

Absolute Nothingness and Metanoetics

The Logic of Conversion in Tanabe Hajime

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In a “postscript” to *The Historicistic Development of Mathematics and Physics* (『数理の歴史主義的展開』1954), Tanabe Hajime 田辺 元 briefly looks back on the course of his philosophical life: “The first half of my philosophical research advanced by following Professor Nishida, and the later years by objecting to him” (xii: 233).¹ Obviously it was this later period that produced what we normally think of as Tanabe’s own philosophy, driven by the desire to develop a philosophy critical of his one-time mentor Nishida Kitarō 西田幾多郎. His criticisms of Nishida, severe and multifaceted as they are, may be epitomized in the complaint that Nishida’s nothingness is unmediated. To correct this Tanabe tries to work out a radical grounding of nothingness in what he calls a “logic of absolute mediation” (*zettai baikai no ronri* 絶対媒介の論理).

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1. 『田辺元全集』[Complete works of Tanabe Hajime] (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1963–1964), 15 vols., cited in the text as THZ, followed by volume and page. The translations from *Philosophy as Metanoetics* are based on the English translation by TAKEUCHI Yoshinori et al. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), hereafter PM. All italics in the quotations are my own.

What is the significance of this mediated nothingness? In my view Tanabe's concept of nothingness is always *mediated* through the finiteness of human beings who exist in the historical world. It is widely accepted that Nishida employs the term "absolute nothingness" in order to express the reality of human existence in this world. When nothingness is described as *absolute*, this is to indicate the reality that cannot be understood objectively in rational terms. This absoluteness, however, did not necessarily include an opposition to the relative. Therein lies an unresolved problem in Nishida's philosophy. For insofar as absolute nothingness not only points to the original reality of human existence but also serves as a kind of philosophical principle, we are driven to the following question: How can human beings, as finite beings, relate to such an *absolute* principle?

As Nishitani Keiji accurately points out, one of the great facts of life is that we usually position ourselves on a standpoint of "discrimination" (*funbutsu* 分別), yet "Nishida seems not to take sufficient account of this fact philosophically or to find for it an appropriate place in his overall system."² In this sense, it could be said that Nishida's nothingness disregards the fact of the finiteness of human beings. To borrow Nishitani's phrase, it is this "Achilles heel" in Nishida's philosophy that shapes the standpoint of Tanabe's philosophy and gives it its originality.

The reason Tanabe is strongly conscious of the distance between the absolute and the relative is that he rejects philosophical views that seek to explain the historical world by way of a particular ultimate principle. Accordingly, he severely criticizes the absolute in Hegel or the "self-awareness of absolute nothingness" (*zettai mu no jikaku* 絶対無の自覚) in Nishida as leading to a rationalization of history. If Tanabe himself accepts absolute nothingness as a philosophical principle, it is only insofar as it is characterized as "something pursued" by the finite. But when it comes to illuminating the essence of the historical world through the concept of absolute nothingness, he inevitably faces the question: How can absolute nothingness itself be connected with the historical world? The whole development of Tanabe's thought from the time of his logic

2. NISHITANI Keiji 西谷啓治, *Nishida Kitarō*, trans. by Yamamoto Seisaku and James W. Heisig (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 185.

of the species (*shu no ronri* 種の論理) may be said to represent an attempt to solve this aporia, the solution to which comes in 1946 with *Philosophy as Metanoetics*, a significant turning point in his thought. In what follows I should like to spell out Tanabe's understanding of absolute nothingness by clarifying the evolution of his philosophy from the logic of the species to the *Metanoetics*.

In his *Metanoetics* Tanabe indicates a shift from a standpoint of "self-power" (*jiriki* 自力) to a reconstruction of philosophy on the basis of "Other-power" (*tariki* 他力). This turnabout in his thought has its ground in an "inner experience" of metanoesis brought about by a sense of philosophical failure. To be sure, the "conversion," itself a richly ambivalent term in Tanabe,³ gives added depth to his existential or religious-philosophical standpoint, but we are still left with the question: What is the *logical* meaning of this conversion? Far from simply abandoning the idea of absolute nothingness, Tanabe tries to develop it more logically. From this point of view, metanoetics is defined as "a *philosophy* that is not a philosophy" (*tetsugaku naranu tetsugaku* 哲学ならぬ哲学), even though metanoetics is an attempt to "resurrect" philosophy by means of an Other-power that transcends mere reason, and thus in effect makes of metanoetics "a philosophy *that is not a philosophy*."⁴ When

3. The concept of *tenkan* 転換 under consideration here to express the mutual and paradoxical dynamic at work between the relative and the absolute is difficult to capture in a single English word without inviting misunderstanding. I have elected to render it "conversion" because it maintains the opposition that the idea of "transformation" tends to do away with, and because of the convenient ambiguity contained in that word. "Conversion" connotes both a "transformation" in the sense one thing "turning into" another and a kind of revolving or "turning point." The direct connotation of a conceptual or religious *metanoia* (a conversion in thinking), which Japanese expresses in other terms, is sometimes, but not always, intended. Given this problem, the translators of *Philosophy as Metanoetics* opted to adjust the rendering of the term according to context but generally preferred "transformation."

