



## Between the Ontological and the Ontic Nishitani Keiji on the Problem of Encounter

Following a remark by Charles Taylor, I take the problem of “understanding the other” to be “the great challenge of this century, both for politics and for social science.” I argue that exploring the logic of encounter sheds light on the ontological presuppositions of any attempt at understanding the other, which, eventually, will lead to a better understanding of the concept of understanding itself. For this purpose, I will inquire into the argumentative structure of Nishitani Keiji’s text “The I-Thou relation in Zen Buddhism.” As we will see, there are significant parallels between Nishitani’s discourse on encounter and Heidegger’s theory of truth; highlighting these parallels will help us to get a better understanding of Nishitani’s discourse. Nishitani and Heidegger both take an anti-Cartesian stance in that they develop a quasi-transcendental argument to reveal the possibility of concrete encounters and of truth (understood as correctness), respectively. However, both attempts give rise to far-reaching philosophical problems. With regard to Nishitani, they concern the role of agency and the continuity of common practices in everyday life. As it will turn out, the example of Nishitani might well serve as a test for the logical consistency of any anti-Cartesian position.

KEYWORDS: Nishitani—Heidegger—Taylor—encounter—truth—anti-Cartesianism—hermeneutics

Why raise the problem of encounter, and why deal with a Japanese philosopher to inquire into this problem? These questions are neither accidental nor superfluous. Philosophical problems do not arise out of the blue but rather belong to a context of effective history (*Wirkungsgeschichte*). We turn to certain philosophers (and texts—both being part of this effective history) because we have good reasons to believe that they have articulated these problems in an exemplary, more penetrating and thorough way than we would consider ourselves to be able to do. Choosing them as interlocutors thus not only challenges our intellectual capacities but also prevents us from the folly of trying to invent the wheel again. Therefore, reflecting one's hermeneutical situation is not only imperative with respect to technical prudence, it is also an exercise in intellectual decency.

# I

Following a remark by Charles Taylor, I take the problem of “understanding the other” to be “the great challenge of this century, both for politics and for social science.”<sup>1</sup> I argue that exploring the logic of encounter sheds light on the ontological presuppositions of any attempt at under-

1. TAYLOR 2011, 24. Those familiar with Taylor's thought will agree that this problem is to be understood against the backdrop of his ongoing inquiries into the genesis and history of Western modernity, which, with the acknowledgment of “multiple modernities,” have reached a new stage (cf. also TAYLOR 2006). The question whether the problem of understanding the other is also a challenge for philosophy proper would have to be discussed within the wider context of a philosophical discourse of modernity. Albeit this lies beyond the scope of this paper, its results should enable us to get at least a very rough idea of how this question should be posed.

standing the other, which, eventually, will lead to a better understanding of the concept of understanding itself.

The encounter of I and Thou is a problem dealt with by many Kyoto School philosophers: Nishida's 『私と汝』 (*I and Thou*), Kuki's metaphysics of contingency, Watsuji's ethics, and Nishitani Keiji's reading of the essence of encounter in *Zen-mondō* are examples that readily come to mind.<sup>2</sup> All of these have in common the assumption that authentic encounter must have its grounds in an experience of primordial openness, be it called place (場所), nothingness (無), void, emptiness (空), or absolute contingency (絶対偶然性).

I argue that we can glean from these attempts a valuable hint for understanding the essence of encounter: its ontological truth. However, I also claim that this ontological aspect has to be complemented by some notion of ontic truth that allows for connecting the aspect of openness with concrete situations of encounter between I and Thou and therefore makes normative assessments of these encounters possible, without which the problem of encounter would be philosophically uninteresting. As I believe, this is not sufficiently appreciated by most Kyoto School philosophers. In fact, in their discourses, the normative dimension of encounter is significantly absent, the reason for which lies in a specific, anti-Cartesian understanding of human subjectivity as "non-self." This might prevent some philosophers from engaging with the Kyoto School in the first place. Nevertheless, bringing to light the problems lying at the heart of these discourses is of value in that it, first, helps to structure the field of inquiry and, second, in that it helps to highlight the limits of any attempt at coming to grips with the problem of encounter that rests on anti-Cartesian presuppositions. To corroborate my argument, I wish to inquire into Nishitani Keiji's 西谷啓治 (1900–1990) discussion of the problem of encounter as in "The I-Thou relation in Zen Buddhism." I choose this text, since, in my view, it is exemplary in rigour, clarity, and accessibility. It also is exemplary insofar as Nishitani's text comprises most of the important aspects characteristic of the attempts of Kyoto School philosophers to articulate this problem. Therefore, it should allow us

2. I wish to understand the term "Kyoto School" in a wider sense. Albeit Kuki and Watsuji do not belong to the genealogy of philosophers commencing with Nishida Kitarō, they certainly share many of their problems, that of encounter being only one among them.

*pars pro toto* to (at least preliminarily) assess the achievements Kyoto School philosophers have accumulated as far as this problem is concerned.

