

Kyoto School Philosophy

A Call for a Paradigm Shift in Philosophical Thought

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To those of us in the post-World War II generation, Nishida Kitarō 西田幾多郎 and Tanabe Hajime 田辺元, the founders of Kyoto School philosophy, already seem figures of the distant past. The system of thought they established lives on, however, in the work of the late Nishitani Keiji 西谷啓治 and other successors of the Kyoto School tradition. Its continuing development assures the School of a vital place in the world of contemporary philosophy.

The Kyoto School is very much part of the Japanese lineage of thought, yet at the same time incorporates many elements from the Western philosophical tradition. Therein lies one of the chief reasons it can be so difficult to understand. Given the nature of today's world, the issues confronting Japan (and hence the Kyoto School) tend to be global in scale, not uniquely Japanese. The Kyoto School philosophers, realizing this, have attempted to address the cultural and spiritual problems facing modern Japan through an extrapolation of the Western intellectual experience (criticized though they are by certain American and European scholars, who view their interpretations as narrow and one-sided).

Their efforts may also be seen, perhaps more accurately, as an attempt to draw viable conclusions from the world's experience with the predominant cultural and religio-philosophical movements of the West. In this sense the Kyoto School philosophers are very much within the Western tradition; their involvement with Western thought may lack balance, as Jan Van Bragt points out, but its importance to the School cannot be denied, given the inspiration and nourishment the Kyoto philosophers have received from the writings of Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Eckhart.

Nevertheless, it would be naive to characterize the Kyoto School as exclusively an expression of Western thought. The decisive influence the School received from Mahāyāna Buddhism, in both its East Asian and its more distinctly Japanese forms, is almost too well known to be mentioned; even the characteristic terminology of the School, starting with its fundamental concepts of “absolute nothingness” (*zettai mu* 絶対無) and *sūnyatā* (*kū* 空), derives in large part from traditional Buddhist nomenclature.

How, then, has the encounter between these two traditions, Western and Buddhist, taken shape within the Kyoto School, and what is the nature of the resulting system of thought? Does it comprise an attempt, as some have suggested, to apply Buddhist solutions to the problems inherent in Western spiritual traditions? The complexity of the situation belies simple answers, as indicated in the proceedings of two recent symposiums at Smith College on the philosophy of Nishitani and Tanabe.¹ From the Buddhist side, the Kyoto School is seen as having deviated from the principles of Buddhism in all but certain limited areas, and hence as not representing a true expression of Buddhist thought; from the Christian side, the School’s understanding of Christian theology is criticized as narrow and incomplete, and its grasp of the Christian religious experience as lacking in several important respects. The concurrence of the Buddhists and Christians in seeing the Kyoto School as insufficiently aware of certain features central to their respective traditions is a reflection, perhaps, of the critical stand that broader religious experience might be expected to assume with regard to the School’s primarily philosophical approach.

This essay examines two of the critiques directed toward the Kyoto School; with this as a base, it takes up the issue of what the Kyoto School philosophers see as the major problem facing today’s world and how they propose to address it. Through this the essay attempts to clarify the “resurrection of reason,” one of the concepts most characteristic of Kyoto School thought.

¹ Papers presented at the Nishitani symposium (1984) were published as *The Religious Philosophy of Nishitani Keiji: Encounter with Emptiness*, Taitetsu Unno, ed. Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1990 (Nanzan studies in religion and culture); those presented at the Tanabe symposium (1989) were published as *The Religious Philosophy of Tanabe Hajime: The Metanoetic Imperative*, Taitetsu Unno and James W. Heisig, eds. Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1990 (Nanzan studies in religion and culture).

A Critique of the Philosophy of Absolute Nothingness

The Kyoto School's *zettai mu* philosophy – its philosophy of absolute nothingness – has attracted criticism from a number of directions. To address all of these critiques would clearly be beyond the scope of this paper, so I will limit my discussion to two representative examples. The first, which encompasses various other evaluations of the School, is that of Jan Van Bragt; the second, which adopts an argument at first glance diametrically opposed to Van Bragt's, is that of Jamie Hubbard. I have chosen these two critiques because, though nearly opposite in approach, they are in fact quite similar in the fundamental assumptions they make regarding the School's central, Mahāyāna-like concept of *śūnyatā*.

This paper will neither adhere to the positions of Van Bragt or Hubbard nor seek to defend the Kyoto School against their attacks. It will attempt no more than to identify an essential element of the Kyoto School's interpretation of *śūnyatā* that appears to have been overlooked in Van Bragt's and Hubbard's assessments, and that, when taken into consideration, provides an alternate perspective on the thought of the School.

