

James W. HEISIG, *Philosophers of Nothingness: An Essay on the Kyoto School*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001. xi + 380 pp. \$21.95 paper, ISBN 0-8248-2481-4.

THIS MAGISTERIAL SURVEY of the three major Kyoto school philosophers (Nishida, Tanabe, and Nishitani) is a ripe synthesis of previous study that should also serve as a plateau for future engagements with these thinkers. It portrays dramatically the three men and their careers and carries on a lively argument with their thought. Here, in a little sprint in the wake of Heisig's marathon strides, I shall air three questions which kept coming to mind as I read him: (1) What is the value of this philosophy as a channel of Buddhist insights? (2) What is the status of "God" in its discourse? (3) How can we sift what is living from what is dead in the philosophy of the Kyoto school?

(1) The Kyoto thinkers open a subversive Buddhist perspective on Western philosophy. Where the thought of Hegel culminates in a rich vision of being, as spirit, Nishida and Tanabe open out philosophical dialectic to absolute nothingness as the ultimate horizon. Too fixated on being and form, Western philosophy cannot handle nihilism and falls into nihilism. Nishitani cures this by recalling both being and nihilism to their home-ground in Buddhist emptiness. To the extent that they succeed in installing a central oriental preoccupation on the stage of European philosophy, the Kyoto thinkers can claim the status of world philosophers: "never before had the western tradition been broken, spliced, enlarged, or seriously challenged by Asian thought" (8). (Not even in India?) In addition, the Kyoto thinkers have provided a "wider intellectual perspective" to "Zen and Pure Land theoreticians" (9), as well as "some measure of synthesis to the study of eastern ideas in the west" (260).

Nishida introduced the theme of "absolute nothingness" in the mid-twenties (his mid-fifties) in a "turn to religion" (296). The religion in question is not formal Buddhism but an Eastern sense of nothingness as the background whence history and especially artistic creation arise. This nothingness is an "eternal now" in contrast to the Greek sense of history as coming from the past and the Christian sense of it as acquiring its meaning from the future. Not Zen insight, but a craving for metaphysical unity is what prevails in the discourse of nothingness: "When we submerge ourselves into the depths of self-awareness in active intuition and take the standpoint of a self whose see-

ing has negated the seer, all things that exist are transformed into a self-awareness and a self-expression" (quoted, p. 59). The "negation of the seer" suggests that the true self is no-self and that it is a Zen-like creativity, arising on the ground of no-self, that is the basis of art and creative morality. But Heisig observes that whereas "the idea of the no-self ... has always been a polyvalent notion" (264), having a different bearing in different uses, such a merely operational approach to no-self seemed unphilosophical to the Kyoto thinkers. Rather, "a self-awareness without a subject was made to function as a paradigm for the structure of reality itself" (265). Milking Buddhist conceptions for the purposes of constructing a metaphysical system, this style of thinking does not take us very deep into the phenomena studied in Buddhism.

Nishida's challenge to Western philosophy largely echoes Western themes, though with a Japanese accent, just as Emmanuel Levinas's challenge to metaphysical "totality" in the name of ethical "infinity" draws on the resources of metaphysics, though with a Jewish accent. When Nishida says of nothingness that "it is beyond encompassing by any phenomenon, individual, event, or relationship in the world. Its absoluteness means precisely that it is not defined as an opposite to anything in the world of being" (62), he is close to Neoplatonists such as Damascius, who speak of an Ineffable that is present everywhere but that is beyond being. For Nishida, too, words and concepts are impotent at this level, and he invokes a mystical nescience using Zen language: "the body-mind is dropped off and we are united with the consciousness of absolute nothingness" (quoted, p. 297). This I take not as a report on contemplative experience but as a postulation, a construction, of how things must be at the ultimate stage of a distinctively oriental metaphysics. It would be unwise to take Nishida's system as a basis or framework for the interpretation of Buddhism.

