The Ethos of Repentance
Løgstrup, Tanabe, and the Problem of Naturalness

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The following essay was first presented at the NIRC on 26 March 2024. The essay addresses ethical thought of the Danish philosopher Knud E. Løgstrup in which spontaneity plays an important role. Through a comparison with Tanabe Hajime's metanoetics, the author brings Løgstrup's account of spontaneity in conversation with Tanabe's idea of naturalness in an attempt to rethink the Christian tradition within the context of intercultural dialogue.

> Because absolute nothingness is the ground of human freedom, to submit oneself to the absolute and serve as its mediator means to be free in the true sense of the term…. Action no longer belongs to the self in the usual sense of carrying on one's own work according to one's own plan. Instead, a higher spontaneity is made manifest—we may call it "transcendent facticity" or "absolute reality"—wherein the plans and doings of the self are mediated, subsumed, and negated. This is "naturalness" (*jinen-hōni*) in Shinran's sense of the term, an "action of no-action" or activity without an acting self in which the action ceases to be merely the doing of the self.[1]
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> The demand is unfulfillable; the sovereign expression of life is not produced by the will's exerting itself to obey the demand. By contrast, the sovereign expression of life is fulfilled, but spontaneously, without being demanded. The demand announces itself when the sovereign expression of life does not come about—but does not engender it; therefore, the demand demands that it is superfluous. The demand corresponds with sin, the sovereign expression of life with freedom.[2]

1. Tanabe, *Philosophy as Metanoetics*, 171.
2. Løgstrup, *Controverting Kierkegaard*, 87.

What is naturalness? What does it mean to act spontaneously? Does it make sense to say that spontaneity contains moral knowledge? Most of Western philosophy tends to see moral value only in actions that follow deliberate reflection. In reflection, a universal is posited which mediates the encounter with the other(s). Mediation takes place in reflection, and through the mediation of the universal, the individual is turned into a moral agent. When an act is done spontaneously, however, there is no prior reflection—no deliberate intention, no willing subject.

The closest alternative to an "ethics of naturalness" in the West is virtue ethics. The decisive difference between them is that naturalness is an act without an actor, while virtue is a disposition of a subject. One Western thinker who tried to rehabilitate spontaneity was Knud Løgstrup. By bringing his thought into dialogue with that of Tanabe Hajime, I hope to elaborate on some topics that remained underdeveloped in Løgstrup's works.

I

Knud Løgstrup was born on 2 September 1905 in Copenhagen. His first academic publication, in 1932, was a prize essay on Max Scheler's ethics. In the following years he turned his attention towards epistemological problems and wrote a doctoral dissertation called "The Epistemological Conflict between Transcendental Idealism and Theology." From early on, he joined the ranks of existential phenomenology, represented by (the early) Heidegger and Hans Lipps. While critical of Neo-Kantianism, the dialogue with Kant would remain a constant throughout his philosophical career. As the title of his dissertation makes clear, Løgstrup's philosophizing was theologically motivated. Despite this, he was always convinced that philosophy and theology should be kept apart. After he finished his dissertation, he returned to ethics again. In 1956 he published his first and most famous book on ethics: *The Ethical Demand*. *Controverting Kierkegaard* was published in 1968. In this work, Løgstrup introduced the important idea of the sovereign expressions of life. Building on his work on ethics, he later developed a philosophy of language, of art, of nature and history, and of religion. These "metaphysical considerations," as he called them, were intended to constitute a philosophy of creation. His metaphysics project remained unfinished at the time of his death in 1981.

Being a phenomenologist, Løgstrup aimed to explicate and structure the understanding contained in our pre-philosophical knowledge. Philosophy should have its feet firmly planted in the shared life-ground. In this regard, natural language is a treasury of pre-philosophical insights. We find the world already as an ordered world, because it is, in a sense, contained in the language we use to orient ourselves. Language is alive and constantly evolving; it shapes speech and is shaped by speech. The historicity of language and of human existence are inextricably linked.

For Løgstrup, it is through engaged interpretation (*tydning*), not detached observation, that we gain insight into human nature. Moods modulate our anticipatory attitude towards the world and each other. For example, when we feel sad, happiness confronts us as something incomprehensible. This incomprehensibility leads to further alienation and forlornness. The world becomes a prison. How different everything is when we are joyful! The world is no longer an oppressive environment, but a source of life. The happiness of others no longer isolates us; we can participate in their joy. We truly understand it. But this understanding is something fleeting. It is an understanding that is only present in and through participation, for which our mood is the necessary condition of possibility. When active participation stops, the understanding disappears.

Experience is a meaningful response to reality. Interpretation is constitutive of experience, not something we add post factum. Some experiences elude our grasp; we are, in a manner of speaking, interpreted by them. They reveal something fundamental about human nature. When we see something beautiful, we are drawn to it. The fact that beauty exists at all, and can hold us in its grip, is quite astonishing. Or consider the phenomenon of "sincerity." We are unable to experience it as negative. Its unconditionality confronts us. In some cases, however, it can be questioned whether it is reasonable to be sincere. If it turns out that it is not—e.g. when we have to lie in order to safe someone's life—the problem lies with the situation, not sincerity. The decision to suspend sincerity has to be justified, sincerity itself does not.[3] Insincerity is the suspension of sincerity without a valid justification.

As interpretation, philosophy is closely related to poetry. According to Løgstrup, poetry is indispensable for philosophy, because it makes the contradiction in our existence present: "we live by what we contradict.… The contradiction in our existence, which the light cast by poetry falls upon, is that we are blind and deaf to the world in which we live."[4] Poetry is at once personal and universal. Genuine poets manage to express the meaning of an experience as such. Universality is not achieved by eliminating the personal relation of the poet to his experience. Science aims at the *elimination*[5] of the human perspective through the use of experiments. Its results belong to the sphere of generality, not universality. Only through the personal relation is the universal meaning of an experience disclosed. What matters is that the poet leaves his contingent personality behind for the sake of the experience itself. Philosophy has to be practiced in like manner. Authentic philosophizing,

3. Løgstrup, *Beyond the Ethical Demand*, 133.

4. Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, 175.

5. "Emotion and interpretation are eliminated, and with them all the questions they introduce—and these questions are not small in number, but quite rightly comprise all the questions raised by human existence, except the scientific ones. But—and this is the crucial thing—we just cannot call a halt to being emotionally engaged and interpreting" (Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, 162).

while rooted in the particular pre-philosophical life of the philosopher—the lifeblood of philosophy—is an overcoming of this particularity through *purification*. The autonomy of philosophy is as much a question concerning the ethics of thinking as it is a methodological issue.

II

In *The Ethical Demand*, Løgstrup wants to determine "in purely human terms"[6] what the proclamation of Jesus discloses about our relation to the other.[7] He pleads for the philosophical relevance of Christianity. According to Løgstrup, some fundamental insights concerning the human condition only present themselves in religion. These insights are universal and can be understood by both Christian and non-Christian. But as part of religion, these insights point beyond themselves. What makes Jesus' proclamation religious is the fact that it is not exhausted by what it discloses—it is soteriological.

