



## An Apology for Philosophical Transgressions

The essay that follows is, in substance, a lecture delivered in Brussels on 7 December 2016 to the 2nd International Conference of the European Network of Japanese Philosophy. In it I argue that the strategy of qualifying nothingness as an “absolute,” which was adopted by Kyoto School thinkers as a way to come to grips with fundamental problems of Western philosophy, is inherently ambiguous and ultimately weakens the notion of nothingness itself. In its place, a proposal is made to define nothingness in terms of “connectedness.” The discussion is bound on both ends by an apology for transgressing established academic boundaries. On one end, I open with a brief digression on a common ground for philosophies East and West as a *mestizaje* to which no tradition can claim dominance. On the other, I close with an appeal for restoring respect for the role of mythical narration as a way to bridge the connection between theory and practice without having to revert to moral absolutes, particularly as it relates to safeguarding this fragile planet of ours from the ongoing sepsis of economic “progress.”

KEYWORDS: Nothingness—absolute—Kyoto School—Nishida—  
Nishitani—connectedness—myth—universal—metaiconography

The strategy of drawing on western philosophical resources to bring a fresh perspective to problems rooted in Asian intellectual history has a history that reaches back at least four hundred and fifty years to Matteo Ricci's discussions with Confucian scholars. To many critics of modernity, it is a history so badly scarred with the same hubris and triumphalism which fed the colonial and militaristic ambitions of the West that any sympathy for the spirit of philosophical adventure behind it has all but evaporated. Meantime, the complementary strategy of drawing on Asian philosophical resources to shed new light on perennial questions of the western philosophical tradition has had to contend with the general academic bias against incursions by quasi-religious, pop-philosophical, half-baked ideas from the East. Like many of you here, I have marinated too long in the philosophical stew of Japan to take any of this seriously.

#### A PHILOSOPHICAL *MESTIZAJE*

Applying the tools of conceptual analysis and historical deconstruction to the idea of engaging philosophies "East" and "West" in dialogue has led to criticism that such talk is at best naïve and at worst morally unacceptable or even violent. The same holds for the notion of a "Japanese philosophy," which is said to endorse similarly subtle tyrannies of racial isolationism and cultural imperialism, if not to be just so much logical silliness. As long as the critique remains at a level once removed from what those terms describe to those who actually use them, there is no hope that a simply change of vocabulary would make the criticisms go away, and even less hope of finding a common ground on which to refute them. The only victory that could possibly satisfy such attacks would be one where the vanquished would join forces in turning the very tools that were their undoing

against other ideologically and irrationally tainted conventions infecting philosophical thought.

The caricature I have just drawn would be laughable were it not such an attractive and simple way for so many to refuse a place in philosophical history to intellectual traditions not nurtured in the Mediterranean basin. I do not see there is much to gain in refining those criticisms in order to tangle with them any further. I much prefer to offer an apology for having spent my life crossing established borders and then to lay out, as clearly and succinctly as I can, an apology for questioning a central tenet of Kyoto school philosophy.

I approached the study of Japanese philosophy much the same as I had approached western philosophy. On the advice of the older and wiser Jan Van Bragt, I first read selected essays of the three pillars of the Kyoto School, Nishitani, Tanabe, and Nishida. In time, as I found my way around more and more of their books, I came to realize that I knew far too little of the resources they were drawing on. The western authors whose names surfaced here and there were for the most part known to me. But there were other springs flowing in and out of their writings, many of them from underground, of which I knew all too little. At times it was an unfamiliar name; at others, an unknown textual reference; and at still others, no more than an odd turn of phrase. Not every trail led somewhere, but over the years I tried to train myself to a workable feel for what the Kyoto School philosophers knew from their cultural surroundings, from their formal education and upbringing, from their appreciation of the Japanese language, and from their intangible native sensibilities.

I remember how Whitehead, the first philosopher whose complete works I had read as a young man, had driven me back to Plato and Leibniz; how Hegel's *Phenomenology* and *Logic* had made me read Kant and Schelling again; how Heidegger and Jaspers only began to make sense when I went back to read Aristotle and Nietzsche more closely. And so it was that in the case of Japan's philosophical tradition, I traced a few obscure, peculiar threads through the weave until I eventually found myself standing in front of a vast, but increasingly less exotic and surprisingly more familiar, tapestry.

As the range of resources opened to me broadened, the framing of philosophical questions changed radically. A border transgressed is never the same border, and the more frequent the transgressions, the less likely one

is ever to feel completely at home on either side again. I remember thinking about this the first time I stood on the shores of the upper Amazon in Manaus, where the black waters of the Rio Negro and the muddy waters of the Rio Solimões flow along side by side, at different speeds, for more than three miles until further downstream they merge into one another and lose their distinct identities.

Assuming there is nothing out of the ordinary in this process, I have marveled time after time, conference after conference, why, with such a rich mine of resources at their disposal, so many philosophers stand still on the shore upstream, writing treatises comparing one philosopher to another or one idea to another when they could use the confluence of their offsetting modes of thought to rewrite the philosophical map and recode fundamental questions.

It is not scholars of Eastern philosophers discussing with their counterparts in western philosophy who will release philosophy from its bondage to the thought systems that originated in the Mediterranean basin. It is not the textual exegetes or historians of ideas who have had the greatest dialogical impact, but those *mestizos* who have already begun to philosophize using resources from both to pry western philosophy open.

As William James remarked, if philosophy, as Plato and Aristotle said, begins in wonder, it

is able to fancy everything different from what it is. It sees the familiar as if it were strange, and the strange as if it were familiar. It can take things up and lay them down again. It rouses us from our native dogmatic slumber and breaks up our caked prejudices.<sup>1</sup>

It would be wrong to think that this is the privilege of established senior professors. The work in which James wrote these words, *Some Problems of Philosophy* bears the subtitle *A Beginning of an Introduction to Philosophy*. Exactly. From the start and at any point after that, postponing, sacrificing, or diluting wonder is the death of philosophy. The world that lies between the lines of Japan's philosophical texts is too startling to be domesticated by pulling out one or the other idea, comparing it to a similar idea from west-

1. *Some Problems of Philosophy: A Beginning of an Introduction to Philosophy* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1921), 7.

ern philosophy, and then closing the book. Unless one takes into account the confluent state of mind in which their ideas took shape, there is little to wonder at in any coincidence of ideas.

