

Nishitani Keiji's Theory of Imagination

The Theory of Imagination in “Emptiness and Immediacy”

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“*Kū to soku*” 空と即 [Emptiness and Immediacy, 1982], which became the last lengthy essay that Nishitani wrote, explains how “elemental imagination, which arises from the sphere called the ‘Dharma-realm in which all things interpenetrate each other’ [*jiji muge hokkai* 事々無碍法界] is set in motion” (NKC 13: 160; NISHITANI 1999, 217). In it, Nishitani advances his distinctive theory of emptiness in relation to the problem of image. He begins the essay by considering the problem of images expressed in poetry and the arts. As the essay proceeds, we are led from poetry and the arts, both of which express “the ‘principle’ [*ri* 理] which we apprehend at the very site of our experience of things” and “the primal form of ‘the non-obstruction of principle and things,’ to the realm where all words, as well as their logos or principle, fade away, and things appear just as they are” (NKC 13: 130; NISHITANI 1999, 194)—that is to say, the realm in which there is no obstruction between things. During the course of this analysis, we encounter Nishitani’s discussion

* Translated by Robert F. Rhodes. Unless otherwise indicated, quoted passages are translated directly from the Japanese, but references to alternative existing English translations have also been provided where possible.

of image, a key concept in this essay, as well as his theories of “*sensus communis*” (often rendered in English as “common sense”) and “imagination” (*kōsōryoku* 構想力; literally “power to construct mental images”), which lie at the basis of his notion of image.

According to Nishitani, the principle governing the relationship between images is already a major theme in poetry which “attempts to express things at the original source where the thing is given and manifests itself to us” (NKC 13: 131; NISHITANI 1999, 195). Moreover, once the possibility of the impossibility of the principle of image is uncovered, what is opened up is the region where “reality appears just as reality” (NKC 13: 132; NISHITANI 1999, 196), i.e., where “things appear just as they are.” This is the region where “all things interpenetrate each other,” i.e., the horizon of religion. In this shift to the horizon of religion, image plays a leading role. According to Nishitani, the “being” of “things” in this world is, originally, closed in on itself, without connection to other things, and completely “non-circuminsessional” with other things. However, mediated by image, a thing, without ceasing to be itself, comes out from within itself and “from the perspective of its relationship with the world, enters into a circuminsessional relationship with other things” (NKC 13: 141; NISHITANI 1999, 203). Nishitani considers this fundamental change of status, in which an entity located in a specific place in the world enters into a relationship with other things, to be “unfolding the inner landscape hidden within ‘being.’” As he says, “fundamentally speaking, it is a transfer from an actual existing thing to its image” (NKC 13: 141; NISHITANI 1999, 203). It means that the “image, which is within and identical with the thing, reveals its own distinctive form as an image,” and moreover, that “the power that is within, and is identical with, each of the five senses, appears as imagination” (NKC 13: 141; NISHITANI 1999, 203).

However, on Nishitani’s view, if the being of things just stands within the network of relationships constituting the world, it remains at a stage that can be described as the “Dharma-realm in which there is no obstruction between principle and things” (*riji muge hokkai* 理事無碍法界). The world in which principle and things are unobstructed must at some point come to a realization of an “absolute contradiction” in this world-relationship: that there is an absolute contradiction between the

“absolute one” and “absolute many,” which “indicate the two extremes delimiting the dominion of the logos characterized by the non-obstruction of the principle and things” (NKC 13: 143; NISHITANI 1999, 203). It is necessary to become aware of this contradiction in which “the clearing that constitutes the world,” where there is nothing, and the “myriad things” are able to come into existence simultaneously, while the contradiction itself remains. The “Dharma-realm in which all things interpenetrate each other” is described as the “place where things return to their origin, a place that embraces both being and non-being, knowing and non-knowing, while at the same time, principle and things are made circuminsessionally identical [*egoteki ni sōsoku seshimeru* 回互的に相即せしめる] with each other.” It is also described as “the realm of realization in which one goes beyond the Dharma-realm in which there is no obstruction between the principle and things” (NKC 13: 145; NISHITANI 1999, 205–206).

The Dharma-realm in which all things interpenetrate each other is a world in which all “principle” (or logos) has been eliminated. It is rather a world of “chaos” and absolute absurdity. Even then, it has meaning at the religious level. As Nishitani declares, “the fact that a religious world is opened up, means that the human mind is opened up towards a source where the clearing of the world is an absolute clearing” (NKC 13: 151; NISHITANI 1999, 210).