A Critique of *Śūnyatā* Philosophy: Van Bragt

Van Bragt first critiqued *zettai mu* philosophy – or, to be more precise, the Mahāyāna concept of *śūnyatā* – in an article published in 1966.² This and subsequent articles may be considered representative of the Western criticisms of the School, particularly those by Roman Catholic scholars, since Van Bragt's position displays a careful study of the other critics' views. It is a position that he himself admits has remained basically unchanged over the years. An analysis of his views as expressed

² The outline of Van Bragt's thought presented in this article is based primarily on the following three of Van Bragt's writings: 1) "Notulae on Emptiness and Dialogue – Reading Professor Nishitani's *What is Religion?*" *Japanese Religion* (NCC Center for the Study of Japanese Religions) 4/4 (1966): 50–78; 2) 田辺と宗教と哲学 [Tanabe, Religion, and Philosophy], *宗教哲学研究* 8 (1991): 1–16; 3) 空の思想と浄土教 [*Śūnyatā* Thought and Pure Land Buddhism] unpublished talk presented at 東西宗教交流学会 in Kyoto: 15 pages. The present article draws primarily on the last-mentioned work, but nearly identical views are expressed in the preceding two.

in his latest article³ yields the following principal points of opposition to *śūnyatā* thought:

1. It is difficult to understand, placing it out of reach of the ordinary person.
2. It does not, in itself, adequately address the complexities of religious existence.
3. It fails to provide a basis or motivation for action in society.
4. It does not, in itself, supply a sufficient foundation for the understanding of Buddhism (Van Bragt directs this criticism in particular towards scholars of Shin Buddhist thought).

It can be seen that all four of these criticisms emanate from a consistent interpretation of the *śūnyatā* perspective. Van Bragt sees *śūnyatā* thought as fundamentally nothing more than a “principle of negation”—as, in other words, nothing more than a system of thought which, based in the concept of dependent origination, proposes *anātman* as a negation of *ātman* and non-substantiality as a negation of substantiality—leaving one to search elsewhere for a meaningful principle of affirmation. Such a principle can be found, he believes, in the Buddhist notion of compassion or the Christian idea of the love of God.

With this in mind, let us examine the above four points in a bit more detail. In point 1, Van Bragt contends that whereas *śūnyatā* (as the principle of negation) is attainable only through self-power and hence lies out of reach of all but the religious elite, compassion (as the principle of affirmation) is open to other-power and hence can be realized by persons of more ordinary abilities.

Point 2 raises his concern that the negative nature of *śūnyatā* thought renders it unsuitable as a basis for the positive aspects of religion, aspects such as spiritual renewal, the activity of love, and the entire range of tangible religious expression from festivals and feasts to such spiritually inspired music as Handel’s *Messiah*; indeed, it may even dismiss such elements as undesirable “attachment.”⁴ The need for positive expression can only be addressed by the presence of a truly affirmative religious principle.

Point 3 expresses a related view: that true empathy and active service toward other individuals and society in general cannot arise from

³ Van Bragt, 空の思想と浄土教

⁴ Cf. Van Bragt, “Notulae on Emptiness and Dialogue”, 63-64. Also in Van Bragt, 田辺と宗教と哲学, 13-14.

the *śūnyatā* perspective, but require an affirmative, compassion-based orientation.

Point 4 points out that, given the central position of compassion in Buddhist Pure Land thought, one cannot explain Buddhism on the basis of *śūnyatā* alone.

Hence Van Bragt views as unbalanced the Kyoto School's tendency to reduce Buddhism to a limited, negative *śūnyatā* perspective and attempt from there to address the problems of the modern world. He considers Christianity, particularly Roman Catholicism, to possess the affirmative focus overlooked by the *śūnyatā* philosophers, and sees great potential for the future in a dialogue between the two.

Van Bragt, incidentally, sees the Kyoto School's *zettai mu* philosophy as having diverged somewhat from the original Mahāyāna *śūnyatā* position of pure negation. He points out that within the School's philosophy a certain "principle of affirmation" has appeared, with the essentially negative principle of *śūnyatā* taking on more active connotations. Van Bragt sees this as a late, somewhat surreptitious addition to the pure *śūnyatā* position; stressing that the underlying nature of *śūnyatā* thought is negative, he considers its original intent to have been betrayed in the more affirmative interpretation of the Kyoto philosophers.⁵ A principle of affirmation is indeed necessary, but seeking this in *śūnyatā* not only obscures *śūnyatā*'s essential nature but also forfeits the possibility of developing a legitimate affirmative response. It is with the recognition of clearly distinguished affirmative and negative principles, believes Van Bragt, that productive discussion and dialogue becomes possible.

A Critique of Tanabe's Philosophy: J. Hubbard

As mentioned above, Hubbard, in his critique of Tanabe Hajime, takes a stance in some ways antithetical to that of Van Bragt. Hubbard sees a "fatal flaw at the most basic level of [Tanabe's] philosophy," a flaw that "allowed Tanabe . . . to twist his thought to serve the ends of wartime totalitarianism."⁶ This flaw is "absolutism," fatal because it "precluded any real implementation of a social or religious philosophy of Bud-

⁵ Van Bragt, 田辺と宗教と哲学, 11.