4. NAKANO Hajime 中整 肇 remarks, "As is shown in contradictory expressions such as 'a philosophy that is not a philosophy' and 'the philosophy of Other-power,' philosophy, as philosophy, that is to say, as a rational thinking, has no doubt already perished here [in *Metanoetics*]. Although the fact is clearly stated by Tanabe himself, the logic of dialectical mediation, which for him is nothing less than philosophy itself, lives on. How can we account for this?" 『田辺元集』[An anthology of Tanabe Hajime] (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1975), 456. The question is directly related to the understanding of the *Metano-*

we set the treatment of absolute nothingness in *Metanoetics* within the broader context of Tanabe's thought, we come to another set of questions: Where does the need to adopt the standpoint of metanoetics originate in Tanabe's thought? And in what does the *logical* significance of the "conversion" in *Metanoetics* consist?⁵ Each of these questions deserves to be looked at closely.

TANABE'S IDEA OF ABSOLUTE NOTHINGNESS

I begin with a brief review of the characteristics of Tanabe's absolute nothingness from his 1932 book *Hegel's Philosophy and Dialectics* (『ヘーゲル哲学と弁証法』) to his early essays on the "logic of the species" (1934–1935).

Generally speaking, as a philosophical principle, absolute nothingness cannot be substantialized into any form of being. In Nishida it is regarded as the "place," or *basho* 場所, of a predicate that cannot become

etics, although Nakano himself insists that the standpoint of metanoetics should not be bound entirely to the logic of absolute mediation. This paper is an attempt to answer the same question.

5. The logical necessity for Tanabe to take the standpoint of metanoetics has already been discussed by a number of scholars from a variety of different perspectives. According to NISHITANI, for example, if one carries the moment of finiteness with Tanabe to its furthest extreme where absolute nothingness is manifested only in the praxis of the finite, then the self-identity of the subject that remains in praxis collapses, and this necessarily brings Tanabe to a metanoetics where absolute nothingness appears as "absolute Otherpower" (*Nishida Kitarō*, 168–71). KŌSAKA Masaaki 高坂正顕, in speaking of the problem of religiosity in Tanabe's philosophy, points out that the penchant for religion is already present in his earlier philosophy (for example, in the element of "belief" introduced into dialectical unity or in his devotional approach to Dōgen in the essay "My Philosophical View of Dōgen's *Shōhōgenzō*" [『正法眼蔵の哲学私観』1939], and this forms the foundation of the standpoint of "metanoetics." See his『西田哲学と田辺哲学』[Nishida's philosophy and Tanabe's philosophy], in『高坂正顕著作集』[The collected works of Kōsaka Masaaki, hereafter KMC] (Tokyo: Risōsha, 1964–1970), VIII: 338–41). TAKEUCHI Yoshinori 武内義範 argues that the standpoint of "absolute critique" (絶対批判), which makes up the logical side of metanoetics, is derived from Kant's practical reason, on which Tanabe's philosophy is originally based, 『宗教哲学——その理解のための序章』[Philosophy of religion: A preface to its understanding], 『田辺哲学とは』[What is Tanabe's philosophy?] (Kyoto: Tōeisha, 1991), 181–4.

a subject. In Tanabe, on the contrary, it is the ongoing and undetermined act of mediation itself. This is the first and most important characteristic of Tanabe's absolute nothingness:

Nothingness, of course, does not exist as such (if it were, it would be being, not nothingness) but consists in the act of negating being. Absolute nothingness is the further negation of this act and therefore represents the mediating unity that negates the negating activity of nothingness, bracketing it and restoring negated being as emptiness. (VI: 131)

All of this Tanabe condenses into the simple phrase, "Absolute nothingness means the act of negatively mediating itself in an absolute manner" (VI: 473).

This aspect of absolute nothingness is based on Tanabe's "logic of absolute mediation," which is both the fundamental standpoint of his philosophy and the brunt of his criticism against Nishida. His view is that all immediacy needs to be understood as part of a process of absolute mediation: "In philosophy, logic must be an absolute mediation that does not presuppose any immediacy, an absolute mediation in which even presuppositions are mediated" (VI: 172). This is possible because immediacy is defined as the negative mediation on which the logical affirmation is based, or in Tanabe's words, because "every negation is considered as a negation in affirmation and becomes a mediation for affirmation" (VI: 173). Tanabe's aim here is to provide a logical grounding for his logic of the species by regarding the element of immediate life (the species) not only as something resisting rational logic but also as the negative mediation through which logic comes about.

Here we see the link between the logic of absolute mediation and Tanabe's critique of Nishida. To claim that any logic completes itself by taking immediacy as its negative mediation implies that any logic that is *not* mediated by a negative aspect and stands alone on its own inevitably collapses into the immediate. Thus even Nishida's absolute nothingness, insofar as it is not mediated by the negative aspect of the species, remains stuck in the immediate:

The mediation of nothingness is actually a mere immediacy.... The logic of the *basho* of nothingness is not the logic it appears to be since

it takes as its standpoint not absolute mediation but the immediacy of place. (VI: 202–3)

This criticism of Nishida’s absolute nothingness is what gives Tanabe’s thought its first distinguishing character, namely the location of the essence of absolute nothingness in the act of mediation. More concretely, Tanabe considers absolute nothingness to be mediated by the negative element of the species, or by the act that affirms this element in the negation of negation.