Tanabe, impatient with Nishida's cult of ultimate unity, stressed the idea of "absolute mediation," which he used as "a wedge to pry open the ideas of absolute nothingness and of self-awareness ... to the historical world" (118). in a vision wherein "all reality is interrelated, and all the events of the world are a dialectic of that interrelatedness" (116). This retrieval of "the primacy of relationship" and the "mutually dependent, absolutely mediated reality we live in," has "roots as deep in early Buddhism as Nishida's pure experience has in the Zen tradition," in that it reflects "the foundational Buddhist ideas of the nonsubstantiality of things and the self on the one hand, and the co-arising of all things on the other" (117). But Tanabe's knowledge of Buddhist thought at this time was slight. He fell back on sub-Hegelian musings on "a dialectical opposition of the individual and the specific wherein each enriches the other and opens it to something greater" (128). The specific is embodied in a particular society. It has a nonrational aspect, and can claim the surrender of the individual's life. Tanabe's appreciation of this nonrational aspect increasingly took a religious tinge: "Religiously, the specific is the locus for the enlightened engagement in the world" something like a "local church" which instantiates and concretizes "the ideal 'universal church' of the entire human family" (149). Absolute nothingness negates "all immediate

forms of sociocultural specificity, as well as the self-subsistent being of individuals” and even “the human race as a universal” (129). Without this perspective we become prisoners of the specific.

But what instantiates this religious perspective? First it is the nation state, as a relative absolute: Tanabe claims to “radicalize the dialectical truth of Christianity by liberating it, as it were, from the confines of myth and by putting the nation in the place of Christ” (quoted, p. 137). He advocates “an eastern ethic that sees the nation as the embodiment, or *nirmānakāya*, of the Buddha in history” (137). The Buddhist language here is probably only a metaphorical expression for his own philosophy. The religious perspective is more directly instantiated by the emperor as the “avatar of absolute nothingness,” “rising up symbolically out of the nation of mutually mediated beings to represent the higher reality in whose power all things are ultimately joined one to another” (150). Heisig argues that while claiming to correct the irrationality of the specific, Tanabe surrendered to it in espousing these non-logical views. But perhaps what Tanabe is aiming to do is rather to justify the irrationality of the specific as the manner in which absolute nothingness concretely exerts its claim on us. I suspect that the irrationality is built in from the start in the very idea of defining logic in terms of society (something Hegel never did; even the *Phenomenology* presupposes the already defined logic of the Jena period). Heisig claims that after the war Tanabe was silent about the fact that his pre-war account of the nation made it an “absolute incarnation” (147) demanding total loyalty from its citizens. Now the nation “becomes simply an ‘expedient means’ for working out a salvation that draws one across specific boundaries” (150). Again, I wonder if there is a real contradiction here, for *nirmānakāya* and skillful means are quite proximate notions.

When Takeuchi Yoshinori showed in 1941 the affinities between Shinran’s *Kyōgyōshinshō* and Tanabe’s ideas of “the primacy of self-awareness, trust in absolute nothingness, the letting go of self, the need to put reason at the service of morality” (156), this precipitated a new constellation of Tanabe’s ideas under the rubric of metanoesis (conversion of mind). “The logic of the specific had shown up the irrationality at the basis of all historical praxis” (157–58); now, in *Philosophy as Metanoetics*, Tanabe reveals the irrational core of all philosophical thought. The “sinful and ignorant” person now undergoes “life-and-resurrection through Other-power” (162), a position that spells absolute critique of the hubris of philosophical reason but that does not constitute a systematic philosophy in its own right. Zen is “continuous, self-identical, and in-itself,” and in the end substitutes the aesthetic for the religious, but the Pure Land existence is “disjunctive, discontinuous, and for-itself” (quoted, p. 164). The Pure Land themes add a new religious profile and warmth to the idea of absolute nothingness. These religious topics are projections of human imagining into the realm of nothingness. Tanabe was influenced by Soga Ryōjin (1875–1971), who saw Amida’s Vow not as an antecedent reality, but as something that faith developed out of itself. This is a richer and more lucid encounter of philosophy and Buddhism than Nishida attained.