It is one thing to use words like “East and West” and “Japanese philosophy” to denote fixed blocs of reality that can be contrasted, compared, and brought into contact as such. It is another thing to use them as temporary markers that lose much of their usefulness and dependability in a confluence of philosophical worlds. Accusations of a subversive agenda at work behind the scenes may still be made, but they are no reasonable grounds to honor them with a response—unless, of course, one wishes to take on the radical campaign of holding every distinction made in the history of philosophy suspect to the charge of treason.

In-depth study of Eastern philosophers and comparative studies of individual philosophers or currents of thought seem to have found their place as acceptable forms of East-West philosophical dialogue. Broadening the base of who is included in the history of philosophy can be an important first step in that direction, but it is just as likely to distract attention from the more radical step of including the resources of another tradition in philosophical thinking proper. If there is any chance of bringing philosophers East and West into dialogue, it will not take place in an encounter between recognized representatives of each side. If western philosophies are to open up to other philosophies in anything approaching the measure in which they have themselves been received around the world, it will not take place only in dialogue among specialists with their counterparts in other traditions or in comparative studies. Rather, western philosophers need to talk seriously with the philosophical *mestizos* who have already taken steps to do their thinking with a greater wealth of materials than those of their own tradition and many of whom can no longer say with confidence which tradition they belong to. This *mestizaje* is a hidden treasure within our reach, and it is hard to understand how it can still be systematically ignored, because without it, western philosophy’s ambitions to “world philosophy” will remain embarrassed by its attachment to pedigree.

I am afraid if I ramble on any further, I will begin to give the impression of a tantrum thrown by a neglected child. For my part, I believe that openness to philosophical funds from the East is an irreversible insight for a younger generation of students drawn to philosophical thinking, and that they will

be the ones, through their teaching and writing, to break down the walls of the echo chamber in which so much of philosophy continues to justify itself.

There are many ways to employ the resources of Japanese philosophy, but the most difficult of them—and also, I believe, the most philosophical—is to look at the world through a lens ground to the measure of different pre-suppositions, to examine the refraction critically, and then to adjust one’s own worldview accordingly. It is just this kind of *mestizaje* I mean to bear the brunt of my apology here for transgressions into Japanese philosophy.

### DISSOLVING THE ABSOLUTE

I begin with a deep slash of Ockham’s razor aimed at the idea of the absolute dominant in Kyoto school philosophy. For the pivotal thinkers of the school, Nishida Kitarō, Tanabe Hajime, and Nishitani Keiji, allusions to “the absolute” and to certain ideas and philosophical tools as “absolute” are so frequent and so centrally positioned that their respective worldviews would appear to totter without them.

The immediate stimulus for making nothingness into an absolute may have come from Hegel, who established the absolute as a philosophical concept into western philosophy, but it would not have taken the hold it did, had it not also struck a chord in the Buddhist sensitivities of the Kyoto philosophers. The slow, dialectical ascent of mind through its relative conditioning to the final freedom of pure self-consciousness and absolute knowledge where subject and object have been transcended was a natural fit for making the ideal of enlightenment philosophically reasonable. For all their criticisms of Hegel in the particulars, the general modes of thought Hegel opened up for them were crucial in shaping their ideas. Never mind that Hegel’s stature in an intellectual tradition that had only recently come into contact with western philosophy was too great to ignore, the way the Kyoto School philosophers adopted the dialectical method and sanctified the notion of the absolute was far from unambiguously Hegelian. Yet even taking into account the sum total of their criticisms, I am persuaded that the adoption was misguided.<sup>2</sup> In fact, aside from its use as a marker for criti-

2. In his book, *The Kyoto School’s Takeover of Hegel: Nishida, Nishitani, and Tanabe Remake the Philosophy of Spirit* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011), Peter Suares has taken a first

cisms against the absolute of being, the notion of an absolute of nothingness is only of limited use to them. I have come to believe that Kyoto School philosophies of nothingness would be better off dispensing altogether with the notion of an absolute and returning the notion of the relative from its exile at the fringes to the center of the field of vision. The dispensation is not as difficult as the verbal tangles would lead one to believe.

To begin with, the use of the word *absolute* in Kyoto School philosophy is not univocal. To be clear about what I am proposing, let me lay out three distinct meanings of the term *absolute* from their texts. As important as the distinctions are, they rarely rise to the surface and it is not uncommon to see overlaps of meaning in the same sentence, leaving it to the reader to sort out the muddle or—which is more often the case—ignore it altogether.

In a first and *literal* sense, the absolute refers to a reality that by nature completely transcends the reality of the world, cut off from dependence on anything else, dislocated from any wider environment, unaffected by time and history. Second, there is a *revised literal* sense in which all the qualities of the literal absolute are not given originally but achieved as the culmination of an extended interaction with the world. Here absoluteness is the final stage of a process which may or may not entail a self-emanation of reality that eventually recovers its primordial identity by being poured out of itself and then flowing back into itself through time. Finally, there is a *metaphorical* use of the absolute which is only marginally related to one or the other literal or revised literal meanings and is meant to describe something or some event as complete, utter, consummate, unsurpassed, unqualified, or simply as infinite. Its usage is more or less rhetorical, depending on the context, but in no way is it obliged to either of the first two meanings.