Faith contains an ontology. This ontology, which Løgstrup calls the universal in Christianity, is part of the unforeseen, historical Christ-event; it is implicitly contained in it as its horizon of understanding. This is reminiscent of how Nishitani characterizes the relation between religion and ontology:

> Every religion, when it takes concrete shape—as an actual historical reality—invariably bases itself on some world view or ontology. For a religion this basic "philosophy" is not something that can be changed at will, like a suit of clothes. It is to religion what water is to a fish: an essential condition for life. Water is neither the life of the fish as such nor its body, and yet it is essentially linked to both of them. A change of worldview or ontology is a matter no less fatal to a religion than a change from salt water to fresh is to a fish.[8]

Every religion has its own unique way of interacting with the ontology it contains. Løgstrup is convinced that the universal in Christianity can be philosophically elaborated and communicated without invoking the authority of (divine) revelation. That which points beyond itself must be comprehensible before that which it points towards can be genuinely accepted and incorporated in our life.

The silent, radical, one-sided, and unfulfillable demand is a philosophical reformulation of the love commandment. The demand gives us "a fundamental and constitutive determination of being, namely that human existence and the world that goes with it have been given to human beings."[9] It indicates both what a

6. Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, 3.
7. His aim is *not* to secularize Jesus's proclamation.
8. Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, 77.
9. Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, 147.

human being ought to do, and what a human being is. Ethics, as the study of man, is ontological.

Even though it is called the love commandment, it is not a command but a demand. A demand only demands of a human being what is due; a command is based on the authority of the commander. Both a demand and a command have to be obeyed. The difference is that to obey a command consists simply in following it, whereas to obey a demand means following it with the knowledge of one's indebtedness.[10]

Human life is impossible without trust. Trust is a fundamental attitude that precedes any particular relation. It is anticipatory. One of the basic *facts* of our ethical life is that we "dare to come forward to be met by the other."[11] By trusting, someone "places something of their life in the hands of the other person."[12] It is out of this fact that the demand arises. We can only live in mutual dependence, which give us tremendous power over each other which obliges us to take on responsibility. Because trust, as a condition of possibility, precedes every concrete encounter, so does the demand. This is why Løgstrup considers the demand to be silent. It is also silent in another sense: the purpose of the demand is not to make us slavishly follow the wishes of the other. The demand precedes the explicit wishes of the one we should care for.

The concrete situation in which we find ourselves is always historically and socially conditioned. Løgstrup compares the relation between the demand and its concrete historical embodiments with a prism.[13] The various ways in which human beings gave shape to their humanity throughout the ages do not stand in the way of the universality of the radical demand. It is therefore important to keep in mind that the demand is *refracted* and can never be fully identified with any particular embodiment. There is only one thing demanded: "the power that the interdependence gives you over another human being, you must use in their best interests."[14] It is our responsibility to determine what their best interests are, according to the unique situation we are in.

Even though human existence is characterized by interdependence, we nevertheless "have a strange idea that the world which for each individual is the content of their life, is occupied by that individual self alone, so that we are outside the other's world and only touch it from time to time."[15] What leads us to this thought? It is a fact that human beings want to be free and independent. In order to exercise our

10. Løgstrup, "Ethik und Ontologie," 389.
11. Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, 17.
12. Løgstrup, 16.
13. Løgstrup, 91.
14. Løgstrup, *Ethical Concepts and Problems*, 11.
15. Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, 15.

independence, it has to be acknowledged by others. If this is not the case, independence will be met with disapproval and oppression. Genuine independence is therefore rooted in a more fundamental dependence. As Løgstrup notes: "In the other person's reception of us, they take part in our self-realization."[16] Because humans are social beings, self-realization is impossible in isolation, for the simple reason that, without others, there would be no self to speak of. Because we find ourselves already being a self, we lose sight of this deeper dependence and erroneously equate independence with self-indulgence.

The act of listening illustrates what it means to take part in someone's self-realization. When we attentively listen to someone, we do not merely let them speak, we also encourage them to speak. There is no difference between our listening and our encouraging. The passivity of listening is activity-generating. We create a space in which the other can develop and clarify their own thoughts—attaining a degree of self-understanding that is only possible through dialogue. By listening, the listener takes part in the self-realization of the speaker.

Because the ethical demand is rooted in the basic fact of interdependence, it is the most natural of all: "God demands nothing other than what he himself gives."[17] Yet it is precisely this demand to which we cannot align our nature: "Our nature posits the commandment, but our nature cannot adhere to it."[18] But what is it about our nature that opposes the demand? "Our self-assertion, our will to power, our ceaseless concern about what we ourselves will get out of what we do, all stand against it."[19]

What is the root of this ego-centric self-assertion? *Anxiety*. Even though we cannot live without trust, we never know in advance whether our trust will be received or abused. Trust is by definition unprovable. As we grow up it is inevitable that we experience this vulnerability, which gives rise to a condition as fundamental as trust: anxiety. The fact that anxiety is derived from trust does not make it less fundamental. It is not something external to trust. When trust breaks down it discloses its inherent vulnerability; we become aware to what degree we are dependent on others and how little power we have over our own lives.

Anxiety engenders an obsessive need for control. An ethics of reciprocity is well attuned to this need. If interpersonal interaction is based on reciprocity, humans have a certain degree of control over the other. I can determine beforehand what the other owes me and possess the *right* to demand what is my due. The one-sided demand contains a completely different understanding of life. The conditions of life are given to us, and we are in no position to make a counterdemand: "The

16. Løgstrup, *Ethical Concepts and Problems*, 21.
17. Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, 93.
18. Løgstrup, *Ethical Concepts and Problems*, 11.
19. Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, 141.

individual is a debtor, not by first committing some wrong, but simply because they exist and have received their life."[20] Once confronted by the demand, it is impossible to fulfil it.[21] This is not to say that it is impossible to do what we should have done: we can make compromises with the demand. We can do what we ought to do, for example, out of a sense of duty. This kind of obedience is, however, always rooted in a more fundamental disobedience. It should have been done spontaneously. Our conscience is the manifestation of the demand's accusation. When we experience pangs of conscience, we are thrown back on ourselves. The opportunity arises to take stock of our lives so far and take a stand towards it. The recollection of past misdeeds in and through conscience is anything but a detached activity—it is accompanied by a feeling of shame. We have two options. Either we can try to talk ourselves out of it and invent all sorts of reasons in order to justify ourselves; or we can accept our failure unconditionally as our guilt. In light of the demand's unfulfillability, only the latter option brings us closer to the truth.

The notion of guilt brings us back to where we began: the religious proclamation of Jesus of Nazareth. In the last chapter of *The Ethical Demand*, Løgstrup raises the question: With what right did Jesus preach the unfulfillable demand? In the gospels, "we are told of a human being who gave voice to the demand of existence as God's demand and as his own."[22] But, and this is the crucial point, Jesus did not only give voice to the unfulfillable demand; he also granted *God's forgiveness*. He simultaneously demands that we love our neighbor unconditionally and forgives our inability to do so. It is therefore important to know why we are unable to do what is demanded and in what way we are guilty; if we did not, forgiveness would have no meaning for us.

