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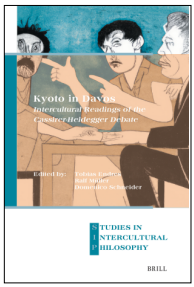

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Gregory S. Moss

Facing Nothingness with the Kyoto School

In the following set of critical remarks, I argue that the Kyoto school is a world philosophical movement and warn against one-sided and essentializing claims about "Western" or "Eastern" philosophy. While many of the papers draw the Kyoto School philosophers closer to Cassirer over Heidegger, I contend that Heidegger is the more important figure between the two. In the course of my critiques, I raise interpretive and philosophical questions, as well as questions related to the significance of Neo-Platonic and German-Idealist traditions in the Kyoto School discourse. The critical remarks are divided into two sections. In the first I treat the papers engaged with Tanabe and Miki, and in the final section I turn to discuss Nishitani.

Tanabe and miki

In "The Davos Debate and Japanese Philosophy: *Welt-Schema* and *Einbildungskraft* in Tanabe and Miki" Tatsuya Higaki investigates the concepts of *Welt-Schema* and *Einbildungskraft* in Tanabe and Miki with relation to the Davos debate. I will primarily focus on questions concerning historical influence, with an eye to Hegel and Heidegger. The author mentions that Tanabe's logic of species is heavily influenced by Bergson[1] but does not discuss exactly how or in what respects Tanabe was influenced by him. It would be of help to the reader to clarify the exact nature of this influence in order to better understand how Tanabe assimilated and developed certain aspects of life philosophy.[2]

This is all the more important in light of the fact that in his *logic of species*, Tanabe regularly refers to "'dialectical' negation"[3] and "speculative reason,"[4] both of which are central Hegelian concepts. As is well

1. Endres, Müller, Schneider 2024, 348.
2. Ibid., 345.
3. Ibid., 350.
4. Ibid., 351.

known, Hegel was an important influence on Tanabe's logic of species. On his relation to Hegel Tanabe leaves very little to the imagination:

> Therefore, in contradistinction to the cultural subject, which can be called the totality-qua-individual, a species can be understood as a specificity which belongs to the substance of culture. "Species" is usually considered to be universal. Of course, such a meaning is also implied in the concept of species in my own case. Since I originally was influenced by Hegel's concept of objective spirit, it is inevitable that what I term 'species' should have this kind of meaning. But Hegel's objective spirit in itself signifies the customs, traditions, and laws of a society. It has both cultural and political content. Consequently, not only is it a specialization and limitation of the absolute spirit as the universal, it also contains the power of binding and controlling the subjective spirit of the individual. In the case of the individual resisting and opposing it, it has the power and authority to coerce the individual's submission. In the instance of the individual affirming and developing it through the mediation of absolute spirit, it has the power and authority to force the individual's spontaneous obedience. Precisely because of this, it opposes and transcends subjective spirit as "objective spirit." Objective and subjective spirit, which are relative, not only differentiate the logical universal and particular, but also possess the relation of political resistance and opposition. Therefore, the absoluteness of absolute spirit, which can also be called the Divine Spirit, as the mediation of their unity, can be thought to be grounded in absolute Nothingness (絶対無), which is the embodiment of the divine love of mercy and atonement.[5]

Curiously, Tatsuya Higaki does not mention Hegel in the text. To what extent does Hegel's influence help clarify the uniqueness of Tanabe's position vis-à-vis Cassirer and Heidegger?

In the conclusion, the author states that "Even in the absence of direct references, it is quite characteristic of their theories that they both lean toward Cassirer as opposed to Heidegger."[6] On the one hand, the author is absolutely on point that Miki's philosophy of myth mirrors Cassirer's symbolic theory of mythical culture. For Miki, "the reality of this world must be founded by means of the logic of the imagination."[7] According to this

5. Tanabe 1969, 274.
6. Endres, Müller, Schneider 2024, 361.
7. Miki 2016, 39.

"logic", the "the individual is universal and the universal is individual."[8] Miki's formulation of the "logic of myth" mirrors Cassirer's law of mythical consciousness, the "*law of the concrescence or coincidence of the members of a relation*,"[9] for according to this law, the universal is individual and the individual is universal.