However, the myriad things, while existing within a world of absurd “chaos,” exists as themselves. Moreover, they exist as things that are at one with “thoroughgoing nothingness,” i.e., emptiness. Here one experiences a world that conforms to the ultimate thing itself. It is a world in which the myriad non-circuminsessional things exist as images of emptiness. From the level of religion, the Dharma-realm in which there is no obstruction between principle and things remains inadequate, insofar as its way of approaching “things” is still governed by a certain “principle”: that of the relationship among images. When one ultimately enters the world of the thing itself, one realizes that the myriad things, while remaining non-circuminsessional, are nothing other than images of “nothingness,” i.e., images of “emptiness.” For this reason, this is truly “the realm of realization in which one goes beyond the Dharma-realm in which there is no obstruction between principle and things.”

Nishitani describes this realm as “a place where everything is an image and nothing more, including even images that are absurd and nonsensical” (NKC 13: 152; NISHITANI 1999, 211). As examples, he gives the verse at the beginning of the “Uji” 有時 [Being-Time] chapter of the *Shōbōgenzō* 正法眼藏 [Treasury of the Dharma Eye]¹ and the episode of Zen Master Tairyū, who composed a verse on a blizzard on a bright sunny day. Such images come extremely close to approximating the Dharma-realm in which all things interpenetrate each other. However, inasmuch as it employs language, it is still expressed from the level of the Dharma-realm in which there is no obstruction between principle and things. But these images have, at some point, passed through the Dharma-realm in which all things interpenetrate each other. According to Nishitani, they are expressed when “the elemental imagination arising from the region called Dharma-realm in which all things interpenetrate each other is set in motion.” Images from the Dharma-realm in which all things interpenetrate each other are not simply the products of the human intellect. Rather, even though the images arise in human beings, they are the result of the spontaneous activity of the imagination that transcends human beings.

In this way, the problem of image holds an extremely important place in Nishitani's philosophical reflections around the time he writes “Emptiness and Immediacy.” A characteristic feature of his reflections, moreover, lies in the fact that it is based on the notions of “*sensus communis*” and “imagination.” Unfortunately, Nishitani does not explain what he

1. Editor's note: Hee-Jin Kim translates the verse in question as follows:

An ancient buddha said:
 There is a time to stand on top of the highest peak;
 There is a time to walk at the bottom of the deepest ocean;
 There is a time to be a three-headed, eight-armed [being];
 There is a time to be a sixteen foot or eight-foot [buddha];
 There is a time to be a staff or a whisk;
 There is a time to be a pillar or a lantern;
 There is a time to be Chang's third son or Li's fourth son;
 There is a time to be the great earth and empty sky.

(From *Flowers of Emptiness: Selections from Dōgen's Shōbōgenzō*, 224. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press.)

means by “imagination” at any length. Neither is it emphasized in *Religion and Nothingness*, Nishitani’s major work from his middle period. But in “Emptiness and Immediacy,” imagination and image suddenly come to hold an important place at the center of Nishitani’s philosophy. In this essay, it is intimated that the problem of image is related to Aristotle’s theory of *sensus communis*. In the pages below, I will attempt to clarify the philosophical basis and range of issues associated with the theory of imagination developed in “Emptiness and Immediacy.”

During the period in which he wrote “Emptiness and Immediacy,” Nishitani’s theory of *sensus communis* is developed within the horizon of Buddhist thought, including the notion of emptiness. Although *sensus communis* is closely associated with Aristotle, Aristotle’s concept of God (“the unmoving mover”) is basically incompatible with Buddhist thought. How then is it possible to integrate Aristotle’s theories of *sensus communis* and imagination with Buddhist thought? Nishitani gives no explanation. In this paper, I will also discuss this problem and explore the background of Nishitani’s theory of imagination as found in “Emptiness and Immediacy.”

THE SOURCE OF NISHITANI’S THEORY OF IMAGINATION: STUDIES IN ARISTOTLE

As we have seen, the theory of image found in Nishitani’s essay “Emptiness and Immediacy” is closely bound to concepts like “*sensus communis*” and “imagination.” After treating how the human senses are integrated while augmenting each other, he continues:

All of the various senses, which have become specialized into different types depending on which of the five sense organs they are associated with, possess in common a function called sensation, or a characteristic which is the “power” to sense things. In a word, this is the basis of the [human senses]. This is what has been called “*sensus communis*” since ancient times. It is the basis which helps to integrate the senses mentioned above with one another. From the standpoint of the original and natural nature of the senses, *sensus communis* refers to the unrestricted (or a priori) nature of the senses before they are subject

to specific restrictions. It is none other than the “power” (*physis*) to sense things, contained innately in each of the five senses. They are the “enabling cause” (*nōsa-in* 能作因; *kārana-betu*) which allows the senses to function in the first place. On the other hand, this same *sensus communis* simultaneously exists apart from sight, hearing and the other specialized senses and has its own distinctive function. This function is universal (in that it is not bound to any of the specific senses). Its function is to produce images (representational forms or mental likenesses), and from this perspective, *sensus communis* can be called “imagination.” (NKC 13: 154; NISHITANI 1999, 212–13)