⁶ Hubbard, Jamie, "Tanabe's Metanoetics: The Failure of Absolutism," *The Religious Philosophy of Tanabe Hajime*, 363.

dhist compassion such as one might expect from a Shinran-inspired philosopher”⁷—a flaw rooted, in other words, in a fundamental deviation on the part of Tanabe from the original standpoint of Buddhist thought.

By “absolutism” Hubbard refers to the preoccupation of Tanabe (and of the Kyoto School as a whole) with the concept of the absolute, expressed in his constant coinage of terms like “absolute mediation, absolute repentance . . . absolute transformation . . . absolute Other-power.”⁸ According to Hubbard, Tanabe’s absolutism carries an implicit recognition of an absolute essence, an Absolute Being, which by definition possesses the characteristics of “homogeneity, non-contingency, permanence, non-relation, etc.”⁹ *Zettai* 絶対, the Japanese rendering of “absolute,” has similar connotations: *zettai* combines the character meaning “to cut off,” with that meaning “opposed” or “related,” signifying a severing of relations with other things, or, in more Buddhistic terms, a nonparticipation in the chain of dependent origination. This is a direct contradiction of the Buddhist teaching of *śūnyatā*, which sees all things as causally determined and thus without permanent, independent existence; the notion of an Absolute, though disguised by the word *mu*, is thus a betrayal of the most fundamental Buddhist concepts. Hubbard directs this criticism specifically to Tanabe, but his reasoning applies to the entire Kyoto School insofar as it stresses the philosophy of absolute nothingness.

Although Hubbard’s critique resists facile comparisons with Van Bragt’s, one might conclude that, while Van Bragt takes the Kyoto School to task from a Christian point of view for its lack of a true affirmative principle in *zettai mu* philosophy, Hubbard chastises it from a Buddhist point of view for incorporating into this philosophy affirmative elements which contradict the essential teaching of *śūnyatā*. Despite the difference in direction, their respective positions share a common perspective, namely, that Kyoto School philosophy has surreptitiously incorporated principles incompatible with and not derivable from the original Buddhist notion of *śūnyatā*.

Their arguments both rest on the same proposition: that *śūnyatā* teaching locates all things within the chain of dependent origination, denies permanent existence, and affirms impermanent, causal exist-

⁷ Hubbard, “Tanabe’s Metanoetics,” 363

⁸ Hubbard, “Tanabe’s Metanoetics,” 363.

⁹ Hubbard, “Tanabe’s Metanoetics,” 366.

tence. Central to this proposition, of course, is a particular definition of the concept of *śūnyatā*. Conceptually speaking there is no reason to disallow the above definition, which, if followed, does indeed lead to a view of *śūnyatā* as a mere principle of negation. I wonder, though, whether there might not be more than one attitude or standpoint from which this issue might be approached. If the efforts of the Kyoto School thinkers are seen as an attempt to deal with such alternate attitudes and standpoints, a new perspective on the philosophy of *zettai mu* is revealed.

Two Perspectives on *Śūnyatā*

Śūnyatā thought, insofar as it derives from the doctrine of dependent origination and hence of *anātman*, can be traced back to the original teachings of Śākyamuni, but it was with the appearance of Mahāyāna Buddhism that it took form as a general principle, an overall worldview, based on a rejection of the concept of *svabhāva* ("self-nature"). This basic worldview was organized into a highly developed philosophical system by Nāgārjuna (c. 2nd–3rd century AD), and accompanied the transmission of Mahāyāna Buddhism to China and Japan.

In the process of this transmission, the emphasis in *śūnyatā* thought shifted from abstract theory back to the more original concept of *śūnyatā* as a reality to be experienced through practice on the path to liberation. This attitude is most clearly expressed in Zen, which aims for a personal, bodily realization of emptiness and takes a critical attitude towards those whose understanding is merely speculative. The Zen standpoint may be expressed in Christian mystical terms as one that transcends all notions of *śūnyatā* as conceived by "natural reason"¹⁰

