

Between Emptiness and Absolute Nothingness

Reflections on Negation in Nishida and Buddhism

Matteo Cestari

This paper aims to develop some questions addressed in a previous volume of *Frontiers of Japanese Philosophy*. There I questioned the “interiorist” terminology and the manner in which it poses problems, casting doubt on whether it is capable of conveying the general meaning of Nishida’s philosophy, since it seems almost unable to show its practical dimension (CESTARI 2009). Here I will concentrate my analysis on the modern idea of absolute nothingness (絶対無) as compared to the original, classical Buddhist notion of *sūnyatā* (J. *kū*, C. *kong* 空) or “emptiness.” The importance of this relationship lies in its being the only theoretical feature that, according to Maraldo, typifies the philosophers of the Kyoto school.¹ In this paper, I will mainly consider the case

I. MARALDO 2001 lists several criteria to define the Kyoto school’s identity, but it is significant that absolute nothingness is the only genuinely theoretical one. In fact, the other criteria are historical and biographical (the relationship with Nishida and Tanabe or the academic position at the University of Kyoto), political (conservative political positions, and notably the rejection of Marxism and a certain attitude toward the Japanese nation and the Pacific War), or cultural and religious (a positive attitude toward Asian culture—particularly the Japanese tradition—and the relationship with religion in general and Buddhism in particular).

of Nishida and his ambiguity toward Buddhism. Unlike Nishida, other thinkers of the school like Nishitani Keiji, especially after the end of the Pacific War, seem to return to a more classical, if philosophically revised, idea of *kū*. It is my conviction that the relationship with Buddhism is not simply a biographical datum but may be seen to have exerted a deep influence on Nishida's theoretical views. Attention to this notion leads into a discussion of the Kyoto school texts and how they are interpreted. Obscurities require that interpreters and critics be aware of the cultural context within which these writings were composed and read. Only then is it possible to grasp what is most essential, which is often something that is not directly expressed (see KASULIS 2010).

A proper understanding of tacit assumptions is particularly important in the case of Nishida. To evaluate his thinking critically on a world forum, finding the right words and metaphors to translate his ideas is necessary but not sufficient. Even that is difficult to accomplish without clarifying a general hermeneutic perspective. Only in this way can Nishida's essays become more intelligible both in terms of what is said and of what is left unsaid.

Buddhism may be of service here in bridging the cultural and historical gap that divides Japanese philosophers from non-Japanese readers and even Japanese readers who are not conscious of their cultural background. It can spell the difference between a de-contextualized interpretation and one that is more self-conscious of the frame of reference from which an author is operating. In reading Nishida's essays, however, one is struck by the relative absence, or at least scarcity, of direct citations of Buddhist texts or direct references to Buddhist ideas. May we still conclude that Nishida is influenced by Buddhism even though there is almost no evidence of the fact? Strange as it may seem, that is precisely what we must say. At the same time, I am persuaded that this is not a question that can be addressed, let alone resolved, by appealing to strict philological analysis alone. The particular nature of religious and philosophical texts in China and Japan demands more. Cultural interpretation also has an important part to play. Accordingly, I will consider the place of the Buddhist notion of *śūnyatā* more as a hermeneutic pattern than as a historically and philologically attested relationship.

CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL CONSIDERATIONS

How are we to consider the meaning of absolute nothingness in Nishida's thought? The question is complicated by a certain ambiguity in the notion itself. If, as I am insisting, Buddhism is a decisive element in establishing the originality of the Kyoto school, the foundational idea of absolute nothingness needs a Buddhist reading. Even so, there are at least three strains of ambiguity in the notion of absolute nothingness that complicate the task. The first concerns the way cultural and historical aspects overlap with and theoretical and religious ones. The second has to do mainly with the genealogy of the notion, which is a hybrid of German idealism and Buddhism. A third ambiguity stems from having to define "Japanese philosophy" in such a way as to confront western universalizing tendencies (often inadvertently ambiguous in themselves) with what amounted to a peculiar blend of East and West. In the end, there is no skirting the ambiguities, even though they may not be easy to identify. Still, insight into Buddhist teachings is essential for orienting our overall interpretation of Nishida's philosophy.