Repentance allows us to take a proper stance towards the preaching of Jesus. Repentance grants us the ears to "hear God's own promise to us.… In having faith that it is God himself that the individual meets in the life of Jesus, then the demand, guilt, and forgiveness, which are central to his proclamation, become realities."[23] Only through divine forgiveness is the ethical antinomy[24] that constitutes our existence resolved without being dissolved.

20. Løgstrup, 100.

21. "In other words, what is demanded is that the demand should not have been necessary. Its radicality consists in this" (Løgstrup, 127).

22. Løgstrup, 177.

23. Løgstrup, 180.

24. "Theoretically, these two assertions cannot be reconciled: the assertion of existence that its demand, implied in the fact that one human being is delivered to another, is fulfillable; and our assertion, made on the basis of our nature, that the demand cannot be fulfilled. Theoretically, we must either maintain that we are right to say that the demand is unfulfillable, and therefore drop it as meaningless and a sham. Or, we must maintain that existence is right to assert that the demand is fulfillable, and therefore drop our own assertion to the contrary, including the illusions about our nature that follow as a consequence. Either way, the contradiction is theoretically resolved; that is, it is shown to have been a sham problem.

In the debate following the publication of *The Ethical Demand*, Løgstrup was often reproached for simply asserting the givenness of the conditions of existence without giving any concrete arguments for it. He fully acknowledged this critique. There is, moreover, some ambiguity whether we ever fulfil the demand. At times, Løgstrup seems to imply that the demand is realized. If it were not, human existence would simply not be possible. If we live by what we contradict, that which we contradict must be a reality. In *Controverting Kierkegaard*, Løgstrup developed his answer: the sovereign expressions of life. It is through the sovereign expressions of life—such as sincerity, trust, and compassion—and not our own effort that the demand can be obeyed. They allow us to act spontaneously and fulfil the demand before it is demanded. We "know the radicality not only as commandment and rule, i.e. a command to love your neighbour and the Golden Rule, but we also know it as spontaneity."[25]

Løgstrup's interpretation of Kierkegaard is heavily influenced by his Kierkegaardian contemporaries. Løgstrup's criticism comes down to this: in modernity, the contact with the divine is excessively interiorized and finds its consummate expression in Kierkegaard's concept of "the moment." This turn inwards is, of course, nothing new. It has been present in Christianity from the very beginning. The problem is that, in modernity, the sense of the fundamental interdependence between self and other, human and world has been lost.

Løgstrup criticized his Kierkegaardian contemporaries for uncritically adopting the irreligious ontology of the age. For them, finitude is reduced to relativity and conditionality, and freedom is only gained in direct relation (i.e. the decision) to the absolute. For Løgstrup, on the other hand, the unconditioned is fully present in the conditioned. Transcendence and immanence cannot be separated. Finitude is both relatively independent and absolutely dependent. Because finitude is fundamentally constituted by a contradiction, i.e. life and death, it cannot be self-sustaining. On its own, life stands powerless against death. It cannot exist without being granted existence at every single moment. The reason that the finite exists, therefore, is because the infinite is fully present in it, without confusion, without change, without division and without separation.

The sovereign expressions of life are the source of freedom. Løgstrup takes over the distinction, introduced by Kierkegaard, between freedom of the will and freedom of existence. According to both Kierkegaard and Løgstrup, the will is not free. It is rather the cause of self-attachment—the will wills to will. It is restless, the will

However, if our existence is ethically constituted by a contradiction, it is not just about getting rid of it theoretically. Rather, it is a matter of letting *both* assertions stand as true just as they are, holding them together and remaining standing in the contradiction by taking on the full responsibility for the unfulfillability of the demand as our own" (Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, 143f).

25. Løgstrup, *Ethical Concepts and Problems*, 12.

is bound to itself; it is bound to the unfreedom of our existence, and the more we exert ourselves to be free, the more unfree we become. This is not an endorsement of determinism, which denies the existence of the will. A bound will is still a will. It is bound because it is intrinsically self-contradictory. We live our lives in self-contradiction and are unable, through self-power, to get out of our predicament. In order to be *truly* free, our existence has to be set free. Even though Løgstrup considers the will to be bound, this is not the whole story:

> Human existence is not sheer unfreedom, because the sovereign expressions of life are fulfilled; they assert themselves. If they did not, our lives together would not go as well as they do. This can only be due to the fact that we live off that which we do not owe to ourselves. This is because the sovereign expressions of life are not accomplished by the will. On the contrary, when the expression of life breaks through our self-enclosedness, it is because the expression of life, and not the will, is sovereign.[26]

The expressions of life are other-centred, rather than self-centred. A spontaneous deed is characterized by self-forgetfulness, and only by being self-forgetful am I (temporarily) freed from my ego-bound self. Genuine freedom is mediated by the other. It is only by liberating the other that I am liberated from myself; it is one and the same event. We either spontaneously participate in the freely given freedom or distort it by trying to make it our own. The sovereign expressions of life are liberating because they are possibility-maintaining possibilities, unlike their distortions, which are possibility-dissolving possibilities.[27] Listening, for example, is a possibility-maintaining possibility. It is a kind of creative not-doing which allows the speaker to speak freely and lets the conversation run its course.

A spontaneous *action* has to be distinguished from a mechanical *reaction*. A mechanical reaction (e.g. the factory worker who performs the same movement day in and day out) is thoughtless, while a spontaneous action is thoughtful in the highest degree. Spontaneity is not identical to immediacy. There is no freedom in immediacy.

Even though the expressions of life are omnipresent and all-pervasive, it is perhaps only in human existence that they fully manifest themselves.[28] The reason is not because humans are the crown of creation—on the contrary. If human beings are a crown, it is a crown of thorns. The reason is, rather, that by breaking through

26. Løgstrup, *Controverting Kierkegaard*, 86.

27. Løgstrup, *Ethical Concepts and Problems*, 12.

28. The sovereign expressions of life can be considered to be self-expression and self-communication of the universe.

humanity's brokenness they reveal their sovereignty. Spontaneity makes its appearance in the world as lost—without sin, there is no freedom.

The human being is a rebel. We do not want to be what we are. Yet it is precisely in not wanting to be what we are that we are what we are. Self-alienation belongs to the essence of human existence and propels us forward towards self-destruction. What we rebel against are the given *sovereign* expressions of life. We try to conform the expressions of life to our wishes. But as rebels, we can do no more than rebel: we do not have the power to destroy the expressions of life, as we are not their source. The sovereign expressions of life are given as realized possibilities.[29] As realized *possibility*, they can be distorted; as *realized* possibility, they cannot be destroyed. Furthermore, a realized possibility has to be distinguished from an actuality. Givenness manifests itself as a realized possibility, which is both definitive and unconditioned. If the expressions of life were given as actualized, their content would be unaffected by the concrete situation in which they are realized. They would be divine laws which have to be applied.