¹⁰ 自然の理性 . This is a term originating in the concept *natürliche Vernunft* in German mystical theology (see Der Frankfurter, *Eine Deutsche Theologie*, translated with introduction by Joseph Bernhart, Frankfurt, 1980, 122, 124; Ferdinand Vetter, ed., *Die Predigten Taulers*, Deutsche Texte des Mittelalters, vol. 11, Dublin/Zurich, 1968, 66). It is frequently cited in Nishitani Keiji's essay 獨逸神秘主義 [German Mysticism] in 神と絶対無 [God and Absolute Nothingness]. According to Nishitani, German mystical thought sees "insight" as that which, through the negation of "natural reason," attains to the realization that "the innermost recess of the soul is the same as the innermost recess of God" (CW 7:161-162 [see note 12 for an explanation of the reference used here]). It should be noted, however, that this clear distinction between "reason" and "insight" is not that of the German mystics, but of Nishitani. In 宗教とは何か [What is Religion? Translated into English by Jan Van Bragt as *Religion and Nothingness*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982], Nishitani's term 理性 [reason] corre-

(a mistaken approach even Buddhism is not immune to) and stresses a positive understanding issuing from what could be called “religious insight” (based on the Scholastic term *intelligere*). It is, so to speak, a physically experienced understanding of *śūnyatā*.

Śūnyatā thought teaches that all things are without self-nature, but how this teaching is understood is of great importance: if the central issue becomes merely the presence or nonpresence of self-nature, then *śūnyatā* knowledge can easily assume the same subject-object structure that defines both conventional thinking and scientific speculation. The problem that the Kyoto School philosophers address is the overcoming of this ordinary, dichotomous manner of knowledge; they are, I believe, calling for a paradigm shift in our ways of understanding.

Viewed in this way, it becomes clear why Kyoto School philosophy is so close to the existential tradition beginning with Kierkegaard.¹¹ Our conventional, scientific, and philosophic modes of knowledge are precisely that which are at fault; because of them the truth we seek can neither be revealed nor transmitted. For this reason Kierkegaard stresses that the direct (i.e. conceptual) communication of truth is impossible.

Zen, too, challenges us to break through the limits of our conventional thought processes and grasp a radically different reality. Here Zen faces a fundamental contradiction, however: in order to help the practitioner overcome ordinary modes of thought, it must—despite *śūnyatā* philosophy’s rejection of the subject-object dichotomy—emphasize the dualistic issues of “practice” and “subject.” As long as “practice” is set in opposition to “theory,” and “subject” in opposition to “object” or “substance,” the fundamental subject-object dichotomy can never be overcome.

Hence the Zen practitioner, i.e., the “subject” who experiences *śūnyatā*, must become the “subject that is not a subject,” the subject that transcends all opposition, all “otherness,” to both practice and theory. The attainment of this can only be through “practice that is not practice,” in which all opposition between practice and theory is gone. (This may, indeed, define the special character of all true religious practice.) The Kyoto School philosophers see this as lying beyond the

sponds to this usage of “natural reason”; through the negation of reason one realizes *śūnyatā*, “manifestation-sive-apprehension” (a subject considered later in this paper), the true self-indescribable even by the term “insight.”

¹¹ Tanabe praises Kierkegaard highly in 實存と愛と實踐 [Existence, Love, and Practice]

capacities of existential thought—one of the principal reasons, I believe, that they call for the transcendence of such thought.

The type of paradigm shift indicated here may be less apparent in the thought of Tanabe than in that of the other Kyoto School thinkers. Still, when Tanabe portrays his “philosophy as metanoetics” as “a philosophy that is not a philosophy,” he is announcing his leaving behind of conventional modes of thought and knowledge grounded in “natural reason.”

Nishitani’s View of “Absolute Nothingness”: *Śūnyatā* in Religion and Nothingness

For a clearer presentation of the nature of this paradigm-shift philosophy, one must turn from the thought of Tanabe to that of Nishitani. An outline of Nishitani’s ideas as expressed in *Religion and Nothingness* 宗教とは何か will, I hope, demonstrate that the Kyoto School is attempting to develop a philosophy that operates on principles quite different from those assumed by its critics.

The Subject-Object Dichotomy and the Standpoint of Śūnyatā

The first issue taken up by Nishitani is the necessity, in the philosophy of *zettai mu*, of transcending natural reason: the everyday, subject-object way of looking at things that defines the parameters of everyday life, of modern scientific thought, and of conventional philosophical speculation. Without such a transcendence, he says, “We cannot come in touch with the reality of things.”¹²

According to Nishitani, “Throughout the history of Western thought . . . being or existence has, by and large, been thought of in terms of either the category of ‘substance’ or that of ‘the subject’.”¹³ By substance is meant “that which makes a thing to be what it is and makes it preserve its self-identity.”¹⁴ To regard a thing as substantial implies

¹² CW 10:133; *Religion and Nothingness*, 118. References for quotes from Nishida, Tanabe, and Nishitani are from their collected works in Japanese, with the volume and page numbers given in that order. References for the English translations are also given when available. The collected work editions cited for the respective authors are: 西田幾多郎全集 [*The Collected Works of Nishida Kitarō*], 19 volumes, Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten; 田邊元全集 [*The Collected Works of Tanabe Hajime*], 15 volumes, Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō; 西谷啓治著作集 [*The Writings of Nishitani Keiji*], 26 volumes, Tokyo: Sōbunsha.

