Foreword

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High up in the foothills of Mount Asama in Kita-Karuizawa a block of black marble rests peacefully at the edge of a solitary wood; on it is inscribed the epitaph *My search is for truth, and it alone*. The words sum up a lifetime of total, nearly fanatical devotion to philosophy that raised Tanabe Hajime (1885-1962) to the ranks of the most original and influential thinkers of modern Japan. That they might also mark a milestone on the path from East to West, and back again, is the hope in which this translation is being published.

Despite the numerous delays that this first book-length issue of Tanabe's work in English has suffered, it could hardly come at a more opportune time. For one thing, the impact of the collision of Western "being" with oriental "nothingness" has sent a tremor through received traditions that seems now to be commanding equal concern on both sides. For another, the translation of several books of Nishida Kitarō (1870-1945) over the past two decades and the recent appearance of Nishitani Keiji’s (1900--) *Religion and Nothingness*, all of them important responses to this very challenge, help Tanabe’s own contribution to emerge in clearer relief to the Western eye than it might have done on its own. In the estimation of Takeuchi Yoshinori, whose own considerable writings distill years of discipleship under all three teachers, there is no better way to survey the state of the question in Japanese philosophy than to triangulate from the standpoints of Nishida, Tanabe, and Nishitani.¹ Nor, I would add, is there any more representative statement of Tanabe’s position than *Philosophy as Metanoetics*. 
The epitaph carved on Tanabe’s tombstone was of his own phrasing but was intended for quite another context. It appears in a late essay on the problem of death composed for a festschrift to honor Martin Heidegger on his seventieth birthday. There, no sooner does he express his gratitude to Heidegger as a teacher than he immediately takes his distance in the name of a weightier demand: “Of course, my search is for truth, and it alone.” When Tanabe’s family and intimates agreed to Tsujimura Kōichi’s choice for the epitaph, they were no doubt thinking of the nobility of the ideal it expressed. But more, the words must have reverberated with their memories of a temperament so thoroughly bent to philosophy that it could not bring itself to compromise the raw, cold force of truth for the warmth and comfort of social relationships. Everything I have heard and read about Tanabe portrays him as a man who never hesitated to rise to the demands of a new idea whatever its source—be it books or teachers or students or colleagues—and never let go of what he judged valuable, even when it meant parting company with those whose influence on him had been most decisive. To see his grave, anonymous and undated, one cannot help but think it fitting that the ego he had slowly sacrificed to the rigors of a most uncommon self-discipline should now, in death, have been effaced once and for all.

Even accounts written of Tanabe while he was still alive agree that he was a man of strong and tautly stretched moral fiber, demanding much of others but always more of himself, never letting up, never pampering himself, stern and ascetic, even scrupulous in his life-style, a singularly humorless personality who never smiled in the presence of his students and commanded an almost terrified respect from them inside and outside the classroom. Even in the company of colleagues and peers he was not given to joviality or banter. He always welcomed serious questions, naive though they might be, but would not put up with clever wordplay, caricature, sarcasm, or willful abstraction from real problems. Throughout the thirty years he spent at Kyoto he avoided sightseeing and side trips, “fleeing the world as if it were a virus.” Nor did he take up his pen for light or popular composition; his writings, like his life, were the very incarnation of the philosophy he practiced. In the words of a senior colleague, “this severity may be seen as a hard and self-fortifying armor of moral Sollen designed to carry Tanabe beyond the sentimentalism to which his inner warmth of affection might have led him.”

The last sixteen years of his life were spent in the relative isolation of
a small mountain cottage where he wrote and studied almost without interruption. During the summer months he would receive visitors, but for at least half of the year he was virtually cut off, often snowbound, with only the postman to negotiate his contact with the outside world. Still, a glance through late photographs of Tanabe showing him sitting in the fields of Kita-Karuizawa, gesturing amicably, or smiling an almost boyish smile, and a comparison of the tone of his last essays with those written during his time in Kyoto reveals how much his manner had mellowed in his late years—"rounded out and filled up," as Japanese would have it.

As a teacher Tanabe enjoyed extraordinary popularity. The hall in which he lectured was regularly filled to overflowing with both students and teachers from the department of philosophy and other departments. He was engaging but never entertaining. "Like a lion roaming restlessly about in its cage," one of his former students recalls, he would stalk back and forth across the front of the lecture hall speaking freely and without notes, but in a way that showed meticulous preparation and impeccable organization of ideas. So seriously did he take his lectures, normally held twice a week, that he had the custom of refusing all visitors the day before.

One of the most attractive aspects of Tanabe's philosophical teaching and, if I am rightly informed, the one that caused him most pain to the end of his life, was his keen social consciousness. The Japanese army's overrunning of Manchuria in 1931 affected him keenly, but not nearly so much as the alliance with Germany and Italy that led to Japan's involvement in the Second World War. Outraged by the irrational tendencies of the state at the time, he is said often to have compared the plight of intellectuals with the persecution of Galileo by the Roman church. The occasion on which the wife of the minister of finance, a schoolmate of Tanabe's wife, came to pay a visit only to be roundly shouted out of the house is only one illustration of his passionate involvement with political issues. Like Plato, who helplessly beheld the decline of Athens, Tanabe knew the painful dilemma of the "unhappy philosopher," unable either to leave his country or to belong fully to it, a dilemma eloquently spelled out in the Preface with which this book opens.

Of itself, the bare skeleton of Tanabe's philosophical career might well give the impression of an inveterate skeptic who spent his time pulling up stakes and breaking camp with one philosophical position after another and was never able to bring his own thinking to any kind
of final synthesis. Such an impression is likely to be confirmed by the present book, which faces tradition from a position of "neither/nor," argues for the ultimate futility of all philosophy, and proposes instead a "philosophy that is not a philosophy." Such impressions work injustice to Tanabe's total effort. The itinerary of Tanabe's ideas is not a tale of ressentiment born of difficulties with systematic philosophy but of an alert sensitivity to the failure of ideas to match the actuality of his experience. Indeed, I have the impression that there has been no philosopher in Japan before or since who has been so concerned with constructive and systematic presentation as Tanabe. But with the sources for an adequate assessment of Tanabe's philosophy locked away in fifteen heavy volumes of Collected Works published in Japanese (to give an idea of just how heavy, the work translated here takes up one half of one of the volumes), and very little else in Western languages to rely on, it is necessary to give some fuller shape to the story of his thought, if only to disarm the reader of misconceptions to which Philosophy as Metanoetics might lead.

