NG Yu Kwan 吳汝鈞, 絕對無的哲學: 京都學派哲學導論 [The Philosophy of Absolute Nothingness: An Introduction to the Philosophy of the Kyoto School]. Taiwan: Commercial Press, 1998. 300 pp. ISBN 957-05-1432-9.

THIS IS THE SECOND book written by Ng Yu Kwan on the philosophy of the Kyoto School. The first, dealing with Hisamatsu Shin'ichi's thought, has already won wide acclaim in the Chinese-speaking academic community (NG 1995).[1] This second volume is still far more comprehensive and penetrating than its predecessor.

Ng is without doubt a pioneer among Chinese scholars in the study of Kyoto School philosophy, about which he has written numerous articles and books. His contribution includes not only presentation and commentary, but also ample bibliographical information (in Chinese, Japanese, English, and German) for further research.

Included in the present volume are twelve articles concerning the seven "recognized" (according to Abe) members of the Kyoto School: Nishida Kitarō, Tanabe Hajime, Hisamatsu Shin'ichi, Nishitani Keiji, Takeuchi Yoshinori, Abe Masao, and Ueda Shizuteru. According to Abe, as Ng points out, Nishida and Tanabe belong to the first generation, Hisamatsu and Nishitani to the second, and Takeuchi, Abe, and Ueda to the third (pp. iv–v). This categorization differs somewhat from that of others, including those like Thomas Kasulis, who want to include D. T. Suzuki in the ranks of the Kyoto School. For my part, I prefer Ng's classification, which is derived directly from one of the members of the Kyoto School rather than from outsiders.

This volume is at once extensive and perceptive. Besides covering Kyoto School philosophies past and present, it argues for the centrality of the idea of "absolute nothingness" among these thinkers. Although the search for common themes among the Kyoto philosophers is not an original idea (NANZAN INSTITUTE FOR RELIGION AND CULTURE 1983, and SWANSON 1996), Ng's particular focus shows the depth of his understanding of what they were about. Indeed, the deeper the reader is drawn into the intricacies of their thinking, the more one is struck by how illuminating Ng's insights are. In the opening essay, "Nishida Kitarō's Philosophy of Ultimate Reality," for instance, the two fundamental concepts of "pure experience" and the philosophy of the place (*basho*) of absolute nothingness found in Nishida's work are clearly elucidated. Nishida's philosophy is a notoriously difficult read, but Ng's exposition goes a long way to making the task easier, even for those who lack a

[1] Reviewed by SU Jun in *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* (1997) 24/1: 202–206.

background in Japanese philosophy and its terminology. Ng outlines the basic argument of the Kyoto School in three steps: (1) there is a lack of universality in the Western idea of logic due to the limitations of Western history and culture; (2) Nishida intends to establish a kind of Oriental logic, which (3) can universally be applied in both the Western and Eastern worlds (pp. 3–4). The renunciation of Western "dualistic" logic and thought opens the way for a more thoroughgoing Oriental (and hence, for them, more "universal") spirituality.

This claim rests not only on a repudiation of the universalist claims of Western spirituality; it also relies on a commitment to the centrality of "absolute nothingness." Ng argues that according to Hisamatsu and Abe spiritual enlightenment can only be attained by extinguishing one's "desire" of attaining substantial selfhood (pp. 98–102, 242–48). Hisamatsu and Abe wondered how "I" (the asking subject) can grasp "I" (the asked object) if a subject-object duality serves as a necessary mediator. But how can one "find" the true Self if it is "ontologically" unattainable?