From early on Nishitani saw that “the only route to philosophy was one that began in a nihilistic despair over the human condition, passed on to doubt over all of existence, and only then ascended to the wonder of emptiness” (191). His first book (1940) views religion as “the awareness of elemental subjectivity,” a subjectivity “completely *without foundation* in outside authority, divine law, or faith” (193). Against the rival absolutisms of historical faith and Enlightenment reason, the “naturalness” of elemental subjectivity affirms “the standpoint of absolute love, of the nothingness of the godhead, a standpoint at which a no-self that has left behind its ground appears” (quoted, p. 195).

After an unfortunate career as a political philosopher, Nishitani returned to this insight after the war, though still proclaiming a mission for Japan: “the rescue of the heart of religion from the slow erosion that inattention and the fossilization of tradition were working on it” (212). Faced with maximum historical disillusion post-war Japan becomes the ideal theater for “the overcoming of nihilism *through nihilism*” (quoted, p. 215). Attempting to construct a new philosophy of religion “different from the classical systems of the nineteenth century that had been based on something immanent in the human individual such as reason or intuition or feeling” (218), he finds its starting point in the Great Doubt, “a kind of spiritual ascent through descent into radical finitude” (219). This leads to “the awareness that the world of being that rests on the nihility of the self and all things is only a relative manifestation of nothingness as it is encountered *in reality*” (220–21). This process is a spiritual experience that cannot be imposed as a philosophical proof. But the promise of this post-Nietzschean path through and beyond nihilism has ensured the attention of Western theologians and philosophers of religion.

Heisig regrets as a “glaring omission” (25) his neglect of the Buddhist sources of the Kyoto thinkers; it might be the topic of a second volume to supplement this one. He refers briefly (65–67, 306–7) to the *sokuhi* logic of the *Diamond Sutra* (“The perfection of wisdom is non-perfection, therefore it is called perfection of wisdom”; A is A—because A is not-A), which Nishida learned from Suzuki and interpreted in his own way (307). He speaks of Hua-yen and Tendai influences on Nishida, but it is unlikely that the vague resemblances are due to a study of the historical sources. As to Tanabe and Nishitani’s commentaries on Dōgen, Tanabe’s (*Tanabe Hajime Zenshū [THZ]* 5, pp. 445–94) tends “to absorb religion into philosophy” (171) and uses Dōgen as “a platform for his own philosophy” (324), while Nishitani’s consists of talks pitched at a popular level and showing little acquaintance with Buddhist scholarship. Even in Nishitani’s *Religion and Nothingness*, the Buddhist themes are developed in autonomous philosophical fashion, not in intensive dependence on Buddhist sources; the references to the *Heart Sutra*, the *Diamond Sutra*, the *Hua-yen Sutra*, Amida’s Vow, Bodhidharma, Rinzai, Hakuin, are fleeting, though those to Dōgen are more sustained. Nishitani’s “standpoint of emptiness” is a Buddhist response to Heidegger’s phenomenology of nihilism and its overcoming: where Heidegger calls for renewed harking to Being, Nishitani urges that we step out into the freedom of emptiness.

This is the Buddhist message of the Kyoto school that has found the widest reception in the West.

If philosophers wish to pursue the Buddhist insights of these thinkers, should they do so in continued dialogue with them, or would they do better to consult classical Buddhist sources instead? I fear that the latter is the case, and that the importance of the Kyoto school is merely historical. The trouble is that the philosophical categories and procedures they used are cumbersome and old-fashioned, though Nishitani travels more lightly, and that they clog their reception of the Buddhist insights, or at least make them unhelpful conductors for our access to these insights.

(2) The Kyoto philosophers speak of God with surprising frequency. Nishida's God is an immanent world-ground: "God cannot transcend the relative world or he would therefore be relative to it. Rather, the relative world must somehow represent a self-negation of God" (102). This God is not personal: "the option for radical personalism in any form is excluded precisely because the fulfillment of the I is located in the transformation to not-I" (81); "the encounter of an I with a you is simply one instance of the I en route to its own negation in self-awareness of nothingness" (83). Thus, when Nishida declares that "we become persons by loving our neighbor as ourselves in imitation of the divine agape" the words do not carry their Christian sense: "It is not clear whether the Christian idea of the selfless love of God for humanity is being used to paraphrase the idea of the self-awareness of absolute nothingness or the other way around, nor what one idea has to contribute to the other" (85). Heisig condemns Nishida's non-I as "a highly cultivated form of ataraxia, a self-transcendence of which the highest good consists of its inability to be moved by either good or evil" (86). Yet the supreme Buddhist virtue of equanimity, or the calm of Plotinus or Spinoza, might be seen in the same unfavorable light.