II

Draw the lines between the stages of development of Tanabe's philosophy as one will, there is no telling the story without constant reference to his clashes of mind with those whose influence on him was strongest. While he cannot be said always to have represented his adversaries fairly or to have understood them as they wished to be understood, the best measure of the seriousness with which Tanabe faced any philosophical position seems to be the degree of turmoil and counterposition it spurred him to in his own thinking.

Tanabe's philosophical career began in 1913, when he took up the post of lecturer in the Tōhoku Imperial University's Department of Natural Sciences. Within two years he had published a book of reflections on science which marks the first important watershed for the philosophy of science in Japan. This was followed by a series of articles written one after the other in quick succession, and a second book on scientific logic. Given these pioneering efforts, the preoccupation of Japanese philosophers after the First World War with neo-Kantian thought, and the encouragement given by the government for study abroad, it was only natural that Tanabe should have been drawn to the work of Cohen and Natorp (rather than to Rickert, Windelband, and the Heidelberg School) and felt it his special calling to travel to Marburg in order to
learn for himself at first hand. Once returned, he might not only make their thought better known but also pursue a critique of his own in the light of the other interests he was cultivating at the time: the recreation of Kantian transcendentalism through phenomenology, the vitalism of Bergson, and the notions of pure experience and absolute free will circulating in Japan through the writings of a brilliant young philosopher in Kyoto named Nishida Kitarō. In 1918 Cohen died, and Tanabe's dream evaporated.

Fortunately, he had already attracted the attention of Nishida, who recognized his talents and helped him secure a post as assistant professor at Kyoto University's Faculty of Arts and Letters. As noted above, Tanabe was already familiar with Nishida's thought, and in fact had been one of the first to recognize the significance of his struggles with the Marburg School and the epistemological limitations of Kant's thought. (Most of this was worked out by Nishida piecemeal between 1913 and 1917 in a self-tortured, drawn-out experiment with neo-Kantianism that nail by nail sealed the coffin on his own interests and those of his successors in neo-Kantianism. The results were later published under the title *Intuition and Reflection in Self-Consciousness*.) "Even were I to go abroad," Tanabe is said to have remarked to one of his colleagues at the time, "I could not find a better teacher than Nishida."9

While Tanabe was in Kyoto, his dream of study abroad came to life again through Nishida's encouragement, and in 1922 he left for Europe with a grant from the Japanese Ministry of Education. The first year he spent in Berlin studying under Alois Riehl, who urged him to go next to Heidelberg and cast his lot in with Rickert. Tanabe would have none of it, and moved instead to Freiburg to study with Husserl and pursue his fascination with phenomenology. During this period he was invited to Husserl's home to address a small gathering on Nishida's philosophy. The impression he left, reports of which reached Nishida directly from a German philosopher who had been present, was highly favorable.10 Husserl seems even to have nurtured the hope that Tanabe might bring phenomenology to the Orient, much as Heidegger was expected to carry on the tradition in Germany. As things turned out, Tanabe had other ideas. Disenchanted with the promise of the movement, he turned instead to the ideas of the young Heidegger, who had been tutoring him privately in German philosophy. Through this contact he came to the grandiose idea of working out a systematic philosophy that would bring together a "philosophy of life" and a "philosophy of the human sciences."
In 1924 he returned to Kyoto, his head buzzing with new ideas but almost no forethought of the new obligations that would await him as a favored young disciple of Nishida who had studied under Husserl. Before he could begin work on his own projects, he found himself thrown back into the grip of Kant. The initial impulse came from what he was later to refer to as "the fateful external circumstances" of the celebration of the two hundredth anniversary of Kant’s birth, for which he was asked to deliver a memorial lecture. His preparations drove him deep into an investigation of Kant’s teleology and surfaced in an attempt to carry critical philosophy through to its ultimate conclusions: to answer the demand for a metaphysics without falling into either the dogmatism of German idealism or the epistemological muddle of neo-Kantianism. Even though the results of his work on Kant were much acclaimed, and helped him to see how the Kantian teleology leads in the end to a religious standpoint, this seems to have been an academically difficult time for Tanabe, unsettling in the extreme. Luckily, it was not long before he had shaken free and was on his feet again, thanks to his rediscovery of Hegel. At first his aim was simply to right what he saw as a lack of dialectic in his own thought, but soon he found himself faced with major confrontations on three fronts at the same time—with Hegel, with Marx, and with Nishida.

Tanabe began his long engagement with Hegel by way of Fichte and Schelling, on whose thought he lectured for two years, followed by two years on Hegel’s *Encyclopedia* and then thirteen years on the *Phenomenology*. These efforts led him not only to appreciate the genius of the Hegelian dialectic but to see how, when carried out absolutely, it led to what he called a standpoint of “absolute mediation.” Meanwhile, the social philosophies of such thinkers as Miki Kiyoshi (1897–1945), whose company he had shared in Freiburg, and Tosaka Jun (1900–1945) forced him to recognize the seriousness of the challenge that Marxist thought posed to the intellectual community in Japan. A keen sensitivity to the historicity of the philosophical task and the moral dimension this entails had always been present just under the surface of Tanabe’s thought, but now broke out with full force and resulted in what many still consider his most original contribution to philosophy: the “logic of species.” Finally, these two complementary ideas—the formal dialectic of absolute mediation and the concrete reality of species—prompted a growing critical posture to two similarly complementary ideas that Nishida was working on: the “logic of locus (topos)” and “active intuition.”