The irony of rebellion is that it can only exist by virtue of that which it rebels against. Even though we occasionally realize—without realizing it—the sovereign expressions of life, we are still in need of substitute motives (i.e. norms) and substitute dispositions (i.e. virtues). Without them, life would be impossible. The construction and formulation of norms and duties, through reflection, belongs to the sphere of morality. The task of morality is to develop principles that can be used to evaluate actions. The expressions of life, by contrast, are to be realized in the concrete ethical situation. They are pre-moral, precede reflection, and are therefore not rational in the strict sense. Yet, it is not the case that the expressions of life are irrational feelings: "they have a primordiality which precedes any distinction between rationality and irrationality."[30] The meaningfulness of moral discourse is dependent on the definitive sovereign expressions of life. Furthermore, if we consider the concepts "good" and "evil" to belong to morality, we might even say that—as their source—the sovereign expressions of life are beyond good and evil.

III

Do not let me hear
Of the wisdom of old men, but rather of their folly,
Their fear of fear and frenzy, their fear of possession,
Of belonging to another, or to others, or to God.

29. Løgstrup, *Ethical Concepts and Problems*, 21.
30. Løgstrup, *Beyond the Ethical Demand*, 151.

> The only wisdom we can hope to acquire
> Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless.[31]

What are the implications of Løgstrup's ethics for our understanding of the human being? First of all, we have to introduce the distinction between "individual" and "person." The difference between individual and person can be described as follows: otherness belongs to the essence of "person," while the concept of "individual" posits otherness as an external relation.

The human being, as *zōon logon echon*, exists in and through speech. Through our words we are fundamentally part of the other's existence. Personhood and language are therefore inextricably connected. But it is precisely the possibility given by language to say "I", that creates an opposition. As Rosenzweig noted, "I is always a No become audible."[32] When we say "I" we set up an opposition—between I and Thou, between I and the world. We stress the absoluteness of our particular individuality at the cost of its fundamental relationality. We forget that our No needs others in order to have content. We forget that the original No is not directed at the other, but at ourselves. The essence of personhood is the unity of I and Thou—which has its source in the sovereign expressions of life. When the demand exhorts me to love the other as myself, I have to discover—not project—myself in the other and discover the other in myself.

The ethical demand reveals that we are not self-enclosed individuals, but interdependent persons. It also discloses the fact that we live in opposition to our own origin. The sovereign expressions of life take place in the space between human beings and are constitutive of their personhood. They are the anonymous ground hidden in every interpersonal encounter. It is only by letting the anonymous ground realize itself, and becoming anonymous, that we can encounter the other truly as a neighbor.[33] But how is it possible to let them realize themselves? Are we not powerless in face of their spontaneity? A spontaneity that is consciously brought about is obviously not spontaneous. It is not possible for us to become what we are through our own power. The relation of the human being to itself and

31. T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 16.

32. Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, 187.

33. Anonymity is not loss of identity, but a different relation to it. To be anonymous is to become self-negation (*kenosis*) through the sovereign expressions of life that are incarnated in the encounter with the other. If my identity did not *exist* as negated, self-negation would be contentless. We have to realize our individuality, our name so to speak, in order to pierce through it and realize true personhood. The realization consist in affirming and embracing the self-contradictoriness of our existence. Only thus do we achieve authentic anonymity.

This is, I believe, how we should understand Paul's exclamation: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20). Thanks to his anonymity, it was possible for him to "become all things to all people" (cf. 1 Cor. 9:19-23).

its surroundings—which are two sides of the same coin—is fundamentally broken. The only thing we can do of our own accord is to distort the given possibilities of life. We do not actively realize the expressions of life: they are spontaneously realized in the encounter with the other, and we are realized through them. Any goodness we do is not our own achievement. There is therefore only one thing that calms us: humility.

Proper knowledge of the fundamental fact that we exist by virtue of interdependence—both in our relation with the other and with reality as a whole—leads to humility. Reality, as the source of our given life, partakes directly in our self-realization. We bear, therefore, responsibility towards the world. Man's natural condition is one in which the given life is negated through self-affirmation. Humility is the negation of this negation. Through self-negation we return to the given life, which expresses itself as naturalness. For Christians, Jesus of Nazareth is the paradigm of humility. He is the way and the truth and the life. As the incarnation of the sovereign expressions of life, he does not share our innate contradictoriness. Not Jesus, but *we* are the paradox.

> [T]here is nothing paradoxical in the fact that the power to be in everything that is[34] then expresses itself in how it is in one person's life, namely how it is in the life of Jesus of Nazareth; indeed, that is what is to be expected, so that the life of Jesus of Nazareth is the only human life in which there is nothing paradoxical.[35]

Only someone who is more than human can be fully human. This, too, is disclosed by the wisdom of humility. The experience of our own impotence crucifies our ego; it allows us to hear the silent Yes in the audible No. Relative freedom is, in reality, enslavement to our own particular individuality. We have to revoke relative freedom in order to become absolutely free. This is not achieved by bending backwards in reflection, but by spontaneously stretching outwards towards the other. Only thus do we regain our true selves.

Spontaneous knowing forms an organic unity with acting. On the basis of Løgstrup's thought, I think it is possible to give a tentative description of this kind of knowing. Spontaneous knowing-acting belongs to interpretation. As we have seen, interpretation is "the kind of knowledge that belongs to our life of active commitment and emotional engagement."[36] Spontaneous knowing is an interpretation of the claim that proceeds from the other. A correct interpretation manifests itself in action. Only against the horizon of humility is it possible to clearly perceive

34. The sovereign expressions of life are the ethical manifestation of a more encompassing "power to be" (*Seinsmacht, værensmagt*). Løgstrup will develop this idea further in his *Metaphysical Considerations*.

35. Løgstrup, *Controverting Kierkegaard*, 14.

36. Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, 161.

and understand the claim. Humility unites knowing and acting. This unity is mediated by the other; spontaneity is only possible as a response to the call of the other—an unconditional call that is grounded in the other's mere existence. I think that Kōyama Iwao has something similar in mind when he writes that: "the call anticipates the response and the response is made to the call.… *The antiphony of call and response is the most fundamental relationship of human existence*, a sort of ground without which we would not have human beings."[37] That which unites call and response are the sovereign expressions of life. The anticipation of the call is concrete, since it anticipates a response that is made to it. As anticipation, however, it has not yet been actualized. It can, therefore, be considered to be a realized possibility. It is only because they are given as realized that we can realize ourselves through them.