Nishitani's attempt is furthermore illuminating, in that it highlights the strong indebtedness of many Kyoto School philosophers to Martin Heidegger's existential ontology. Tanabe, Kuki, Watsuji and others immediately recognized the anti-Cartesian implications in *Being and Time*; their writings of the 1930s and 1940s give witness to their genius in appropriating and developing further Heidegger's destruction of the subjectivist paradigm. The attraction that Heidegger's anti-Cartesianism exerted on Japanese philosophers is not limited to the first generation of the Kyoto School members. One might even argue that, while Heidegger reworked his original position and, furthermore, added a historico-philosophical dimension (the notion of *Seinsgeschichte*) to it, this attraction grew significantly over time, Nishitani being a well-known example of this tendency. Although this wider background has to be kept in mind when dealing with Kyoto School philosophers, I will confine myself to a more detailed discussion; in particular, I will focus on the structure of Nishitani's argument in "The I-Thou Relation in Zen Buddhism."

As we will see, there are significant parallels between Nishitani's discourse on encounter and Heidegger's theory of truth. Nishitani and Heidegger both develop in their own way a quasi-transcendental argument to reveal the possibility of concrete encounters and of truth (understood as correctness). However, in that both of them posit an experience of primordial openness (which is to serve as the ontological grounds that make encounter and truth possible on an ontic level, but which, at the same time, are not at man's disposal), they are moving beyond the framework of transcendental philosophy and exhibit strong similarities with certain post-metaphysical tendencies in current philosophy. These tendencies have also come to the fore in recent discussions on Japanese philosophy. Various attempts have been made to wed Nietzsche's anti-metaphysics (which is, as we have to be aware of, received through the reading of Heidegger) with the philosophy of the Kyoto School. Interestingly, Nishitani's thoughts on nihilism and emptiness often serve as a blueprint for a style of thinking that appears as having itself freed from the fetters of Western subjectivism. For that reason alone, Nishitani and Heidegger are valuable interlocutors for coming to grips

with a host of problems discussed in the field of Japanese philosophy and beyond.<sup>3</sup>

## II

The problem Nishitani discovers at the heart of any encounter is “self-attachment which puts one’s ‘self’ at the center and so discriminates between ‘self’ and ‘other.’” (BE, 50) Self-attachment and discriminating between self and other are the source of all kinds of strife and enmity between human beings. It is grounded in avoiding an experience of primordial openness, which Nishitani calls “*śūnyatā* [void, emptiness]” (空) (BE, 44).<sup>4</sup> That is to say, self-attachment prevents us from facing the “unbounded horror” (BE, 48) lying hidden on the ground of any everyday encounter. I will come back to this notion below (section IV), but when Nishitani invites us to look into the abyss of “unbounded horror,” he aims at elucidating the possibility of an encounter that is not based on the discrimination between self and other and, thus, avoids falling into strife and enmity.

To reveal this possibility, Nishitani introduces an absolute distinction between the realm of concrete, everyday encounters and the dimension of true, authentic encounter. The common characteristic of everyday encounters is, to Nishitani, that they have to resolve the conflict between freedom and equality. Every individual strives for freedom and independence, while, for the sake of self-preservation, has to cooperate with others who equally strive for their individual freedom. Cooperation means that human beings are sharing certain practices which, in order to be successful, have to be normatively structured; therefore rules and laws—like the moral law, civic laws, or God’s laws are imposed. Nishitani calls them “universals.” With respect to universals, all individuals are supposed to be equal and, therefore, “any one individual could take the place of any other.” (BE, 42) And yet, every individual insists on his or her individuality. This inevitably leads to strife and enmity. The function of universals is to prevent individuals from falling into

3. For a preliminary overview cf. LIEDERBACH 2017, 9–34.

4. NKC 12: 280. Note that, in this text, Nishitani uses “void, emptiness” also in the sense of 無我 (non-self), cf. *ibid.*, 285, 287.

a Hobbesian *bellum omnia contra omnes*, i.e. a state of absolute enmity, by imposing on them certain limitations and, thus, establishing a certain level of harmony. Therefore, everyday encounters are characterized by a constant tension between freedom and equality, resulting in a precarious balance of enmity and harmony. Each poses a limitation to the other. This is to say that, in everyday encounters, the individual is neither truly free nor truly equal. Nishitani holds that, “where interhuman relationships are subordinate to such universals, with the result that equality and freedom accompany one another in their incompleteness, no authentic encounter between human beings is possible.” (BE, 42–3) I wish to call this notion “ontic inauthenticity.”

To fully actualize freedom and equality and, thus, to attain authenticity and, finally, to overcome strife and enmity, Nishitani proposes to transcend the limits represented by any form of universals. The place of this transcendence is the above-mentioned, *śūnyatā*. In transcendence, we are forced to look into the abyss of “unbounded horror.” In this existential experience, the very reason for strife, enmity and the imperfections of freedom and harmony—that is, the duality of I and Thou—is dissolved. That is to say, a transformation of both I and Thou comes about in which self-attachment is rooted out. Nishitani writes:

But the essential point is that the subjective relation of man to man is no longer that of I and Thou in the universal sense.... The I *is* the Thou, even as the Thou *is* the I.... I and Thou blend completely into one another. (BE, 47)

However, Nishitani stresses that the dissolution of I and Thou must not be confused with eliminating their difference. It is rather brought about in a movement of dual negation that breaks up fixed determinations of I and Thou. While the I is the Thou, the I is the I and the Thou is the Thou:

Absolute opposition is at the same time absolute harmony. Both are the same. Here, absolute opposition is, as it is, a sport (遊び) and absolute harmony is not simply nondifferentiation. *Self and other are not one, and not two.* (BE, 49)

I would like to call this notion “ontological authenticity.”<sup>5</sup>

5. Even from these few remarks we can discern the existentialist background of Nishitani's discourse. Similar to what can be considered his systematical main work, *Religion and Nothingness*, in his essay on encounter, Nishitani aims at disclosing a dimension of experience

Having given this brief introduction into the argumentative structure of Nishitani's discourse, I will now proceed to prepare the grounds for putting it into the context of Heidegger's existential ontology.