"Nishida's idea of God was formed the way most Westerners form theirs: he began with the received image and simply painted out the parts he didn't like and painted in what he felt was missing. He did not approach God as a 'western construct'" (100). God becomes "a cipher of the dynamism of the life of the world" and there are hints of "an identification of God with the true self" or something like "Buddha-nature" (101). The notion of "inverse correspondence," expounded with reference to Shinran, entails that the more fully we discover our finitude the more nearly we coincide with this self-negating God (103). The notion of God is firmly subordinated to that of absolute nothingness. Nourished on the same Buddhist and Western philosophical sources, the three thinkers share the same "philosophical faith," though they may occasionally strike a more confessional note when inspired by a religious thinker, Christian or Buddhist. Nishida's and Tanabe's "commitment to philosophy was such that they could not conceive of religious doctrine other than as philosophical ideas" (268).

Tanabe associates his inability to take the step from Jesus to Paul, from being *ein werdender Christ* to being *ein gewordenener Christ*, that is, from existential appreciation of the gospel message to reflective dogmatic commitment, with

his vocation as a philosopher, and suggests that his philosophical detachment can be an indirect service to Christianity (*THZ* 10, p. 260). Since institutional religion controls its adherents and resists its rivals, “it will of necessity fix the relative and make it absolute, it will abolish the negative mediation of free dialectics and posit articles of belief according to the logic of identity” (*THZ* 10, p. 264; trans. Ozaki). Tanabe sees God as “a self-emptying divinity who is manifest only in the self-negating act of love” (163). Nothingness, in his later philosophy, is manifest not only in “the mere fact of absolute negation of the world of being” but as love in action, indirectly manifest “wherever relative beings negate themselves in the act of love.” “God’s only reality is the continued ‘negation and transformation—that is, conversion—of everything relative’ ” (163).

Heisig denies that Nishitani simply rejects the Christian God “in favor of a God fashioned in the image and likeness of absolute nothingness” (245). Rather, “what was only implicit in Nishida and Tanabe is brought into clear relief: a philosophy of absolute nothingness needs the idea of God as a central ingredient” (246). But “if the idea of God is to survive, it can only be by finding a more fundamental impersonality beyond the personality of God” (247); nothingness “is more absolute than God... in the sense that the elemental nature of a thing is more absolute than any particular manifestation of it” (248). The philosopher can recover for Buddhism and Christianity “the soul they seem to have lost in preoccupying themselves with doctrinal, ritual, or structural reform” (252), healing in particular Japanese Christianity, which is “a kind of ‘hothouse’ religion, ‘having no contact and even isolating itself from the actual life of Japan’ in order to keep its western form intact” (253).

Heisig surmises that “the approach to religious truth as symbols pointing to basic and intangible impulses in our common human nature, to particular experiences that fall outside normal patterns of relationships..., or to some form of moral or intellectual task..., has loosened the previously unassailable connection between God and being” (267). But the reduction of God to an ideal or a *Sollen*, in a non-realist theology, would signify not a reconception of divine being in terms of emptiness or nothingness but an agnostic suspension of the question of God’s existence. A richer reading of the Kyoto thinkers is attained if one takes them as quasi-Eckhartians convinced of divine reality but conceiving it in a new key. When they put forward speculative metaphysical statements about God as being or as nothingness, they expose themselves to the critique of Thomists and metaphysically minded analytical philosophers. But when they remain on the phenomenological plane, as Nishitani usually does, they challenge those philosophers to register the gulf between metaphysical conceptuality and the phenomena, and to find new resonances in talk of God in terms of being and in terms of nothingness. But now that they have said their say about God, and that their insights have been grafted on to those of Tillich and Bultmann, who present a non-objectifiable God, I doubt if much is to be gained by lingering in dialogue with them rather than with the classic Buddhist sources.