The modern origins of absolute nothingness give the idea a cultural aura that belongs to Japan's modernization in the Meiji and Taishō. At that time numerous philosophers tried to find a "logic" (論理) to reflect Japanese particularity in a philosophical context. The program of formalizing the Japanese soul or ethos or *Weltanschauung* in philosophical language was considered essential, given the strong cultural pressures exerted by western knowledge and Japan's lack of an equivalent to academic philosophy. Absolute nothingness may also be considered one way of filling this lacuna. The need to clarify a Japanese *logos* was one Nishida himself shared, as typified in the introduction to *From Acting to Seeing*.²

To speak of the modern origins of absolute nothingness implies that it needs to be understood in a cultural context where it represents a response to the disenchantment and disorientation that followed the loss

2. "At the root of Oriental culture, which nurtured our ancestors for thousands of years, is there not something hiding that sees the form of the formless and hears the sound of the soundless? Our mind unceasingly searches for this thing and I wish to give a philosophical foundation to this demand" (NKZ 4: 6).

of premodern reference points. Indeed, it was this challenge of modernity, not Buddhism, that motivated the thinkers of the Kyoto school to practice *tetsugaku* or western-styled academic philosophy. This is not to say that they passively accepted from the West its universalistic discourse. Their attempt was to raise the *particular* thinking of Japan to the level of *universal* philosophical learning, or alternatively, to rethink the universal in terms of the particularity of Japan. In effect, they brought into question the inherent parochialism in western “universal” ideas, and they did so by alternatively adopting, criticizing, complementing, and otherwise thinking beyond the hegemony of received categories of thought. I find it difficult to agree with the recent critique of Sakai Naoki, who seems to indicate a universalistic dimension in their philosophical venture:

The discipline to which the Kyoto school was committed was “western philosophy”.... It was neither “Japanese,” “Asian,” nor “Buddhist” philosophy, even though its medium was the language of the Japanese nation; it was unambiguously the universal philosophy, the universality of which could not be modified by any national, regional, civilizational, or religious particularity. (SAKAI 2008, 187–8)

I would rather say that the Kyoto school was experimenting with *both* western-style philosophy *and* Japanese thinking, and that their aim was to bring East and West closer together, despite the obscurities that this unaccustomed blend might give rise to (see NKZ 12: 385–94).

Examining the historical and cultural background of the Kyoto school, as representatives of the Japanese intelligentsia, alerts us to the ways in which an idea like absolute nothingness could function as an ideological tool to help create a religiously and philosophically homogeneous and concentrated “East” to set against the “West” and its culture of being. As a category of thought it condensed cultural, religious and philosophical elements into an identity that the East could brandish as its own. Hisamatsu Shin’ichi’s “Oriental Nothingness” (1970) is a case in point, and it must be said that at times Nishida himself, albeit from a more nuanced position, teetered on the edge of such a position in distinguishing the western tendency to self-affirmation from an eastern tendency to self-negation (see, for example, NKZ II: 174). By the same token, absolute nothingness was also a hermeneutical tool for reading western

cultural history. In this sense, nothingness became a matter of cultural identity, a kind of Buddhist shortcut to modern nationalistic thought. While Buddhism was being presented as the essence of Japanese or Asian civilization, absolute nothingness, employed as a hermeneutic device to interpret Buddhist history, often came to be considered the epitome of Buddhist, particularly Zen, teaching. In this way, it affected the way in which the cultural and religious history of Asia was approached as a whole.

A simple reconstruction of history based on a dualism between western being and eastern nothingness not only rides roughshod over the evidence; it also sidesteps the complex genesis of the idea of nothingness with its fusion of Buddhist and idealist elements. As is well known, Hegel and Kant were instrumental in the formation of categories and themes that make up the philosophies of Nishida and Tanabe. Moreover, the Kyoto school thinkers shared with many other prewar philosophers an interest in building a new logic. In general this took the shape of a dialectics, often patterned after German idealism. So common was this in Taishō and early Shōwa philosophies that it was often criticized as a mere posturing or submission to the fashion of the day.³

In any case, it seems reasonable to conclude that the term “absolute nothingness” relies heavily on these western sources, all the more so because of the prevalence in Kyoto school philosophy of other idealist—notably Hegelian— notions such as determination, negation, and alienation. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to reduce the notion to its idealist, Romanticist, or Hegelian roots. It came to birth rather on a middle ground where western philosophy and eastern culture encountered each other for the first time. I am convinced that Buddhism had an important role to play in the process.