Here Nishitani argues that imagination is the ability to produce images. But the *sensus communis* and imagination are not exactly the same thing. In a different section of “Emptiness and Immediacy,” Nishitani describes the *sensus communis* as “the power to form mental likenesses which seems to be contained within, and is united with, the power of the senses which is ‘passive’ or ‘receptive’ (or the ability to be passive or receptive)” (NKC 13: 128; NISHITANI 1999, 193). Furthermore, he distinguishes imagination from *sensus communis*, saying that the former is the “independent activity of the very ‘ability’” to produce images, which, although rooted in *sensus communis*, is relatively free from the senses. In “Emptiness and Immediacy,” Nishitani does not discuss *sensus communis* and imagination in any further detail. But from the lectures that Nishitani gave at Ōtani University around the same time, we can see that the framework of his theory of *sensus communis* derives from the notion of *koine aisthesis* (common perceptual sense) which Aristotle developed in *De Anima* (NKC 25: 418). In fact, in his early volume, *Arisutoteresu ronkō* アリストテレス論攷 [*Studies in Aristotle*, 1948; referred to hereafter as *Studies*], Nishitani presents a detailed study of Aristotle’s theories of *sensus communis* and the power of imagination. In other words, the source of Nishitani’s theory of imagination is to be found in his early *Studies*.

It must be noted here that there are major differences in opinions concerning what Aristotle meant by *sensus communis*. Moreover the question of whether or not Nishitani’s interpretation of *sensus communis* is correct is another problem altogether. However, I will not go into these problems here, since my main concern is to elucidate Nishitani’s interpretation of Aristotle to see how it is related to the argument found in

“Emptiness and Immediacy.” In the pages below, I will consider Nishitani’s understanding of *sensus communis* as found in his *Studies* and see how it relates to the concept of imagination.

Sensus communis is a controversial topic, but it is generally said to have its origins in Aristotle’s discussion of *koine aisthesis*, found in *De Anima*. In Book 3, Chapter 1 of *De Anima*, Aristotle declares:

...but of the common objects we have from the start a common sense (*sensus communis*), not a *per accidens* awareness; so it is not a special sense.... The senses perceive the proper objects of one another *per accidens* (in virtue not of being the particular senses they are, but of being species of one genus), when there is a simultaneous perception of both qualities in the same object.... (ARISTOTLE 1961, 268)

Commenting on this passage, Nishitani declares that *sensus communis* is “a particular ability which can distinguish between different varieties of sensation, and therefore stands in the position of an integrator within the entire field of sensation” (NKC 5: 57). Moreover, *sensus communis* is defined as “the elemental sense faculty” or “the source of the various sense faculties that have developed into diverse forms” (NKC 5: 57). As for the way it actually functions, Nishitani begins by using the idea of “within” (中 *chū*; トメソノ *to meson*; the mean). He says, “*Sensus communis*, insofar as it can distinguish, for example, between white and blue, integrates, on the one hand, the function of sight and, on the other hand, the function of taste. At the same time, insofar as it can distinguish between white and blue, or to put it differently, as *sensus communis* itself, it is neither [the function of sight or taste]. Rather it must be within [the sense of sight or taste]” (NKC 5: 58).

According to Nishitani, *sensus communis* “always works, only through, or together with, the various specialized senses” (NKC 5: 59). However, it is “not identical with any of the specialized senses. Rather, it is something that integrates them at their source. That is to say, what is seen at the source of the various specialized senses is, simultaneously in itself, the original source (*arche*) of all specialized senses” (NKC 5: 60). Therefore, the fact that the *sensus communis* is “within” the senses means that it is “like the center of a circle where many straight lines with different end points converge” (NKC 5: 60). It is the single center “within” a cir-

cle. In this way, it can be said that all things within the field of the senses can be found in the *sensus communis* with its power to integrate all the senses. It is for this reason that the *sensus communis* can distinguish and compare the data given to the various different senses. It is also for this reason that “the sensing consciousness and the actual consciousness of the *psyche* that senses” (NKC 5: 71) are both found in *sensus communis*. Moreover, on Aristotle’s view, sensation of “‘things that are sensed in common’ such as movement, stillness, form, size, number and oneness” also belong to *sensus communis*.

The concept of *sensus communis* is an attempt to locate the power to integrate the various data given to the senses within the senses themselves. It shows that Aristotle was not satisfied with locating the power to integrate the senses outside the senses. According to Nishitani, “By thinking in this way, Aristotle brought the distinctive character of the understanding down into the senses” (NKC 5: 80). Of course, this does not mean that he ignored the essential difference between sensation and understanding/reason. As Nishitani notes, “He simply sought to recognize, not only the disjunction and discontinuity, but also the living continuity, between sensation and understanding” (NKC 5: 80).