### III

While the notions of authenticity and inauthenticity immediately remind us of Heidegger's distinctions in *Being and Time*, the philosophical implications of Nishitani's discourse can be revealed better by contrasting it with Heidegger's text "On the Essence of Truth" from 1930.<sup>6</sup> This comparison will be particularly illuminating, since, for Heidegger, the matter of truth eventually coincides with the matter of freedom, the notion of freedom implying a critique of modern subjectivism that is similar to Nishitani's critique of self-attachment. Heidegger remarks:

To free oneself for a binding directedness is possible only by *being free* for what is opened up in an open region.... The openness of comportment as the inner condition of the possibility of correctness is grounded in freedom. *The essence of truth, as the correctness of a statement, is freedom.* (PM, 142)

With what I have referred to above as a quasi-transcendental argument, Heidegger seeks to deduce the possibility of correctness (*Richtigkeit*), meaning the "accordance of a statement with a matter" (PM, 140). That is, he aims to prove that correctness originates in the experience of some primordial openness which makes any accordance possible. It is within this openness, and not within the structure of an epistemological subjectivity, Heidegger claims, that any relation between statement and matter can be established.

This appearing of the thing in traversing a field of opposedness takes place within an open region, the openness of which is not first created by the pre-

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that would lead us to a radical change of our existence. Hence, the examination of the argumentative structure of Nishitani's discourse in "The I-Thou relation" will give us an idea about the limits and possibilities of existentialist philosophy as such (albeit exemplified here by the specific case of encounter). Far from denying the meaning such an experience could have for an individual existence, I shall claim that it entails far-reaching philosophical problems when it comes to giving an account of human agency, particularly the continuity of common practices that derive from and/or are presupposed in any encounter between I and Thou.

6. Translation by John Sallis in PM, 136–54.

sending but rather is only entered into and taken over as a domain of relatedness. (PM, 141)

Put in phenomenological terms: openness provides the necessary (and Heidegger would add: sufficient) condition for any intentionality, that is for any correlation of *noësis* and *noëma*. Only in this openness the experience of what Heidegger calls *Daßheit* (the simple fact that there are beings) can be made.

This is, at first sight, convincing, but problems arise when Heidegger has to determine the relation between the ontological and ontic dimensions of truth, that is, between openness and correctness. Such a determination would have to include an argument on how the experience of *Daßheit* of beings is essential to make correct statements about its *Washeit*, that is, about what it really is; only then it could be shown that the experience of openness provides the indispensable yardstick for making our statements and judgements correct or false. This I take the phrase “binding directedness” to mean. However, when Heidegger claims that “that which is opened up, that to which a presentative statement as correct corresponds, are beings opened up in an open comportment,” and then adds that “freedom for what is opened up in an open region lets beings be the beings they are” (PM, 144), it is obvious that “binding directedness” is not at all related to correctness.<sup>7</sup> If it is so that freedom is the essence of truth, and that “freedom... reveals itself as letting beings be” (PM, 144), then the only function the experience of primordial openness has, is disclosing beings as beings, their *Daßheit*, leaving open the problem how to move from *Daßheit* to *Washeit*. Propositions about *Washeit* might be correct, but they never can be true in Heidegger’s sense, since the determination of a concrete being means “the concealing of beings as a whole” (PM, 147). Therefore, ontological truth and ontic correctness are forming an opposition, or, put in logical terms,

7. I do not wish to enter into a discussion about the implications of *Seinlassen* (letting beings be the beings they are); for my argument it suffices that Heidegger provides us with no clue as to how *Daß* and *Was* are connected with each other. However, the problem of *Seinlassen* is important inasmuch it has to be understood against the backdrop of Heidegger’s anti-metaphysical aspirations, which have been eagerly received by his Japanese disciples, first and foremost by Nishitani. I will leave this discussion for another occasion.



an exclusive disjunction, where the former cannot be complemented by the latter. In Heidegger's conception, truth is above all an ontological event, in contrast to which the *logos* of ontic correctness cannot but be derivative.

As we have seen, the objective of Heidegger's theory of truth lies in showing that forming correct statements about a determinate being depends on experiencing indeterminate beings as a whole; indeterminateness is prior to determinateness; the latter is grounded in the former. However, when Heidegger claims that our intentional relatedness to beings is merely derivative in the sense that obtaining correct information of beings (*Washeit*) leads to the complete concealment of beings as a whole (*Daßheit*), he shuts out the possibility of any continual movement from the experience of openness to the formation of correct statements; indeterminateness cannot be translated into determinateness. But if the former were to bear any significance for the latter (and only under this condition, Heidegger's theory of truth would make sense), such a movement would be necessary.