The expressions of life are the source of human existence but do not originate in the finite world: "Eternity has incarnated its demand on us in the interpersonal situation, and in the sovereign expressions of life which correspond to it."[38] The implication is obvious: "Eternity does not incarnate itself for the first time in Jesus of Nazareth, but already in creation and the universality of the demand."[39] We can therefore say that, when the expressions of life are realized spontaneously, it is Christ who lives and acts through us. If we distort the expressions of life, we crucify Christ. If we crucify ourselves, Christ lives in us. Because God is Love, to participate in the life of Christ is to love Him. This love is expressed in and through love of the neighbor.[40]

I am convinced that it is necessary to take into account Eastern intellectual traditions, since they have treated the problem of spontaneity more thoroughly. No man is an island—and neither are religions and cultures. When an intellectual tradition refuses to learn from others and isolates itself, it will inevitably become a prisoner of its own concepts.

The aim of intercultural dialogue is to create the conditions of possibility for mutual understanding. Genuine self-understanding can only be achieved when we look at ourselves from the point of view of these conditions.

IV

Tanabe Hajime was born in Tokyo on 3 February 1885. Even though he initially wanted to become a mathematician, he decided to become a philosopher instead. His interest in mathematics and natural sciences, however, remained throughout

37. Heisig, Kasulis, and Maraldo, *Japanese Philosophy: A Sourcebook*, 742.

38. Løgstrup, *Controverting Kierkegaard*, 90.

39. Løgstrup, 90.

40. "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me" (Matt. 25:40).

his life. His predilection for mathematics influenced his style of writing, which, according to James Heisig, "is ponderous and lacking in rhetorical flourish. His sentences are long and winding yet crafted with mathematical precision."[41] He applied himself monomaniacally to the study of philosophy and quickly made a name for himself. Thanks to Nishida Kitarō, he was appointed assistant professor of philosophy at the Kyoto Imperial University. During his stay in Germany, from 1922 to 1924, he studied with Martin Heidegger. Heidegger's philosophical reflections on the meaning of death would have a great impact on Tanabe's further thought—not least in his magnum opus *Philosophy as Metanoetics* (1946). After his return to Japan, Tanabe's own philosophical position gradually took shape. The study of Hegel was to be of vital importance for the rest of Tanabe's philosophical career. As he came into his own, he grew more and more dissatisfied with the philosophy of Nishida. The relationship between Tanabe and Nishida quickly turned sour and they did not hesitate to criticize—albeit without mentioning names—each other's philosophy in their publications. Their disagreements became the ground on which the Kyoto school was build. In the 1930s, Tanabe developed and perfected one of his most important ideas: the logic of species. In 1945, Tanabe reached the official age of retirement and retreated to a cottage in Kita-Karuizawa. There he lived the rest of his days until his death in 1962.

During the Second World War, Tanabe underwent a deep spiritual crisis. As the aging professor looked back on his life, he could not help but wonder: what has come of it all? A profound sense of personal failure—both as a philosopher and a human being—took hold of him. The havoc the war wreaked on the Japanese nation was reflected in Tanabe's inner life. One day, something unexpected happened: "In the midst of my distress I let go and surrendered myself humbly to my own inability."[42] Tanabe felt that the only way forward was to embrace his failure unconditionally: "The only thing for me to do in the situation was to resign myself honestly to my weakness, to examine my own inner self with humility, and to explore the depths of my powerlessness and lack of freedom."[43] Tanabe had no other choice but to practice *zange*; indeed, he had no choice because it was not *his* choice.

> *Zange* thus represents for me an experience of Other-power acting in and through *zange* to urge me to a new advance in philosophy. I entrust my entire being to Other-power, and by practicing *zange* and maintaining faith in this Power I conform the truth of my own conversion-and-resurrection experience. In this way the practice-

41. Heisig, *Philosophers of Nothingness*, 110.
42. Tanabe, *Philosophy as Metanoetics*, 54.
43. Tanabe, 54.

> faith-witness (*gyō-shin-shō*) of my *zange* becomes the philosophy of my regenerated existence. This is what I am calling "metanoetics," the philosophy of Other-power.[44]

Out of this experience, a new philosophy was born. Convinced of the universality of metanoesis, it is Tanabe's aim to reform philosophy on the basis of the metanoetical principle, without jeopardizing philosophy's autonomy. Central to the metanoetical principle is the distinction between self-power and Other-power. According to Tanabe, traditional philosophy is based on reason and the principle of identity. In metanoetics it is not the philosopher who thinks *about* Other-power, but Other-power that thinks through them. *Zange* is not contemplation, but action:

> *Zange* is not to be seen as "thought" but as action, and not as the mere action of self-power but as the action of Other-power, one moment in the trinity of action-faith-witness (*gyō-shin-shō*). It is not a matter of self-power, but points to the activity of absolute mediation which can coordinate both self-power and Other-power mutually by converting the former to the latter and thus make transcendent, absolute nothingness manifest. It is for this very reason that we speak of metanoesis in terms of action-faith-witness to a real transformation brought about by the natural spontaneity of Other-power.[45]

Before delving deeper into the meaning of metanoesis as a philosophy of Other-power, I think it is instructive to consider Tanabe's understanding of absolute nothingness. Without a clear grasp of Tanabe's understanding of absolute nothingness, it is impossible to understand his metanoetics. Using the example of language, I will try to make its underlying dynamic more concrete. I will take the liberty of simply positing *translation* as the essence of language. Translation is an event, an activity of transformation. While translatability is the defining characteristic of language, translation, as such, is not something that belongs to language.

Every utterance is an act of transformation: the history of a language becomes part of the present and is opened towards the future. When I speak, I do not give words their meaning, I use their meaning for my own purposes. At the same time, the context which shapes the meaning of my words is transformed by my utterance. Thoughts are translated into words, words are translated into thoughts. The act of speaking is the translation of the past into the present, generating new meaning and creating the conditions for future translations. The axis around which this process revolves is not the individual speakers but the particular language into

44. Tanabe, 55.
45. Tanabe, 319.

which they were thrown. Language realizes itself through us, allowing us to realize ourselves.

Translation is a dialectical process. When a word is translated, it is negated. Because the translated word, however, contains a reference to the original word, it also contains the negation of itself. The original word, by being translated, returns to itself by a negation of negation, which is an affirmation of the word *as* word, rather than a meaningless compound sound. A word, furthermore, is characterized by connotation and denotation. Connotation belongs to the word's embeddedness in the history of a language. When a word is translated, it is necessary to take both denotation and connotation into account. The translated word is given a new home in the history of the other language, changing the history of both languages at the same time. A word cannot be translated as an isolated unit. Through the word, a whole language is translated into another.

In order for language to fulfil its true nature, it *needs* to be translated. Language exists for the sake of translation, for the sake of plurality. Speech is therefore not an option, but a necessity. Yet, there is no genuine speaking without listening. Silence—the language of listening—is the only true universal language; it does not need translation. Silence unites plurality without dissolving difference; it gives depth to speech. If speech is a necessity, silence is an obligation.

Without understanding language—which mediates the relation to the world, the other and the self—it is impossible to under the human being. But is it possible to take up an impartial position and get a hold of language through language? If translation is the essence of language, then the answer is without a doubt: no. It seems that the means we use to philosophize makes the end of all our efforts—absolute knowledge—impossible. The inexpressible is the center, not the border, of the expressible. We seem to be at an impasse.