On the other hand, it seems problematic to claim that Tanabe's philosophy was more influenced by Cassirer than Heidegger, especially in light of Tanabe's most mature work, *Philosophy as Metanoetics*. In this late text, Tanabe is much more engaged with Heidegger than Cassirer. In that text, Cassirer is never mentioned, but Heidegger is mentioned often. What is more, Heidegger's concept of nothingness and time is given extensive treatment. He writes:

> As far as its fundamental structure is concerned, I have no doubt that Heidegger's thought is in complete accord with my idea of conversion in and through absolute nothingness. But for Heidegger, the mediation of nothingness through action is taken as a mediation of being in the realm of the interpretation of linguistic expression; he has not realized how absolute nothingness, as the principle of absolute transformation, functions as ground.[10]

Both Heidegger and Tanabe—against Cassirer—posit nothingness as the principle of their philosophies, and their fundamental disagreement concerns the way to conceive of that nothingness. It seems that, at the very least, this controversial claim about the relative importance of Cassirer and Heidegger should be significantly qualified. Would the author argue that Tanabe's philosophy becomes *more akin* to Heidegger in his late thought? If not, why?

In "Now, Ever or After: Contrasting the Pure Lands of D. T. Suzuki and Tanabe Hajime" Rossa Ó Muireartaigh argues that "there is that sense of oneness that tends to suffocate spontaneity when taken to its conclusion."[11] While the author gives good reasons to accept this view, some Kyoto School philosophers, Nishida most prominent among them, give good reasons to reject it:

8. Miki 2016, 41.
9. Cassirer 2021, 65.
10. Tanabe 1983, 78.
11. Endres, Müller, Schneider 2024, 427.

> As I have said, God is the basis of the countless beings in the universe, and no things exist apart from God. Because all things emerge from God's internal nature, God is free. In this sense God is absolute freedom.[12]

Once oneness has become absolute, nothing can determine it. For this reason, it must exist as self-determined. Exactly because oneness is absolute, it must determine itself. But self-determination is nothing but freedom. Thus, there is a sense of oneness that enables freedom, rather than destroy it. By my lights it seems highly plausible to see Suzuki very much on the side of *absolute freedom*. As I have indicated above, Nishida's *Inquiry* also seems to view freedom this way, for in his case too, the freedom of the human being requires oneness with the Absolute or God.

More importantly, the author aligns Tanabe with freedom and thinks of him as a philosopher of spontaneity. While he certainly is a philosopher of freedom and spontaneity, there are very good reasons to read him as a philosopher who is *mediating* between spontaneity and thrownness. In fact, Tanabe explicitly draws on Heidegger's concept of *Geworfenheit* to develop a concept of freedom informed by submission.

One cannot deny Tanabe's sober observation of the contingency of human existence. On the one hand, human life is contingent, because it depends upon (or is *contingent upon*) something else, such as the Absolute. On the other hand, human life is also contingent because it depends upon that which transcends reason. Because the Absolute is trans-rational, and everything relative depends upon the Absolute for its relativity, human life depends upon the trans-rational. Because the ground of human life is trans-rational, in the final analysis, there is *no reason* why human life exists. Although we do exist, and for this reason it is possible that we exist, it is just as possible that we never existed at all, and there is no reason that explains why the one possibility is realized and not the other. Human life is contingent because *it could be otherwise*. Drawing on Heidegger, Tanabe teaches us that our lives are characterized by *Geworfenheit* (Thrownness):

> Turning from historical facts to our own existence, contemporary existential philosophy speaks of the contingency of historical facts as our "'thrownness'" (*Geworfenheit*), a term used to express the past of *Dasein*. We must accept actual

