida’s idea of God as the absolute present manifest in each individual than it is to Cusanus’s rather more conventional theology. It is to be found in a pseudo-Hermetic text, the *Liber viginti quattuor philosophorum*, a seventeenth-century redaction of a work dating from around the end of the twelfth century, which in turn seems to have been compiled from a longer Greek text subsequently

translated into Arabic.<sup>7</sup> Uncertainties over its authorship and historical connections to the Hermetic tradition did not deter medieval theologians from treating it seriously. Indeed, for several centuries the work was held in high esteem by Eckhart (who gave it its present name) and Cusanus, as well as by thinkers as different as Alain de Lille (1125–1202), Bonaventure (1221–74), Giordano Bruno (1548–1600), and Blaise Pascal (1623–62).

The book is framed as a gathering of twenty-four reputed philosophers, each of whom is asked to answer the question: What is God? None of the answers cites scripture or makes any reference to Christian faith, which raises doubts of its Gnostic authorship. The first three responses all present God as a union of opposites:

- (I) *Deus est monas monadem gignens, in se unum reflectens suum ardorem.* God is unity giving birth to unity, reflecting a single flaming brightness in himself.
- (II) *Deus est sphaera infinita cuius centrum est ubique, circumferentia nusquam.* God is an infinite sphere whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.
- (III) *Deus est totus in quolibet sui.* God is complete in every part of himself.

As the 1245 commentary of Thomas of York (d. 1258) suggests, the second statement can be read as an explanation of the qualities expressed in the first, namely that God casts himself everywhere like a burning light but remains a simple unity in himself (or perhaps more faithfully, *itself*). This is not a mere spatial metaphor but needs to be understood temporally as well. To this the third adds the element we saw to be central in Cusanus: the presence of God in everything caused by God. If the metaphors are spatial and temporal, what the metaphors point to has nothing to do with space and time. They indicate that God is intelligible – but inexhaustibly intelligible. In other words, the “nowhere and never” are not just apophatic negations but positive affirmations of an “eternal present everywhere,” of which there is always more to be seen and understood. The next step, the affirmation of God as nothingness that we find hinted at in Eckhart, is missing.<sup>8</sup>

## a neglected heritage

Nishida’s use of the metaphor of the infinite sphere is used not only to think of God in terms of a universal, all-encompassing *basho* of absolute nothingness but also to rethink the reality of each individual in the historical world as a moment of the “eternal present” in time, a point at which all of reality converges to make possible in being the infinity of possibilities contained in that absolute nothingness. In his words, if everything that is *made* in the world of being is at the same time involved in *making* everything else (what Buddhism refers to as the co-dependent generation of all things), this can only “take place” in such an acausal, atemporal, nowhere, a place that is not a place so that it can be a place for all places, at a time that is not a time so that it can be a time for all time – in a word, an ultimate time and place for causality.

The difficulty of fitting Nishida’s overlapping conceptions of God and the fully self-aware historical individual into the Western philosophical tradition should be obvious. Not even the familiar forms of pantheism and panentheism will quite do, given the precedence these assign to causality over place and being over nothingness. By far the better solution is to broaden the philosophical tradition by disqualifying it as “Western.” That said, the integration of Eastern philosophies like that of Nishida need not be seen as a mere appendage, any more than Nishida considered his use of Western philosophies a mere patchwork on Eastern ways of thinking. If it is true that the kinds of esoteric and mystical traditions referred to in the foregoing are woven of the same stuff as mainstream traditions, but in different patterns, the ideas spun on Nishida’s loom may yet prove a better fit than we realize if we widen our scope of the Western intellectual tradition to include ideas that did not occur to Nishida himself. I have already hinted that Eckhart’s thought holds out more promise than Nishida gave it credit for. I would like to conclude with another possible confluence.

From the late sixteenth century in Europe we see a sudden flourishing of Latin treatises and debates about *Nihil* that seem to have

completely slipped the attention of philosophers of Eastern nothingness.<sup>9</sup> Earlier discussions on *Nemo* (including the legends of Santo Nemo that date to the thirteenth century) were mostly humorous in tone and bear little resemblance to serious ideas of “no one.” Typical of these are the *Lusus de nemine* of Théodore Marcile (1597) and the *Nemo* of Gaspard Dornau (1619), both of which play on Latin grammar to treat negations as affirmations and turn the pronominal “No one” or “Nobody” into a playful companion to the medieval Everyman, like a “tune played by the picture of Nobody” (Shakespeare, *The Tempest* 3.2):<sup>10</sup>