What then is the relationship between *sensus communis*, which mediates between sensation and understanding, and imagination? Nishitani provides the following lucid interpretation: “When a movement which has a sense-impression as its inner essence shakes the sense organ to its very foundation and remains even after the present sensation has passed away, a figure of imagination arises.” Stated in greater detail,

It is none other than the fact that the *sensus communis*, which lies at the basis of the specialized senses, is being stimulated. That is to say, when a stimulus in one of the specialized senses stimulates even the *sensus communis*, and there remains a qualitatively different agitation arising from the stimulus, i.e., the pathos of sensation, even after the initial sensation has ceased, that is the figure of imagination. Therefore, “The figure of imagination is the pathos of *sensus communis*” (*De mem.* I, 450a10) and imagination is the production of the representation or figure of imagination. (NKC 5: 86)

Therefore, imagination is “that aspect of the *sensus communis* that can

be passive [in order to receive sense impressions]” (NKC 5: 88).² When the sense organ is shaken to its very foundation and the *sensus communis* is stimulated, both sensation and imagination arise. But the latter “while being a *sensus communis* that has arisen from the present sensation, remains as residue after the sensation has ceased. Therefore, there is a time lapse between it and the sensation” (NKC 5: 87). In other words, what appears before the *psyche* in imagination is the “sense impression itself” (NKC 5: 87). Hence imagination is “due to its distance from the sense object, free from the direct influence of the object. Being separated from the sense object, it can on occasion become creative” (NKC 5: 89). But at the same time “in contrast to sensation which is always accurate, imagination can, as a result of this distance and separation, sometimes prove mistaken” (NKC 5: 89).

We can discern here a distinctive feature of Nishitani’s interpretation of Aristotle. This is his idea that “the passive is active” (*judō soku nōdō* 受動即能動). Nishitani points out that there are two aspects to *sensus communis*: that which is included in the specialized senses and that which is unique to itself while remaining a part of the specialized senses. In other words, the former is the aspect that is subject to stimulus by means of the agitation remaining within the sense organ, while the latter is the aspect that appears in front of the *psyche* as the figure of imagination which arose as a result of this stimulation. But these two aspects are one, in that they are simultaneously passive and active. It is because of this that a mental fact called imagination can come into being” (NKC 5: 91). Concerning the specialized senses, too, Nishitani says, “Sensation is simultaneously passive and active. Only by being *apathes* can our senses be *paschein*. If this non-passive aspect is lacking in our senses, we cannot receive sense impressions at all” (NKC 5: 46).

Furthermore, Nishitani distinguishes imagination itself into two types: sensational imagination (*kankakuteki kōsō* 感覺的構想) and deliberative imagination (*shiryōteki kōsō* 思量的構想). The latter serves to mediate between sensation and intellect (reason). The power of imagination, inasmuch as it remains passive, does not escape the full play of the abil-

2. Nishitani emphasizes the term “can” here, indicating that he stresses the active aspect of *sensus communis*.

ity of sensation. When recollection arises, Nishitani maintains, “the power of imagination is freed from the power of sensation, and instead becomes associated with the power of speculation. This is comparative or deliberative imagination.... Just as sensational imagination arises in association with emotional perception (*kanjō chikaku* 感情知覚) and the power of deliberative imagination, it can be said that the power of deliberative imagination arises in association with the power of sensational imagination and speculation” (NKC 5: 112).

With the discussion above in mind, let me turn to how Nishitani's interpretation of Aristotle found in *Studies* is related to the arguments set forth in “Emptiness and Immediacy.” In the foreword to *Studies*, Nishitani states that the “essential points that I wanted to discuss in this volume” (NKC 5: 4) can be summarized as follows:

- 1 “The first concerns the mutual identity and interpenetration of the ‘natural’ and the ‘logical’ or *physis* and *logos* in Aristotle's philosophy” (NKC 5: 4);
- 2 “The second point concerns the fact that the activities of the various abilities possessed by the *psyche*, whether they belong to the emotions or to reason, include a non-passive aspect within the constitution of their passivity, even while they are passive in that they receive their form from the object” (NKC 5: 8);
- 3 “The third concerns the interpretation of the relationship between active reason and passive reason” (NKC 5: 9);
- 4 “The fourth concerns the point of view that I expressed in this volume using terms like, for the time being, ‘present’ (*Da*) and ‘present consciousness’” (NKC 5: 10).