By tying the absolute to the dialectic—affirmations generated by negating negations and subsuming contradictions—the absolute forfeits the kind of literal meaning it has, for example, in dualistic theism, and takes on a revised sense. The identity that Nishida claimed for “the absolute” is in fact dependent on its relationship to that which it is not in the sense that it subsumes into itself that negation of itself and thereby negates its own separa-

---

step towards sorting out and evaluating Kyoto School readings of Hegel. The suspicions I am raising here run deeper to question the extent of their engagement as a distraction.

tion from what it is not. Nishida is clear on this point, as one passage in his final essay advises:

The true absolute does not simply cut itself off from opposition. If it did, it would be no more than absolute negation and could not avoid being relativized. The true absolute must be something that faces its own absolute negation in itself and includes it in itself..., something that mediates itself through absolute negation.<sup>3</sup>

Now it might warm the heart of a Hegelian to talk of the absoluteness of the absolute as a negation of its own absoluteness, but I find myself cringing at the reliance on dialectical logic to decide what is a “true” absolute and what is not. I will have more to say of this later, but for now it is enough to note that taking the term *absolute* to mean something like a radical internalization of relatedness itself unfairly expropriates the term *relative* and dilutes its original meaning. For one thing, there may be something seriously wrong with the absolute-relative distinction itself. For another, not even the totally transcendent, *totaliter aliter* deity of the scholastic metaphysics could qualify as absolute without discarding biblical language, not to mention living forms of theistic faith and centuries of the Christological imagination. The idea of making nothingness into an absolute by contrasting it with the absolute God of being was a misleading strategy and I am persuaded Kyoto School philosophy would have been better off without it. In any event, when supremacy is transferred from God to nothingness, God is in effect made relative to the *absolute of nothingness*. Whatever sentiments of ultimate dependency, whatever hopes and aspirations the idea of a supreme Being may stir in the soul, in the end it is relative to nothingness; as a literal absolute, it can only register as a failed attempt of reason to awaken to the true reality of the absolute.

When it comes to talk of the absolute, Kyoto school prose is disconcerting. One has the sense that it hangs together logically, but rarely the sense that much of any consequence hangs on it. To see the matter at hand through their eyes, to stand where they stood when they wrote what they wrote requires more than mastering the technical vocabulary they are using. Beginning with “absolute nothingness,” many of their terms were not

3. 『西田幾多郎全集』(Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2004), 10: 333.



predefined but worked out in the employment. For another, mastering a philosophical lexicon does not allow one to generate new ideas or criticize previous formulations unless one is also caught up in some version of the questions that prompted it. Obviously, none of this can be done by proxy. Either you wrestle with the ideas firsthand or you submit to them and spend your time parsing and paraphrasing the texts just as they are. All I can do here is outline the conclusions to which my own limited reading of the Kyoto school have driven me.

Just what kind of an absolute, then, is absolute nothingness? Despite disclaimers of comparison to the absolute God of being, the literal, strict sense of the absolute is at times an entirely fitting attribute of nothingness. If the absolute is said to denote unconditional release from anything that can claim a hold on it or stand vis-à-vis to it, if it is said to be absolved of all attachments, obligations, conditions, qualities, and even other modes of reality, it comes close to a dualistic view of reality. If the absolute of nothingness cannot be a thing among other things, let alone the sum of all things in the world, then even if the world as we know it is ultimately a mental illusion, it is still set up as one false, imperfect reality transcended by another, truer reality. For absolute nothingness to coincide with reality as it truly is, it must lie beyond the separation of mind and matter in a supreme and unchallenged self-identity, dependent on nothing, needing nothing, wanting nothing apart from itself. In this sense, the “self-awareness of absolute nothingness” is the negation of the experienced, phenomenal world and the affirmation of another world beyond experience and appearance.

To follow this line of reasoning would make philosophy meaningless, or at least reduce it to a radical negation of everything we think we know about the world and ourselves in it. The only way out is to de-absolutize the absolute and somehow restore true reality to the world. This is precisely what the Kyoto school philosophers had to find a way to do.

If you permit me a quick aside, I find their quandary similar to the one that the God of scholastic metaphysics posed to Cusanus. In *De docta ignorantia* he attempted to skirt the ethereal theological speculation of the day by introducing a distinction between God as the *maximum absolutum*,<sup>4</sup> and the rest of creation is a *minimum absolutum*. The terms “absolute highest”

4. *De docta ignorantia*, Book 1.2.

and “absolute lowest” would seem to represent the polar extremes of reality, a *ne plus ultra* and a *ne plus infra*, but in fact they are meant to depict a perfect coincidence of divinity and creation. The world and everything that makes it up are seen as a *contraction* of the divinity, leading Cusanus to cite the pseudo-Hermetic *Liber XXIV philosophorum*, “God is a circle whose circumference is nowhere and whose center is everywhere.” In practice, God is completely and utterly related to everything and everything to God—the exact opposite of a literal absolute.

Quite apart from any association with the God of Judeo-Christian faith, Cusanus’ God can be shown to fulfill the general requirements of a first principle in Greek philosophy. Taking a lead from Pythagoras’ idea of a “seminal point” from which all of existence sprung, the Stoics posited a single principle in which reason and reality coincide so perfectly that the *logoi spermatikoi* that burst forth from it flower naturally into the multitude of things that make up the world.<sup>5</sup> Were it not for the cause-and-effect duality set up between a creative one and a created many, the long Platonic tradition of the unity of the rational and the real represented in the Stoic model might have found itself at home in the rich Buddhist tradition of imaginative thinking on the nonduality of principle and fact. As it was, when Augustine transported this idea of seminal reason to the Middle Ages, he made the primordial unity of reason and reality subservient to an otherworldly, divine providence. Cusanus took a modest step back in the direction of the primordial unity the Platonists envisioned, and hence of the primordial unity of God and world that had hidden itself from the scholastic mainstream in mystical and hermetic literature.