The consequences of Tanabe’s confrontation with Nishida, which
may be dated formally from a 1930 essay fitted out with the reverently ambiguous title “Looking to the Teachings of Nishida” and was to carry on even after Nishida’s death in 1945, were unexpectedly divisive. Just two years before, it should be remembered, Nishida had retired from Kyoto University, leaving Tanabe to assume the vacant chair. Tanabe rose to the challenge with great outward intensity and even greater inner turmoil. Students noticed a nervous edge to the usual earnestness of his lectures; the scattered streaks of gray in his hair spread visibly. Patching together scattered and parenthetical remembrances of this period, I conclude that it was far less the prestige of the appointment that weighed heavily on him than the lingering presence of the absent Nishida. What began as no more than a slight crease in Tanabe’s esteem for his mentor ended up as a yawning chasm of discord that neither was able to bridge. They grew further and further apart until they could not suffer one another’s company and in fact could hardly read one another’s writings without misunderstanding. It is no accident, for example, that Philosophy of Metanoetics does not once mention the name of Nishida, even though various aspects of Nishida’s thought come up for explicit criticism; nor that Nishida’s last essay, “The Logic of Locus and a Religious Worldview,” completed in the same year, submits Tanabe to criticism in no less anonymous a manner. This is not to say that they did not continue to learn from their differences, and even to sharpen or alter their views, but only that their personal relations had soured to the point that those who counted them both as their teachers were helpless to do more than look sadly on as their sympathies for each other deteriorated further and further.

At the same time, there is no denying that this daring departure from his teacher set Tanabe off in the direction of his most creative philosophical years and opened a way for others to appropriate Nishida’s thought more critically. Had there been no such head-on clash with Nishida by someone of his own intellectual stature, it is arguable that there would be no Kyoto School as it is known today, and little if any contact between Nishida’s thought and the West, but only a tradition of “Nishida Philosophy” scattered throughout Japan. In this sense, Tanabe may rightly be reckoned the founder of the Kyoto School.

In any event, it was against the backdrop of these confrontations that Tanabe turned his attention to the philosophy of religion in Philosophy as Metanoetics, a book that set him squarely on the existentialist standpoint he was to uphold for the rest of his life. The argument of the book moves elliptically around a confrontation with Shinran (1173–1262),
founder of the True Pure Land sect of Buddhism, on the one hand, and a
series of confrontations with Western thinkers—Eckhart, Kant, Schel-
ling, Hegel, Pascal, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Heidegger—on the
other. Tanabe hoped to locate an Archimedean point outside of the
world of philosophical tradition from which to dislodge that world and
set it spinning in a new orbit. Proclaiming it the standpoint of one “sinful
and ignorant” yet trusting in Other-power3 he set about a religiously
motivated “non-philosophy” that would undermine the claims of the
“saints and sages” based on self-power. The inconsistency entailed by
the claim to abandon philosophy by means of purely philosophical
arguments, all of which are intended for public scrutiny and critique,
was not lost on Tanabe’s disciples.13 But neither was the sense that only
a convinced sage can make the kind of transition from knowing to
unknowing that he was trying to elaborate in the “philosophical religion”
of a metanoetics.14

To be sure, it is the great and ineluctable paradox of the book that
only reason can ultimately persuade reason of its own debilities. At the
same time, the sense of finitude that Tanabe was attempting to convey is
qualitatively different from what we find in Nishida and Nishitani.
Their is a position closer to Heidegger in the sense that its primary focus
is the existential condition of being human. Tanabe ventured to take the
further step of grounding the critique of reason in a recovery of basic
sincerity that can come only from shifting the focus to one’s own indi-
vidual experience of existential limits. To miss this shift of focus is to
depribe the book of its greatest originality.

After Philosophy as Metanoetics Tanabe returned to many of the
concerns, if not the language, of his “logic of species” in the attempt to
fill out his philosophy of religion. Given the experience of the war itself,
and the harsh measures that had been taken during the time immediately
following the war against a number of key figures in Kyoto University’s
Department of Philosophy for their supposed complicity in bolstering
the myth of nationalism, Tanabe let his past political philosophy lie
where he had left it—at the idea of a social democracy that would
preserve the best of communism and democracy—and turned his gaze to
wider horizons. Against all the culture-worshiping voices of intellectuals
raised to invigorate the national spirit for the restoration of Japan, he
insisted that it was necessary that Japan commit itself positively to a
sociohistorical praxis based on love—an idea that began in the form of
“nothingness—qua—love” and evolved to a triunity of God—qua—love,
love of God, and love of neighbor—and aimed at world peace.15
At the same time, he returned to his interest in science, carrying on what Takeuchi has described as his lifelong "guerrilla warfare" against the inflated claims of natural science. The progress gained through an accumulation of knowledge, he saw, was ultimately no more than the working out of the innate methodological fragmentariness of science itself, which impeded a true synthesis of knowledge, and suggested that the contradictions the new physics was uncovering at its own foundations should be read as existential koan. In this way, the "metanoetic" spirit of his later writings is apparent in his attempt to define the goal of philosophy as to insert itself into both science and religion, so that the two might unite and cooperate in promoting love and peaceful collaboration among the peoples of the earth.

In 1951 Tanabe’s wife of thirty-five years died after a protracted illness, leading him to what was to be the final great confrontation of his life: the encounter with death itself. In memory of his wife, whose long devotion to him and whose exemplary attitude to her approaching death seemed to embody the philosophy he had been writing about so assiduously for so many years, he composed a short waka, or Japanese poem. Rendered literally and without meter it reads: “My wife who gave her life on my behalf and died has been reborn and lives within me.” This intensely personal experience of the transformation of life into death and death into life attracted Tanabe’s attention to the Christian symbol of the communio sanctorum, and wiped away the last vestiges of vitalism from his dialectic of absolute mediation to make room for a new dialectics of death that was central to the writings of his last decade.