Who can do things that Nobody can do? [...] Nobody can breathe in and out at the same time. Nobody can serve two masters [...] Nobody gives birth to themselves or knows everything [...] Nobody can do everything Jove can do, which is why Nobody is content with his fate. (Ossola 4, 6, 8)

Nobody has long been as eloquent as Cicero. Nobody is more gifted than Plato [...] Nobody is not afraid of sickness or the thousands of moral perils [...] Your glory will live on, Oh Nobody, as long as there are trees on the earth, stars in the heavens, and waters in the Nile. (Ibid. 13, 18)

With the exception of the symbolic captain of the *Nautilus* in Jules Verne’s 1860 novel, *Nemo* was not taken seriously the way *Nihil* was. Although much of the same punning is carried over, Nothing becomes a serious metaphysical concept. It was a kind of lodestone dipped into ancient texts to pull out references to negational and apophatic logic that could then be fixed to philosophical affirmations about the ultimate nature of reality. Granted, the arguments are by and large tethered to standard metaphysics; they present an increasingly serious attempt to depose “being” and “essence” from their ontological thrones in language that would have been immediately intelligible to someone like Nishida. In fact, most of them can stand, just as they are and without qualification, as representative of Eastern philosophical discourse. A cursory review suggests three kinds of approaches to Nothing. I shall let the texts speak for themselves

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here rather than attempt to bring their implications into fuller relief.

First, and most obvious, Nothing is seen as beyond the reach of ordinary language and reason. It is spoken of in much the same terms reserved for God in apophatic tradition. For example:

If of Nothing I should speak, there is nothing of value I can say of Nothing and nothing of value for you to hear [...] But I will talk of Nothing and of Nothing will have precisely nothing of value to say or nothing of value to beg for your attention. One cannot discourse on Nothing with the security of concepts but rather with words and concepts worth nothing. (G. Castiglione 1632, Ossola 79)<sup>11</sup>

Second, and in spite of the superiority of Nothing to reason, knowledge of Nothing is considered necessary to explain reality:

For me, this is the sense in which Socrates meant the words, *Hic unum scio quod nihil scio*.<sup>12</sup> I cannot believe he was so fond of ignorance that he decreed it for the rest of the world, or so inattentive to the honors bestowed on him by the Gods who declared him most wise that he would make such a wicked and boldface lie of it. The words of Socrates have no other sense, as far as I know, than to add his voice to praise for the grandeur of Nothing. (M. Dall’Angelo 1534, ibid. 122)

Now if I show that the mind of the humble person is the most illuminated and wise of all minds, and that the Nothingness of man is the most profound and difficult thing there is to understand, would I not have proved by this uncommon truth the falsehood of that maxim now widely celebrated among the philosophical schools as infallible, that no knowledge comes from Nothing? (E. Tesoro 1592, ibid. 208)

Third, Nothing is positioned between being and nonbeing as a third reality and sometimes as a ground for the two. At times, in line with conventional theology, Nothing is not identified with God, even if it is presented as co-eternal:

Nature produces nothing from nothing, reduces nothing to nothing [...] God made

## nothing and nowhere

everything from nothing, something nature is incapable of; and everything can just as suddenly be reduced to nothing. Nothing new is born and grows; Nothing never perishes [...] Nothing is nothing, *is* not, is a nonentity, has never been nor will ever be; nor is it possible for it ever to be. Nothing became the *locus* for everything; each thing is located in that place from the first [...] Entities repel entities; they distance themselves from every other entity. But Nothing is a nonentity and is not displaced by any entity. At the same time, it is instantiated in everything and blended into everything. It penetrates and underlies all entities [...] This nothing is the weight of the world for the one who has taken everything on himself as if drawing it into a single point or tiny atom – God, the infinite sphere whose circumference is nowhere, as if the middle whose centers are everywhere. He repels every Nothing and negates every void [...] Without God, no Nothing. (M. Frigillanus 1561, *ibid.* 24–28)

Another text repudiates Parmenides' claim that "Nothing cannot be known":

Aside from God, there is nothing more noble and more perfect than Nothing [...] If you were to consult the temple oracle, he would confess as much to you and proclaim it older than himself [...] Thus, comparing the antiquity of Nothing with time is to make it a white-haired dotard. I would compare it rather with eternity but I am reminded that eternity cannot be separated from the Eternal. And if it could not be the Eternal, it would still be Nothingness, so that in a certain sense Nothing is more necessary than the Eternal. (L. Manzini 1634, *ibid.* 97)

At other times, Nothing is made to transcend God:

Nothing, Nothing is more efficacious than divine Wisdom, nobler than celestial virtue, more glorious and desirable than eternal bliss [...] When the King of Kings and God of Gods decided to create the universality of the whole world, who took part in this decision? [...] To whom did the most wise Author and Creator appeal when he wanted to create this universe? To Nothing. And not without reason [...] Not to detain myself

any longer, it has to be realized that Nothing is older than the eternal God. For Nothing was created before God. From this the antiquity of Nothing is obvious. Let us therefore approach the multiple powers of Nothing [...] Oh power of Nothing superior to faith! [...] Nothing (let it be said out of reverence for piety) holds free dominion over the supreme Authority of the Gods. Nothing installs fear in it [...] Thus Nothing is more powerful than God. For this reason Nothing takes precedence over God and all divine prerogatives. (A. Porti 1609, *ibid.* 61–65)

Now God can annihilate the world with the same facility with which he called forth Being from Nothing [...] But could he remove Nothing altogether? It would be a horrible blasphemy to say so [...] For if Nothing were absent and insofar as it is lacking, it would no longer be possible for the power of God to produce new creatures. Lacking Nothing, neither would there be divine omnipotence. (G. Castiglione 1632, *ibid.* 85)

Finally, there are texts in which God and Nothingness are close to being identified, as in the following:

The word *Nothingness* cannot properly be spoken, nor can anything be predicated of it, at least in the Latin languages. The copulative "is" in the statement "Nothing is Nothing" is forbidden since it would indicate in a strict sense something that *is* in nature or at least *is* in the mind [...]

Still, the following statement holds true: "Nothing is nowhere, not in nature, not in the mind, not in the sensible or the intelligible world, not in God, not outside of God."

Nonetheless, of the two propositions, "Everything is full of Being" and "Everything is full of Nothing,"<sup>13</sup> the latter (taken from the mystical theology of the divine Dionysius) remains truer and more profound from the moment that God, who crowns all, is said to be defined *through negation*, that is, that God is Nothing. (G. Gaufrido 1634, *ibid.* 151)

If this way of thinking fell to one side in Western philosophy and theology before it could be further developed, leaving behind little more than the occasional trace in the literary, esoteric,

and mystical traditions, it has a long and honorable history in the thinking of the East. To be sure, the contexts are wildly different and the overlap of key terms will often not hold up under scrutiny. Perhaps the entirety of the coincidence will turn out, on closer examination, to be little more than an academic curiosity. Then again, it might offer a bridge between worldviews oriented towards being and a logic of causation and those oriented towards nothingness and a logic of location. In either case, it is getting more and more difficult to dismiss philosophies of the East as foreign countries uninhabitable by Western minds.



## notes

1 A careful reading of Dionysius' original writings will show that most of the references to "nothing," "absolute being," and "being beyond being" end up being careless translations of terms that could never be translated back into the Greek originals for those terms.

2 For additional textual references, see Heisig, "Nishida's."

3 I have adjusted Peter Erb's original translations throughout.

4 For one of the most exciting ventures in this direction, see Keel.

5 Nishida's interpretation is clearly confirmed in Cusanus's 1444 dialogue between a Christian and a Gentile, where the affirmation that God is *Urgrund* of being and non-being alike is immediately negated in favor of the *contradiction* (Cusanus 16–19).

6 The most striking example of this is Dilworth's rather liberal translation of the final essay, which introduces the name of Cusanus at each point (Nishida, *Last Writings* 53, 76, 89, 95), misrepresenting Nishida's own reference to it as "medieval."

7 For a treatment of the images of the circle in literature ranging from the Renaissance to the twentieth century, see Poulet.

8 I have provided further details on Nishida's use of the metaphor and its connection to the *Liber XXIV philosophorum* in Heisig, "Response."

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9 The texts and historical references here are drawn from the immensely suggestive collection of Carlo Ossola published in 1997. I have omitted treatment of "no one" here, although clearly it needs to be brought in to examine parallels to the Buddhist notions of "no-self" that figure so strongly in Kyoto School philosophy.

10 This kind of play on words is impossible in Chinese and Japanese, which have no words for "no one." Nor do they have a word for "nowhere." From what I know of the history of the glyph pronounced *mu* in Japanese and *wu* in Chinese and generally rendered in English as "nothing" or "nothingness," a cause could be made that this term covers the affirmative sense of negation for "no one" and "nowhere" as well.

11 From here on the quotes originate from Ossola, with the original author and date of publication indicated in parentheses.

12 "I know only that I know nothing." This is a Latin aphorism based on Plato's *Apology* 21d, where the pun does not work.

13 Not too much should be made of this one sentence. Elsewhere the same text likens "being" in God to the heat of the sun: just as the sun is not "hot" in a formal sense but only in an *eminent* sense, so God is not formally but can be referred to as Being in an eminent sense. In this sense God is presented as a "middle term" between Nothing and Being (Ossola 157).

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