I have pulled out one thread from the enormous tapestry into which metaphysical notions of a first principle or “absolute” have been variously woven, but only to isolate the problem the Kyoto philosophers faced: how to adopt the idea of the absolute without allowing it to be controlled by the idea of an absolute otherworldly God. As their familiarity with the western philosophical tradition broadened, they came upon thinkers sympathetic to many of their own reservations and closer to the nondual worldview they

5. For a helpful review of the question, see Hiro Hirai, “*Logoi Spermatikoi* and the Concept of Seeds in the Mineralogy and Cosmogony of Paracelsus,” *Revue d’histoire des sciences* 61/2 (2008): 245–64.

wanted at all costs to preserve. Throughout it all, only the God of the philosophers interested them. The personal God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was left aside and did not even merit a refutation. In contrast, the idea of God's self-emptying in the kenosis of the incarnation was an image they found sympathetic precisely because it served to negate the idea of a supreme, transcendent being by defining it as essentially self-negating.

The Kyoto school thinkers ventured into these waters not out of a sense of obligation to any particular western philosophical tradition but because they wanted to position the idea of nothingness at the center of reality. To do that, they had to relegate being and the God of being to a lower status and to elevate nothingness to an absolute that would render all being relative to it. Standing on its own, the glyph 無 that we have come to render as "nothingness" was too ambiguous for philosophical argument. Adding the qualifier "absolute"—a kind of *ignotium per ignotius*—made the transition easier but only as an expedient means. Hegel's conception of the absolute, which travelled in the same direction as Cusanus' but in the open and at full speed, was the one the Kyoto school philosophers adapted to insert nothingness into the discussion and, finally, to de-absolutize the literal absolute of Western philosophy.<sup>6</sup> Their revised absolute shared two fundamental traits with Hegel's logic. First, it defined an ultimate universal encompassing all other universals and rendering them relative. Second, it introduced an evolutionary process by which the relative finds its way to union with the absolute. When Nishida depicted his logic of *basho* as an ascent of the self-aware mind to absolute nothingness, he did so with a series of concentric circles, the very thing that Hegel had done in describing all of philosophy as an "a circle of circles," an image whose etymology figures in his choice of a term to designate his system as a whole: *Encyclopedia*. Incidentally, I am surprised never to have found a reference in Nishida or his commentators to this fact.<sup>7</sup>

6. In Tendai Buddhism 相待 was used to describe things understood in relation to or comparison with something else, and its opposite 絶待 was used to describe something supreme that cannot be described in terms of anything else. This pair of terms existed for a time but seems to have given way from the last nineteenth century to 相对 and 绝对 and were used to translate Hegel.

7. "Each part of philosophy is a philosophical whole, a self-contained circle, in which the Idea appears in its element as a particular determination. Each individual circle, imbued with a

Before we go any further, I should add a word about the third, metaphorical use of the word *absolute*, a rhetorical emphatic that stands opposed to the de-emphasizing attribute *relative*, which describes a thing or action as partial or limited. Absolute negation, absolute mediation, absolute dialectic, absolute love, absolute time, absolute death, absolutely unlimited, absolute irrational, absolute disruption of reason, absolute contradiction—all of these expressions and more familiar to readers of Kyoto school philosophy are examples of this metaphorical use of the term. It would make no sense to describe death or love or dialectic or contradiction as *the* absolute, even in a revised sense, but this does not mean that the usage is simply hyperbole and that the literal sense is entirely absent from the connotation. Quite the contrary, the quality of absoluteness is attributed precisely to show that something of absolute nothingness has rubbed off on the idea in question. They all serve as markers of the absolute without themselves qualifying as absolute in the same sense in which it is applied to “nothingness.” In other words, we are not speaking of something absolute in itself but something *relative* to that which is absolute in itself. Linguistically this is reflected in the way in which “the absolute of nothingness” is used as a synonym for “absolute nothingness” but not for any of other term described as absolute.

It seems to me that for Kyoto school philosophy, seen from inside or out, the adoption of nothingness as a metaphysical absolute in any sense, is superfluous, logically confusing, and philosophically distracting. If we take it as a synonym for the unity of reality, the One of which it is said that all things taken together make up, such a One would have to be relative to the many because it would have no meaning apart from the sum total of the many. Reality would be absolute only in the sense that it is a final tally and that there is nothing outside of it that can be called real. The word absolute adds nothing to the One that the many does not at once take away—unless, of course, you assume that there is some place in the world you can stand and see the One all at once. This is so even if you were to subscribe to a

---

drive to totality, breaks through the barriers of its element to set the stage for a wider circle. In this way the whole presents itself as a circle of circles, each circle comprising a part so that the organization of the various elements constitutes the Idea as a whole at the same time as the Idea appears in each one of them.” *Encyclopädie*, § 15. Replace *Idea* with *self-awareness*, and the passage reads as a condensed version of Nishida’s logic of *basho*.

monistic worldview in which the totality of reality is ultimately nothingness and not being.

The revised sense of the absolute as the culmination of full self-awareness towards which relative beings are evolving has to contend with a number of objections. First among them is reliance on the dialectic as a producer of insight into a “true absolute.” The problem with dialectical logic, as Bergson would say, is not that it is too rational but that it is too *intellectual* and not rational enough. If, as Christian piety understands all too well, a transcendent absolute of being, be it the orthodoxy of the scholastics or the panentheism of Spinoza, keeps us foreigners from God, an absolute of nothingness wedded to a dialectics of negation, as students of the Kyoto school should know just as well, obstructs our intimacy with the world. The reduction of meaning to a moment of eternity in time dispels history and is a clear sign that something is wrong.