III

As with any abridgment of ideas woven tightly together over the course of a lifetime, it is impossible to pull out the main threads without getting tangled up along the way. In the case of Tanabe, the stubbornest snarls are those that gather at his notions of the logic of species and the dialectics of absolute mediation. Because of the importance of these notions for understanding the transformation his thought went through in Philosophy as Metanoetics, it is worth trying to clarify our account a bit at these points.

The term “logic” in “logic of species,” as also in the case of Nishida’s “logic of locus,” does not refer in the first place to a formal metalanguage yielding inference and proof or to a generalized theory of semantics, but simply to a cluster of principles or linguistic recommenda-
tions for carrying on theoretically. The Japanese word, however, slides back and forth between these two senses rather more easily than Western philosophical terminology, allowing Tanabe to develop a rational theory about the workings of irrationality in history (which is what the logic of species is ultimately all about) with an occasional sideswipe at the structures of formal logic, particularly its principle of self-contradiction, but not obliging him to a thorough review of the formalities of traditional logic.

In contrast then with traditional logic, which places the category of species below genus and above individual, and seems to deny it anything but an ancillary role in order to account for the varieties of particulars belonging to the same universal class, Tanabe proposed that species be understood as the substratum of human Existenz itself, the ground of the "will to life." His aim was to replace the series of negations he saw worked out in Hegel, in which the individual is made to pass through the specificity of history to a transcendent universal, with a positive affirmation of the permanent role of species. In other words, to account for the basic structure of consciousness, it does not suffice to state that we are born as individuals into the human race, and then turn to a phenomenology of our generic humanity; nor is it enough simply to carry on a phenomenology of the processes operative in the individualizing of transcendental or generalized values in specific historical societies (after the manner, say, of Rickert’s Kulturwissenschaft or Dilthey’s Geisteswissenschaft). The concrete specificity of a tribe or people or nation is more than a theoretical filter after the manner of what the young Hegel called a “national imagination.” It is the most immediate ground of human being, an immediate, formal disposition not existing itself but forming a concrete substrate in terms of which the individual formally actualizes its genus in history.

Where Hegel and Marx seek to locate rationality in a generic substratum of spirit or matter working itself out in history, Tanabe’s species begins from a radical irrationality of pure desire for life at the core of human consciousness, a desire defined by social conditions. Although attracted to Schelling’s idea of an irrational, unconscious impulse to will outlined in Philosophical Inquiries into the Nature of Human Freedom, Tanabe wanted to define species as a kind of social archetype that is more clearly visible in the uniting symbols of a society, such as the totemic imagery that he found treated in the works of Lévy-Bruhl, than in any purely individual expression.

It is not hard to see how, on this basis, Tanabe should come to see a
positive significance in acknowledging the emperor of Japan as a symbol of the sacredness of the nation. But neither is it hard to see how such statements might be misinterpreted, as in fact they were both by nationalist-minded intellectuals before and during the Great War and by critics of nationalism after it. No fair account of Tanabe's logic of species can fail to see, however, that its goal was a "theory of national existence" that would serve as a direct critique of the blind nationalism he saw inspiring Japan's engagements in Asia and fascism in Europe. Taking the distinction between "open" and "closed" societies from Bergson's *Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, he strove to show how a society based on a "closing of species" subjugates a particular race or people to the irrationality of its particularity, cutting it off from affinities with generic humanity or blurring the distinction idealistically (his criticism of Hegel's genus-nation and Kant's "world citizen"), and how only an "opening of species" to genus through the dialectical mediation of rationality has any hope of promoting freedom in history. It is therefore altogether wrongheaded to suppose, as some Japanese historians were to do from post-War bandwagons, that Tanabe had composed his *Philosophy as Metanoetics* in order to dissociate himself from nationalist views he had once espoused. Not only did he never hold such views, but the lectures on which the work were based were delivered during the war.

The second nodal idea, the "dialectics of absolute mediation," represents the formal lining to the material logic of species. For Tanabe, the concrete individual of history, while grounded in the contingent definition of its locus as a being in the world ("species"), is also the subject of freedom and spontaneity. The unity of these two dimensions is worked out as a dialectic of what he calls "determination-*qua-*reverse determination," and it is this dialectic in turn that defines the nature of human rationality. In other words, the fullness of reason demands not only that the individual exert its freedom *from* its contingency but also that it make itself free *for* that contingency, and this can be accomplished only through an absolute negation of reason. In mediating the "will to life" of its specific contingency, the individual exercises the "will to power" of its particular freedom, and vice versa.

What distinguishes this from Hegel seems at first to be no more than a procedural device: Tanabe begins at the moral standpoint that Hegel only arrives at three-quarters of the way through the *Phenomenology*, namely with the conviction that dialectical mediation must never be viewed contemplatively as a static unity between every I and Thou but
always and primarily as an ongoing process, full of struggle and con­
frontation, between species and individual within which the I-Thou
dialectic takes its meaning. This shift from a generative account of the
emergence of the individual to a concrete, existential account served two
additional purposes, however. First, it established the role of the logic of
species as a hermeneutic device for reading philosophical texts. Second,
it set up a direct, and we can only say in hindsight greatly exaggerated,
opposition between his “dialectics of absolute mediation” and Nishida’s
“self-identity of absolute contradictories.” That Tanabe, wrongly I think,
traced the philosophical pedigree of Nishida’s position to the eman-
tational logic of Plotinus and the Neoplatonists need not detain us here.
More important is the fact that this confrontation further stabilized his
commitment to a radically historical I, the subject of rationality, engaged
in a permanent mutual mediation with its species, the realm of the
irrational in history. Whatever harmony may be achieved between indivi­
duals, this fact plants a fundamental irrationality and “egoity” at the
core of the I which sooner or later will pull on rationality until it is torn
out by the roots. This radical negation was the beginning of the conver­
sion that Tanabe called metanoesis.19

The key problem here was to ground the conflict and mutual medi­
ation of specificity and individuality. Tanabe’s commitment to rational­
ism would not allow him to find such a ground in an absolute irration­
ality, since that would effectively sterilize the position of the individual
subject and disallow its freedom. But neither could he find it in the
absolute rationality of the free subject, since that would effectively
dehistoricize the individual. He therefore came to speak of a principle of
self-alienation at the core of everything that is. Formally put, this means
that the absoluteness of absolute mediation stems from the fact that the
mediation between individual and species in human life is itself
mediated by the general impossibility of unmediated existence. It is not
just that the two dimensions are engaged dialectically with each other as
a result of the free choice of the subject, but that neither can be what it is
except in terms of an essential internal contradiction: to be what it is, it
must appropriate to itself the other, which it is not. There is no species
without individual, no individual without species—in short, nothing
unmediated in the human world, and therefore no actual achievable
unity of opposites. It is not only the individual but also species that
suffers the self-alienation of a desire for unmediated existence frustrated
by the concrete demands of mediation.