With my objection I do not wish to completely invalidate Heidegger's theory. I agree with Heidegger that the notion of openness is necessary for forming correct statements, but in a different sense than he intended it to be. To insist on the possibility of correct statements and, at the same time, to appreciate the notion of openness, we would have to show that determining concrete beings does not mean to completely conceal beings as a whole, but only certain aspects of this wholeness. This would allow for acknowledging some kind of determinateness in the experience of openness without having to identify it with actively determining particular beings. The determinateness, which the experience of openness gets access to, is nothing else than Heidegger's "binding directedness." It allows us to disclose a particular being in a certain mode, from a certain perspective, which is not the same as determining that being, but a necessary condition for its determinateness. Recasting Heidegger's theory of truth in this way would, of course, make it necessary to substantially qualify the notion of primordial openness.

Carrying out such a qualification requires us to provide a notion of ontological truth that is continuous with ontic correctness, so that it could initialize our inquiry of particular beings. This inquiry cannot begin with an experience of primordial openness that does not allow for any determination. It rather has to begin with an experience of an openness that is, while not being propositionally determinate, normatively structured, so that the

inquiry can proceed to determining “what” a particular being really is. And we make this experience all the time when approaching particular beings under a certain perspective. Guided by what Hans-Georg Gadamer has called *Vorverständnis* (preunderstanding), we distinguish different dimensions of beings, knowing that, for instance, approaching a piece of art with methods developed by natural sciences would not lead us very far.<sup>8</sup> In this sense, we cannot but move in a “space of reasons” (Wilfrid Sellars), which is, while not determinately articulated, normatively structured in that it provides a “binding directedness,” which makes determinate standards of correctness possible, against which particular statements can be assessed. (This is not to deny the possibility of experiencing a normatively unstructured primordial openness; it is only to say that such an experience would bear no philosophical significance—unless, of course, one would discard the notion of philosophy as such, as Heidegger did, when he introduced a non-traditional, non-standard mode of thinking, which he calls *Denken*, a move that inspired so-called post-modern thinkers like Vattimo, Rorty and others; but I do not intend to wander into those thickets.) In this sense, determining what a particular being is, means to give an interpretation of the reality that there are beings; determination is interpretation.<sup>9</sup> Hence, “that” and “what” form a hermeneutical relation that is essentially circular. Experiencing the limited openness of a “binding directedness” triggers the quest for asking “what” a particular being really is. And asking for the being of beings is, then, a reflection on the condition of the possibility of the act of determination, an account of account-giving.

Reading “On the Essence of Truth” in this perspective (upside down, so to speak), does not necessarily invalidate Heidegger’s main intentions. “What” a being is, is still related to the (albeit limited) openness of the reality “that” there are beings. The crucial point is that determinations of “what” a particular being is can never exhaust the possible meanings of the “that” of

8. Gadamer makes this point in his discussion of art in part I of *Truth and Method*.

9. I wish to understand “interpretation” as in the German *Darstellung*. The common English translation, “representation,” is misleading, as it has implications that point in a Cartesian direction. In contrast, the way I am using *Darstellung* and *darstellen* here is similar to the usage in sentences like, “In der BBC-Produktion von John le Carrés *Tinker, Taylor, Soldier, Spy* aus dem Jahre 1979 ist Alec Guinness der Darsteller von George Smiley / wird George Smiley von Alec Guinness dargestellt.” For the concept of *Darstellung*, see FIGAL 1996, 11–31 and *passim*.

this being, since every single determination is just one possible account that could be replaced by another, potentially more appropriate one.<sup>10</sup> That is to say, the experience of (limited) openness runs through the whole process of determination, and thus helps us to not lose track in our inquiry. Although this experience has not necessarily to be subject to propositional articulation (Kuhn's "normal science" could serve as an example), it can become an object of reflection. Then, the truth is revealed that the inexhaustibility of interpretation is made possible by the limited openness "that" there are beings which can be disclosed in a particular way. That is to say, moving from "what" back to "that" accounts for possible changes of our interpretations. (In Kuhn's terms, this would open the possibility for bringing about a "paradigm change.")

The fact that Heidegger obviously does not and cannot acknowledge the aspect of normative determinateness within the experience of primordial openness is responsible for the ambiguity of his argument: While he succeeded in showing that the experience of openness is a necessary condition for all kinds of intentionality and for making correct statements, he failed in proving that it is also a sufficient condition. Only when complemented by some knowledge about "what" a particular being could be does the experience "that" there are beings as a whole have a bearing on a theory of truth.