It was not language, but Kant's antinomies of reason that drove Tanabe to the depths of philosophical despair. According to Tanabe, Kant misunderstands the true implications of the antinomies and therefore does not go far enough is his critique of reason. For Kant, the antinomies indicate the impotence of reason beyond a certain point. When kept within its proper boundaries, pure reason proves to be an infallible judge. But,

> Contrary to what Kant thought in his critical philosophy, it is impossible for the autonomy of reason to provide its own foundations. Reason endowed with the capacity for self-criticism cannot evade the ultimate predicament of the antinomies of practical reason, since it is caught up in the original sin stemming from basic human finitude.[46]

46. Tanabe, *Philosophy as Metanoetics*, 94.

Note that Tanabe refers here to the antinomy of *practical* reason. While asserting the primacy of practical reason, it seems that Kant underestimated the consequences the antinomy of practical reason has for the antinomies of pure reason. The antinomies of pure reason are rooted in the antinomy of practical reason, which, in its turn, is rooted in radical evil. Since it is *radical*, it is all-pervasive: everything we think and do bears its stamp. Insight in the antinomies can only provide us with a diagnosis; left to its own devices, reason is unable to cure itself. For Tanabe, the conclusion is clear: we cannot go on philosophizing as before. We are left with no other choice but to take a different path. The way Tanabe proposes is metanoetics (*zangedō*), which is "not a philosophy founded on the intuitive reason of *jiriki* (self-power), but rather a philosophy founded on action-faith-witness (*gyō-shin-shō*) mediated by the transformative power of *tariki* (Other-power)."[47] In other words,

> Philosophy must be carried out in the faith-witness that the self is being-*qua*-nothingness, that is, being (*rūpa*) as a manifestation of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) or absolute nothingness. In this way the self is resurrected to an existence beyond life and death; it receives the gift of a new life. The action mediating this faith-witness is nothing other than metanoesis.[48]

As action, metanoesis is eminently ethical: "the confrontation of ethics with radical evil cannot avoid facing antinomy and arriving ultimately at *zange*."[49] Metanoesis is, however, a peculiar kind of action; it is an "action without an acting subject."[50] Furthermore, when we philosophize by way of *zange*, it is Other-power that philosophizes through us. The philosophical method of Other-power, i.e. the logic of metanoetics, is absolute critique: a "critique without a criticizing subject."[51] Absolute critique is therefore not a method the philosopher uses, but something he witnesses:

> Absolute criticism means that reason, faced with the absolute dilemma, surrenders itself of its own accord. In the course of this critical task, the subject that is undertaking the critique of pure reason cannot remain a mere bystander at a safe remove from the criticism. The subject of the critique cannot avoid getting tangled into its own web and exposing itself to self-criticism. It cannot avoid dismember-

47. Tanabe, 73.
48. Tanabe, 92.
49. Tanabe, 81.
50. Tanabe, 104.
51. Tanabe, 121.

> ment by the absolute dilemma of its own thought. Yet in the very midst of this absolute disruption and contradiction, the power of contradiction is itself negated: the absolute contradiction contradicts itself. At this point an absolute conversion takes place and philosophy is restored, through the power of the transcendent, as a "philosophy that is not a philosophy."[52]

Absolute critique can be summarized as follows. First, it uncovers relative being's inborn propensity to cling to itself (radical evil); then, it is pointed out that its independence is not rooted in self-identity, but in the mediating activity of absolute nothingness. The true nature of relative being is to become a pure mediator of absolute nothingness, i.e. being-as-*upāya*, or "empty being." This leads to a salvific conversion (Great Nay-*qua*-Great Compassion), by which reality can manifest itself just as it is. Through *zange*, finite self-consciousness becomes a pure mediator of absolute nothingness. As empty being, the finite can participate in the absolute's work of salvation.[53] Absolute nothingness, as absolute transformation, needs the relative as much as the relative needs the absolute.[54] This is why Tanabe can say that his "philosophy is 'returned to the world' in an act of gratitude, to serve as a medium for spreading faith in Other-power. In this way, metanoetics becomes a philosophical witness of action-faith in Other-power."[55]

Rather than scrutinizing Tanabe's dialogue with Western thinkers such as Kant, Hegel, and Heidegger, I want to take a (far from exhaustive) look at Tanabe's interpretation of Shinran; in particular the relation between *ōsō* and *gensō*. In abstract terms, Tanabe describes the dynamic between *ōsō* and *gensō* as follows:

> [T]he aspect of ascent (*ōsō*) and the aspect of descent (*gensō*) should be mediated in action (*gyō*); the way of *ōso* becomes possible through the mediation of an absolute *gensō*; the absolute *gensō* passes over into the *für sich* stage through relative *gensō* and from there develops into a merit-transference (*gensō-ekō*).[56]

The word *ekō* refers the transforming effect of merit-transference.[57] Because, according to the Pure Land tradition, it has become impossible for sentient beings

52. Tanabe, 61.

53. Tanabe, 340.

54. "[T]he redeeming truth that the absolute can function only as the power of absolute mediation can reach self-consciousness by way of reciprocal mediatory activity between relative selves. In this sense, the transformation through vertical mediation between the absolute and the self must also be realized in the horizontal social relationships between my self and other selves" (Tanabe, *Philosophy as Metanoetics*, 63).

55. Tanabe, *Philosophy as Metanoetics*, 391.

56. Tanabe, 356.

57. Tanabe, 336.

to perform meritorious deeds, the sole agent of *ekō* is Amida Buddha. The transferral of merit should be understood as a transformation. The Tathāgata transfers the true mind (*shinjin*) to those who wholeheartedly recite the nembutsu. What is transferred through the Primal Vow is therefore a new mode of being, grounded in Other-power. The new mode of being is characterized by *zange* and naturalness, death-and-resurrection.

According to Tanabe, the teaching of the *Larger Sutra*—which goes from absolute truth to *upāya*—represents the aspect of *ōsō*; the teaching of the *Meditation Sutra*—which goes from *upāya* to absolute truth—represents the aspect *gensō*.[58] In this sense, the teaching itself is a historical manifestation of *gensō*. The story of Dharmākara in the *Larger Sutra* contains three elements. First there is Bodhisattva Dharmākara, second his self-discipline and third his transformation in Amida Buddha (Tathāgata). When read philosophically, Dharmākara's resolve, his self-discipline and transformation happen simultaneously. The Primal Vow is the efficient and final cause of Dharmākara's self-discipline, sentient beings are the material cause, and the nembutsu is the formal cause. Sentient beings share the efficient and final cause of the absolute, but have radical evil as material cause and *zange* the formal cause. The nembutsu has the same relation to the absolute as *zange* has to the relative. They can be considered the axis around which the dynamic mutual transformation of the absolute and the relative takes place.