Apart from the role accorded species, which was pointed out earlier,
the logical scheme of what Tanabe is doing again looks like vintage Hegel. And indeed it would be, but for the fact that Tanabe had already shifted the accent of absoluteness from the realm of being and reason—and therefore also from a personalized and anthropomorphic view of the world—to the realm of nothingness. The consequences of this shift of the concrete universal from absolute being to absolute nothingness unfolded gradually in Tanabe’s thought until he was able to display the full compass of his dialectic of absolute nothingness in *Philosophy as Metanoetics*. To appreciate that what is taking place here is not just a crude distortion of Hegel’s thought to an Eastern eye but an original rereading of its religious dimension, it is necessary to speak briefly to the question of what Tanabe understood by nothingness.

The infrastructure Tanabe has in common with Nishida. Both approached Western philosophy from a basic stance of absolute nothingness. That this happens to be a prejudice of Eastern intellectual history should trouble us no more than the fact that philosophy itself began under the Western prejudice of the supremacy of being. (I assume “prejudice” here to carry the fuller meaning that Gadamer has restored to it.) This absolute nothingness is not some cold and calculating metaphysical negation of everything that is or might be, but first and foremost “an awakening to the drive to know the truth about what it is to be alive; it is the very stuff of human Existenz.” In other words, the standpoint of nothingness does not begin from reflection on the world of objects but from reflection of the self upon itself; and it finds its moorings not in the everyday external realities of perception but in the realization that all things functioning in existence are “shadows emptying the self of itself and projecting it back into itself.” Where Western philosophies of being begin from an ontological reflection on science and myth, the standpoint of nothingness rests on a primarily psychological realization of the world akin to religious experience.

Just how that “realization” (or self-consciousness) is conceived in practice is no less open to a variety of viewpoints than Western ontologies. In fact, Tanabe’s break with Nishida began with a disagreement over the latter’s “standpoint of absolute nothingness,” which he considered so bound up with the self-consciousness of a realm of universal ideas that he even revolted for a time against using the term at all. In the end, the common bond proved too strong and fundamental to be sacrificed so simply, and Tanabe returned to the notion of absolute nothingness in *Philosophy as Metanoetics*, where it is said to become manifest in the absolute mediation of absolute Other-power to the
subject of metanoesis. (This Other-power has the curious logical quality of having been deduced a posteriori from the personal experience of a transcendent force, and at the same time of having been postulated a priori after the manner of the Hegelian Absolute Spirit.) Thus while Nishida took absolute nothingness as the transcendent ground of all reality, toward which the self that has let go of the subject-object dichotomy breaks through to face reality as it is, Tanabe ultimately came to understand it as the ground of a transcendent force that breaks in upon the self from without. For Nishida, the quality of “religious experience” associated with absolute nothingness is reviewed by the self-conscious subject philosophically and at a remove from historical conditions; for Tanabe, this very review itself belongs to history and therefore demands an absolute “disruption” of the conscious subject and an absolute “crisis” in reason.

This two-dimensional understanding of absolute nothingness, namely in its logical and its experiential functions, affected Tanabe’s dialectic of absolute mediation in three ways. First, it carried the Hegelian dialectic of the *Phenomenology* to what he saw as its inevitable conclusion (close to what Hegel himself did in the *Encyclopedia*, though Tanabe does not acknowledge this): the outright rejection of an abstract and nonmediated absolute, antecedent to and transcendent to the relative beings that make up history. Second, under the rubrics of the Shin Buddhist notions of *gensō* and *ōsō* it raised absolute mediation to the status of religious experience, not only at the level of the experience of the transcendent but also at the level of the return to care for one’s fellow living beings. And third, under the influence of Kierkegaard, it shifted the ideal of the I-Thou relationship from Hegel’s unity of the self with the other through self-negation to a “nothingness-*qua*-love” that lets go of self-power altogether, and thus elevated the I-Thou relationship to the same level as the individual-species relationship, if not actually above it. In each case, the dialectics of absolute mediation that was forged to undergird the logic of species ended up transfiguring it.

IV

The logic of species that governs the “will to life” of historicity, and the dialectic of absolute mediation that governs the “will to power” of the individual, are brought to term in what may be called a “logic of envelopment” that characterizes the “will to salvation” at the level of genus. The working out of this final step is the philosophy of religion that
Tanabe began with *Philosophy as Metanoetics* and enhanced during the years of his retreat to Kita-Karuizawa.

At the start of his confrontation with Nishida in 1930, Tanabe accused his teacher of a mystical erasure of the distinction between philosophy and religion by stressing the "self-consciousness of absolute nothingness." Not only did Tanabe later return to use that term himself, as already noted, but he did so in a way that threatened the distinction far more than Nishida had ever done.24 How this works out in practice will be clear enough from the text of the translation that follows. While this is a trait that, to one degree or another, all the thinkers of the Kyoto School have in common,25 we need not trouble ourselves with those differences here. It is enough if we can lay a finger on the principal peculiarities of the way Tanabe brought "religion" into his philosophical thought.