#### IV

It is not too difficult to see how this connects with Nishitani's discourse on encounter. Like Heidegger, Nishitani aims at revealing for an ontic human activity the ontological grounds which are not at man's disposal. In Heidegger, this activity meant making correct statements; in Nishitani, it is the I's encountering another human being, a Thou. Moreover, for Nishitani, like for Heidegger, the ontic dimension cannot but conceal the ontological grounds (in Nishitani's phrasing: the "unbounded horror"). We can therefore expect that the problems Nishitani will have to face are similar to Heidegger's. Before going into detail, I should point out that Nishitani adds an important qualification to his discourse. Transcending the realm of everyday ontic encounters towards the dimension of "void"

10. Cf. Charles Taylor's "best account principle" as developed in TAYLOR 1989, 56.

is, as he stresses, an experience “in a religious sense” (BE, 48).<sup>11</sup> However, this qualification should not prevent us from extracting the philosophical significance of this experience, and I do not believe that Nishitani is avoiding a philosophical debate. After all, he makes numerous references to philosophical sources from old and new, East and West, so that it is not completely unjustified to challenge him on this plane. Moreover, the experience of transcendence Nishitani wishes to elucidate is related to the realm of everyday encounter, which undeniably involves an array of philosophical problems, and Nishitani himself addresses some of them. Finally, the claim that the religious experience of transcendence “has absolutely severed self-and-other from self-and-other in their relative sense” (BE, 48) is philosophically too interesting to leave its interpretation to monks and theologians.

To work out the structural parallels between Heidegger’s theory of truth and Nishitani’s discourse on the essence of encounter, I shall begin with a discussion of the key element in both, that is the experience of transcendence. The indeterminate openness of the “that” there are beings, finds its structural parallel in Nishitani’s concept of “void.” However, the experience of “void” clearly has a more existential ring than Heidegger’s experience of indeterminate openness. (Instead, it recalls Heidegger’s explications of “nothingness” in his lecture *What is Metaphysics?* from 1929.) Nishitani’s talk of the “unbounded horror” lying on the ground of any encounter, implies several aspects of indeterminateness, each of which is horrifying in a certain sense. First, the experience of “void” reveals the emptiness of the I and so negates its very substantiality. Second, it reveals that common practices which are regulated by “universals” are inauthentic in that, like in Heidegger’s description of *das Man*, they cannot be determined in terms of Being-there’s authorship and ownership. Third, it follows that the claims “universals” are making on us are, from this existential perspective, unjustified; in this respect, their significance is void, and thus the very grounds of our practices are fundamentally put into question. Since our everyday life is

11. “In other words, what is required is an equality in which the negation of the individual and his freedom would become the absolute affirmation of the individual and his freedom. This is of course quite inconceivable, unless seen from the point of view of absolute nothingness, *śūnyatā*—nonbeing in the Buddhist sense of the term” (BE, 43).

made up of common practices, and since I and Thou can enter these practices only by being restricted by universals, carrying out one's common practices and, thus, sticking to one's everyday life means, consequently, to avoid the acknowledgement that I, Thou, and universals are substantially empty.

Although Nishitani invites us to make the movement of transcendence into the dimension of "void" to become aware of these aspects of emptiness, he does not wish to leave us in horror and despair; for him, the experience of "void" is just a necessary (and, as he would add: sufficient) condition for acquiring true freedom on the basis of authentic encounter. In other words, the experience of horror changes completely and reveals the "infinite beauty" that is "hidden below the surface" (BE, 43) of any everyday encounter. Although this is likely to be understood as a religious experience of conversion,<sup>12</sup> I would insist on extracting its philosophical implications. In particular, we will have to ask what it means that "true freedom... can only take place where the locus of *sūnyatā* becomes the locus of freedom" (BE, 44).

From what has been said so far about the experience of "void" and its relation to freedom, it is obvious that Nishitani, like Heidegger, rejects the standard notion of freedom, understood as a quality that specifically belongs to persons (like freedom of the will, freedom of action, and freedom of consciousness). Given the anti-Cartesian aspirations of Heidegger and Nishitani, this is not surprising. Both are aiming at deconstructing the notion of substantial subjectivity, which came to the fore in Western modernity. Notions like *Da-sein* (being-there) and *muga* (non-self) indicate a radical break with the subjectivist paradigm in that they point at a fundamental relatedness of human beings to a dimension of reality which is not at the disposal of the determining activity of the subject, which, in turn, makes it necessary to reassess traditional notions like freedom, agency, and others. It is against this background that Nishitani, like Heidegger, holds that the standard notion of freedom is only derivative from humanity's relatedness to a primordial openness<sup>13</sup>; by becoming aware of this relatedness and, thus

12. Cf. DAVIS 2017.

13. It should be noted that the derivative notion of freedom is bound to a specific historical situation. For Heidegger and Nishitani, the modern understanding of freedom is an expression of a deep crisis in the history of Western civilization that, according to them, is culminating in modern nihilism, the overcoming of which is to be achieved by adopting a new mode of thinking, *Denken*, and, therefore, by transforming

acknowledging the fundamental emptiness of I, Thou, their common practices, and the universals that regulate these practices, humanity enters a state of authentic encounter, and thus obtains true freedom. This is all to happen on a level that I have called above “ontological.”

If this were to have any bearings for what is happening on the “ontic” level of encounter, we would have to assume that the awareness of the various aspects of emptiness were to motivate a new form of I-Thou relation that avoids any further instantiation of what Nishitani has identified as “imperfect” modes of “equality and freedom” (BE, 42). We would, therefore, expect that, on the basis of a new I-Thou relation, significance, function, and legitimacy of universals would have to change, too. This implies that there has to be a continuous movement between the two levels. Therefore, as in Heidegger, where the experience of *Daßsein* was meant to motivate our quest for *Wassein*, in Nishitani, the experience of “void” would have to guide us towards the realization of specific and determinate encounters. However, similar to Heidegger’s case, where it turned out that the experience of ontological truth is not continuous with making correct ontic statements, we must doubt whether the experience of true freedom and equality in Nishitani translates into the formation of concrete I-Thou relations. After all, it is not clear why the experience of primordial openness should motivate us to form bonds with others in the first place. Furthermore, does it allow for discriminating between determinate kinds of bonds? How does this experience affect the function of universals? Can it explain why we adhere to certain universals and why we reject others? These and other questions Nishitani would have to address, if his discourse on encounter were to be consistent.