This dilemma provides Ng with the keynote to *The Philosophy of Absolute Nothingness*. In general, *śūnyatā* is usually translated into English as "nothingness" or "emptiness," to which the qualifier "absolute" is attached more often in English translation than in the original Japanese texts. For Ng, however, the word *absolute* is necessary to stress that the *nothingness* of which they speak is not non-relativistic, non-dualistic, or non-absolute. It is absolute because it repudiates the existence of all substantial subjects and objects as well as of the duality of their relationship. It is absolute in that it renounces the dualities of self and no-self, subject and object, birth and death. One cannot, in the light of absolute nothingness, attain the true Self if such dualities remain. In order to overcome the bifurcation of subject and object on the one hand, and the use of words and language on the other, the Kyoto School profoundly challenges the Western "dualistic" philosophy in its attempt to construct a non-dualistic Oriental spirituality. The Kyoto School scholars concur with Zen thinking that one must transcend one's relative intellect if one is to attain "absolute nothingness" or enlightenment (p. 10).

This leads to a series of questions. *Who* is supposed to attain enlightenment if the goal is "absolutely nothing?" Is the Kyoto School advocating a kind of nihilism in rejecting both dualism and absolutism? Does the idea of "absolute nothingness" contradict itself? Ng agrees with Nishitani that "The human must live above the realm of nihilism.... This is the standpoint of *śūnyatā*. *Śūnyatā* is in fact not something far from the world... and should not be recognized as something external from existence; it is indeed united as one with existence and is actualized, uniting existence with the self" (p. 137). One must absolutely abandon the duality of the subject who inquires and the object that is inquired about, since "existence" and the self are one. One must go beyond the dualities of existence and non-existence, life and death, and so forth, in order to attain to formless, unobjectified transcendent subjectivity (p. 114). It is neither non-dualistic nor nothing; it is "absolute nothingness" in the ontological sense.

For the Kyoto philosophers the idea of absolute nothingness does not stop

at the negative denial of nihilism by renouncing subject-object duality; it makes positive assertions, as we see clearly in Abe, about the transcendence of duality in its philosophy of life and death. Abe believes, under all circumstances, there is "absolutely nothing" for one to be afraid of, including life and death, for nothing substantially exists (pp. 114—18).

Another positive contribution the Kyoto School provides through its critique of Western philosophy and religion is its opening of a new kind of East-West dialogue with particular emphasis on the Buddhist (Zen)-Christian dialogue. We see this, for example, in Abe's effort to identify the Christian God as the self-emptying God (Chapter 9) and in Tanabe's conception of Jesus Christ as absolute nothingness (Chapter 2). The Kyoto School scholars place great importance on this dialogue with Christianity since they see absolute nothingness as a "paradigm" for overcoming Western dualistic philosophical and religious thought. While one may disagree with their reinterpretations of particular Christian doctrines, there is every reason to hope that such dialogue can lead Buddhism and Christianity beyond their specificities to an "ever greater truth."[2]

For all my excitement about Ng's work, I cannot fail to record my own reservations. For one thing, Ng relies heavily on Masao Abe. Sections on Nishida Kitarō (e.g., pp. 5, 10, 13, 16), Nishitani Keiji (probably all of p. 121), and, of course, Abe himself (chapters 5, 9, and 10) depend on Abe's writings. This is no doubt due in part to the lack of other secondary material (as Ng points out in his preface), but this does not escuse the overreliance on a single thinker, especially since that thinker has his own agenda. as a member of the School. To be fair, Ng does refer to other sources, such as Chinese Christian theological writings, but his work would be better served if broadened by other perspectives as well. This may be why Ng acknowledges that his is only an "introduction," and that further study waits to be done (p. v).

Ng's book attests to the active interest in the Kyoto School among Chinese and Asian academics. As a comprehensive introduction to the Kyoto School philosophy, it is to be highly recommended.

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[2] The phrase "ever greater truth" I take from the following passage by Hans Küng: "We need a dialogue with give and take, into which the deepest intentions of the religions must be introduced. Thus it must be a critical dialogue, in which all religions are challenged not simply to justify everything, but to deliver their best and most profound message. In short we need a dialogue in mutual responsibility and in the awareness that none of us possesses the truth 'ready-made,' but are all on the way to the 'ever greater' truth" (KÜNG 1986, p.xix).

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