¹³ CW 10:124; *Religion and Nothingness*, 110.

¹⁴ CW 10:124; *Religion and Nothingness*, 110.

its representation as an object external to that which is subject; hence to view being as substance is to be inextricably entangled in the subject-object dichotomy. Within this framework the nature of subject – that which cannot be object – inevitably becomes a problem.

Since the time of Kant, philosophy has come to characterize this non-objectifiable sense of subjectivity as “subjectivity in Existenz.”¹⁵ It is important in this construct to distinguish “being as substance” from “being as subject.”¹⁶ Both substance and subject nevertheless presuppose the same subject-object dichotomy: object is regarded by subject as substance, and subject is subject only in relation to object (this being the sole condition under which the representation of subject can occur).

According to Nishitani, the self-identity of substance, its mode of being as it is in itself, is none other than Buddhist “self-nature.”¹⁷ Hence the self-nature of things and of ego cannot be negated as long as we, on the basis of the subject-object dichotomy, continue to regard the being of things as substance and the being of ego as subject – we may espouse the teachings of *śūnyatā* and *anitya* (impermanence), but we can never actually overcome the concept of self-nature. One might assent conceptually to such propositions as “Things exist in a relationship of mutual dependence with other things; hence they are without self-nature,” but if these “other things” are regarded as objects, as representations existing over against the self as subject, then one has yet to attain the standpoint of *śūnyatā*, has yet to grasp things in their true mode of being.

Nishitani emphasizes that the self must “shift to an entirely new field, different from what it has hitherto known,”¹⁸ in which the “simply ‘theoretical’ standpoint of merely inquiring into existence, a stand-

¹⁵ CW 10:124; *Religion and Nothingness*, 111.

¹⁶ According to Nishitani, “The standpoint of the subject laid bare its ground only when it advanced to an ecstatic self-transcendence on the field of nihility. But this meant that at the same time nihility was opened up at the ground of the existence of things” (CW 10:153; *Religion and Nothingness*, 135). Since *śūnyatā* can only be attained through an experience of the standpoint of nihility, the standpoint of the subject assumes major importance in the process of transcending views of existence as substance. Unfortunately this topic is beyond the scope of this paper, as is the central topic of nihility.

¹⁷ cf. CW 10:132; *Religion and Nothingness*, 117–18. Though Nishitani views “substance” and “self-nature” as equivalent, the identification of the Christian and Western philosophical concept of “substance” with the Buddhist concept of “self-nature” is in fact quite problematic. This essay, however, will confine itself to a consideration of Nishitani’s line of thinking.

¹⁸ CW 10:126; *Religion and Nothingness*, 112.

point at which the questioned and the questioner [are] set apart from each other” is transcended and one enters “the kind of field where questioner and questioned are both transformed into a single great question.”¹⁹ If this “entirely new field” is understood as the field of pure experience, experience prior to the opposition of subject and object, then it corresponds to the realm pointed to in the philosophy of Nishida.²⁰ In this, the very field of *sūnyatā*, “the mode of being of ‘things’ and the mode of being of the self can no longer be either substantial or subjective.”²¹ Our grasp of things in this new field no longer corresponds to our ordinarily modes of cognition.

Things, Self, and Manifestation-sive-Apprehension

I would next like to consider two questions relating to this “entirely new field.” First, in what way are things and the self manifested in this field, and, second, in what manner does the actual knowledge of things occur? Needless to say, in the field of *sūnyatā* the opposition of subject and object is transcended, rendering the issue of “things” versus “self” irrelevant, but for purposes of explanation I will treat them for the time being as separate.

Let us first consider the matter of things. As mentioned above, we generally regard things as being “of substance.” Even in this case the concept of “thing” points to the self-identity of the thing over against its external attributes, but such understanding is limited to a grasp of the form of things in relation to ourselves as subject. The only matter at issue in this case is, in other words, the selfness of a thing as opposed to us—the self-identity of the thing itself is not being expressed. The latter type of expression occurs only when the distinctive subject-object

¹⁹ CW 10:125; *Religion and Nothingness*, 111–12.

²⁰ See Nishida Kitarō’s 善の研究 [*A Study of the Good*. Translated into English by Abe Masao and Christopher Ives as *An Inquiry into the Good*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990]. According to Nishida, pure experience is “to know facts as they are . . . by completely relinquishing one’s own fabrications . . . without the least addition of deliberative discrimination” (CW 1:9; *An Inquiry into the Good*, 3), a state in which “there is not yet a subject or an object, and knowing and its object are completely unified” (CW 1:9; *An Inquiry into the Good*, 4). Moreover, “no matter how complex it might be, at the moment it occurs, pure experience is always a simple fact” (CW 1:11; *An Inquiry into the Good*, 5). Nishitani, too, talks of the standpoint of *sūnyatā* as that which precedes the division of subject and object, adding, “the sheer fact of hotness,” does not exist in a “sensory world” nor in “a world apart, an ‘intelligible world’ of ideas,” but in “the field of absolute nothingness . . . at one with the world of primary fact” (CW 10:144; *Religion and Nothingness*, 127).