To begin with, Tanabe abstained stoically from association with any one religious tradition, Eastern or Western, in order that he might the better address the problem of religion in a more general sense. Some of his commentators judge him closer to Christianity, others to Shin Buddhism, and still others to Zen. The evidence to support any of these conclusions is there in abundance, but only because it was his goal to keep equidistant from all three, thereby to work a general dialectical synthesis of the philosophic core of Zen Buddhism (concern with totality), *Nembutsu* Buddhism (concern with the individual), and Christianity (concern with species).

In the second place and within these perimeters, Tanabe saw no reason to extend his investigation of religion outside of Buddhism and Christianity, the two major world religious traditions that must in any event be drawn into a philosophical encounter between Eastern nothingness and Western being. To all other forms of religion, he simply closed his eyes. My own suspicions, as yet unconfirmed, are that this was in part a device to avoid having to face the fuller religious dimensions of Shinto as part of Japanese historical specificity, in spite of the way it was being used for nationalistic purposes repulsive to his moral sensitivities.

Third, in treating Buddhism and Christianity he did not oblige himself in any strict sense to the same historical and textual standards that he applied to philosophy and science, preferring to countenance these traditions in a direct and for all practical purposes ahistorical manner. Indeed, so little did he bother with theology (aside from a scattering of ideas from Augustine to Bultmann that attracted his philosophical appetite) and denominational distinctions, that he all but re-
duced the Christian Scriptures to the Gospel accounts. Likewise, his understanding of Shin Buddhism, the crux of his argument in the present book, is based on a highly original but critically suspect reading of the Kyōgyōshinshō.26

In the fourth place, he lopped off from religion the whole dimension of ritual and symbolic expression, as well as of dogmatic constructs based on faith in special revelation, a strategy he found he could support by a radical appeal to the method of demythologization.27 Here too, for all the importance he gave the notion of species, not to mention the immediate historic setting of his "metanoesis," the historical-institutional aspect of the religions he studied is brushed to one side.

Fifth, Western reflections on religion are restricted to their philosophic aspects. Poetry, literature, music, the arts, and so on that speak to religion in a nonphilosophic manner are all but neglected, a bias he tried to set straight in some late writing on poets such as Rilke, Mallarmé, and Valéry.

Lastly, he did not harass Western intellectual history for its misrepresentations of Buddhism and oriental religions, of which he would have found more than enough to complain about in Hegel, perhaps in order to avoid attracting like criticism of his own reading of Christianity.

There is no point in faulting a philosopher for not doing what it is not, or what he does not see it as, the business of philosophy to do. But even when we have to do with a thinker so heroically single-minded in his pursuit of philosophy as Tanabe, the complaint that his generalizations simply do not fit the facts of religious consciousness in history is serious. Without the continued nuisance of data, philosophy cannot sustain the moral edge that Tanabe always insisted on. At the same time, fairness requires that students of religion acknowledge how right his philosophic instincts were at times in getting to the heart of problems that other approaches tend to obscure.

To return where we began, the judgment that Tanabe's writings grind away the edges between the religious and philosophical dimensions of the human is no more true than the same conclusion he once drew in regard to Nishida's writings. There is of course no denying a tension in Tanabe's late work. On the one hand, it is clear that "metanoesis" and dependence on Other-power are closer to religious faith than Nishida's "self-consciousness of absolute nothingness." On the other, his notion of absolute critique does not permit him to leave the realm of philosophy to chase after the "absolute freedom from error"
thesis that he associated with faith, dogma, and theology.28 But to conclude, as one commentator has done, that there is no more religion in Tanabe as a person than one finds in his philosophic texts, and that therefore he is an "unchurched religious vagabond" with whom millions of people in Japan and Europe who cannot make a home for themselves in any specific religious tradition can identify,29 is both naive and indiscreet.

There is far too much in Tanabe’s late writings suggestive of what we might call with Jaspers a “philosophical faith” to lump him together with the largely unreflected and untutored religious consciousness of the secularized world. If one limits religion to standing within a particular confessional tradition and practicing its rites in public, it is easy to classify him as irreligious. A broader perspective, such as I believe the last two hundred years of intellectual history obliges us to, surely allows the possibility of characterizing a critique of the religious dimension in self-consciousness as itself a religious act. Though Tanabe himself would not have welcomed the comparison, his religiosity falls squarely in line with a Western tradition that goes back at least as far as Plotinus and the Neoplatonists.

Moreover, there is far too little of Tanabe’s private papers (practically nothing compared with the copious correspondence and diaries that Nishida left behind), to permit such a conclusion. Attempts to speak of Tanabe’s inner religious life must remain at best hunches from evidence that is inadequate and ambiguous. What we can say, it seems to me, is that Tanabe saw in the abstractions of philosophy a defense behind which to safeguard his private life and feelings from public view, and yet from whose privileged position he could address the modern soul directly. The personal metanoesis he performs for us in Philosophy as Metanoetics under the continually repeated leitmotiv “sinful and ignorant as I am” so rarely touches down on the solid ground of particular historical fact that the reader cannot but slide over the words after a while. Since I find it hard to imagine that Tanabe was not aware of this as he was writing, I can only conclude that he had taken what was originally a genuinely personal (though in its details genuinely impersonal) sentiment and turned it into the mask of an Everyman so that his readers might gradually be led to think “sinful and ignorant as we are,” and be drawn into the same experiment of life-and-resurrection through Other-power that Tanabe was conducting himself. Far from being an asbestos cloak that protected his inward self from catching fire, the outer mask then takes on the glow of a religious conviction burning within.

Confessional writings based on religious experience are nothing
new to Western philosophy, but it is hard to know just where to place Tanabe's brand of metanoesis in their ranks. One thinks of Augustine, Pascal, Hamann, Kierkegaard, and Blondel, to mention but a few possibilities for comparison. Yet the peculiar blend of self-criticism without autobiographical detail, appeal to religious experience without firm commitment to a given religious tradition, sharp moral sense without an ethical theory, and overall critique of the rational subject that we find in Tanabe undermines the likenesses from the start. The difficulty of locating his "metanoetics" in intellectual history implies more than the fact that every speculative thinker of rank enjoys some degree of distinctiveness from every other. The context itself has shifted from Western philosophy's objective associations with religious experience to an oriental understanding where the very grounds of distinctiveness rest in the experiencing subject. More particularly, it has shifted to the Japanese philosophy of the Kyoto School, where this context forms the vanguard of a confrontation with Western thought.