Aside from the general pattern of the dialectic in which negations and negations of negations propel the mind toward loftier and loftier affirmations, the main thing the Kyoto philosophers took over from the Hegelian scheme was what they called “self-awareness of absolute nothingness.” Given their commitment to overcoming the subjective self that we usually associate with consciousness and the objective reality that we usually associate with the world, Hegel’s objective consciousness with its culmination in absolute knowledge did not seem to them a true absolute. The ambiguity of the phrase occasionally suggests, and we said as much above, that absolute nothingness is somehow aware of itself, but it is normally meant to imply that it is that to which the mind awakens at its highest level of performance. This presents the idea with a predicament. On the one hand, making the fully awakened mind an ontological absolute is out of the question, either as the mind of individual subjects or as some cosmic mind like Hegel’s. On the other, to talk of mind at all is to talk of something that really exists, which disqualifies it as a nothingness.

The long and short of it is that if nothingness is absolute, it is unaffected by the fact that minds are aware of it, or at least infer it by seeing through the relativity of everything around them. The only way it could be “cut off” from the relative is if it were no more than an infinite void like Plato’s *chōra*. The reason for bothering to enhance awareness is not that it somehow

secures final unity with the void of nothingness, since there is literally and without qualification *nothing* to unify with.

As Hegel realized, our attempts to be reasonable are part of reality, but the dialectical bridge from abstract logic and its necessities to actual life cannot bear the weight of ordinary experience. Assume that human consciousness is the highest form of mental activity in the universe if you will, to make its path to perfection into an absolute with no wider environment to embrace it is an offense to the long history out of which our consciousness evolved. Nothing real is without its environment, and I see no good reason that claims of absoluteness for nothingness should suggest otherwise. I do not see that the Kyoto school's revised notion of the absolute escaped from Hegel's faith in truth as eternal, objective, necessary, and one, and his view of the world as one in which only what *must be* are real, can withstand the moral and aesthetic demands of living in a world in which the most we can say most of the time is how things *may be*. To say that only that which has no environment, no *basho*, is ultimately true defies our every attempt to be reasonable in practice, however much it satisfies the contemplative intellect. The idea of absolute nothingness is a soap bubble that refracts the whole of the world for a brief moment, only to dissolve at the slightest breeze of change.

I am afraid I have oversimplified, but only enough to show that the nothingness of the Kyoto School philosophers cannot amount to an absolute in any but a metaphorical sense. It may seem that I have plucked too many feathers from the idea of absolute nothingness to leave it any hope of flight. But if we eliminate talk of a literal absolute from the discussion of nothingness, Nishida's claim cited above implies that the historical world of being and becoming argues against the absoluteness of the absolute, and that absolute nothingness is only truly absolute when it is *not* absolutely cut off from the world of relative beings but directly related to it. In short, the only way to preserve the true nature of the absolute is that it *not* be seen as absolute in any literal sense at all.

Think of it. If there is no greater enveloping presence or power to which nothingness can be called "relative," then it would seem to merit the name "absolute." If nothingness is the absolute other of being, and being the relative other of nothingness, then there is a sense in which an absolute of nothingness could subsume all relative being into itself and retain its absolute

character. But if the absolute has no being to embrace, if there are no circles within its circle, if it can no longer be called a universal of universals, then there would be no point to even using the term *absolute*. If, on the contrary, it is in the nature of the absolute to encircle what is relative, it still fails to merit the name “absolute.” If the absolute is only absolute vis-a-vis the relative, any literal sense of independence falls away.

Referring to nothingness as an absolute reality is a half-truth, but the reason for suggesting we eliminate it altogether is that the part of it that is true tends to distract us from the part that is not. The vast emptiness that Nishida imagined to reach beyond the final circle of being without itself being encircled either will have to be reimagined so that the world of being and becoming can be held in the embrace of emptiness, or it will have to be reduced to nothing more than a critique of other pretenders to the throne of the absolute.

#### RE-IMAGINING NOTHINGNESS

There are other, more pressing reasons why the Kyoto school’s idea of nothingness can no longer feed on the empty husks of dialectical logic in its pursuit of the status of an absolute. I do not mean to ignore philosophy’s efforts to make reality as a whole, somehow or other, reasonable. I just think that the notion of nothingness as an absolute frustrates that end. In the attempt to highlight the logical confusion in the way Kyoto School philosophers talk of the absolute, I have kept things on much the same high level of abstraction as their own texts. There is almost no indication in their writings of what practical difference it makes to the human community to think of reality as nothingness rather than as being. I happen to think it does, and I offer that practical reason as an apologia for trampling on their notion of the absolute.

Perhaps promoting the self-awareness of nothingness would make for a kinder view of society than promoting the struggle for power or wealth. But that promotion would make a mockery of critical thinking if it did not include the bigger question: What practical difference can it make to see reality in its full embrace of everything and everyone as an empty nothingness rather than as, say, the sum total of all beings? If there are no reasonable, practical consequences, what reason have we to embrace nothingness and

forsake the many traditional paths at hand for arriving at radical skepticism, pessimism, and the despair of making any sense of the world?

While the literal sense of *the absolute* in Japanese—dis-connection, 対を絶する—captures the philosophical meaning of the word, it contradicts the whole point of grounding a philosophy in nothingness. I see no reason to compromise. Let nothingness be understood in its most extreme, uncompromising sense and not diminished to an apophatic tactic aimed at dogmatic descriptions of reality. Let it be nothingness pure and simple. Let it, too, be a philosophical ground, a fundamental, all-encompassing fact of reality. As we have hinted, nothingness would be unknowable, and thus meaningless, if it did not actually embrace anything. The world of interconnected, relative beings is the only manifestation of nothingness we have. To understand the world surface and depth is our only path to awakening to the nothingness of reality. Nothingness must be radically—or metaphorically put, absolutely—relative to this world in which we exist. The search for the unqualified and indefinite is not a search for the unrelated but for the supremely related—that which is related immediately to everything, always and everywhere. This is how I understand the Kyoto philosophers’ maxim, 無即有、有即無: nothingness is only real in being, and being is only real in nothingness.