A second characteristic of Tanabe’s absolute nothingness, as we have seen, is that it does not determine itself as a *basho* but is “pursued” by the finite. This is apparent in his allusion to absolute nothingness as “the transcendent whole” (*chōetsuteki zentai* 超越の全体). In a clear reference to Hegel’s *Idee* as the subject of the absolute universal (*zettai fūhen no shukan* 絶対普遍の主観), he writes:

This is *the transcendent whole* that manifests itself everywhere as the ground of the dynamic relative unity that unfolds in making negation its mediation in the essentially relative opposition of subject and object, but which, at the same time, transcends every relative unity and embraces within itself the dynamic development of this unity. *Although it does not therefore exist in the way the finite-relative exists, it must be understood as what is always awakened to as the ground of the dynamic development of the finite relative existences.* This refers to the *nothingness, indeed the absolute nothingness, at the ground of being.* It also refers to the emptiness that transcends being and nothingness and into which both enter. (III: 103)

Tanabe also expresses this “transcendent whole” as “purposiveness without a purpose” (*mokuteki naki gōmokutekisei* 目的なき合目的性), and, in this sense, considers it a kind of teleological principle. This is why he speaks of it as a transcendent *whole*. By this he does not have in mind a whole that subordinates to itself the finite “parts” that exist historically, determining what direction they should take. If that were the case, history would turn into a kind of emanation from nothingness. Eager to avoid all teleological necessity in history, Tanabe was uncompromising in his criticism of Hegel’s absolute and Nishida’s “self-awareness of absolute nothingness” and insisted that the “whole” of which he spoke

could only be transcendent vis-à-vis social-historical existence. In this sense, “the transcendent whole” can be said to be an absolute nothingness for the finite.

This “transcendent whole” is manifested in the finite through praxis. In other words, it is the transcendent whole that appears as the “purposiveness *without purpose*” in the practical self-awareness of “the moment of the acting present” (*kōiteki genzai no shunkan* 行為的現在の瞬間, III: 168), in which the finite negates the kind of praxis aimed at realizing particular value:

Moral praxis differs from action that merely has a sense of purpose. It is not an act in pursuit of a finite purpose and the realization of a relative value, but a volitional act that makes life itself its purpose and sees absolute value in itself. The good is the value that belongs only to this volitional act as absolute value, and the content of the good is a “purposiveness without purpose” whose aim is an *absolutely negative transcendent whole*. (III: 413–4)

Accordingly, the third characteristics of absolute nothingness consists in the assertion that only this moral praxis can enable the manifestation of absolute nothingness, which can be thought of entirely as a transcendent *for the finite*.

THE SELF-ALIENATION OF THE GENUS AND THE IDEA OF ABSOLUTE NOTHINGNESS

Tanabe’s thought took concrete shape as a “logic of the species.” As opposed to Nishida’s logic of “individual–genus,” Tanabe proposed a logic of “individual–*species*–genus” to stress the importance of negative mediation. But more than that, Tanabe intended his new logic to be a kind of “social ontology” insofar as it includes the particular elements of the species, things like race and class, that are left out of a scheme that thinks only in terms of individuals on the one side and the whole of the world on the other. This accounts for his practical interest in a critical analysis of the nation’s control of individuals and in transforming the ground of that control into a “nation of humanity” (*jinrui-*

teki kokka 人類的国家). Hence logic of the species discloses the following concrete structure:

individual
race (ethnic nation)
nation (of humanity).

In this scheme absolute nothingness occupies the position of genus, that is, the nation understood as a nation of humanity. Obviously it does not correspond to any de facto existing nation since, as the act of mediation itself, absolute nothingness cannot simply be identified with that which is being mediated. Absolute nothingness is rather the principle that enables realization of the nation as genus. In a word, for Tanabe, the actual *specific* society, marked by the conflict of ego among individual egos competing with one another, is transformed into a community of human relationships based on a self-awareness of finiteness and realized in concrete moral praxis. This community, he asserts, is what he means by the nation as genus, as a “nation of humanity” sustained by finite beings with the will to overturn their limitations as a species, that is to negate the negativity that identifies them as belonging to a species. It is absolute nothingness that forms the foundational support for this negation of negation. The following passage illustrates the point:

The absolute negating form of unity [the genus] not only secures the self-negation of the species in its mediating role, it preserves the negativity of the species as a negating element, making it a starting point and a mediator of conversion. This *practical turning point*—or what we may call a *punctum saliens aller Lebendigkeit*—is none other than the individual. Through the individual’s action the species is negatively transformed into the collective unity of the genus, and the element of species, which represents the unity in itself, becomes the genus as a whole. (VI: 489)

This idea of the individual serving as a “practical point” for changing species into genus is sustained throughout Tanabe’s logic of the species in the pre-war years.

It is worth noting here that the transcendent character of absolute nothingness for the finite is reflected in the nation itself, insofar as the

activity of absolute nothingness embodies an actualization of the “nation as genus.” Simply put, the nation assumes the character of an ideal in the logic of the species, as witnessed in the following passage:

The mediation for this sublation [of the species as substratum (*kitai* 基体) into the “nation as genus”] is the individual, who forms the harmonious relationship of self-*qua*-other within the nation. This absolute mediation of genus–species–individual is the logic of social being. It is, of course, not so much an actual fact as it is a *task to be fulfilled by praxis*. (VI: 233)

Tosaka Jun 戸坂 潤 is among those who criticizes this idealization of the nation:

The important point is that the nation that Dr. Tanabe insists on so earnestly is an ideal nation or—to put it in terms that save it from sliding into an Hegelian emanationism—a kind of nation as nothingness, which is not to be identified with actually existing nations like Japan, China, Manchuria, Italy, or Ethiopia. As an ideal of moral praxis the nation should have this meaning, and it does not matter what concrete actual relation it bears to real nations (and the same case be said of races).⁶

Tanabe was sensitive to these sorts of criticism. While stressing that the nation in his logic of the species should not be regarded only as the aim of moral praxis, he candidly admits that it remains an ideal.⁷ Later modifications to his position may be said to represent an answer to this question.

