



**James W. Heisig, *Nothingness and Desire: An East-West Philosophical Antiphony***

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THIS BOOK has its origins in the Jordan Lectures on Comparative Religion, delivered by the author in 2011 at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. “Nothingness” and “desire” are put forward as what the author calls “guiding fictions,” through the interplay of which an antiphony—a call-and-response—between philosophies East and West becomes possible, ranging across five critical contemporary topics: self, God, morality, property, and the nature of the East-West divide.

Perhaps “ranging” is the wrong metaphor of movement: the six lectures that make up this series do not so much “range” complacently or at random across their themes as circle them repeatedly and with intent. Heisig’s contention is that the lingering and mistaken centrality in the western philosophical imagination of humanity and its anthropocentric projections has contributed profoundly harmful patterns of thought to our social and political discourse—such that unless new, alternative narratives of life and the natural world begin to take root soon, the social and ecological crises engendered by the old ones seem all but certain to overwhelm us. This gives *Nothingness and Desire* the feel of being as much an antiphony of politics and philosophy as of philosophies East and West: an examination of how everyday politics—in the broadest sense of our individual and collective pursuit of power and security—and our most fundamental philosophical assumptions unceasingly call out and respond to one another, in such a way that the former can only meaningfully be reimagined, or redeemed, in conjunction with the latter.

“Nothingness” and “desire,” the elucidation of which forms the basis of the introductory lecture, perform a great deal of useful work here both as critical concepts and as symbols drawing us constantly onwards in the asking of ever more refined questions about the five major themes of the book. And while Heisig finds parts in

his antiphony for voices as diverse as Daoism, Confucianism, various Buddhist traditions, and Japan's Kyoto School, through to Aristotle, Augustine, Eckhart, and the modern German tradition spanning Hegel and Heidegger, his eschewal of unnecessary contextual detail ensures that his analysis proceeds apace. Readers may find as a result that prior familiarity with the work of Nishida Kitarō and Tanabe Hajime is an advantage in grasping the basics of this crucial opening chapter, but then again Heisig pitches his prose at the intelligent generalist rather than the specialist—providing in his brief introduction to “nothingness,” for example, a series of helpful correctives to false assumptions about the term that might easily distort a reader's understanding and misdirect their engagement with the rest of the book. Heisig points out, for instance, that while “being” operates in parts of the western tradition as the supreme principle of reality, “nothingness” is not a straightforward alternative. Certainly, there is a sense in which nothingness can be understood as the principle that encompasses and makes possible both being and non-being. But it is not solely, or even mainly, a descriptor: depending on the situation, its expressive, performative aspects come to the fore, and we encounter nothingness vividly as a “dynamism... a quality, or a state of mind” (23). This point about nothingness being verbal as much as it is nominal matters a great deal for later chapters, where practical virtues such as insight, the training of habit, and the ability to respond naturally to the demands of the present situation are recommended over against the problems and self-deceptions that attend established religious or philosophical formulations.

If Heisig requires of us a degree of pause and reflection in order to understand the multivalence and implications of “nothingness” here—not to mention the rereading of the occasional sentence, where the philosophical amateurs amongst us are concerned—the same goes too for “desire.” At root this is a phenomenon so raw, Heisig insists, that we ought to think of it not as generated through the interplay of (desiring) subject and (desired) object but rather as something primordial that arises out of and is drawn back towards nothingness, bringing subject and object into being in the process. As Heisig says in his second lecture, on self and relatedness, it is not that “I” have desires, which then connect me to the world around me (“I want this, I want that,” and so on) but that “the desire for connectedness in the world *has me* and is the final ground of my identity” (38).

The antiphonies of East and West, and of politics and philosophy, truly come into their own in the second half of the book, comprising reflections on God, morality, and property. Building on an earlier discussion of Feuerbach's critique of theology as “covert anthropology,” Heisig shows how the historical dominance in western religious traditions of a personal deity over the impersonal, as the “prototype of all transcendence,” has given succor to the kind of anthropocentrism that relegates the (impersonal) natural world to the mere status of our “environment.” How did this happen? Somehow our religious symbols kept pace with us as we moved, in the distant past, to agrarian forms of life—witness the familiar agricultural-pastoral

metaphors of western monotheism—but after that the progress of symbols stalled, unable to move forward to accommodate modern industrial life or to pay the sort of renewed attention to the natural world that our recent ecological predicament requires. Perhaps, suggests Heisig, we should look now to Francis of Assisi, to Ryōkan, and to Bashō, for accounts of salvation within the natural world that can replace our fantasies of salvation *from* it.

Heisig's discussion of morality and property provide us with a feel for how his alternative narratives of self and God might play out in practice, with the old anthropomorphisms not recklessly jettisoned but rather consigned to the margins. Where the former is concerned, a raw desire that constitutes rather than proceeds from human subjectivity points naturally, he says, to a kind of "moral no-self" whose most pressing question is not "what should I do with my life?" but "what does life want to do with me?" In seeking answers we are called to a renewed intimacy and immediacy in our moral praxis, in the sense both of deepening and extending the life of the "convivium" of which we are inextricably a part ("the maxim to love my neighbor also entails love of my neighbor's neighbor" [83]) and making morality a matter first and foremost of insight and natural habit: being able to "do what love requires" rather than "posturing in the name of higher principles and arraigining arguments to defend our choices" (78–100).

Heisig's final lecture looks at the cultural and academic institutional impediments to the kind of extended and constructive meeting of East Asian and western philosophical traditions that he sees as crucial to the social and ecological task at hand. In Japanese academia the high point of what one might call philosophical outreach was the prewar Kyoto School, after which things have tended to deteriorate into the prizing of specialization in one or another western philosopher—often resulting in scholarship that disappoints western audiences by its familiarity rather than inspiring any real exchange. Culpability in western academia lies partly, Heisig suggests, in the hiving off of Japanese philosophy into Asian Studies or Asian Religion departments—a tendency stemming in part, one might add, from the historical refashioning of the humanities to meet Cold War governmental requirements for area-specific expertise (an arrangement that looks set to be prolonged as some of these same "areas" now become economically and political powerful enough to command the affections of cash-strapped European and North American universities and to make the endowment of centers and chairs an aspect of soft diplomacy). An additional problem, suggests Heisig, is the present lack of a "common fund of texts" available across Chinese, Japanese, and Korean languages, which might serve as the basis of a philosophical "field" comparable to the established western tradition and capable of interacting with it in a sustained way. Translation is a clear imperative for the coming years.

Some distracting typographical errors aside, *Nothingness and Desire* offers a valuably direct immersion in East-West philosophical exchange and its real potential for tackling pressing political problems (beyond the platitudes that sometimes

afflict inter-religious dialogue). It is valuable too for the quality of the insights into human life that emerge in the course of the analysis. The mood and intent of the book is perhaps best summed up by an image to which Heisig returns a number of times. Through the window of his office in Nagoya he sees trees, birds, soil, and occasionally an outline of himself projected onto the scene courtesy of a reflective window pane: confirmation that as humans we are both profoundly a part of the natural world and yet all but habitually constrained to apprehend it via our own preoccupations and self-understandings.

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