Nishitani makes no reference at all to the first point above in “Emptiness and Immediacy” and it is unclear how much this particular concern is carried over into this essay. However, the analysis of the structure of the soul found in *Studies*, to which the second point above refers, is, I believe, carried over into “Emptiness and Immediacy.” For example, the interpretation of Aristotle's theory concerning the relationship between *sensus communis* and imagination found in *Studies* is also found in “Emptiness and Immediacy.” As I noted above, Nishitani says that the power of imagination is “that aspect of the *sensus communis* that can be pas-

sive.” This means that the sense organs are shaken to the foundations, the *sensus communis* arises, and imagination is produced passively by the *sensus communis*. But the aspect in which the *sensus communis*, while passively receiving the sensation, produces imagination is referred to as the power of imagination. In other words, the passive aspect is taken up independently. This is parallel to the relationship between *sensus communis* and imagination found in “Emptiness and Immediacy.” Moreover, in “Emptiness and Immediacy,” the power of imagination is also defined as a “universal primal function unique to itself, which is distinct from specific functions like sight and hearing” (NKC 13: 154; NISHITANI 1999, 212). This agrees with the following statement from *Studies*: that imagination is “due to its distance from the sense object, free from the direct influence of the object. Being separated from the sense object, it can on occasion become creative” (NKC 5: 89).

Nishitani’s discussion concerning the fourth point is strongly influenced by Heidegger. Briefly stated, the problem that Nishitani wished to discuss here is that of the “self-consciousness” of the *psyche*. This is related to the problem of “sensibility” which he took up in his lectures at Ōtani University, that is to say, the problem of how the entire world, including oneself, is reflected in the senses. However I cannot discuss this point any further in this essay.

The most problematic point is the third: the interpretation of the relationship between passive reason and active reason. In this context, Nishitani discusses Aristotle’s understanding of God. In the foreword to *Studies*, Nishitani declares that it “resembles the problem of the relationship between Original Awakening and Incipient Awakening in Buddhism.” Unfortunately, this point is not developed at all in *Studies*. At the very least, it can be said that he does not deal with the question of how active reason (God) and the Buddhist notion of awakening are related to one another. To repeat, in this volume, it is still unclear how Aristotle’s thought can be integrated with Buddhist ways of thinking, such as those based on emptiness.

Of course, as Nishitani himself says in *Studies*, he wrote this book simply to help further his own understanding of Aristotle’s philosophic standpoint (NKC 5: 4). For this reason, the results of his research were not used in any special way to deepen his own philosophy. Even in *Shūkyō*

to wa nanika 宗教とは何か [What is Religion?, 1961], one of Nishitani's major works, the power of imagination is not a particularly important topic. However, it suddenly comes back to prominence in "Emptiness and Immediacy," where it is subject to detailed analysis, especially as it relates to such Buddhist concepts as emptiness and the Dharma-realm in which all things interpenetrate each other. Unfortunately, Nishitani neglects to explain how or why he came to focus once again on the role of imagination in this essay. Hence the process by which Nishitani returned to the problem of imagination remains a "missing link" in the study of Nishitani's philosophic development. How then was Nishitani able to integrate his understanding of Aristotle with Buddhist thought? Through what process was Nishitani able to open up a horizon of thought encompassing both Aristotle's *anima* theory and Buddhist philosophy? It is necessary to consider these questions in order to fully appreciate the significance of "Emptiness and Immediacy."

NISHITANI'S DISTINCTIVE THEORY OF IMAGINATION: THE OVERCOMING OF *NOESIS NOESEOS*

In his summary of the distinctive features of Aristotle's philosophy in *Studies*, Nishitani presents his interpretation of the words, "When reason apprehends and thinks of the *noeton* (the object of thought), it (i.e., reason) becomes the *noeton*, found in Chapter 7, Book 12 of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*." Nishitani's interpretation is as follows:

"When reason thinks of *noeton*" means that it (reason) enters into an activity that is identical [*ichinyo* 一如] with the active reason of God. "By thinking of *noeton*, it becomes *noeton*" means that, in thinking of the active reason of God, it enters into an activity that is identical with the active reason of God that eternally reflects upon itself. From such a standpoint, reason also becomes a *noeton* to itself. In other words, this means nothing less than the fact that, by becoming a *noeton* that is identical with the *noeton* of God, it becomes a *noeton* identical with God as *noeton*. In other words, the action of seeing God (*noesis*) itself becomes one with the action of God (*noesis*) and to become one with the action of God is to see the self along with God. (NKC 5: 189)

Moreover, God, the prime mover of the universe, is the unique primal principle of the universe and “the substance of all things” (*Met.* 12–10, 1076 a1). Hence, “the act of seeing the world is included within the act of seeing God. However, to think of things in the world and the various forms they take does not necessarily include the act of seeing God” (NKC 5: 192). In any case, “in thinking wherein reason sees both God as *noeton* and itself, the universe is also seen as one entity” (NKC 5: 194). In other words, “it reaches a sphere of contemplation that may be described as ‘all is one and one is all’” (NKC 5: 193).