COMPARING PHILOSOPHY AND BUDDHISM

Before entering into a comparison between *śūnyatā* and absolute nothingness, it may be helpful to point to certain differences between

3. PIOVESANA 1963, 250. Among these critics are Yoshimitsu Yoshihiko, Ōnishi Hajime, Takahashi Satomi (TSZ 3: 264) and Tanabe Hajime (THZ 3: 77).

Buddhism and western philosophy. Not a few Buddhist terms resist direct translation into philosophical concepts. For one thing, modern western philosophy has kept its distance from religion, beginning with the ancient Greek distinction between λόγος and μῦθος, and was fortified by the Christian emphasis on a faith competing with rational understanding. Unlike Buddhist *śraddha*, faith makes truth claims that set it up for a confrontation with reason and thinking which, in its extreme, reduces philosophy to an *ancilla fidei*. Buddhist “faith” is not generally centered on truth content but to the exercise of a decision to follow the *dharmā*, which is more a problem of will than of truth. The grounds for a *credo quia absurdum* that severs faith from reason are lacking. In Buddhism, reason is not a merely mundane, secularized, and demythologized disposition of intellect; neither does faith make any claim to replace reason. Since a distinction between myth and logos, reason and faith is absent, Buddhism cannot be described as “pure religion” opposed to “pure philosophy.” Buddhist discourse joins philosophical elements seamlessly with religious and practical ones.

Doctrines have a certain importance in Buddhism, but are far less important than they are in modern philosophy, which is completely devoted to elaborating abstract notions. Compared with Buddhism, in modern philosophy human experience is limited to conceptual discourse. In Buddhism reference to practice, rituals, performance is essential—dimensions that are all but absent in modern thinking. A philosophical text in the Buddhist context is not simply an object of intellectual academic study. It is also, and more essentially, an object of practice, ritual, and even worship.⁴ This practical importance of the text is essential for understanding the rhetorical use of negation in Chan and Zen, which is obviously far from Nishida’s merely conceptual negation (HEINE 1997).

In Buddhism, the pedagogical moment is crucial for the very conceptual and theoretical dimension. Treatment of the “twofold truth”—the distinction between conventional (*samvṛtti satya*) and ultimate truths (*paramārtha satya*) in Nāgārjuna, for example—and the related doc-

4. For example, the Heart Sūtra, whose philosophical complexity is well known, was often worshipped and even considered as a powerful talisman against demons. See LOPEZ 1996.

trine of “skillful means” (*upāyakauśālya*, 方便) are clear examples of this orientation and show how seriously the importance of the hermeneutic *process* of awareness is considered. The difference in aim is notable. In the one, the goal is religious, which means that it carries in itself a certain dialectics between salvation and wisdom (salvational wisdom, wisdom as salvation); in the other, the goal is knowledge directed toward an “external” object. The religious goal entails bodily engagement that is not required of modern philosophers. In this regard, despite many similarities between the philosophical world of the Kyoto school and modern philosophy, the pivotal role that practice plays for these thinkers cannot be overlooked. On balance, their approach is more intellectual than practical, and like *tetsugaku* (modern academic philosophy) in general, the praxis of thought is not directly related to any religious or practical way. And yet some important first steps in that direction have been taken by Nishida and Tanabe, and even more by postwar thinkers like Nishitani, Hisamatsu, and Ueda.

PROBLEMS IN DEFINING ŚŪNYATĀ

In comparing the absolute nothingness of the Kyoto school with Buddhist emptiness, a number of critical problems concerning the idea of emptiness in Buddhist history come to the fore. I shall summarize some of the most important ones.