²¹ CW 10:126; *Religion and Nothingness*, 112.

referent is cast away and all things, inclusive of self, stand in a relationship of equality.

This relationship of mutual equality is, of course, a relationship of mutual dependence. If we regard a thing from the standpoint of its dependence upon all other things, we see that the thing is in a position of “servant” to all other things; if we regard a thing from the standpoint of all other things being dependent upon *it*, we see that the thing is in a position of “master” to all other things. This is the case not only in certain specific relationships but in all relationships. Nishitani calls this mode of relationship “circuminsessional.”²² It is only within this circuminsessional relationship that, for all things, the self-identity of the thing itself can be expressed; that, in other words, a thing can become “master of itself,” can express “the autonomous mode of being of that thing.”²³

Nishitani elaborates upon this mode of being as follows:

Insofar as we can speak of a thing in itself, we imply a quality that draws it into the concept of substantiality; and insofar as we are able to speak of a thing as autonomous, we imply a quality that fastens it to the concept of subjectivity. But of itself it is neither substance nor object. We have here a completely different concept of existence, one that has not up to now become a question for people in their daily lives, one that even philosophers have yet to give consideration.²⁴

It is probably inappropriate to equate this “completely different concept of existence” with “self-nature,” since it is viable only within the context of a circuminsessional relationship. If one *were* to label this fundamental mode of being as “self-nature,” one would have to utilize the paradoxical statement that the self-nature of a thing consists of non-self-nature.

The same considerations that apply to “things” apply to the matter of “self.” They apply also to the epistemological question of how things are known within the field of *śūnyatā*. As mentioned above, in the field of *śūnyatā* things do not exist as objects of knowledge, since rationality—the subject’s ability to represent a thing as “object”—is no longer operative in the *śūnyatā* realm. *Śūnyatā* knowledge is not knowledge of something, nor, of course, is it rational cognizance—it is the touching

²² CW 10:166; *Religion and Nothingness*, 148.

²³ CW 10:144; *Religion and Nothingness*, 127.

²⁴ CW 10:145; *Religion and Nothingness*, 128.

of the very reality of a thing. In this *śūnyatā* epistemology the self is no longer the subject who knows; rather, it exists in a circuminsessional relationship with the thing touched, a relationship of complete equality in which the ego itself becomes a “thing” and hence has its own reality touched upon.

Śūnyatā knowledge is knowledge free of the bifurcating ego, knowledge in which contact with the reality of a thing is at the same time contact with the reality of the self. Such knowledge is generally termed “self-awareness” but, as Nishitani notes, “This self-awareness, in contrast with what is usually taken as the self’s knowing of itself, is not a ‘knowing’ that consists in the self’s turning to itself and refracting into itself.”²⁵ It is not a knowing, in other words, which incorporates any type of objectification, including intuitive knowing and rational intuition. Nishitani explains *śūnyatā* knowledge as follows:

. . . knowledge of things in themselves (the knowing of non-knowing) means precisely that in truly returning to our own home-ground, we return to the home-ground of things that become manifest in the world. This knowledge is a realization (apprehension) in the sense of a reentry to the home-ground where things are manifest in their suchness. This reentry to the point where things in themselves realize themselves nonobjectively and posit themselves . . . means for the self a direct reentry to the home-ground of the self itself. This is a knowing of non-knowing. In a word, it is the nonobjective knowing of the nonobjective thing as it is in itself that we speak of. It is not a knowledge, therefore, that depends on rational capacity.²⁶

In this realm thing and self are no longer distinguished, so that things in their selfness, in their original mode of being, are one with self in its original mode of being (i.e. the true self). Since in this field self equals thing, a way of knowing not dependent upon objectification comes into existence. The actualization of things in their true self-identity is thus none other than the “nonobjective knowing” mentioned by Nishitani. Nishitani labels this mode of knowing “manifestation-sive-apprehension.”²⁷

It should not be thought, however, that Nishitani, in taking up the issue of a “true self” in this way, is betraying the notions of *anātman* and

²⁵ CW 10:174; *Religion and Nothingness*, 154.

²⁶ CW 10:183; *Religion and Nothingness*, 163.

²⁷ CW 10:174; *Religion and Nothingness*, 155.

śūnyatā. The following quote should clarify what he means when he refers to true self.