12. Nishida 1992, 163.

> facts for their contingency and their inability to be grounded on reason; they are simply something into whose midst we are "thrown." The past is given to us and, therefore, is contingent. It is not something we can determine at will; we are "thrown" into history and have no alternative but to accept it as it is. This is the primordial contingency of our being.[13]

Indeed, we are thrown into a world for which we are not responsible. As merely relative beings, we are thrown into a world that is not of our making—a world that transcends reason. Unlike Nishida's late philosophy, Tanabe never attempts to deduce the relative out of the absolute alone, as though the former were an emanation from the latter. The relative is there and it is there *without why*.

Although we are thrown into the world, and our life is characterized by a twofold contingency (dependency upon the trans-rational absolute), we are still free:

> Insofar as freedom lacks a principle, it is contingent; but freedom cannot merely remain contingent. It becomes real when the subject turns this lack of principle into a principle by taking over the determination (destiny) of contingency as its own will, changing it into the content of its own decision, and rendering itself capable of overcoming contingency by submitting itself to it.[14]

By mediating absolute nothingness in absolute critique, reason knows itself as the mediator of absolute nothingness. Thus, reason knows itself in absolute critique. Insofar as it is its own object, *reason mediates itself*, but only in virtue of the other-power of the Absolute. By revealing the Absolute to be the mediator of an absolute and free self-knowing reason, the trans-rational other power takes its place *within rational insight* and rational order, thereby enfolding itself within reason itself as its mediator. While reason is determined by the Absolute, *the Absolute is itself also mediated by reason*. Accordingly, the other power is no longer beyond reason or without principle, for it is revealed by reason *as trans-rational*. Thus, in the *paradoxical* experience of the freedom of rational self-consciousness, reason (which is relative and dependent upon absolute nothingness) is "restored to salvation

13. TANABE 1983, 65.
14. Ibid., 66.

through transcendent grace."[15] In short, the contingency of our existence that is a function of our dependency upon the other power of absolute nothingness *retroactively* becomes an expression of the freedom (and spontaneity) of reason itself.

Because it is in rational self-consciousness whereby reason is self-determining, Tanabe declares that "Freedom exists only in the subject's self-consciousness of being free."[16] Here in the paradoxical self-consciousness of the freedom of reason, freedom is *true to itself*. In the same paradoxical moment, by voluntarily relinquishing our autonomy, by submitting to an absolute other power that transcends our reason, the absolute is rendered immanent within our reason, thereby realizing and expressing our absolute freedom. It is for this reason that Tanabe appears to be offering an account of freedom that does not just reject thrownness, but is mediating between spontaneity and thrownness.

Rossa Ó Muireartaigh's article also addresses a central concern of *Philosophy as Metanoetics*: the relation between Zen and Pure Land. However, a conflict arises for Tanabe's account of the relation between Zen and Pure Land in *Philosophy as Metanoetics* that is not addressed by his article. Tanabe sometimes says that the way of Zen is open to those who have the discipline for realizing enlightenment by their self-power alone (自力, *jiriki*). However Tanabe claims that he is not one of them, and for this reason must choose the path of other-power (他力, *tariki)*.[17] At other times, Tanabe argues that realizing absolute nothingness by one's own power is impossible (for example he argues that one cannot detach from the goal to be detached), and this implies that only salvation through other power is possible.[18] How does the author resolve this tension within the text regarding self and other power and Zen and Pure Land Buddhism?