Given the general structure of the logic of the species, the idealistic conception of the nation is not necessarily a flaw that needs modifying. It was a more practical concern that drove Tanabe to alter the logical status of the nation, namely to expand his logic from a *social* ontology to include a *historical* ontology.

6. TOSAKA Jun 戸坂 潤, 『種の論理』—田辺元博士の所説に就いて』 [The logic of the species: The theory of Dr. Tanabe Hajime], 『戸坂潤全集』 [Complete works of Tosaka Jun] (Tokyo; Keisō Shobō, 1966–1979), III: 300.

7. See, for example. THZ VI: 453–4, VII: 30.

Concerning the relation between the logic of the species and history, Tanabe has this to say:

History, especially history based on the standpoint of the “particular,” can only be constructed by regarding the species as a substratum. The mediating role that history plays stems from the mediating nature of the species.... Is it only as a logic of the substratum that the logic of the species can hope to survive as a logic of history? (VI: 203)

As Tanabe notes, we need to bring into the picture the aspect of the species not covered by the individual or the genus. But it is not possible to explain the formation of the historical world through the mutual mediation of individual, species, genus as long as the genus remains, as it did for Tanabe, out in the “beyond” as an ideal nation. For the logic of the species to become a historical ontology, the genus needs to be understood not only as an ideal transcending the actual but also as something concretely related to the historical world as such.

This problem is addressed by the introduction of the concept of the “self-alienation of the genus” (*rui no jiko sogai* 類の自己疎外), spelled out in two 1937 essays: 「種の論理に対する批評に答う」 [A reply to critiques of the logic of the species] and 「種の論理の意味を明にす」 [A clarification of the meaning of the logic of the species].⁸ Originally, the idea of the self-alienation of the genus was intended as an answer to the criticisms raised by Takahashi Satomi 高橋里美 and Mutai Risaku 務台理作 against Tanabe's new logic.⁹ Briefly put, both of them argued that the introduction of the aspect of the species is only required if one first accepts his view of logic, since the immediate and the irrational contradict his asser-

8. The idea of the self-alienation of the genus had in fact already appeared earlier. For example, we read in his 『論理の社会存在論的構造』 [The socio-ontological structure of logic, 1936]: “The genus cannot be relativized as a species; it is only when the genus loses its absolute universality through its own *self-alienation* that it falls into the species” (VI: 327). It is thus more accurate to say that in responding to his critics Tanabe was giving this idea a more central role than it had before.

9. TAKAHASHI Satomi 高橋里美, 「種の論理について」 [On the logic of species], 『思想』 [Thought] 175, 177, 178 (1936–1937); MUTAI Risaku 務台理作, 「社会存在論に於ける世界構造の問題」 [The problem of the structure of world in the social ontology] 『哲学論叢』 [Philosophical debate] 5 (1937).

tion that everything can be subsumed into a “logic of absolute mediation.” In response, he argues that the historical world, as the species of the finite existing in the present, is not only immediate but also alienated from the past unity of the genus, and in this sense is mediated by the genus.

As the following statement makes clear, Tanabe’s reasons for speaking of the species as a self-alienation of the genus is to establish concrete point of contact between genus and reality:

Given that affirmation is always made by way of a dialectical negation and that alienation always accompanies unity, it seems obvious that the dualistic division of historical reality must be understood, as I have, in terms of the alienated aspect of unity. (VI: 454)

At the same time, he acknowledges the inadequacies of the theory insofar as the irrationality we find in reality cannot be explained simply as a self-alienation of genus. This imperfection in the logic of the species, he goes on, was “inevitable, given my original intentions with the idea and stems from the presence of an ahistorical tendency in my thinking.”

The important point here is that this concept effected a change in Tanabe’s idea of absolute nothingness. Previously he had seen the essence of absolute nothingness to lie in the individual’s affirmation of the negativity of the species, in the negation of a negation. Broadly conceived, this meant that absolute nothingness marked a move from the particular to the universal. With the notion of the self-alienation of the genus, however, the unity of the genus realized by the individual in the absolute-negative act of nothingness disintegrates and descends into the being of the species. In this sense, absolute nothingness is defined as the act of making the self-alienation of the genus function as a negative mediation in order to achieve absolute negativity. In other words, in alienating itself in the move from the universal to the particular, it returns from the particular to the universal, the alienation serving to mediate the regression. “Absolute nothingness,” he writes, “mediates being which in turn mediates its way back to itself” (VI: 473), adding later that “absolute negation returns to itself by way of the mediation of the self-negation as self-alienation” (VI: 474). Hence the shift in orientation from the universal to the particular.

THE *ŌGEN* OF THE NATION AND
THE *GENSŌ* OF ABSOLUTE NOTHINGNESS

We see a certain evolution of the logic of the species as historical philosophy in the notion of the self-alienation of the genus where the suggestion is made that the meaning of history as process consists in the threefold mediation of individual–species–genus. Tanabe was not himself convinced, however, that his logic of the species was sufficiently historical. This brings us to the next step in his development of the logic into a full-fledged historical philosophy.