For these reasons, I am convinced that a heavier dose of the classical Buddhist conception of the inalienable reliance of ultimate truth on conventional truth would better serve the logic of a “self-awareness of nothingness” than associating it with a dialectical logic of the absolute. I fail to see any cause for eliminating the mind and the ordinary reality of the world as pure fictions. I am in sympathy with Kawabata Yasunari when he spoke in his Nobel Prize speech of “losing the self and entering into the realm of nothingness..., an emptiness in which everything communicates freely with everything, transcending bounds, limitless,” but in which one remains “master of one’s own thoughts.”<sup>8</sup> Far from having Kyoto School philosophy redefine itself as some kind of romantic transcendentalism or get lost in postmodern criticisms of the absolute, the self-awareness of nothingness seems to me a highly original but practical way of steering philosophy towards what seems to me its most momentous but largely neglected task today.

8. *Japan the Beautiful and Myself* (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1969), 56.



What I have in mind is this: The concept of nothingness and our awareness of it should not be defined primarily as abstract concepts, as reactions against western ontology, or even ways to describe the experience of “enlightenment.” These are derivative functions that can be justified only by the light they shed on a more basic problem: the search for an understanding of our relationship to the earth that can inspire us to put an end to the systematic havoc that civilization is inflicting on the natural world. Without a healthy planet, sooner or later human existence will be reduced to a caricature of itself. We have watched philosophy become marginalized throughout the twentieth century by the subservience of academics around the world to the economic and political order. The erosion of the teaching of philosophy to comply with the progress of education in a globally competitive world is not something for those with a philosophical vocation simply to monitor and criticize from the sidelines—or to do so to the extent that it does not jeopardize one’s career or status within the philosophical establishment. To ignore the earth is matricidal. We cannot afford to send young students with these concerns back to the texts on the assumption that everything has been said somewhere before. The question sears the conscience precisely because it has been so slow to find its proper place in philosophical discussions. This is not a problem a dialectical logic of absolute nothingness can handle any more than that logic has been able to contribute to scientific research. I admit there is a bit of mischief in what I am about to propose, but my only regret is that I did not ask it sooner and more forcefully in the philosophical circles of Japan where Kyoto school thought is studied so fervently.

The notion of absolute nothingness circulating among Kyoto School scholars is not only irrelevant to the crisis of the planet; it is, at least indirectly, an argument against its relevance. The best way to demonstrate this is to try to give it an expression responsive to the crisis that faces us. By that I mean, redefine it in such a way that it speaks directly to our experience, locates that experience in a broader tradition of thought, and opens up into an awareness of what is morally acceptable for the advance of human society on this fragile commons we call our earth.

Raising this question, I am struck by the way the concept of nothingness changed shape in the short history of Kyoto school philosophy. Nishida’s absolute nothingness was through and through speculative. It managed to introduce the *concept* of the historical world without actually engaging

that world as it is lived. Tanabe took exception to this, but in his attempt to see absolute nothingness as a historically regulative principle rather than a metaphysically constitutive principle, he, too, failed to bring it from its rarefied heights down to the level of concrete moral choice. Nishitani, in contrast, was rich in concrete examples of how we experience nothingness from the watered down nihilities of life's frustrations to its full, radical sense. Others, like Mutai Risaku and Shimomura Toratarō labored to draw the broader human community and the problems of modern science into the picture without upsetting the foundations that Nishida had laid. In the process, however, the idea of absolute nothingness became diluted or at least pushed to one side. The next step, it seems to me, is to de-absolutize nothingness, *pace* Nishida, and reexamine it in a way that honors the story of its development while admitting that it has become stale and out of touch with a growing awareness of the primacy of the earth.

It may seem an exaggeration to accuse absolute nothingness of blinding us to the devastation of the natural world. But the mere fact that it has *not* generated discussions of its own, that it has had to be bracketed for that discussion to begin, suggests otherwise. The problem, in fact, is not with nothingness (or with being, for the matter), but with two other matters that apply as much to philosophies of being as to those of nothingness.

First is the imagined transcendence of the subject, one of those ideas that have deep and stubborn roots in modern philosophy since Descartes. The dominant idea of mind among Kyoto School thinkers is the very idea that we find Sartre criticizing for being detached from the world for failing to see ego as a temporary constellation of the social milieu.<sup>9</sup> The transition from Kant's transcendental categories of thought to a self-awareness liberated from the subject-object dichotomy assumes that, in the liberation, subjectivity can function in an elemental state without interference by the impediments of innate a priori or experiential a posteriori conditioning. It is from this state of mind that the compassionate return to the human historical world takes its start and defines its goal, namely, the spread of the same state of selfless action. In this sense, it is not surprising that care for the natural

9. I am referring, of course, to his *La transcendance de l'ego*, a dense but important essay in which he argues against the phenomenological assumption that the ego can be defined apart from the concrete situation in which it finds itself.

world is made subservient to the enhancement of mind in its natural journey to the self-awareness of nothingness.

Second is the imagined unity of reality which, combined with the transcendent subject, creates a distance between the individual and the vastness of the cosmos. One can lose oneself in the *All-Einheit* without actually relating to it responsibly. To surrender oneself to the cosmos may bring the self to an ultimate stage of transcendence, but may also anesthetize it against its obligations to its immediate surroundings. This is the self-awareness of nothingness at its most romantic. There seems little to gain by regrounding oneself in the world once the self has already lost itself in the groundless void of the all or absolute nothingness.

Structurally, the tendency to marginalize responsibility to the natural world in order to maximize the purification of the subject is not so different from the hope of an afterlife whose quality depends on regulations set down by an otherworldly transcendent being. This does not mean that the purification of mind as such is irrelevant to the health of the planet, only that insofar as it obstructs awareness of the problem it needs to be developed further. This is hardly a matter of irrelevance or secondary concern to a philosophical worldview committed to the real world we live in. This further development begins with defining the notion of nothingness in such a way that self-awareness includes the natural world as an essential component. In effect, where the relationship to the earth is considered in terms of a self that relates itself to an absolutely transcendent, supreme being whose judgment it must survive to attain life beyond the grave, it is no different from the self that loses itself in an awareness of absolute nothingness. In both cases, there is a transcendence—divine or human—that needs to be relativized to the primacy of the earth.

