

Robert E. CARTER, *The Nothingness Beyond God: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Nishida Kitaro*. Second Edition. St. Paul: Paragon House, 1997. xxvii + 228 pp. \$16.95 paper, ISBN 1-55778-761-1.

“NISHIDA’S STUDY of Zen is not a study of Zen thinking and Zen logic, as though thinking and logic were the primary training and practice of a Zen monk”; rather, in the “process of unraveling the philosophical topography of the Zen landscape” he took his cue from pure experience “pure no-thingness

... empty of any and all distinctions. Yet its emptiness and nothingness is a chock-a-block fulness, for it is all experience-to-come. It is rose, child, river, anger, death, pain, rocks, and cicada sounds" (174–75). Such are the tones in which Robert Carter presents Nishida's thought. One thinks of a master-phenomenologist, a Japanese Heidegger grounded in Zen and in the entire sweep of Eastern tradition, a thinker in whom "everything clarifies itself to itself through pure experience, and it does so within the nothingness wherein pure experience itself arises" (177). Surely Nishida must emerge as the greatest philosopher of all time.

Alas, not so. Turn to Nishida's texts and you will find a murky writer, stringing out an argumentation that is unsatisfactory in terms of logical development and lucid articulation. Nishida proceeds by gropings and suppositions, and this rules out the possibility of reviewing and checking his arguments. When he establishes some point to his own satisfaction he asserts it again and again, but the arguments he musters for it are broad speculative constructions that do not lend themselves to further detailed critique or development. The basic structure is a transcendental argument that moves from empirical knowledge to its basis in self-awareness (Kant's synthetical unity of apperception), and to the "intelligible world" in which self-awareness finds itself as it confronts the absolutes of the true, the beautiful, and the good (Hermann Cohen's domain of pure knowing, pure willing, pure feeling). This world in turn finds its ultimate locus in absolute nothingness. There is a hierarchy of self-determining universals, one embracing the other, and absolute nothingness is the universal of all universals. As a concrete universal it determines everything else in determining itself. Absolute nothingness is known not by conceptual analysis but by a leap beyond conceptual thinking, whereby the tensions and antinomies of conceptual thinking are resolved.

What marks the realm of absolute nothingness, which is also the realm of the present moment of pure experience, is a "self-identity of absolute contradictions"—a motif that recurs obsessively in Nishida's mature works. Nishida habitually postulates that all contraries must ultimately have a ground that unifies them. But he does not allow this unity to display itself in a patiently worked out dialectic in the manner of Hegel. Rather, the postulate short-circuits the recognition and exploration of differences. Whenever an opposition emerges, Nishida immediately discovers an underlying unity. Thethetic character of his thought thus disables real dialectical development. The resultant sterility might be offset by phenomenological evocations of absolute nothingness, in the manner of Zen, and indeed Nishida does gesture in this direction, sometimes with the assistance of quotations from Zen poems. Carter vamps up the phenomenological suggestions in Nishida's thought, conferring on dusty professorial suppositions a momentous significance by enshrining them amid classic texts of Eastern religious thought. The reader notices how conventional Nishida's response to Eastern tradition was and how poorly he used it. Carter himself is a more eloquent and imaginative exponent of Zen.

Often Nishida is outshone by the prestigious sources cited to elucidate his significance. His first work, *A Study of Good*, is lucid and brisk in comparison to the turbid marasmus of his later writing. But when Carter quotes William James as background to the idea of pure experience, poor Nishida is eclipsed. James would approve, Carter claims, of Nishida's sense of the self as nothing more than a unitive functionality. But Nishida does not dwell with that insight and expound it in a telling way; rather he spoils it by immediately drawing a connection with religious enlightenment, "the apprehension of that profound unity which lies at the foundation of intelligence and the will, namely a kind of intellectual intuition, a deep grasp of life" (quoted, p. 3 and p. 12). This overleaping of the phenomena at hand in a hasty flailing after omni-comprehensive theory is perhaps Nishida's central weakness. Carter, whose study is based on the English translations, seems not to see any weakness at all. Rather hopefully, he takes Nishida's statements on intellectual intuition as attesting a phenomenological vision deeper even than James's grounding of all intellectual "perches" in "the original undifferentiated flow of pure flight." "Pure experience is an heuristic limiting concept for James, whereas it appears to be an actual and direct experience for Nishida. Indeed, a culture of meditation, of silence and emptiness would not find pure experience a speculative fact, but an original experience out of which conceptual experience is carved" (8); hence he "apparently breaks with James, who urged that all direct experience was already post pure experience" (11). Here a form of orientalism is being invoked to make a virtue out of Nishida's relative naivety. As usual in Western presentations of Nishida, no account is taken of the Japanese critics who dogged him from the beginning of his career; nor did Nishida, sublimely solipsistic, take any account of them either.

Carter's presentation centers on "the logic of *basho*" whereby Nishida brings all things back to their "place" in absolute nothingness. This logic is supposed to do more justice to knowledge of the individual *qua* individual than Aristotle could. Whereas in Aristotle a less general universal (the subject) is subsumed under a more general universal (the predicate), Nishida, inspired by Hegel's concrete universal that includes the individual, effects a "Copernican revolution" by changing the question from "how are these two universal concepts unified?" to "how can such specification of the wider (more general) universal occur" (27). If Nishida does succeed in thinking the individual, it happens off stage. That is, we are assured that the intuition of absolute emptiness restores access to things in their thusness, and that the self "is at each moment in the process of transformation, now losing every trace of itself in nothingness, now blooming selflessly with the flowers and like one of them, now meeting another and making the encounter into its own self" (176). But what actually meets us on Nishida's page is a monochrome sequence of abstractions, which are less oriented to the individual than the categories of Aristotle, Hegel, or Bergson.

Nishida is a significant figure in the history of philosophy, particularly in view of his role as a bridge between European and Japanese tradition. But it is misleading to market him as a great philosopher. What is needed is a clear

diagnosis of the failures of his thought. The failures are partly a matter of his personal intellectual temperament, and partly a result of wrong turnings that he shares with European inheritors of German idealism. But they may also reflect a crisis in the assimilation of Western ideas in Japan, as well as the stress to which European styles of argument are exposed when put at the service of a Japanese quest for the wisdom of emptiness.

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