Concerning God’s contemplation, Nishitani writes, “at the time passive reason turns its back on emotions and imagination and turns towards active reason, it becomes an actual force which is identical with things. When it (i.e., reason) sees itself within things, it can be said that ‘the divine’ contained within reason becomes manifest” (NKC 5: 178). The actual force of divine reason means that, in thinking of God, which is the object of thought, human reason becomes identical with the eternal active reason. “It is, as it were, an action in which one sees God by means of the very action through which God sees his own self. This is called ‘*noesis noeseos*’ (thought thinking itself).” In “thought thinking itself” the activity of *nous* of thinking (*energia*) is identical with God’s *energia*. By approaching the pure contemplation of God, life discovers value within itself. This is the most virtuous way to live.

As we saw above, Nishitani gives the notion of “thought thinking itself” as one of the distinctive features of Aristotle’s philosophy. In his view, “thought thinking itself” is the distinguishing characteristic and goal of philosophy. The structure of the human soul, including such things as passive reason, is raised to a higher level when it becomes identified with active reason through the process of “thought thinking itself” and becomes actualized. “Even while transcending emotions, passive reason acts in association with emotions. It is here that perception of actual things comes into existence. However, passive reason functions as a result of the actual force of active reason. Therefore, at the basis of the perception of emotional actual things, the actual force of active reason exists” (NKC 5: 174). All workings of the soul, from passive reason to emotions, are fundamentally actions due to the actual force of active reason. According to Nishitani’s interpretation, Aristotle’s entire

philosophy, including his understanding of the formation of images, is based on the idea of “thought thinking itself.”

In *Studies*, Nishitani points out that the notion of “thought thinking itself” is also important for Hegel. Says Nishitani, “I may also add that the passage from the *Metaphysics* given above³ is, as everyone knows, quoted verbatim by Hegel at the end of his *Encyclopedia*. In my opinion, Hegel’s position represents the deepest understanding of Aristotle’s thought (even though it is, of course, not a faithful reproduction of the latter)” (NKC 5: 191).

Nishitani believes that the notion of “thought thinking itself” provides the basic framework of Western philosophy from Aristotle to Hegel. He reiterates this view in the essay “Hannya to risei” 般若と理性 [*Prajñā* and Reason, 1979], which was written at around the same time as “Emptiness and Immediacy.” In “*Prajñā* and Reason,” Nishitani attempts to overcome Hegel’s philosophic standpoint, which is based on the notion of “thought thinking itself,” through the use of Buddhist concepts. In the section in this essay dealing with the relationship between Aristotle and Hegel, Nishitani declares,

In Hegel’s *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, the standpoint of *noesis noeseos* (that is, direct knowledge of direct knowledge by means of direct knowledge) discussed in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* is declared to be the standpoint of philosophy itself, ...that is to say, the standpoint of philosophy as absolute knowledge. This is the standpoint from which one perceives directly (i.e., through *sophia*) the function of the direct perception (*sophia*) of the totality of all things in their totality, i.e., as totality itself. In other words, it is the ultimate standpoint of “contemplative knowledge” wherein direct knowledge contemplates itself. Philosophical thought is, first of all, thought that concerns itself with the totality of things, and from such a standpoint, the thinker and the object of thought are always one. In that sense, unlike reflective knowledge in which the subject that knows and the object that is known are opposed to each other, knowledge always has the character of absolute knowledge. (NKC 13: 71)

3. This refers to the passage from *Metaphysics* Chapter 12, Section 7, where Aristotle states that the self-contemplation of reason is divine and the highest good.

Nishitani describes the main current of Hegel's philosophy as found in the chapter on Absolute Spirit in the *Encyclopedia* as follows: "In the realm of Absolute Spirit, being and knowledge, both of which have an absolute character, are one. Absolute Spirit develops towards a state in which there remains no duality or opposition at all between absolute being and knowledge" (NKC 13: 80). This is not found even at the level of "revealed religions." This is because "Absolute Spirit is still represented as absolute being" (NKC 13: 80). At this level, God is still "considered to be an entity called God, as the Other, so to speak" (NKC 13: 80). Indeed, even though an attempt is made there to make an infinite contact between God and humans, still "it cannot be said that the knowledge of God is identical to God's knowledge of Himself" (NKC 13: 80). God knows and loves Himself, but the absolute knowledge that humans possess can only know and love God. The duality is abolished when God's knowledge operates directly in the form of human knowledge. We reach such a standpoint when knowledge knows itself. According to Nishitani, "The ultimate standpoint of absolute knowledge is that of the knowledge of absolute knowledge" (NKC 13: 81). From such standpoint, "there is only the act of knowledge and knowledge is the act of knowing that act of knowing.... This is the position that was called *noesis noeseos* in Aristotelian philosophy and Plotinus's Neo-Platonism which followed" (NKC 13: 81).