Now, Nishitani does not deny the necessity of universals in everyday life. He says: “Not that law is bad. What is bad is to fix one’s self on some universal as ‘being,’ to become attached to law—in its heteronomous, autonomous, or ‘theonomous’ form” (BE, 50–1). From this, we can glean that Nishitani wants us to become aware of and to overcome the illusion of understanding universals as absolutes; he surely does not want to give us a prospect of a completely unrestricted and lawless life (the Hobbesian state of nature).

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the substantial self-understanding of man as subjectivity. Cf. HEIDEGGER 2012 and NISHITANI 1990.

Borrowing from his paradoxical phrasing, we might say that Nishitani wants us to adhere to universals while not adhering to them. In his view, this is possible when

man cuts off his small self and devoutly enters reality, [when] the Great Wisdom (*prajñā*) opens up as the native place of all things, as the place where they emerge and realize themselves as they are—the place of reality itself. (BE, 51)

I assume that Nishitani wants to make the point that “devoutly entering reality” makes us see through the limitations of universals; in other words, it would then become clear, that they are trying to fix something on the ontic level, which doesn’t pose any problem at all on the ontological level. While this is as comprehensible as Heidegger’s move to show that ontic correctness is derivative of ontological truth, the problem remains how this translates into everyday encounters and common practices.

In this regard, it is telling that Nishitani describes this translation or movement in terms of “poetry” and “spiritual divertissement” (BE, 51).

The “poetry,” he says, does not consist in images imagined by human consciousness, nor is it composition made up of human language. Here the poem uses as its images actual things themselves; it is composed of the words that all things themselves recite.... This is not a poetry of Romanticism, but of radical realism. (BE, 51)

And similarly:

The “spiritual divertissement” spoken of is not a spiritual divertissement staged in our consciousness, but one that arises from the very depths of our being and the being of all things. (BE, 51)<sup>14</sup>

14. Here again, the parallel with Heidegger is obvious. If the “poetry” Nishitani refers to, discloses “the native place of all things..., the place where they emerge and realize themselves as they are” (BE, 51), it functions in a similar way as a piece of art in Heidegger’s essay *The Origin of the Work of Art* (1935/36), although Nishitani is more radical in that the place where beings emerge is not just a historically determined world, as it is in Heidegger, but “the place of reality itself” (BE, 51). However, they converge in that they insist on a dimension of reality, the access to which does not depend on an activity of subjective consciousness, but rather on that which Heidegger calls *Seinlassen*, a mode of comportment beyond the opposition of activity and passivity. Needless to say that, on this plane, consciousness, activity, and passivity are nothing else than derivative modes of existence, which inevitably conceal the dimension of *Unverborgenheit* (Heidegger) or “reality itself” (Nishitani). For the problem of how ontological



Poetry and spiritual *divertissement* take place only after the experience of transcendence, that is, after the reality of all beings has been disclosed as “void.” If poetry and spiritual *divertissement* were to designate a return to the ontic dimension, this would indeed suggest a fundamental change of how we enter everyday encounters and carry out common practices. We might even ask if these very terms would still make sense, since it is questionable whether that experience allows for any form of continuation of both—forms of encounters and common practices—without relapsing immediately into a state of inauthenticity. All the same, it is obvious that Heidegger’s move to connect the problem of truth with the problem of freedom is radicalized by Nishitani, who treats the problem of freedom as something that is fundamentally depending on an experience of “the place of reality itself.” Therefore, we can assume that the “poetry” Nishitani is referring to is not without rules but receives its rules from “reality itself.” If we translate this notion into the situation of everyday encounter and the common practices related to them, we would have to say that, following Nishitani, I and Thou, when authentically encountering each other, are following rules that are not mediated by institutions (“universals”) but rather receive these rules by some intuitive knowledge or awareness that flows out of the experience of “void,” that is, “reality itself.”

The experience of “reality itself” reveals that the common notion of reality, which derives from everyday experience rests on a false belief about the essence of beings. While everyday experience implicitly takes it for granted that beings are ontologically grounded in substances, the existential leap into the dimension of “void” unmask this belief as mere appearance. Therefore, the insight into the true nature of things implies a fundamental break with common practices; the intuitive awareness of the emptiness of all beings, particularly of universals, has consequences that are of a more radical nature than those that would result from obtaining knowledge about the (historical and normative) limits of universals. While such knowledge does not necessarily lead to the total negation of determinate universals, this is precisely what is implied in the intuitive awareness Nishitani is after. In the

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and ontic dimension relate with each other, these distinctions are of no importance; it makes no difference whether the ontological dimension is called “place of absolute reality” or “unconcealment,” so long as both notions imply a radical break with the ontic dimension.



place where I and Thou can authentically meet, no determinate universal will suffice to set the rules that preserve the freedom of I and Thou, while at the same time, any attempt on the side of I and Thou at understanding themselves (and the universals) as ontological substances is rejected. The break with their ontic self-understanding is fundamental, since the very (ontic) notion of self is of no use for designating I and Thou who entered a state of intuitive awareness on the ontological level. In Nishitani's conceptual framework, the ontological and the ontic are forming an exclusive disjunction: We can imagine ontological awareness *replacing* ontic self-understanding; it cannot be seen how the latter could be *modified* by the former, as it would be possible on the basis of an inclusive disjunction.