The translation of this book has had an odyssey all its own, which bears brief telling if only because of the many delays involved in its publication, first announced some fifteen years ago. Around 1965 UNESCO, which had been collaborating with the Japanese Ministry of Education to sponsor and publish English translations of Japanese philosophy in Japan, made it known to Shimomura Toratarō that it was interested in Tanabe's work and would offer a grant for its translation. Shimomura conveyed the offer to the other editors of Tanabe's *Collected Works* at a meeting in Kyoto, and the decision was reached to translate *傲悔道としての哲学* (*Philosophy as Metanoetics*). One of the group, Takeuchi Yoshinori, then professor of philosophy at Kyoto University, was entrusted with the task. Takeuchi approached Yamamoto Seisaku, a gifted young philosopher who had just returned from doctoral studies in the United States and who has since distinguished himself as the translator of Whitehead's *Process and Reality* and as one of the foremost process thinkers in Japan. In rather short order, Yamamoto prepared a rough draft of about 80 percent of the book. After checking it himself, Takeuchi sent sections of the English typescript to UNESCO, who in turn contacted its publishers for an opinion. The judgment was favorable but cautioned that stylistic improvements were needed. Anxious to have the polishing done by someone familiar with Japanese philosophy
in the Kyoto tradition, Takeuchi invited Valdo Viglielmo (whose translation of Nishida’s *A Study of Good* UNESCO had published in 1960) to assist him in the work.

At the time Viglielmo was busy with a translation of Nishida’s *A Study of Good* and in need of assistance himself. For several years Takeuchi and Viglielmo spent their summers together in Japan, giving their mornings to Tanabe and their afternoons to Nishida. About half of the untranslated portion was passed on to Jan Van Bragt and Hase Shōtō; the rest they decided to do on their own, the grant having already been exhausted. In the hope of publishing the book in 1968, Takeuchi issued a draft of the Preface in 1967. Once again, in 1971, it being felt that publication was imminent, an earlier draft of part of the fourth chapter that had been polished stylistically by Gerald Cooke of Bucknell University was published.

Soon thereafter it became clear that UNESCO was intending to discontinue its publishing ventures, though no formal statement was made to this effect. Still incomplete, the manuscript book fell into a temporary limbo until 1980, when Takeuchi persuaded the responsible authorities to release the rights for publication to the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture in Nagoya. Once again Viglielmo began his summer visits to Japan to work with Takeuchi on the remaining chapters. In fall of 1984, the entire manuscript was handed over to the Institute to prepare for presentation to the University of California Press, which had already expressed interest in it.

Over the twenty years of interrupted labors, the translation had lost its sense of unity and consistency of phrasing and style. For better or worse, it fell to me to take up the task, restoring portions lost in the shuffle of papers from one draft to the next, polishing the rough edges, and tracking down the notes. From the first I was struck by the precision and almost mathematical balance of Tanabe’s prose, well suited to the sources and topics he was treating. (I was not at all surprised recently to come across the following comment by one of Japan’s former ministers of education, Aihara Shinsaku: “The secret of Tanabe’s ability as an author to draw such a large number of readers lies in the highly fascinating way he has of orchestrating complicated theoretical works in the clear and critical tones of rationality.”) The deeper I got into the work, the more did my admiration grow for the immense labors that had thus far gone into the translation and the more convinced I became that nothing short of a total review would do justice to the work already
invested in it. With the encouragement of both Takeuchi and Viglielmo, I spent the next several months shaping and reshaping the winding sentences and massive paragraphs (one of which runs no less than twelve pages) into what seemed to me more flowing and digestible segments, until the text reached the form in which it is presented here. Rather than yield to the temptation to take the still more arbitrary step of inserting subtitles into the text, it was decided to follow the somewhat dated procedure of including at the head of each chapter the major themes treated there. I am only too aware that my contribution is one that others could have carried out with greater eloquence than I can command and that Tanabe's brilliance was often diminished through my phrasing of his ideas. For this I beg the reader's indulgence and correction.

In the course of preparing these remarks, I have been tempted again and again to make predictions about the reception Tanabe will receive in the West, particularly among those philosophers of religion and theologians whose interests have drawn them to Japanese philosophy and the Kyoto School. On each occasion I have found my mind the same blank slate with no higher inspiration to guide my hand. Part of the problem, no doubt, is the enigma the Kyoto School itself presents to Japanese philosophy as a whole. Neither Nishida nor Tanabe, surely the two "classical" philosophers of modern Japan, have left behind disciples in the strict sense of the term. There are no Nishideans or Tanabeans to be compared with the Kantians, the Hegelians, or the Heideggerians of the West. One Japanese critic has singled out four reasons for this in the case of Tanabe. First, Japanese academics are not yet prepared to compare the level of Japanese philosophy in any form with its Western counterparts. Second, the demand that philosophy be defined, as Tanabe himself had done, as the result of one's own highly subjective quest chills one philosopher's relationship to another's systematic thinking, as if before an antique that should be looked at but not touched. Third, there may be something badly wanting in the academic quality of Tanabe's own thought as such. And finally, a philosophy that concerns itself with absolute nothingness abandons the canons of philosophy for those of religion, turning even the philosophy of religion into a philosophy-qua-religion.\[33\]

It is surely an irony of some significance that on each point of this assessment, it is the very opposite view that has been promoting Western interest in contemporary Japanese philosophy. Aside from a growing revisionist strain, one would have to say that the cutting edge in American and European philosophy still rests in the area of a critique of the
limits of speculative language and logic, and that it is this concern more than any other that accounts for the recent spate of comparative studies on Buddhist thought and mainline Western philosophies. Tanabe's arrival at a comparable critique, though one worked out in what we might now consider a dated language, has remarkable affinities with the thrust of this concern. At the same time, if one may view the revisionist stance—especially the return to classical metaphysics—as an attempt to reconstruct what has been torn down by largely critical philosophies, there would seem to be great promise in pursuing a standpoint of nothingness that offers a positive alternative precisely by upholding its critique of the rational metaphysics of being. There is no knowing what the fate of oriental philosophy in the countries of the West is to be. For now we can only say that the question has risen up too strong and clear above the voice of the past to be silenced without a suitable reply.