On Nishitani's view, Hegel's concept of Absolute Spirit can be regarded as "the final summit of Western philosophy that resembles a lofty range of mountain peaks, that developed from Plato and Aristotle" (NKC 13: 85). Aristotle's *noesis noeseos*, while dressed up in this concept of Absolute Spirit, appeared within Nishitani's thought as the fundamental framework of Western philosophy. However, Nishitani criticizes *noesis noeseos* as presented in Hegel's philosophy in the following words:

The standpoint of *noesis noeseos* certainly breaks free, through self-negation, from the standpoint of detached observation, or *Zuschauen*, which lurks within all human philosophic thought. According to Hegel, human philosophical knowledge has its foundation in absolute knowledge. However, it is also endowed with "freedom from absolute knowledge" which prevents it from being swallowed up by

the object of knowledge. This is due to the manifestation of “absolute negation” or “freedom” which knowledge itself possesses. It is here that the progress of knowledge as a discipline of absolute knowledge becomes possible. At the final stage of this system, absolute negation negates even the standpoint of detached observation (*Zuschauen*) and becomes one with the thought of the Absolute Being. In this sense, absolute negation is fulfilled and is free from self-contradiction. However, on the point that this final stage is that of the “thinking of thinking,” it has “not yet become absolutely free from its character as thinking.” To further fulfill the absolute negation of knowledge, knowledge must escape from freedom in the sense of “freedom from something” and attain liberty or thoroughgoing freedom to act without any constraints. (NKC 13: 84)

Knowledge that has been affirmed absolutely “must be of the nature of unconstrained absolute affirmation or *Positivität* towards all things” (NKC 13: 84). Therefore it means that, insofar as it remains knowledge, “it still remains insufficient in getting to the bottom of the substance of what is called knowledge” (NKC 13: 84). This standpoint is still not free of the tacit assumption that the substance of Absolute Being is “knowledge.” Even though Hegel’s philosophy begins from the Absolute, the Absolute is defined as “being.” This, Nishitani repeatedly points out, is a major problem in Hegel’s philosophy.

How then can we overcome *noesis noeseos*? One way is to get to the bottom of the standpoint of knowledge and advance on to unconstrained absolute affirmation which may be called “knowing of non-knowing.” But Nishitani is skeptical about any attempt to deepening a given entity as “knowledge” or “academic discipline.” He asks, “When a thing, whatever it may be, appears before us as a distinct existent (*jitsuzai* 實在), can its facticity or existentiality be fathomed through knowledge?” (NKC 13: 85). Then he continues, “Instead of taking the path of logical understanding, which is different from directly knowing a given fact as it is, there is the way of deepening this direct knowledge itself.” Nishitani considers this to be sole standpoint of truth. In other words, this is a question of where one should begin one’s religious or philosophical quest. In his words, “It is a question of where their ‘starting point’ is and where we can discern its source” (NKC 13: 92). Concerning

this “starting point,” he says, “it must be something that is prior to all knowledge, all thought, all logic, etc. Moreover, it must be the starting point of all knowledge and thought” (NKC 13: 92). Stated differently, “It is the standpoint from which one can freely go into and out of the world of knowledge, thought, and logic. Or else, it is the power to negate knowledge, thought, and logic while at the same time affirming knowledge, thought, and logic. It is, so to speak, simultaneously the power of non-knowing and the power of knowing” (NKC 13: 92).

Nishitani understands this power to be “absolute negation” itself. This absolute negation is not something which anticipates some thing to be negated, nor is it something which presupposes its opposite, absolute affirmation. “Absolute negation, in its true form, does not have anything that it needs to negate. In this sense, absolute negation is simultaneously absolute affirmation. Absolute nothingness is immediately absolute being (*zettai mu soku zettai u* 絶対無即絶対有). Hence it is the origin of all negation and affirmation” (NKC 13: 93). Since absolute negation has nothing to negate, through its act of negation, it manifests its power of absolute affirmation. Nishitani further explains:

This power has its locus at the site indicated by the term “immediate” [*soku* 即], where absolute negation is none other than absolute affirmation. If we refer to the site indicated by the term “immediate” in the phrase “absolute nothingness is immediately absolute being” by the word “emptiness,” this locus of emptiness is at the same time the locus of knowledge. Knowledge always implies negation or the freedom to negate because it is empty. At the same time, the site of emptiness is the place where all existence is allowed to exist or where all things manifest themselves as things that exist. In addition to being the place where all things exist, it is the place where we can perceive all things as existing. (NKC 13: 93)