It has become obvious that the *aporiai* of Nishitani's discourse of encounter stem from positing an absolute distinction between the ontic and the ontological. Therefore, in everyday encounters, the "place of true reality," that is, the dimension of "void," where the opposition of I and Thou can be resolved, is inevitably concealed. Moreover, if we follow Nishitani, this concealment is in itself (a) complete/absolute and therefore (b) cannot be revealed from the perspective of everyday life, but only from the perspective of ontological authenticity. This is what Nishitani means when he says that "the only way this can be done is to break through the ground of the encounter" (BE, 49). That is to say, ontological authenticity and ontic inauthenticity are not complementary to one another. Rather, they constitute an opposition where the former claims priority over the latter. To put it differently, the *logos* of ontological truth does not translate into ontic language. Hence it becomes impossible to relate the ontological dimension back to the sphere of ontic encounter. But we would need to establish this relation, if Nishitani's ontological inquiries were to have bearing on our understanding and actualization of everyday encounters and on our efforts to overcome strife and enmity.<sup>15</sup>

15. Another reading might be that, on this level of inquiry, it no longer makes sense to distinguish between the ontological and the ontic. This would be the paradoxical pinnacle of Nishitani's discourse, and it is obvious that any argumentative language would have to fail when trying to articulate what is going on here; one can justly doubt whether it could be addressed by academic philosophy in the first place. In this reading, again, Nishitani's indebtedness to Heidegger stands out. For Heidegger too, the "other beginning" (*der andere Anfang*) is not to be articulated by standard philosophy, or as he puts it, metaphysics, but by

Probably it is this difficulty that accounts for Nishitani's making use of metaphoric language. His invocation of images of poetry and spiritual *divertissement* can be understood as an attempt at translating the experience of "void" into a dimension of communicative practice between I and Thou. However, the place of this communication is anything but the place of everyday encounters; the metaphoric language Nishitani employs rather depicts an exceptional mode of comportment that presupposes a quite unusual (to say the least) relationship between I and Thou, and self and world. And so it seems that the experience of "void" described by Nishitani cannot be translated into the dimension of everyday encounter without sacrificing what constitutes its very everydayness, i.e. the common practices that make up our social life.

This gives rise to another problem: Nishitani's absolute distinction makes it impossible to question critically the specific role and function of power (in his phrasing, of "universals"). A discussion of this problem would require us, once again, to relate the ontological dimension to the sphere of ontic, everyday encounter, where the aspect of power cannot be ignored. What is at stake here, can be studied in Watsuji's ethical thought. There, a similar problem occurs. In Watsuji, the insufficient determination of the relation between ontological principle and its ontic actualization leads to the totalization of "void" which vacuums up all critical concerns regarding the power of state and nation.<sup>16</sup> Neither in Nishitani nor in Watsuji we find the conceptual means to raise the question of power. Both leave us clueless when it comes to justify its meaning, function, and exertion. However, to claim the significance of Nishitani (or Watsuji, for that matter) for enhancing our understanding of the essence of encounter within our contemporary, global predicament, where a multitude of universals (i.e. different forms of power)

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poets like Hölderlin and Trakl. All this depends on a grand narrative of the history (that is: the decline) of Western modernity, of which Heidegger and Nishitani are major proponents. The far-reaching implications of this narrative require a detailed discussion, especially since S.N. Eisenstadt's theory of "multiple modernities" has triggered a pluralistic turn in modernity discourse. I leave this point open for another occasion. In any case, it would be irresponsible to simply buy into this narrative and indulge ourselves in some post-metaphysical "thinking." In this regard, PIPPIN 1999 merits attention.

16. This is the problematic essence of Watsuji's dialectics of dual negation ; see WATSUJI 1996, 23–4.

are clashing with one another, we would need precisely such conceptual means. (And we would need them also for coming to grips with other problems related to the phenomenon of encounter, such as tolerance, recognition, dignity, and respect.)

However, we can doubt whether Nishitani is genuinely interested in addressing these problems. For him, so it seems, to solve the problem of authentic freedom and equality, transforming the ontic level of encounter (and this includes our common practices) does not suffice, it rather has to be turned upside down; no gradual change of, but only a radical break with our common practices will do. This would, so we can assume, give birth to unprecedented “poetic” practices, the commonality of which were to be found in the place that is revealed when we have broken through the ground of encounter. Nishitani says:

It is there that the condition of eat or be eaten is penetrated to the condition of at once eating *and* be eaten, until the little self of each one dissolves. It is at this point where self and other are not two different things, where strife is transformed into sport (*asobi*). There it is like flowers competing with their reds and purples in the spring warmth. Unless the relations between individual and individual, between nation and nation, between all factions, all groups, return to this condition, there remains only the battle between wolves in the wild. (BE, 49–50)

That is to say, since the days of Hobbes, modern societies have made no progress at all. It is not that they have not tried, but since they put their trust in the imperfect function of universals, their efforts necessarily had to fail. In this radical view, modern life is nothing else but a succession of broken promises that had no chance to be kept in the first place.—The malaise of modernity must be unbearable indeed if it makes one paint the picture of modern life in such bleak colors.