In "Cassirer, Heidegger, and Miki: The Logic of the Dual Transcendence of the Imagination" Steve Lofts explores Miki's logic of the imagination. In Miki the logic of the imagination is a logic wherein "the individual is

15. Ibid., 44.
16. Ibid., 1983, 66.
17. Ibid., 25, 85.
18. Ibid., 8–9, 13–14.

universal and the universal is individual."[19] As we indicated at the outset of our critical remarks, this seems to have the same formulation as Cassirer's mythical law, whereby mythical phenomena are organized according to "the concrescence of the members of the relation." In myth, according to Cassirer, there is no sharp divide between sense and existence. Since Cassirer does not accept that every form of culture has an unbridgeable dichotomy between sense and existence, it seems problematic to characterize the "essentially Western account of the human" as one in which there is an "unbridgeable dichotomy between sense and existence."[20] This may be a dominant view within the tradition, but by the twentieth century, this view had long been called into question by a variety of different philosophers and philosophical anthropologists.

The author notes that it is the logic of non-contradiction which blocks us from overcoming the opposition between thrownness and spontaneity,[21] an opposition that was thematic for our earlier discussion of Tanabe's concept of freedom. The author convincingly shows that Miki's logic overcomes the opposition by affirming contradictions, such as is expressed in the formless form.[22] However, does this not imply that Miki's logic should simultaneously be *absolute and relative*? Accordingly, would it not be *one sided* to describe the logic as "a logic of individuals, not a logic of concepts and ideas about particulars?"[23] As a contradictory logic, should it not equally be true that it is a logic of concepts and ideas about particulars as well as a logic of individuals? Is Miki's logic itself at fault here, or does the author's formulation require revision? If this is not the case, what about the concrete universal requires blocking such contradictions?

In contrasting Miki with Western philosophers, Lofts claims that "In the Western tradition, something is if it is self-identical to itself."[24] However, for Hegel, the Early German Romantics, or Heraclitus, this does not seem to apply with any self-evident univocity. For instance, Schlegel claims that

19. Endres, Müller, Schneider 2024, 403.
20. Ibid., 394.
21. Ibid., 391.
22. Ibid., 412.
23. Ibid., 403.
24. Ibid., 399.

"'Everything contradicts itself.'"[25] Should this claim about Western philosophy and self-identity not be ameliorated?

After reading Lofts's interpretation of Hegel, some pressing interpretive questions arise. The author writes that "the Absolute comes to know itself in and through the particular, not through the individual."[26] However, in Hegel's logic of the concept, there are three determinations, not two: the universal, particular, and singular (or *individual*). The singular is the feature whereby each moment of the whole is the whole itself. The concept is true to itself only when it is singular, and it is through the singular that it knows itself. This is also why the individual or singular philosopher is the organ by which the absolute knows itself, for the philosopher is the singular, namely both particular and universal (the unity of which is the singular).

Regarding the author's reading of Cassirer, what does the author mean by the "radical indeterminacy inherent in both the self and the world"?[27] In one sense this seems exactly right, for scientific cognition is never complete. The indeterminacy in self and world ensures the constant development of scientific cognition. And yet, for Cassirer science is the highest form of culture. It is the highest because it is the form of culture that best corresponds with the *determinate form of the whole*. In Cassirer, the ordering of cultural forms into a hierarchy appears to imply a determinate standard by which truth is measured, not a fundamental indeterminacy. The true is the whole, and this is not purely indeterminate, for it possesses a determinate, scientific form.

Finally, I would like to invite the author to further clarify the difference between philosophical anthropology and ideology. Miki has the view that the *Logic of the Imagination* will advance to a purely logical form.[28] Since "Ideology" is the "logic of ideas or idea-forms" does Miki's philosophy culminate in ideology? Further, how can one distinguish philosophical anthropology from ideology? According to the author, both seem to be mediated by anthropology, but philosophical anthropology should also guide ideology. At the end, the author warns us against the "empty ideological power of

25. Cited in Frank 2004, 213.
26. Endres, Müller, Schneider 2024, 403.
27. Ibid., 412.
28. Ibid., 394.

idea-forms"[29] so that ideology appears to possess a danger that philosophical anthropology may not pose. Some clarification on how exactly to distinguish these terms would be helpful as we learn to better navigate Miki's text and his ideas.