Dharmākara symbolizes relative beings and Dharmākara's self-discipline is "the absolute symbol of *zange* for us sentient beings."[59] Even though the resolve to engage in his self-discipline remains with Dharmākara, his self-discipline is not done through self-power, but through the working of Other-power. Dharmākara's metanoetic self-discipline results in the absolute transformation into Amida Buddha. Amida is dependent on Dharmākara, because it is only through his self-discipline that Amida "came into existence"; and Dharmākara is dependent on Amida, because the latter's self-discipline is initiated and sustained by the Primal Vow. In other words: the relative and the absolute need each other. From the point of view of sentient beings, Dharmākara's self-discipline is *ōsō-qua-gensō*; from the point of view of the Tathāgata, it is absolute *gensō*.

Dharmākara symbolizes the *an sich* of the absolute, his self-discipline the *für sich*. As mediating element within absolute nothingness, the truth of relative being is being-as-*upāya* or "empty being." When the relative performs *zange* it realizes its true nature as mediator of absolute transformation. Empty being is characterized by both *ōsō* and *gensō*. The absolute can only "return to the relative" by transforming the relative into a witness of its transformative (saving) power. Absolute *gensō*

58. Tanabe, 334.
59. Tanabe, 337.

is realized when the relation between the absolute and the relative is realized in the relation between relatives. Mediated by empty being, the absolute become *an-und-für sich*. More concretely put: there is no distinction between reciting the nembutsu as a way of praising Amida (action-faith; the relation to the absolute) and communicating Amida's Boundless Compassion (Witness; the relation to other relatives). Without the spontaneous recitation of the nembutsu through Other-power, the Primal Vow remains powerless; yet without the working of the Primal Vow, the nembutsu is nothing more than words, rather than a transformative realization and manifestation of reality in an through naturalness.

V

> I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope
> For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love
> For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith
> But the faith and love and the hope are all in the waiting.[60]

Løgstrup excels in concrete phenomenological descriptions of everyday phenomena. He consciously avoided exploring the interconnectedness of the phenomena he disclosed through dialectics. Without a dialectical moment, however, descriptive philosophy runs the danger of becoming merely a collection of loosely connected analyses, as penetrating and thought-provoking they might be individually.

Tanabe's style of philosophizing differs greatly from Løgstrup's. Dialectics runs through Tanabe's veins. His philosophy is a masterclass in mediation. I believe that this allowed him to delve more deeply into the difficulties that confront a philosophy that is open to religion. A predilection and genius for dialectics also has a downside. The dialectician can easily get carried away and lose themselves in mediation. While Tanabe constantly stresses the importance of concrete historical reality, the actual treatment of everyday phenomena remains quite abstract—if not absent.

Tanabe is very open about the occasion which prompted him to perform *zange*. Where we—fellow ordinary, ignorant persons—have to make a beginning is far from clear. Repenting without a concrete cause would be mere pseudo-religious self-indulgence, a pathological cultivation of guilty conscience. This is where Løgstrup's analysis comes in. The possibility, indeed the necessity, of repentance is rooted in our relation to the other. There is no need for an extraordinary experience, only a change of attitude towards the ordinary. What is lacking in Løgstrup is an exploration of repentance's inner dynamic.

60. T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 17.

The ethical demand never became a philosophical principle for Løgstrup the way metanoesis did for Tanabe. There are two reasons. The first concerns methodology. Staunch phenomenologist as he was, Løgstrup's sole aim was to describe our experience and unearth its hidden presuppositions. The content of the experience itself is not to be meddled with. Dialectics is different. In dialects, what is thought and the act of thinking mutually determine each other. The thought becomes part of the thought-process, transforms it, and generates a new thought and so forth. This makes it possible to transform the act of *zange* into absolute critique. The second reason concerns their religious sources of inspiration. As we have seen, Tanabe considered Shinran to be his metanoetical guide. According to Tanabe, Shinran witnesses Other-power from a religious point of view, and differs from his own philosophical witness of *zangedō*. Their authors, however, are both ordinary, foolish individuals and stand in the same relationship to Other-power. When it comes to the relation to the ethical demand, Jesus and Løgstrup do *not* share a common ground. Jesus teaches the demand with *authority*, through preaching, in which the "radicality of the demand does not arise from an analysis of human beings" existence with each other, nor is it put forth as an idea or advanced as a saying or an aphorism in a learned discussion about the law. On the contrary, its radicality is expressed through the most direct claims and appeals to the bystanders, or to one individual amongst them."[61] This is not an attitude that can be integrated into philosophical discourse. Philosophy is without authority, its task is to bring clarity.

To conclude this essay, I will first consider Tanabe's critique of theism, followed by an exploration of the interrelatedness of the ethical demand and the sovereign expressions of life.

> In the view of theism, God is an absolute existence transcending absolute nothingness and a unifying will embracing the mediation of dialectics. Thus it is clear that the ground of the world and its being are seen not as a mediation of revelation in the self-negation of love but rather as an unmediated, direct activity of God's will which determines the mediation of love. But, speaking metaphorically, God is the principle of democratic organization among people—not lording it over humanity but appearing only in a mediatory function—and therefore the divine activity may be considered as one of mediating among human beings.… Theism, however, does not allow for a deepening of the principle of democracy in the relation between God and human beings. The selective, spontaneous will of God always remains

61. Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, 177.

> the ultimate principle, like the will of an autocratic monarch, and this does not accord with the principle of democracy just referred to.[62]

In sum, because the relation between the absolute and the relative lacks medition, there is—according to Tanabe—no room for genuine freedom in theism. In order to tackle the problem of freedom, we have to have a clear understanding of the relation between God and human beings. Previously it was said that the finite is absolutely dependent and relatively independent. Now I would like to add that eternity is absolutely independent and relatively dependent. God freely binds himself to his creation, and freely grants and sustains finitude's independence—He blesses his creation. By creating, the Creator posits an absolute beginning, thereby manifesting his absolute freedom. Only that which is beginningless can freely posit an *absolute* beginning: "So far as we are able to understand, for Himself God does not constitute either an origin, or an intermediary state, or a consummation, or anything else at all which can be seen to qualify naturally things that are sequent to Him. For He is undetermined, unchanging and infinite, since He is infinitely beyond all being, potentiality and actualization."[63] For Thomas Aquinas, the relation between the Creator and his creation is, from the point of view of the Creator, a conceptual relation; from the point of view of the creation, a real relation.[64] God and his creation do not stand opposed to each other. This would only be the case of the relation were real on both sides. God is absolutely immanent and absolutely transcendent, infinitely close and infinitely distant.

The distinction between a conceptual relation and real relation can shed light on the aforementioned idea of a *realized possibility*. God sustains his creation by giving himself as realized possibility. If God were to incarnate His will as an objective, universal set of laws, that is, an actuality, this would imply a real relation rather than a relation of reason. In that case, Tanabe would be right: there would be no room for freedom creation. In Christianity, however, God did not incarnate himself as law, but as life. The sovereign expressions of life are ethical manifestations of God's divine activity and contain three inseparable elements: a *telos* (selfless love), a definitive principle of movement (e.g. trust, sincerity or compassion), and an obligation to decide for ourselves what best serves the other. In this way God realizes his freedom through us and enables us to participate in his freedom. If we let the truth live through us, it sets us free.