NOTES


The immediate impetus to commit such a sentiment to print seems to been a Latin proverb Tanabe came across in Carlyle: Amicus Plato, magis amica veritas (Sartor Resartus, chap. 2), though the saying itself is much older. The original Greek proverb, stemming from a passage in Plato’s Phaedo (91) and referring to Socrates, was given its form in Ammonius’s Life of Aristotle. Latin translations and variants are to be found in Erasmus, Luther, and Cervantes.


4. See Takahashi Satomi, 「田辺元君の死を悼む」("In Memoriam: Tanabe Hajime"), 「思想」(Thought) 9, no. 459 (1962): 1258–1259. In his eulogy, Takahashi likens Tanabe’s philosophical disposition to a blend of the temperaments of Kant, Schelling, and Schiller. See also the special issue of 「理想」(Ideals), 1963, no. 2, devoted to Tanabe.

5. See Ōshima Yasumasa, 「教師としての田辺先生」("Professor Tanabe the Teacher"), in The Philosophy of Tanabe, pp. 273–284.

6. Ibid., p. 269. It should be noted that there were certain left-wing students in
Kyoto who tried to use Tanabe’s ideas for their own purposes and in the process circulated their share of distortions. Since the essay being cited here was read by Tanabe, however, we have reason to presume he approved of it.


While these translations have stirred a certain amount of interest in the German-speaking world, there has been virtually no major work done on Tanabe elsewhere in Europe or in America. The only book-length treatment of Tanabe to appear in a Western language is Johannes Laube’s *Dialektik der absoluten Vermittlung* (Freiburg: Herder, 1984). Although Laube had previously published a number of articles on Tanabe’s thought, and includes a good bibliography of source materials, his book falls under some suspicion for its alarming overdependence on a single work that Tanabe had prepared for a more popular audience and published in 1949 under the title *Introduction to Philosophy*. His more recently published critiques of Fritz Buri’s treatment of Tanabe in *Der Buddha-Christ als der Herr des wahren Selbst* (Basel: Paul Haupt, 1982), pp. 81–112, however, applies rather more rigorous standards (*Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft* 67 [1983]:154–155; and *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 27 [1985], 207–218).


10. Ibid., p. 264.
11. See Abe Nôsei, 「田辺元君と私」 (“Tanabe Hajime and I”), in The Philosophy of Tanabe, p. 256.
12. In saying this I cannot fail to mention the important role that Kosaka Masaaki played in stabilizing the position of the school. The exemplary lucidity and fairness of his comparative studies of Nishida and Tanabe, and of Nishida and Watsuji Tetsurô, have set the highest of standards for Japanese historians of philosophy. One can only hope that increased interest in the Kyoto School will inspire their translation into Western languages in the near future.


21. Consider the following passage which Hegel quotes from the Vorbegriff to the third edition of the Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences, Sec. 61 ff., in Book I of The Science of Logic: “there is nothing, nothing in the heavens or in nature or in the spirit or anywhere, which does not contain both immediacy and mediation.”

22. One is tempted here to start drawing comparisons with Whitehead, as indeed Ueda has hinted (“Biology in Tanabe’s Philosophy,” p. 207), but the clear burden of any such attempt would be to show that beyond the level of logical formalities about the interdependence of God and the world, Whitehead had produced any clear notion of subjectivity capable of facing the questions that are central to Tanabe.

23. The word 摂取 is a Buddhist term, referring to the protection and assimilation of the believer by Amida Buddha.

24. Funayama Shin’ichi reckons that if Tanabe had broken from Nishida earlier, his thought might have developed in a more profitable and less religious
direction than metanoetetics and a philosophy of death (Ideals, p. 33; see above, n. 4). I could not disagree more.

I would also note that in the earlier stages of this translation, Professor Takeuchi had often inserted the qualification "religious" before the words "self-consciousness" and "consciousness" to stress the point, feeling that it might otherwise have been lost on the reader. I later took the liberty of deleting these additions in the hope that our prefatory remarks would suffice to make the point.


26. Nakayama Enji takes Tanabe to task here in the second and third chapters of his book 『仏教と西田・田辺哲学』 (Buddhism and the Philosophies of Nishida and Tanabe) (Kyoto: Hyakkaen, 1979). The main thrust of his argument centers on two points: that Tanabe had failed to distinguish the coming-to-faith from the actual state of faith achieved in coming-to-the-Pure-Land, and had misrepresented the radical otherness of Other-power. Similar complaints are lodged against Tanabe's reading of Shinran's notion of zange (repentance) in his late works.

As the offhand, scissors-and-paste comparison of Tanabe and Nishida in the early chapters of this book makes amply clear, Nakayama is far more out of his depth in the world of philosophy than Tanabe was in Shin Buddhism. The book contributes too little to our understanding of Tanabe to warrant more than the rubric of a footnote.

27. For a résumé and critique of Tanabe's position here, see Mutō Kazuo, 「非神話イ匕一自然神学の問題と関連して一」 ("The Relation of Demythologizing to the Problem of Natural Theology"), in Absolute Nothingness and God, pp. 104–130.


29. Laube, Dialektik der absoluten Vermittlung, p. 222.

30. In spite of this, Nishitani takes the notion of Tat as the "alpha and omega" of Tanabe's endeavors. See his memorial lecture, devoted largely to Philosophy as Metanoetics, "Tanabe's Philosophy."

31. See above, n. 7.

32. "Professor Tanabe," p. 263.