Two opposing tendencies are present in the shaping of history through the mediation of the species: the tendency for the individual to achieve the genus by making the species its negative mediation, and the tendency for the genus to lose its unity and fall into its alienated form owing to the disruptive nature of the species at the ground of the genus. Clearly the self-alienation of the genus belongs to the latter. It cannot lie within the realm of rational activity and hence is something contingent for individuals. For history harbors irrational elements and develops in a way that lies beyond the capacities of individuals to effect. In fact, however, Tanabe does not call on the self-alienation of the genus to complete the transformation of the logic of the species into a historical philosophy. In the final pages of “A Clarification of the Meaning of the Logic of the Species” he asserts that “the logic of the species must be a logic of historical reality and at the same time a logic of *ethics*” (VI: 521). As we have seen, it is from a standpoint of moral praxis that Tanabe seeks to historicize his logic, a task he tackles in his 1939 essay 「国家的存在の論理」 [The logic of national existence]. He states at the outset:

Up until now, what I have discussed as “social ontology” represents only a partial structure of what self-awareness of historical social reality itself is. This social ontology does not arrive at the practical self-awareness of development-qua-construction and becoming-qua-praxis (*hatten soku kennsetsu, seisei soku kōi* 発展即建設、生成即行為) in and for itself. It is not until social ontology develops into a logic of history that it can become self-awareness of concrete reality. (VII: 27)

This practical self-awareness of development-qua-construction and

becoming-qua-praxis is meant to indicate a standpoint that regards historical development as the process of human beings forming nations. This is what makes it a logic of history for Tanabe, a historical philosophy whose subject is the nation:

Social existence develops historically only through the constructive praxis [of nations]. (VII: 29)

It is not that first there is a world and then nations come about, but rather the historical world is formed only in tandem with the birth of nation. (VII: 57)

From these statements we see that for Tanabe moral praxis no longer refers simply to the standpoint from which the individual exists in reality but to the whole of the historical world. It can therefore be said to function as a principle of historical philosophy and thus to set up a relationship between the two in which the process of bringing about nations through praxis can be directly regarded as history itself.

The concept of the nation itself needs to be adjusted to justify such a position. For this reason, Tanabe proposes seeing the nation as the *ōgen* 応現 of absolute nothingness. He takes the term *ōgen* from the Diamond Sutra to mean “manifesting itself according to the occasion” (VII: 60). He adopts it to explain the way in which absolute nothingness manifests itself in being as its own other. “The *ōgen* of nothingness is being as the negation of nothingness and at the same time as its manifestation [*genjō* 現成]” (VII: 61). Noting that all social institutions include some kind of organization (VII: 76), he describes them as concrete historical manifestations of nationhood and as “national mediations” (VII: 79).¹⁰ On this basis, he tries to show that the nation is not separate from reality but appears in the historical world itself as the *ōgen* of absolute nothingness.

Tanabe further elaborates the concept of *ōgen* by the *gensō* 還相 or

10. Tanabe does not in fact absolutize the modern form of the nation state; nor does it think that it takes shape and develops in history as an inevitable outgrowth of human society. Nevertheless his understanding of the nation as a form of organization that societies possess historically implies that to some extent the nation belongs to the society that actualizes it. This seems to lead to the conclusion that Tanabe is affirming the reality of the state as it is.

“returning” of absolute nothingness (VII: 61). He uses this word, Buddhist in origin, to denote a movement from the absolute to the relative or from transcendence to immanence. Its opposite movement is called *osō* 往相 “going,” as we see in the following passage:

“Going” [*osō*] does not arise without a corresponding “returning” [*gensō*] of transcendence to immanence, because the going takes its sense of moving from immanence to transcendence only when transcendence reciprocates by mediating immanence and lifting it up to itself. (VII: 148)

Tanabe regards this *gensō* as an indispensable ingredient in his logic of absolute mediation:

It is necessary for dialectics to have the aspect of *gensō*. Insofar as it has only the aspect of *osō* in practical mediation, it cannot be absolutely mediated. (VII: 64)

The criticism implied here is directed at his own position thus far:

I have strongly opposed views that end up making absolute nothingness a kind of immediacy in a *basho* of nothingness precisely because this conflicts with the dialectic of absolute mediation. That said, I have to confess that I was stuck in the opposite abstraction in my standpoint of practical mediation as heretofore conceived. While I can see no way of avoiding the conclusion that the immediacy of nothingness as *basho* is an abstraction that eventually turns nothingness into being, the mere practical standpoint of absolute mediation is an abstraction headed in the opposite direction insofar as it considers nothingness merely as nothingness in itself and hence makes it immediate. (VII: 61)

As these statements show, Tanabe is questioning his previous view of absolute nothingness as conceived merely in terms of *osō*, that is, merely in terms of praxis by the relative, and adjusting it in order to stress that the logic of absolute mediation must include the element of *gensō* as well. The logic of absolute mediation, therefore, means that action from the immanent and relative to the transcendent and absolute is mediated absolutely by the reverse movement, so that absolute nothingness can

be said to complete its activity only when mediated by the relative aspect of *gensō*.

As I indicated earlier, this movement from the absolute to the relative in absolute nothingness had already shown up in Tanabe's discussion of the self-alienation of the genus and his subsequent rethinking of the structure of absolute nothingness.¹¹ This movement comes into sharper relief with the introduction of the *gensō* of absolute nothingness and its treatment in his logic of absolute mediation.

We may therefore infer that the development of the logic of the species that has to do with the ideal nature of the nation is the same process that absolute nothingness must follow, and should not merely be regarded as an initial transcendent gradually assuming the movement of a "return." In this sense, the notion of *ōgen* may be seen to represent a final solution to the problem. At the same time, this process entails an expansion of the role of the nation in the logic of the species—an idea that Tanabe himself would later come to criticize in his *Metanoetics*.