It will help if we elevate the notion of the relative to the status that had been reserved for the absolute. To begin with, the *relative* need not be seen as the opposite of *absolute*. The opposite of the absolute is a radical pluralism that abstains from asserting a principle of unity at work in reality. The absolute, one way or the other, always implies a principle of oneness to reality, even if experience at its soberest and most enlightened tells us that the actual world is a moving picture that surrounds us on all sides and looks differently from different perspectives. No matter how many small connections we can register, they do not add up to an assertion of absolute unity. Even so, radical

connectedness as such does not entail a denial of that unity, only a denial of its metaphysical supremacy. Absolute nothingness, in contrast, is inextricable from a monism in which the self becomes selfless and being is awakened to as a manifestation of an all-encompassing emptiness. The radical relativization of nothingness makes no such demands on our view of reality. Nor, for that matter, does it require notions of absolute space and time that shaped the dominant metaphors by which nothingness was distinguished from the world of being and becoming.

Let me be clear. The idea of a pluralistic reality seems to me a better fit for the idea of nothingness than a monistic view, but it is not required for a radical relativization of the idea. The important thing is a positive notion of nothingness that preserves the essential Buddhist insight of the Kyoto School philosophers that nothingness is only real in being, and being is only real in nothingness. If we take the accumulated experience of the physical sciences along with our own human experience as a foundation, the idea of the radical connectedness of reality allows for such a positive view of nothingness. Connectedness does not exist as such but is only manifest in the actual connections that make things real as what they are. To see nothingness as connectedness means that nothing can be real and at the same time be disconnected from the rest of reality. Put the other way around, the idea of absolute disconnects, like that of absolute unity, are possible only in the speculative human imagination.

If everything in the world of being and becoming is, directly or indirectly, connected to everything else, it follows that the actual connections themselves are temporary and constantly being redrawn, rerouted, and misconnected in a way that the mind experiences as disconnection. In fact, nothing has been disconnected. Everything that is, always is *with* something else, but there is nothing that includes everything. No transcendent unifier or principle of unity is needed to hold this pluralistic reality in existence. To repeat the a thirteenth-century pseudo-hermetic text cited earlier, connectedness is the nothingness of a circle whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.

The idea of nothingness as connectedness is of course a metaphysical abstraction. As in the construction of a rock garden, one first sets the master rock and then proceeds to set the other rocks in accord with its request. Connectedness is not an absolute ground but a foothold in relativity, noth-

ing more. There is nothing novel about this image of reality. It is as old as Buddhist philosophy and as new as astrophysics. Versions of it are scattered across the entire intellectual and religious history of humanity. Its first function in philosophy is to clarify the foundational form of the forms of things that make up the real world, but that is not the end of it. On the contrary—and this too is a very old, if often neglected idea—it needs to be accompanied by a new image of metapraxis, the form of the forms of moral action. As we have been saying, even if we can imagine what seem to be disconnections, the sum of our experience does not allow us to imagine a disconnected world. All disconnects in the end turn out to be redirections of connectivity. New technologies and their accompanying modes of production and distribution, for example, are often experienced as a human disconnect from the natural world. On balance, the benefits too often outweigh the disadvantages, which are easily dismissed as a romantic desire to return to a simpler life that keeps us in touch with the world. This way of thinking needs to be looked at more closely. What we experience as a disconnect is in fact a loss of direct connection. This is not only true of our personal histories but of the tools we rely on for social life. Technologies and industries do not disconnect anything. Their immediacy and utility merely oblige us to take detours—longer and more labyrinthine detours as the process advances—to reconnect with the natural world. The way we imagine the connections among the things that make up our life changes as a result. It is these detours, these undesirable irrelevancies, that need to be looked at, but that is only possible if we first recognize them as such.

This is where Ockham's razor performs its most sensitive cut: to eliminate the absolute from our moral ideals. Insofar as an idea of nothingness or of another world disconnected from our own informs a praxis that deliberately sidelines the natural world and our responsibilities to it, metapraxis in an interconnected world is in peril of being reduced to the private realm or absorbed in the general ideological agenda of society. Nishitani, you will recall, describes the standpoint of emptiness as seeing the world in a kind of double-exposure in which the transiency of the world displays itself to imagination and liberates us from attachment to immediate desires and satisfactions. At the same time, he insists that the world is more than an occasion for refining personal awareness of the illusions that infect the mind. It is only *really* the world for us when we allow it to be what it is and not what we

imagine it to be for our own purposes. To actually do this, we need to go further than Nishitani did. That is, we need not only to *see through* our image of the world but to *walk through* the detours that have distracted our imagination from our own conspiracy in the overconsumption and devastation of the planet. Self-awareness is incomplete without an exposure of the habits of thought and action that we have come to take for granted. The demands of daily life are so tangled up in a nonsense that passes for common sense that we no longer find it reasonable to demand fresh water, fresh food, and fresh air—or even pay attention to those whose enjoyments of these basic rights are being taken away from them in the name of technological progress. In a word, we have come into the habit of making do with a polluted savoring of the things of life that reconnect us more and more indirectly to the natural world. We experience the planet ambiguously, through technological misconnections that have turned it into a virtual reality, resigning ourselves to the idea that direct connection is no more than romantic pining for a bygone era.

Awareness of the form of the forms of thinking and the form of the forms of acting does not easily translate into a change of habits. Metaphysics and metapraxia alone do not provide the impulse to do so. Something more is needed to bridge the self-awareness of nothingness to the natural world, namely, an impulse to a living sympathy with the aboriginal, unknown and uncontrollable miracle of connectedness. Unless we can see our brief and fragile existence as part of a greater story, our metaphysical and metapragmatic speculations risk declining into moral indifference. I am convinced it is time to restore trust in the big stories that philosophy and science have collaborated to demythify out of rational thinking.