## v

Setting Nishitani’s “The I-Thou Relation in Zen Buddhism” alongside Heidegger’s “On the Essence of Truth” has enabled us to critically question the argumentative structure of Nishitani’s discourse. As we have seen, the problems Nishitani faces are similar to those of Heidegger;

and like in Heidegger, these problems derive from a problematic (because absolute) distinction between the dimensions of the ontological and the ontic. Because of this distinction, Nishitani cannot show how everyday encounters and practices could be transformed by the ontological experience of “void,” and therefore he also cannot account for the possibility of making normative assessments about practices carried out in concrete encounters.

To be sure, in the ontological dimension depicted by Nishitani, the fixed determinations of I and Thou are cancelled and thus a new encounter becomes possible. Borrowing from Heidegger, we could say that, ontologically speaking, any encounter “takes place within an open region, the openness of which is not first created by the presenting [that is: “the encountering” in the context of Nishitani’s discourse] but rather is only entered into and taken over as a domain of relatedness” (PM, 141). However, as in Heidegger, Nishitani’s account fails to acknowledge a “binding directness” in the sense discussed above. Therefore, he can understand ontic encounters only as derivative of, not as complementary to the ontological dimension. Similarly, the notion of “sport” is meant to designate a form of agency that can never become subject to the norms that govern everyday practices. Like in the case of Heidegger, these objections are, however, not meant to negate the significance of what lies at the very heart of Nishitani’s intentions; we would just have to add some qualifications.

Therefore, in concluding this paper, I argue that the notion of primordial openness, i.e. “void,” could nevertheless be employed for coming to grips with our present situation, where “understanding the other” (Charles Taylor) is of vital importance. However, to support this claim, we would have to understand the concept of primordial openness not in the existential (or religious) sense Nishitani and Heidegger are aiming at, but in a hermeneutical sense. Therefore, we would have to show that ontic encounters are not derivative in the sense that they conceal the ontological dimension completely, but that they hold themselves open towards it. After all, it is within the dimension of concrete, ontic encounters, where the problem of absolute freedom and equality arises in the first place. This means that, already in this dimension, we are capable of realizing the problematic limitations that universals exert on freedom and equality. And if we are aware of these limitations, we have, in a certain sense, already transcended them,

since for recognizing limitations we have to straddle them, that is, we have to have a notion of what lies on both sides.

The same applies to our understanding of fixed determinations of I and Thou. Awareness of one's self-attachment does not depend on the dissolution of I and Thou. The linguisticity of human existence gives witness to the (limited) openness, the horizon of *logos*, in which ontic, everyday encounters take place. That is to say, the primordial openness shows itself in everyday encounters, although its appearance will be only partial and clouded, these "imperfections" being the necessary condition for relating the dimension of ontological primordial openness to the sphere of ontic, everyday encounters.

I argue for distinguishing between the experience of limited openness and the dissolution of I and Thou. If we can achieve the former without having to go through the latter, we also will be able to resist self-attachment in everyday encounters. That is, we will be able to put into question our own "universals," that is, our convictions, beliefs, and values. What kind of experience could make this possible? It is precisely the experience of "void," not in an existential sense as in Nishitani, but in a hermeneutical sense. While, in everyday encounters, there will never be no limitations of freedom and equality, the notion of "void" could designate the hermeneutical space where competing claims of universals would not inevitably lead to a Hobbesian *bellum omnia contra omnes*. In that hermeneutical space, I and Thou, each holding his or her own convictions and beliefs, could enter into a dialogue in which their absoluteness becomes subject to reexamination. The *logos* that is needed for such reexamination is neither that of the I nor that of the Thou exclusively. It will rather have to be a *logos* that is brought about within the hermeneutical middle ground between I and Thou. Here, and not in some transcendent realm, I argue, lies the truth of encounter.

To be sure, in the picture given here, there will be strife and enmity; self attachment will not be rooted out; regulating these all-too-human aspects of humanity by means of (imperfect) universals will never solve the problems related with the phenomenon of encounter, as it is impossible to return to a state of humanity prior to what, in the spirit of Heidegger and Nishitani might be designated as "Cartesian fall from grace." But this is as much as we can get. And yet, even if we acknowledge the above-mentioned qualifications of Nishitani's notion of "void," and even if the hermeneutical con-

ception of encounter can assure the continuity between the experience of limited openness and the formation of relations between I and Thou, the question remains how to justify the normative demands relations make on us. Addressing this question would reveal that the hermeneutical approach sketched out above is by no means sufficient; it would have to be complemented by a conception that could make comprehensible the logic of normative account-giving in historical time.

Despite all the criticism we put against Nishitani, his radicalism has created an awareness for what is philosophically at stake here; the problem of encounter might well serve as a test for the logical consistency of any anti-Cartesian position.

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