Nishitani

In "From Despair to Authentic Existence: Kierkegaard's Anthropology of Despair in the Light of Nishitani's Thought" Sebastian Hüsch motivates Nishitani's *Religion and Nothingness* by showing how it can solve the problem of existential despair. The author takes Nishitani's view to be superior in part because it does not take recourse to theistic solutions which he views with suspicion. My remarks will focus on the place of God in Nishitani, as well as the import of historical influences at the intersection of East and West in Nishitani's thought.

The author argues that Nishitani can offer a way out of existential despair that "implies the overcoming of merely occidental perspectives."[30] However, it seems that at best, the author has only given an objection to a very particular and highly limited vision of Christianity, such as Kierkegaard's Protestantism, according to which a personal God transcends the world and human life. Both Nishida and Nishitani were highly influenced by Christian mysticism. Boehme, Eriugena, and Cusa (among others) appear in Nishida's work. In *Religion and Nothingness*, Nishitani does not argue that Zen is in itself superior to Eckhart's Christian mysticism. Rather, *both* give us access to the truth that the *Absolute is nothing*. Indeed, even the language of the "*ohne warum*" cited by the author[31] is a reference to the Catholic poet Angelus Silesius. Silesius writes that "Die Rose ist ohne Warum. Sie blühet, weil sie blühet."

Nishitani's thinking is deeply cosmopolitan. To see this, one need only consider Nishitani's high praise for Eckhart in *Religion and Nothingness*:

29. Ibid., 414.
30. Ibid., 372.
31. Ibid., 379.

> If the standpoint of sunyata is not an atheism in the usual sense of the word, even less should it be classed as a form of what is normally called theism. In the preceding chapter, Eckhart exemplified a standpoint that does not set up an either/or alternative between theism and atheism. While taking the personal relationship of God and man as a living relationship between the "image of God" in the soul and its "original image," he refers to the "essence" of God that is free of all form-the completely "image-free" (bildlos) godhead-as "nothingness," and considers the soul to return to itself and acquire absolute freedom only when it becomes totally one with the "nothingness" of godhead. This is not mere theism, but neither, of course, is it mere atheism. (For this reason, it was even mistakenly called pantheism.) As the "ground" of the personal God, this "nothingness" lay on the far side, in the background of God, and yet was immediately realized as being "my ground," lying directly on the near side, at the foreground of the self. We find here in Eckhart a turn to the sort of standpoint I spoke of as the absolute near side. The standpoint of sunyata appears when such a turn has been achieved clearly and distinctly.
>
> To be sure, even in Buddhism, where we find the standpoint of emptiness expounded, a transcendence to the far side, or the "yonder shore," is spoken of. But this yonder shore may be called an absolute near side in the sense that it has gone beyond the usual opposition of the near and the far. Indeed, the distinguishing feature of Buddhism consists in its being the religion of the absolute near side.
>
> In the case of Eckhart, the "nothingness" in which God's ground is my own, and my ground is God's own, is the field that brings about a personal relationship between God and man. It is on this field of "nothingness" that the actual Form-the visible Form or Bild-of everything that exists, including God, comes to light. Only in this "nothingness" is everything that is represented as God or soul, and the relationships between them, made possible. It is the same with the standpoint of emptiness. As I said before, only in emptiness does the abyss of nihility appear, and only in emptiness can it be represented as an abyss. Moreover, it is only on the field of this same emptiness that God and man, and the relationships between them, are constituted in a personal Form, and that their respective representations are made possible.[32]

Rather than overcome the West, Nishitani looks to discover points of contact with Western thinkers—such as Eckhart. Far from simply negating