Nishitani points to emptiness or absolute negation as the site where both “thought thinking itself” (*noesis noeseos*) and the being that is presupposed as the starting point of absolute knowledge can come into existence. The standpoint of *noesis noeseos* itself comes into existence in the field of emptiness and, moreover, possesses the possibility of returning to the site of emptiness. It can be said that the standpoint of empti-

ness which Nishitani arrived at in the final years of his life was reached by overcoming and absorbing Aristotle's notion of *noesis noeseos* via Hegel. Here the locus of emptiness is opened up as the site where "thought thinking itself," which is the final stage of knowledge's journey, can come into existence. The absolute negation that is emptiness is, to repeat, "the power to negate knowledge, thought, and logic while at the same time affirming knowledge, thought, and logic." For this reason, the whole range of the soul's activities—from feeling and perception to imagination and acts of reason—is grounded in emptiness. It also means that absolute negation is at work in acts of feeling and perception. As Nishitani has already pointed out in *Religion and Nothingness*, "All acts of consciousness are emptied from their very foundations" (NKC 10: 172; NISHITANI 1982, 153).

The starting point of Hegel's dialectic logic is the "self-identity" of the "thing itself," that is to say, "the form in which the thing itself is still undifferentiated from the 'principle' or concept it contains" (NKC 13: 54). This can be likened to the experience based on the power of sensation, "in which imagination and judgment are included in a 'seed-like' original nature" or a primal "reality of the experience of sensation" (NKC 13: 153; NISHITANI 1999, 212) described in "Emptiness and Immediacy." The standpoint of *noesis noeseos* is severed from sensation, which is the basis of relative knowledge, and, turning its back on knowledge based on sensation, seeks to turn toward active reason. In contrast, as he suggested in "*Prajñā* and Reason," Nishitani does not seek to deepen his understanding of things through "knowledge" or "academic discipline" but attempts to inquire into the truth by "directly knowing a given fact as a given fact" or to "deepen the direct perception itself." That is to say, he seeks to deepen the experience of direct perception by going back to the very source of sensation. If emptiness is absolute negation, it is working, for the time being, at the level of self-identity that is the primal form of logos. That is to say, it is working at the level of direct perception in which a thing is grasped by means of image based on *sensus communis*. The standpoint of *noesis noeseos* emphasizes and carries through to its logical conclusion the ability of the "knowledge" that absolute negation possesses to develop itself. If however, from the viewpoint of the "freedom" that absolute negation possesses, it is necessary to break

away from the level of image and proceed to “knowledge,” it must mean that this standpoint is premised on the notion that “the true nature (of knowledge) is ‘knowledge.’” If one completely realizes the freedom to act without constraints, there is no need to proceed towards “knowledge.” Therefore, concerning this position, Nishitani indicates the need to take one further step from the “thought thinking itself” (knowing knowing itself) to the negation of the standpoint of knowing, i.e., to “knowing of non-knowing” (*muchi no chi* 無知の知).⁴ Nishitani entrusts himself to the negative tendency already working at the level of this primal experience and presses on to the “thing” itself.

What, then, does it mean to entrust oneself to the negative tendency manifested at the level of image? Nishitani hardly develops his thoughts on this point, but I believe it can be described as follows: It is to awaken to the fact that the world of circuminsessional relationship (*egoteki sekai* 回互の世界) that comes into existence through images, i.e., the world constituted by the network of images, contains within itself an absolute contradiction—the contradiction between absolute oneness and absolute multiplicity. It means to hear and awaken to the self-confession of absolute negation arising from the “Dharma-realm in which things are unobstructed with each other” itself, wherein all attachment to the world of circuminsessional relations constituted by the network of images has disappeared. This is nothing other than the standpoint of the self-overcoming realization of the Dharma-realm in which all things interpenetrate each other. The world of the Dharma-realm in which all things interpenetrate each other is a sequence of mute and absurd images in which no order can be found. They freely create a series of images to express themselves and may even develop into poetry. It is impossible to ask for a reason or “meaning” there. Is not the “setting in motion of elemental imagination” something natural and free like this? In “Emptiness and Immediacy,” Nishitani, while using Aristotle’s theory of *sensus communis*, goes beyond it to the standpoint of emptiness based on absolute negation. In this way, he takes the first steps in creating his distinctive Buddhist theory of imagination.

4. Cf. “*Prajñā* and Reason,” 85 (NKC 13).

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Abbreviation

NKC *Nishitani Keiji chosakushū* 西谷啓治著作集 [Collected Writings of Nishitani Keiji]. Nishitani Keiji 西谷啓治, 26 vols. Tokyo: Sōbunsha, 1986–1995.

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