Nonetheless, his logic of absolute mediation, as the mutually mediated activity of the relative and the absolute with an emphasis on the *gensō* of absolute nothingness, survives to play a fundamental role after the *Metanoetics*. In this sense, the development that his logic of the species underwent may be said to have laid the ground for Tanabe's later thought.

We should not overlook the discontinuity resulting from the notion of *ōgen*. That is to say, the logic of the species had already shifted its focus away from the species and been reoriented toward a "logic of the *genus* or *nation*." True, the essence of the logic of the species, the negative mediating role that species played vis-à-vis absolute nothingness,

11. The word *gensō* itself had already appeared in "A Clarification of the Meaning of the Logic of the Species," but there it was used not to characterize absolute nothingness but to explain the dual nature of the individual. According to Tanabe, it is through the mediation of the individual that the species is raised to the level of the genus, and at the same time it is because of the individual that the genus descends into species. In that context, he speak of the individual as "the intersection of *ōsō* and *gensō*" (VI: 491). *Gensō* means the movement from genus to species here and, in this sense, we can think of it as virtually identical with the self-alienation of the genus, though Tanabe himself does not draw the connection.

remained despite the talk of a self-alienation of the genus. But Tanabe no longer sought this negative mediation in the species but turned to the genus or nation instead:

The *ōgen* of nothingness is being as the negation of nothingness and at the same time as its manifestation. *This ōgen is none other than being as negative mediation*, which in the concrete means that non-being is at the same time being. (VII: 61)

Hence the attempt to use the logic of the species to solve the problem of the nation ended up transfiguring it into a logic of the nation.¹²

THE STANDPOINT OF METANOETICS

The dissatisfaction prompted by this turn to a “logic of the nation” found an outlet in his philosophy of metanoetics. In his preface to 『種の論理の弁証法』[A dialectics of the logic of the species] that followed his *Metanoetics* in 1947 he writes:

In my earlier thinking, it was inevitable that I would slip into a tendency toward the very Hegelian rationalism I had always criticized, to absolutize the nation as he had done and to absorb into it the freedom of individuals because nothingness, the principle of absolute mediation, ...was not yet sufficiently negative and had not yet been made to transcend to the bottom of contradiction, and thus was incapable of sloughing off its identity with reason. (VII: 253–4)

It is interesting that he faults the incompleteness of his notion of absolute nothingness for the fall into Hegelian rationalism. To pursue this point, we may begin with a brief consideration of metanoetics (*zangedō* 懺悔道).

To begin with, metanoetics is understood as the absolutely radical standpoint of finite being, a standpoint in which the self realizes its ineluctable limits and lets go of itself in despair:

12. Tanabe ceases to use the term “logic of the species” after “The Logic of National Existence,” apparently intent on replacing this idea with the fated idea of a “logic of the nation.”

Metanoesis must begin with a casting away of the self that is no longer qualified to exist because it is forced to recognize, through suffering and sorrow, that its being is valueless. (IX: 20; PM, 5)

In the encounter with radical evil, however, the self is paradoxically resurrected: “Amazingly enough, however, the power urging us to forsake ourselves is at the same time the very power that reaffirms our once negated being.” This is the second meaning of metanoetics, its “affirmative aspect” in contrast to the “negative aspect” of submission (IX: 21; PM, 6). In short, metanoesis entails both repentance and “conversion”; the original self-awareness of the finitude of self is at the same time its “breakthrough” (*Durchbruch*) (IX: 19; PM, 4).

Clearly metanoetics, as the way of metanoesis, is not mere objective description but is expressed in subjective terms closely related to Tanabe’s own experience. Still, it is not merely an effusion of his personal sentiment or simple confession of belief. This is evident in his adoption of “absolute critique” (*zettai hihan* 絶対批判) as the corresponding “logic of the metanoetics”:

Metanoetics is not a product of my subjective feeling; nor is it simply a matter of my having been so overpowered by the Pure Land Shin doctrine expounded by Shinran that I was forced to mold my thought in conformity to it alone. I would argue that metanoetics is the inevitable result of philosophy pursued as the critique of reason. Accordingly, I refer to metanoetics as *absolute critique*. (IX: 46; PM, 37)

This absolute critique, which constitutes the negative aspect of metanoetics, reinforces the complete collapse of autonomous reason as a ground for philosophy. Tanabe discusses this problem in connection with the Kantian critique:

Contrary to what Kant thought in his critical philosophy, it is impossible for the autonomy of reason to provide its own foundations. Reason endowed with the capacity for self-criticism cannot evade the ultimate predicament of the autonomies of practical reason, since it is caught up in the radical evil stemming from basic human finitude. The critique of reason needs to be pressed to the point of an abso-

lute critique through “absolute disruption” and absolute crisis, which constitute the self-abandonment of reason. (IX: 32; PM, 19–20)

For Tanabe, the inadequacy of Kant’s criticism consists in the fact that he excluded reason from the critique and, as a result, did not bring himself to question the very idea of a rational critique. This makes his critique fundamentally flawed. If, on the other hand, the reason doing the criticizing is itself to become an object of criticism, this would seem to require a second reason, thus landing us in the helpless position of an infinite regress. This self-contradiction is why a truly radical critique brings about its own collapse: “It is both a matter of destiny and ultimate truth that in the pursuit of full autonomy, reason must finally break down” (XI: 48; PM, 39).