I recall some years ago standing in the Piazza del Duomo in Milan with a small circle of friends, one among many such circles there, engaged in animated discussion of our philosophical worldviews. I had just come from the quarters of Cardinal Martini and was full of questions and doubts that arose over conversation at dinner. When our circle dispersed, I wandered into the magnificent medieval cathedral at the head of the piazza. At once, the row of towering pillars transported my gaze up into the vast expanse that arched overhead. I felt, as anyone who steps into that space must, lifted up, my lungs filling up deeply and irresistibly with a sense of awe. As many times as I have known that feeling, I have never been able to contain myself, let

alone understand it. At such moments, it is as if one has seen the place where great stories of heaven and earth breath the air they need to speak of things more than words can tell.

These stories—many of them from traditional religious cosmologies, more and more of them inspired by scientific cosmologies—can help cast a bridge from philosophical speculation about our habits of thought and action to actual practice. No one is moved by all of them and not everyone is moved by any of them. Then, too, enough of them get distorted into literal or dogmatic verities which tear them down and built them up again as walls to cut off the faithful from the unbelievers. To reconstruct these stories as if they were the seepage of a higher truth from another world into our feeble and porous minds is to deprive them of their power to move. Literalism disempowers them, and a philosophy satisfied with a critique of literalisms is as much at fault as a hermeneutics that scales them down to apophatic expression. Where these great stories are at their best, they serve to transform the chilly, rationalized ideas of the piazza into living but incomplete symbols that cry out for concrete investiture in action. Without such symbols, the hope of reconnecting to this sick and ailing planet of ours is seriously discouraged. To put this philosophically, metaphysics and metapraxis need the complement of a metaiconography that includes more than the demystifying and comparative study of mythologies. We coat these big stories with sugar or dust at our own peril. How very much we still have to learn from religions and cosmologies grounded in the natural world but marginalized by a rationalism that does not understand their unique reasonableness.

Simply put, I do not see how we can manage our nearest neighbor, the earth, without inspiration from a story of the cosmos. Whether our philosophical lenses are ground to the measure of nothingness or that of being, without these nonphilosophical stories, our philosophies cannot avoid contributing to shortsightedness that the earth pays for day by day to satisfy the suicidal gluttony of civilization.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

The argument can be made that the creativity of the Kyoto school has spent itself and that its only remaining influence is in the world of historical scholarship. Sure enough, that scholarship has raised a few eyebrows and

generated discussions about the western control of philosophy. I agree that to incorporate them into a new *mestizaje* is not to deculturalize philosophy but to interculturalize it. These thinkers remind us, too, that transcendence can be restored to philosophy in the form of transcending the limits of the everyday, self-deluded ego. But if their writings are to survive as more than arcana from the East, we need to find a place for the transcendence of the earth and to include its story, immeasurably longer than human reason, into their vision. Kyoto school philosophy has to understand that the great cosmic stories of creation and the exploits of the gods are not, as Tanabe once suggested, mere “myths to be washed away and transformed radically into dialectical symbols.”<sup>10</sup> They are the cathedrals of the mind without which our relationship to the natural world is greatly impoverished. In the image of Rabbi Ovadia Ben Adar of Izmir, they are “the cradle between words and deeds, the place where our breath perceives the infinite, after which our mouth falls open with admiration and we cannot but smile.”<sup>11</sup>

The idea of an absolute of nothingness is showing signs of ageing. Its final refutation, as I have been trying to say, comes from its moral consequences. It is far from obvious what kind of things an absolute nothingness would make morally unacceptable that we are not already sufficiently aware of. To ask that question, I suggested the notion of a “connectedness” that is our permanent environment but is not an absolute. Whatever lies beyond the nothingness we see manifest in the world of being and becoming is beyond the reach of our poor reason and the tools of our sciences and technologies. To allow the absolute of nothingness to define moral judgment is to devalue the world that lies within our reach as no more than a beguiling fantasy. Absolute nothingness is an upper-floor abstraction at the end of a steep and spiraling staircase. The way that leads to moral responsibility is down the stairs to the ground and out the door.

At the same time, there is every reason to endorse the efforts of the Kyoto school philosophers to find a proper place for religion in a philosophy of self-awareness rather than dismiss it as a scientific embarrassment. As Jacques Lacan once remarked, “If science works at it, the real will expand

10. THZ 10:31.

11. Mario Satz, *La palmera transparente. Parábolas, historias y enseñanzas de la Kábala* (Madrid: Editorial EDAF, 2000), 200.



and religion will thereby have still more reason to soothe people's hearts."<sup>12</sup> It is not only the all-merciful being of a deity that can soothe the heart; so can an absolute nothingness in which individual and universal melt into a dialectical identity of contradictory opposites, to use Nishida's phrase. But here again, I have to insist: the soothing of our hearts and mystical union with the One are ultimately pointless if they render us insensitive to the irritations and the injustices imposed on the much, much older world around us. As much as we need our cathedrals of the mind for personal comfort, the earth needs them more.

François Jullien has helped us appreciate the basic ambiguity of the philosophical quest of the universal—and I mean to include Kyoto School philosophy here—by distinguishing between the uniform and the common.<sup>13</sup> Any universal that is not grounded in the radical pluriformity of reality is as much a perversion of the term as the economic and political pressure for globalization. The truer universal is a commons which is the property of everyone, every culture, every great story by being the possession of none. And what truer example of a commons can there be than the earth itself? And what better way to honor the writings of the Kyoto school philosophers than to draw their ideas out of the precincts in which they have been enshrined and into that commons to face the questions that the sufferings of the natural world are putting to them?

12. Jacques Lacan, *The Triumph of Religion* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 64.

13. François Jullien, *On the Universal: The Uniform, the Common, and Dialogue between Cultures* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014).