(3) To sift what is living from what is dead in the Kyoto philosophers, we need now to read them against the grain, in a phenomenological style, cutting through the dialectical logic to discern whatever new impulse of thought is seeking to be born in their writing. As we orient ourselves in regard to their fundamental ideas, we need only pursue the ins and outs of their dialectic to the degree that it allows us to feel our way into this orientation. To release the basic ideas from the desultory register of academic tinkering with the heritage of German Idealism, we must rethink them from their existential ground.

Nishida is the least welcoming of such treatment. He has occasional phenomenological flashes. Goethe's verse, like Chinese painting, opens onto "the space in which the personal element is absorbed, creating the sense of 'a voiceless echo reverberating without form and without bounds' in the heart of artist and viewer" (58). But, unlike Heidegger, Nishida did not pursue very far the phenomenology of art, as a lead-in to apprehending the nature of reality. He lacked confidence in his aesthetic responses, but the deeper problem was his reliance on the too abstract categories of philosophical aesthetics. Though saluting in art the embodiment of pure experience, he imposed on himself an exile from such immediacy, instead searching vainly for rigor in a game of dialectical solitaire. When he does use phenomenological language, it is not always clear what phenomenon is being evoked: "to see the working of all things that exist as shadows reflecting the self within a self that has nullified itself, a kind of seeing without a seer into the bottom of all things" (quoted, p. 72). It is doubtful if his thought ever crystallized into the lucidity of a single concrete vision. The variety of tactics deployed in his raids on the "locus of nothingness" and on "self-awareness" does not bring a correspondingly rich determination of these notions. Where the dialectics of Sartre enhance an existential phenomenology, Nishida's dialectics blur his vision of the phenomena and dull the existential thrust of his thought.

No doubt Heidegger's emphasis on the *Stimmung* (mood, attunement) of thought helped Nishitani to overcome Nishida's intellectualism, according philosophical dignity to phenomena of the kind evoked in D.T. Suzuki's writings. (One suspects that Nishida felt he was taking a holiday from the serious task of philosophy when he wrote on Goethe.) Nishitani's "standpoint of standpoints" replaces Nishida's "universal of universals" as a concrete place or foothold from which one can see clearly. Nishitani's thought practices "the continual uncovering of the sense of things just as they are, and the exposure of what we do to block ourselves from seeing them" (189). We must "see through the objectifying tendencies of mind to its true activity as awareness" (227) and break with "the pattern of not being able to think of an ultimate without substantializing it" (229) to which even Plotinus was a victim.

The philosophy of time offers the Kyoto philosophers some occasions to be phenomenologically penetrating, but unfortunately these are quickly overtaken by speculative generalizations, even in Nishitani. Against the processual, continuous nature of Hegelian dialectic, Nishida advances a more radical dialectic, each temporal moment is discontinuous with what precedes and fol-

lows, “a discontinuous continuity in which each moment passes away, a life through death” (quoted, p. 82). But to espouse this radical finitude of the present is to live in an “eternal now.” Time exemplifies rather clearly Nishida’s key notion of the self-identity of absolute contradictories: the self-identity of the present only subsists as the conjunction of the absolute contradictories of past and future. But this logical pattern is scarcely worked out in a careful phenomenology of time. The notion of time as arising from an eternal background gets in the way of such insight. Logic and phenomenon are also clumsily yoked in Tanabe’s statements on time: “the present, being the point of mediation where past and future mutually convert themselves actively into the direction of future, can be grasped in the free, acting self-awareness of each moment as the identity of time and eternity” (*THZ* 10, p. 261; trans. Ozaki). Nishitani’s language about time tries to give Nishida’s dialectic a more phenomenological character: the present moment is an “eternal now” as “an opening to the ‘homeground’ of time itself, in which not only past and future, but all the meaning of history has its elemental, and infinitely renewable, source” (244). The abstraction that limits all three philosophies of time shows up particularly in their sweeping declarations about the nature of history, which underlie their feeble and ill-starred efforts as social and political thinkers.

The Kyoto thinkers, in sum, demand to be saved from themselves and from their admirers. James Heisig’s authoritative work is a major step in this direction.

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