Nor is practical reason any help in removing this self-contradiction, and that for the simple reason that human existence is by nature rooted in radical evil. As Tanabe notes, “the confrontation of ethics with radical evil cannot avoid facing an antinomy and arriving ultimately at *zange* [metanoesis]” (IX: 124; PM, 127). Although this problem is not pursued along the lines of the *Critique of Practical Reason*,¹³ Tanabe explains that freedom and contingency, good and evil, are absolutely opposed and yet at the same time so dependent on each other that the antinomy inevitably brings us to “the contradiction that what ought to be is not, and what ought not to be is” (IX: 153; PM, 159), a contradiction beyond even the powers of practical reason.

What is important for us to note here is that this “absolute critique” marks the self-surrender of the standpoint of moral praxis on which Tanabe’s philosophy had essentially been based.¹⁴ Previously, praxis meant an overcoming of the will by a finite being in order to pursue a particular value; it was the sole condition for the manifestation of absolute nothingness and the realization of the nation. In *Metanoetics*, how-

13. KŌSAKA Masaaki discusses this problem in relation to the concrete content of Kant’s *Critique of Practical Reason*. *Nishida’s Philosophy and Tanabe’s Philosophy*, KMC VIII: 341–9.

14. What is being denied here is praxis based on “self-power,” not praxis as such. This continues to be Tanabe’s fundamental standpoint after *Metanoetics*. He considers the resurrection of finite beings through the activity of “Other-power” to be a kind of praxis (*kōi* 行為) which he names *gyō* 行, adopting a religious term.

ever, this possibility of negating the will is completely discarded. Finite beings are considered to be rooted in radical evil and thus driven to self-contradiction.

In other words, the defining mark of Tanabe's dialectic here is that he sought to base dialectical synthesis not on speculation, as Hegel had, but on practical reason, or as he put it, an advance "from Kant to Hegel" accompanied by a return "from Hegel to Kant":

We may say that understanding Hegel properly requires reviving Kant's standpoint towards the priority of practical reason and giving it a solid footing. (III: 134)

But when we come to the logic of absolute critique, reason loses its ability to sustain its autonomy even in a practical sense. Accordingly, there is no alternative but to forsake the dialectical synthesis secured in the standpoint of moral praxis.

ABSOLUTE NOTHINGNESS AS A PRINCIPLE OF CONVERSION

The next point to be clarified is the significance of the "affirmative aspect" of metanoetics, that is, the sense in which finite being is resurrected by "Other-power." This will also help clear up the question of how the metanoetics came to affect Tanabe's understanding of absolute nothingness.

The claim that moral praxis is abandoned through "absolute critique" assumes that Tanabe is able to negate completely his idea of grasping absolute nothingness from a finite position, or as he says, from a standpoint of "self-power" or *ōso*. As a result, the gap between the absolute and relative, which could be bridged only barely by practical self-awareness, becomes an *absolute* gap in the context of absolute critique, and absolute nothingness acquires the meaning of the transcendent Other over and against the finite. To borrow Tanabe's phrase, absolute nothingness, "which is nothingness in every sense of the word, is transcendently opposed to the nature of our existence as beings, and it in no

way allows us to think of it as identifiable with an absolute-qua-relativene” (VII: 360).

I find this idea of the transcendence of absolute nothingness essential to reaching the logical core of the *Metanoetics*. It is precisely the absence of the aspect of transcendence in absolute nothingness that accounts for the absolutizing of the nation:

Nothingness lacked transcendence in my thought when I was not aware of a religious action-faith-witness (*gyōshinshō* 行信証) mediated through absolute nothingness in metanoetics. For this reason, I could not avoid the tendency, on the one hand, to expropriate the individual subject with the result that the absoluteness of nothingness became immanent to and identical with the individual subject; and on the other hand, to become identified with the substratum of species and, as a result, to absolutize the nation. (VII: 367)

As noted earlier, Tanabe originally considered absolute nothingness to be a transcendent counter-positioned to the finite. This attitude stemmed from his criticism that the *basho* in which Nishida places absolute nothingness and the absolute in Hegel inevitably end up in a kind of Plotinian “emanationism,” becoming so completely “given” that the problem of individual sin and historical contingency are swept aside. In developing his logic of the species the aspect of “returning” or *gensō* gradually came to make itself felt in the idea of absolute nothingness as a way to overcome the problem of the nation that was a consequence of this way of viewing the transcendence of absolute nothingness. From the viewpoint of metanoetics, he would later fault this idea of the nation for relying on an insufficiently transcendent idea of nothingness.

On the one hand, absolute nothingness is said to act on the finite self in metanoetis as *gensō*, meaning that the salvation of the self is wrought not by the self but by Other-power. On the other hand, Tanabe insists that introducing the notion of *gensō* does not imply that absolute nothingness becomes an immanent principle of history, but rather that it remains transcendent vis-à-vis the finite. These two aspects of absolute nothingness are diametrically opposed: there is no alternative but to recognize that absolute nothingness includes an aspect of *gensō* in which praxis by “self-power” is completely negated and the way from the rela-

tive to the absolute is blocked. Unless *gensō* is taken in a radical sense, the absolute rupture is lost and absolute nothingness inevitably slides into immanence. The fundamental question in the *Metanoetics* is thus how to relate these two contradictory aspects of absolute nothingness, how to justify its transcendence while preserving its aspect of *gensō*.”