32. Nishitani 1983, 99.

the occidental, or eliminating Christianity, Nishitani is interested in discovering new forms of mediation. For Nishitani, Christianity "must instead accept atheism as a mediation to a new development of Christianity itself."[33] Like Dōgen, Eckhart advanced beyond the theism/atheism dichotomy to the *impersonally personal* view of the Absolute engendered by the concept of Sunyata developed by Nishitani in *Religion and Nothingness*. Indeed, one cannot dispense with Christianity because one has dispensed with Kierkegaard or Protestantism in general. Eckhart is not subject to the same critiques that affect Kierkegaard. This is not at all surprising, given that his teacher, Nishida Kitaro, boldly endorsed the existence of God:

> How can we verify the existence of God in facts of our direct experience? An infinite power is hidden even in our small chests that are restricted by time and space; the infinite unifying power of reality is latent in us. Possessing this power, we can search for the truth of the universe in learning, we can express the true meaning of reality in art, and we can know the foundation of reality that forms the universe in the depths of our hearts—we can grasp the true face of God. The unifying free activity of the human heart proves God directly.[34]

It seems that the paper has not given us the resources to transcend merely occidental perspectives, but rather calls for the overcoming of a highly charged protestant view that would absolutely separate God from the world. Even the word "mysticism," a term employed positively in this chapter, has its origins in Western philosophy. The term harkens back to Dionysius the Areopagite's *mystical theology*, and signifies a form of apophatic Christian theology. Because the Kyoto School is already a world philosophy, any description of Nishitani's philosophy as opposing the East to West here seems out of place and potentially misleading.

The author writes in detail about the importance of "intellectual honesty." The author argues that both Kierkegaard and Nishitani's views on the solution to the problem of despair and nihilism *transcend reason*. While this is true, it raises a problem. If both solutions transcend reason, then each is *equally irrational* (at least from the perspective of reason). Each equally violates the norms of reason. For this reason, there is no rational measure

33. Ibid., 37.
34. NISHIDA 1992, 81.

by which one can decide whether one ought to adopt the theistic solution to the problem of despair or a non-theistic solution. Thus, it seems that the theistic answer is not any more "intellectually dishonest" than Nishitani's. How would one counter such an objection? Perhaps the author can help clarify, with greater precision, exactly how this term "intellectual honesty" is supposed to operate.

The author claims that Nishitani's solution does not require a "strong metaphysical claim." But there are many such claims in *Religion and Nothingness*, including the view (among others) concerning the circuminsessional view of the system of being:

> Now the circuminsessional system itself, whereby each thing in its being enters into the home-ground of every other thing, is not itself and yet precisely as such (namely, as located on the field of sunyata) never ceases to be itself, is nothing other than the force that links all things together into one. It is the very force that makes the world and lets it be a world. The field of *śūnyatā* is a field of force. The force of the world makes itself manifest in the force of each and every thing in the world.[35]

Far from abstaining from strong metaphysical claims, Nishitani makes *radical and contradictory claims about the nature of reality.* Nishitani really appears to be a radical metaphysician who makes contradictory claims about the nature of reality. *Prima Facie*, such a view is not any more plausible than the view that there is a personal God—in the case of Christianity, a contradictory unity of humanity and divinity.

Finally, the solution to the problem of despair as the author describes it seems to follow the logic characteristic of Zen in general. It seems that one could substitute Dōgen for Nishitani and get similar results. For this reason, it is not exactly clear what specific contribution Nishitani offers to the problem of despair. Does the author think that Nishitani himself has a special conception of despair, nihilism, or satori that makes his philosophy especially compelling? Or is Nishitani just another repetition of Zen thinking?

35. Nishitani 1983, 150.

Conclusion

The four papers in this section offer stimulating reflections on Miki, Tanabe, and Nishitani, all of which bear upon the Cassirer–Heidegger debate in Davos. With these critiques and questions, I hope to have enriched the conversations, and give the authors opportunities for further elaborations and reflections. We can only hope that the spirit of world philosophy that animated the Kyoto School will continue to burn brightly well into the twenty-first century.

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