. . . by turning from what we ordinarily call “self” to the field of *śūnyatā*, we become truly ourselves This means that the field of the so-called self, the field of self-consciousness and consciousness, is broken down. In a more elemental sense, it means that we take leave of the essential self-attachment that lurks in the essence of self-consciousness and by virtue of which we get caught in our own grasp in trying to grasp ourselves. It means also that we take leave of the essential attachment to things that lurks in the essence of consciousness and by virtue of which we get caught in the grasp of things in trying to grasp them in an objective, representational manner.²⁸

Absolute Nothingness

Nishitani frequently uses the expression *zettai mu*, absolute nothingness, synonymously with the term *śūnyatā*. This usage is in many ways problematic, and leaves Nishitani open to criticisms similar to those Hubbard directs toward Tanabe’s supposed “absolutism.” The issue is too broad for adequate treatment in this paper, but it might be of interest to note that the “absoluteness” of Nishitani’s *śūnyatā* concept does not invariably signify the cutting off of relations with others that Hubbard finds so objectionable. Indeed, Nishitani argues that it is precisely within the *śūnyatā*-based circuminsessional relationship that non-self-nature becomes possible.²⁹ It is, in other words, precisely within the field of circuminsessional relationship—the “place” in which all relative existence including the self interrelates and interpenetrates—that the notion of “absoluteness” can be spoken of. Without relative existence the circuminsessional field could not arise, so that the latter is mediated by the former.

Nevertheless, why does Nishitani find it necessary to use the term “absolute nothingness”? The reason, I believe, lies in Nishitani’s call for a fundamental paradigm shift in our way of thinking. Ordinarily we think and communicate in words and concepts, a process rooted in what I referred to earlier as natural or everyday reason. The field of *śūnyatā*, however, demands the overturn of this type of reason, and therefore cannot be expressed in the conventions of ordinary speech.

²⁸ CW 10:170; *Religion and Nothingness*, 151.

²⁹ CW 10:166-67; *Religion and Nothingness*, 148.

The statement “One cannot say that *śūnyatā* is *A*” signifies something quite different from the statement “*Śūnyatā* is not *A*.” The latter can be reexpressed as “If *Śūnyatā* is not *A*, then it is *-A*,” but such a reformulation is inappropriate in the case of the former: that which cannot be expressed as *A* also cannot be expressed as *-A*. The latter is a situation of negation as opposed to affirmation, while the former is less negation than transcendence, in which the dualistic constructs of negation and affirmation are both left behind.

The limits of language force us to refer to both of these expressions as negations, however. Here the latter—negation as opposed to affirmation—could be termed relative nothingness, while the former—a transcendence of such opposition—would correspond to absolute nothingness. *Zettai mu* in its true sense signifies neither negation nor nothingness, but rather what Eckhart calls the “essence” of God. Nishitani, citing Eckhart, characterizes this “essence” as “. . . an altogether formless, absolute ‘nothingness’ [that is] beyond any of the forms in which he discloses himself to his creatures.”³⁰

Conclusion

Above I have attempted to present an outline of the paradigm shift central to Nishitani’s philosophy. Tanabe’s philosophy develops the Kyoto School *zettai mu* tradition in a direction quite different from that of Nishida and Nishitani, yet the two lines resemble one another in their call for an overturn of ordinary, natural reason. Tanabe’s fundamental posture is reflected in his statement that

. . . the reason that dies in the depths of absolute critique is not resurrected in the same form as before, as reason whose principle is self-identity.³¹

It should be stressed that what the Kyoto School seeks in this paradigm shift is not an across-the-board destruction, negation, or abandonment of the rational faculty, but rather its *rebirth*. Reason and subject-object discrimination are necessary to everyday life—they cannot simply be discarded. Life in the world demands rational, responsible behavior from us, the subjects who think and act.

³⁰ CW 10:130; *Religion and Nothingness*, 115.

³¹ CW 9:61; Tanabe Hajime, *Philosophy as Metanoetics*, translated by Takeuchi Yoshinori and James W. Heisig. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986, 55.

The rebirth of reason called for by the Kyoto School philosophers requires of the ordinary intellect a passage through the dimension of *śūnyatā*, of “not subject, not object,” a dimension which is in fact the intellect’s place of origin. By means of this passage—or the continued reexperience of this passage—the dissolution of self-attachment (the “daydream” or “root perversion”) can be attained.³² Again, this does not imply the destruction of the thinking, rational subject, whose continued existence is necessary for carrying out the activities of everyday life.