The contradiction is resolved only by seeing the absolute distance of the relative from the absolute as a form of mediation that enables absolute nothingness to “return,” that is to say, to manifest itself in the relative. In other words, absolute nothingness is realized only through the independence of the finite that opposed it negatively as absolutely other. Thus absolute nothingness becomes “a self-negating principle” that makes its affirmation possible by negating itself toward the finite. “The absolute, as absolute mediation, is a *self-negating principle*, for which reason the absolute allows the relative—as the negative aspect of the absolute—to possess a relative independence” (IX: 35; PM, 24). Absolute nothingness allows itself to be mediated by the independence of the finite and hence to become a “self-negating principle.” To put it concretely, it allows for the sin of the finite. For this reason absolute nothingness is defined as “nothingness-qua-love (*mu soku ai* 無即愛)” or as a “Great Nay-qua-Great Compassion (*daihi soku daihi* 大非即大悲)” (IX: 5; PM, li).

Such self-negativity of absolute nothingness does not, however, entail a unilateral structuring of the absolute, as if it could stand alone in opposition to the relative. Were this the case, nothingness would lose its nature of ceaseless activity and take the fixed form of a being. Thus Tanabe sees absolute nothingness as mediated in the self-negating performance of metanoesis by the finite and, in this sense, defines it as *nothingness-qua-love* and *Great Nay-qua-Great Compassion*. The relationship is one of strict mutuality, like two sides of a single coin: absolute nothingness realizing itself affirmatively by grounding the independence of the finite as its mediation, the finite recovering its existence on the basis of “love” or of “Great Compassion.” Tanabe describes this mutuality of the relative and the absolute as follows:

The self-negation and transformation wrought by relative beings among themselves is made possible because they are affirmed by nothingness, whereas this self-negating act of nothingness becomes its own

affirmation and its realization in the world. *This absolute transformation* [zettai tenkan 絶対転換] *is truly absolute nothingness and at the same time absolute mediation.* (IX: 152; PM, 158)

To paraphrase: the finite is the negative other standing in opposition to absolute nothingness because, as being, it is rooted in radical evil and is inclined to rebel against what is absolute. If the absolute were an immediate and static existence without any relation to the finite, it could not be absolute nothingness. Absoluteness, *as nothingness in act*, must therefore be thought to affirm itself only through the mediation of the finite as its own negative other. This means that it declines to affirm itself out of itself alone and, *in an act of self-negation*, allows for sin in the finite. This act is manifest as “love” or “Great Compassion.” Absolute nothingness manifests such self-negativity only when the unbridgeable gap between the relative and the absolute expands itself to the extreme at which the finite persists in its independence and the absolute stands opposed as transcendent other. To the extent that the distance from the absolute is unbridgeable, leaving the finite no choice but to collapse and fall apart; and in thus negating its existence out of awareness of its sin, absolute nothingness is able to manifest its self-negating act and the finite to recover its existence.

This relationship in which the affirmation of the relative is at the same time the self-negation of the absolute, and the affirmation of the absolute at the same time the self-negation of the former—to borrow Tanabe’s phrase, the mutuality in which “the affirmation of independence is made possible only through the negation of dependency and... the self-negation of dependency is made possible only through the affirmation of independence” (IX: 248; PM, 273)—is the essence of the “absolute mediation” as found in the *Metanoetics*. The absolute is defined as absolute nothingness in virtue of its *self-negating* act mediated through the independence of the finite. Tanabe speaks of this aspect of absolute nothingness as a transforming “conversion” (*tenkan* 転換) rather than as a “self-negating principle.” As I understand him, his aim is to show clearly that absolute nothingness does not stop at the unilateral act of relating itself to the finite as a mere self-negating principle but includes its own *mediation through the self-negation of the finite*. It is absolute nothing-

ness as *an act of transforming conversion* that fundamentally supports the paradoxical and mutually reversible relation in which the affirmation and the negation of the relative and the absolute are inseparably intertwined. Consequently, the *logical* meaning of conversion in the *Metanoetics* is to be sought at the point where absolute nothingness is transformed into a self-negating principle of *conversion*.

Evidently this gives Tanabe a way to solve the problem of the aporia I pointed to at the start: How are we to explain a relationship in which absolute nothingness positions itself vis-à-vis the historical world without removing the finiteness that belongs to human beings? The more this finiteness is stressed, the more absolute nothingness comes to be seen as “pursued” by the finite, removing the possibility of connecting it concretely to the historical world. If, however, the link of absolute nothingness to reality is explained by seeing it simply as a principle immanent to history, then finitude, and with it the radical evil and contingency of human beings, are obliged to recede. This is the aporia towards which the logic of the species was eventually driven as Tanabe developed it until, in his *Metanoetics*, he argued that *the finiteness of human beings itself is the only possible basis for absolute nothingness to relate to the historical world through self-negation or gensō*.

The originality of Tanabe’s philosophy does not stop at his insistence on the self-negation of absolute nothingness. This question had already been raised by Nishida in 『無の自覚的限定』[The self-awakened determination of nothingness, 1932].¹⁵ Rather, the originality lies in his idea that the self-negation of absolute nothingness must always be mediated by the self-negation of the finite, and as a result, that nothingness must be considered a principle of *conversion*. This approach seems to me not only to show one way to inherit Nishida’s philosophy critically but also suggests that the idea of absolute nothingness can lay the foundations for a new ontology amidst the current climate of opinion that would dismiss discussions about what the historical world in which we exist as mere metaphysics.

It was through Tanabe that Nishida came to realize the problem of the self-negation of absolute nothingness, namely, how nothingness itself is related to the historical world. But this is too complicated a question to treat in any detail here.