62. Tanabe, *Philosophy as Metanoetics*, 188–189.

63. Maximus Confessor, *Two Hundred Texts on Theology and the Incarnate Dispensation of the Son of God*, First Century, 2.

64. "A creature by its name is related to the creator, but a creature depends on the creator, not the converse. And so the relation whereby a creature depends on the creator is necessarily real, but the relation in God is only conceptual" (Thomas Aquinas, *The Power of God*, 41).

Tanabe interprets Dharmākara and Amida Buddha as nothing more than a symbol for absolute nothingness.[65] Within a Christian framework it is impossible to relativize God's personhood in a similar manner. Yet, God cannot be completely identified as person, since, in himself, "God is one, unoriginate, incomprehensible, possessing completely the total potentiality of being, altogether excluding notions of when and how, inaccessible to all, and not to be known through natural image by any creature."[66] But, when God turns towards us, he truly becomes a person. One might object that when I say "turns towards us" this implies a personal act, and that I'm therefore contradicting myself. Whether I am contradicting myself, I do not know. What I do know is that, when we reach the limits of what can be thought, we have no choice but to resort to metaphorical language.

Christianity has to take Tanabe's critique seriously. It cannot be denied that the traditional conceptualization of God's omnipotence easily leads to the view of an autocratic monarch. Hiding behind the so-called inscrutability of the divine will is no option. Tanabe is right: an unmediated divine will cannot be the ultimate principle if we want to understand God as love. Perhaps we have to reflect more deeply on the Cross as the symbol of the unity of divine omnipotence and divine impotence.

Within a Christian framework, it is impossible to simply adopt Tanabe's idea of absolute mediation. The relation between the personal Creator and his creation is not absolute mediation, but absolute givenness. Givenness can be understood in two ways. Either God, as person, gives us something, or God becomes a person through the act of giving himself. Whatever might be the case, one thing is certain: between the created and the uncreated exists a chasm that can only be bridged by the latter. One of those bridges is the sovereign expressions of life.

The sovereign expressions of life are the alpha and omega of human existence. No one has not at least once performed a genuine selfless deed. No one has not at least once failed to act selflessly. If the unconditional claim to which the sovereign expression of life corresponds is left unfulfilled, it leaves a trace—this trace manifests itself as conscience. Our conscience accuses us: we did something we should not have or refrained from doing something we ought to have done. This gives rise to the phenomenon of law and its implicit *absolute* distinction between good and evil: *thou shalt not*.[67]

65. "[E]ven Amida Buddha is not merely himself identical with absolute nothingness. Taking the form of a personal Buddha called Amida Buddha, his manifestation is a particular form of *gensō* with its own historical affinities, one buddha among many. His being is merely that of a symbol, no more than an *upāya* for leading sentient beings to the truth" (Tanabe, *Philosophy as Metanoetics*, 338).

66. Maximus Confessor, 1.

67. Conscience is not a repository of universal, objective rules. The function of conscience is to accuse past actions, not prescribe future behavior. The law is, in its most basic form, an attempt to objectify conscience (e.g. the decalogue) and will inevitably bear the stamp of the particular historical situation in

The failure of realizing the sovereign expression of life spontaneously is transformed, by conscience, into the ethical demand, even though, at this stage, it is perceived as a command. The demand reveals its true nature through the proclamation of Jesus, where it is coupled with forgiveness; or through the teaching of Shinran, where it is connected with Amida's Primal Vow. We realize that it is impossible to bring forth intentionally a genuine selfless deed. The insight gained through the demand transforms obedience-as-self-power into obedience-through-Other-power. Without the proclamation, the accusation of conscience intensifies calculative thinking (*hakarai*).

> Shinran's insight was that *jiriki* and *hakarai* share a common characteristic: you can participate in neither without first isolating your self from either its goal of praxis or its object of thought. In other words, in both praxis and theory, the Path to Self-perfection assumes a discrete, detached self.[68]

Through calculative thinking, humans attempt to produce reality themselves, rather than letting reality realize itself. We consider the good we do to be our own achievement, something we can pride ourselves on. Intoxicated by our own illusions, we become ever more prideful, ever more blind to the true source of our life. Self-righteousness becomes the *cantus firmus* of our existence.

Sin has the power to turn good into evil. A selfless deed can become, when reflected on, a source of self-satisfaction—in a split moment, light is turned into darkness. As closely related as they are, it is important to keep sin and evil distinct. Whether we do good or evil, our natural mode of being is characterized by sin. Sin consists in relating absolutely to what is relative. As finite beings, the only thing we can relate to absolutely is the relative. This absolute relating, because it originates in the finite, cannot be anything else but a distorted and distorting absoluteness.

A pervasive religious illusion is that, through mediation of a divine law, we are able to relate appropriately to the relative and the absolute. To be sure, obedience to the law can affect and guide our actions for the better, but it can never change our mode of being. The reason is that there is a distance, so to speak, between the law and the good, which cannot but incite *hakarai*. The relation between repentance and forgiveness is different.

Repentance *is* forgiveness.[69] By repenting—which is done through the painful recollection of conscience—we realize that we are not the source of our own exis-

which it was formulated. Not every formulation is of equal rank; sometimes they even run counter to their true intention. This is why "the ideas grounding our rationalizing and organizing must constantly be tested against the expressions of life" (Løgstrup, *Beyond the Ethical Demand*, 156).

68. Kasulis, *Engaging Japanese Philosophy*, 187.

69. "So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be

tence and acknowledge our indebtedness. Whereas we formerly prided ourselves on having acted selflessly, we now understand that our deeds are wrought by the sovereign expressions of life. This insight leads to gratefulness and humility. Through humility, spontaneity is transformed into naturalness. Through repentance, we exist as being forgiven, "becoming as one who has died yet still lives."[70]

We catch a glimpse of eternity by pondering the contradictoriness of the world. Contradiction teaches us the wisdom of humility—the narrow gate of faith. When we repent, Christ dies with us; when He grants forgiveness, we rise with Christ. Faith[71] is directed towards the past and points towards the future; hope[72] is directed towards the future and points towards the present; love[73] realizes the fullness of time in the present. Faith abides in hope and acts through love. Carried by the triunity of faith, hope, and love, we are reborn[74] into the *vita passiva*:

> A condition of complete simplicity (Costing not less than everything)[75]

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opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened" (Luke 11:9–10).

70. Tanabe, *Philosophy as Metanoetics*, 278.

71. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

72. "'The time has come,' he said. 'The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!'" (Mark 1:15).

73. "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres" (1. Cor. 13:4-7).

74. "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh" (Ezek. 36:26).

75. T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 43.

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