The Kyoto School philosopher Ueda Shizuteru explains the functioning of the reborn reason using Nishida’s statement, “I see a flower. At that moment, the flower is me and I am the flower.”³³ According to Ueda, the first part of this statement, “I see a flower,” is parallel in structure to the subject-object modes of expression inherent to the conscious mind, and in this sense appears to reflect the workings of ordinary, dualistic reason. This resemblance is only apparent, however: the reborn rationality encompasses the distinction of “self” and “flower,” so that the “self” can “look” at a “flower,” but it differs from ordinary rationality in that it does not consider the fundamental nature of this occurrence to be a directing of the function-of-looking by the self-as-subject toward the flower-as-object. The reason for this is that, in the consciousness of the reborn rationality, “the flower is me and I am the flower.”

The everyday intellect, the scientific intellect, the philosophic intellect, do not experience this, because, unlike the reborn intellect, they have not passed through the field of *śūnyatā* in which subject and object remain in their primal unity, in which both “self” and “flower” are self-expressions of the undifferentiated self.³⁴ Both ways of understanding the statement “I see a flower” involve reflection, but the nature of that reflection changes depending upon whether or not it has passed through the field of *śūnyatā*. Ueda comments as follows:

Reflection, when it knows the pre-reflective state (in which knowledge does not comprise reflection upon reflection, but

³² See Ueda Shizuteru, 絶対無の宗教哲学 [The Religious Philosophy of Absolute Nothingness] 350, in 宗教学のすすめ [An Invitation to Religious Studies], Ueda Shizuteru and Yanagawa Keiichi, eds. Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1985, 330–56. Also Ueda Shizuteru, 経験と自覚 (続) [Experience and Self-Awareness (sequel)], in 思想, 744:88

³³ CW 16:430.

³⁴ See Ueda Shizuteru, 経験と自覚 (続), 88–89.

rather self-awareness), is qualitatively different from that type of reflection that has yet to break through the limits of reflection.³⁵

Kant, the last of the Enlightenment philosophers, attempted to define the limits of reason through a critical exploration of its function, and was finally forced to identify the “radical evil” as lying within reason itself. This problem inherent in reason itself became ever more apparent with the passage of time, as the increased rationalism called for by the Enlightenment philosophers led paradoxically to expanded barbarism and misery.

Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialektik der Aufklärung* also takes up the problem of our ever-greater reliance on the rational faculty, a faculty we can neither reject nor do without. Adorno and Horkheimer suggest that as long as reason is our only means of resolving the problem – the *misery* – of our unabandonable rationalism, then it is precisely reason in which we must place our hope. Yet if this “reason” in which we place our hope is none other than the “reason” that first gave rise to our misery, how is it to aid us?

The Kyoto School philosophers emphasize that the reason must experience death and subsequently be reborn as a new mode of reason, that reflection must pass through the field of *śūnyatā* and emerge as a new mode of reflection. This stress upon the conversion-and-resurrection or death-and-resurrection of the reason (to use Tanabe’s terms) reflects the living experience of the Kyoto School philosophers themselves, an experience often founded upon long-continued Zen practice but also existing in quite similar form in Christian mysticism (a fact these philosophers often point out).

Mysticism in this sense is a phenomenon seen universally in all religious traditions, suggesting that the mystical experience is fundamental to mankind. The reverberations of this experience may imbue not only Christian mysticism but also more “orthodox” forms of Christian faith. The study of the various religious traditions, by providing actual examples of the death-and-resurrection of the reason, may support the concept of paradigm shift central to the Kyoto School’s philosophy of absolute nothingness.

Nevertheless, even such indications of the universality of the death-and-resurrection of reason cannot fully resolve the many questions which remain concerning Kyoto School philosophy – questions,

³⁵ Ueda Shizuteru, 経験と自覚 [Experience and Self-Awareness], in 思想, 738:46

for example, about the concrete functioning of the resurrected faculties of reason and reflection, and about the nature of the philosophical system based on this “new reason” (Tanabe’s “philosophy that is not a philosophy”). Must, for example, those who wish to participate in this philosophy have themselves undergone the death-and-resurrection experience? If so, can such an approach be properly considered part of the academic philosophical tradition?³⁶

The consideration of such issues in the future may form a fruitful line of investigation for the Kyoto School.

[translated by Thomas Kirchner]

³⁶ Several philosophers dispute the Kyoto School’s qualifications as a system of academic thought. Nakano Hajimu 中基肇, for example, specifically denies the academicity of Tanabe’s philosophy as metanoetics—the “philosophy that is not a philosophy”—and everything subsequent (Nakano Hajimu, 田辺哲学解説 [An Analysis of “Tanabe Philosophy”] in 近代日本思想大系 [An Outline of Modern Japanese Thought] 23 田辺元集 [The Works of Tanabe Hajime], Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1975, 432, 454). Nakano’s reasoning is that if reason is abandoned philosophical development becomes impossible; conversely, if philosophical development *does* take place, this is proof that reason has not truly been abandoned (439, 440, 456). Hence even if one grants the possibility of the death-and-resurrection of reason and reflection, the nature of these resurrected faculties remains to be defined.