Emptiness is a complex idea not only because of its technicalities and subtleties, but also because it has been interpreted in many different ways throughout the long history of Buddhism. Nearly every Buddhist sect or school developed its own interpretation of emptiness, from the early Buddhist idea of *anatta* (impermanence of both knower and known), to the sophisticated notion of *śūnyatā śūnyatā* (impermanence of the very Buddhist doctrine, or *Dharma*, and Buddha himself) in the *Prajñāpāramitā* tradition and Nāgārjuna with his idea of twofold truth; from Yogācāra’s theory of three natures (*trisvabhāva*), to the idea of a “buddha-womb” (*tathāgatagarbha*, 如来藏). Chinese Buddhism added its own interpretations, as in Zhiyi’s threefold truth (void 空, conventional 假, and middle 中) and the Huayan dialectics of principle 理 and

phenomenon 事 to replace the idea of *kong* 空 (Kumarajīva's translation of the Sanskrit word *śūnyatā*). Neither can we neglect to mention the Chan/Zen debate on “mind” (心) and “buddha-nature” (佛性), which is also to be found in Dōgen. Surveying the length and breadth of this field, it seems unlikely that any formulation of the idea of emptiness can be singled out as *the* most representative, despite Hakamaya Noriaki's attempt to do just that in making the thinking of Tsongkhapa (1357–1419) paradigmatic (1990, 58).

Another difficulty is the relative weight attached to emptiness in Buddhism. It is often said that Indian Buddhism differed from other religious movements of its times because it was *anātmavāda*, or *śūnyavāda*. In fact, East-Asian Buddhism generally takes a rather positive attitude towards the world and is much more attracted to the idea of *tathāgatagarbha*. The emphasis put on mind is derived from this idea and is central in lineages such as Chan Buddhism (HEINE 2004). As is known, “critical Buddhism” has raised some fundamental questions regarding this notion, but they seem to have stirred up more dust than light (see HUBBARD and SWANSON, 1997).

Important scholars of Buddhism like UMEHARA and YANAGIDA (1969, 193ff) have argued that the concept of nothingness (無, J. *mu*, C. *wu*) has been overemphasized in Zen, as typified in the famous *kōan* of Jōshū's dog and its buddha-nature. To a certain extent, Yanagida and Umehara ascribe this interpretation to the influence of the Kyoto school. If this is the case, it would invite us to rethink some of the assumptions concerning the importance of nothingness and emptiness in Buddhist history. Just how representative is this idea in the Buddhism of China and Japan? Does such a difficult doctrine really have authoritative power in Buddhism or was it merely part of an esoteric tradition? In judging this notion as fundamental, might we not be relying too heavily on the western assumption that theoretical aspects predominate over practical ones?

An important distinction should also be drawn between Vedic, Daoist, and Buddhist ideas of nothingness or emptiness. In Vedic culture, the role of negation with regard to ultimate reality is used to underline the unutterable dimension of a permanent essence of the world (*Brahman*). For some Daoist scholars, such as Wangbi from the “Study of Mystery” school (Xuan Xue 玄學), *wu* is definitely a metaphysical foundation, the

hidden origin of everything, beyond every possible word and conceptualization. It is the totally indeterminate. In Indian Buddhism, *śūnyatā* is a way of looking at the world, a non-attached attitude to life (which means non-attachment to both annihilationism and eternalism). The ideas of nothingness as a mental attitude (Buddhism) and nothingness as a metaphysical principle (Daoism) should therefore be kept separate, at least on an abstract level, even though historically matters are not so simple, given the way Daoist and Buddhist ideas have intermingled in the intellectual history of China and Japan.

In China, the adoption of *wu* as a translation of *śūnyatā* created numerous misunderstandings and obscurities before Kumārājīva's work. In fact, *śūnyatā* had nothing to do with the Daoist opposition between the cor-relatives of being (有) and nonbeing (無). The Buddhist point of view took the opposition as between the relative and the nonsubstantial, but it could also be interpreted as an opposition between substantial being and negative nothingness. This ambiguity caused Kumārājīva to translate *śūnyatā* with *kong* (空), while Zhiyi for his part elaborated the threefold conception of truth—empty, conventional, and middle—to avoid just such misunderstanding (SWANSON 1989, 14).

Similar problems would later arise in the West with the rendering of *śūnyatā* as “nothingness.” As is known, the metaphysical opposition between being and nothingness is as old as philosophy itself. To avoid this confusion, “emptiness” is a clearer (and etymologically more accurate) rendition. Hence, from the Buddhist point of view, Nishida and Tanabe's use of the idea of nothingness could be accused of inaccuracy and of misleading readers of their thought.⁵ What is more from the perspective of contemporary philosophy, the strong idealist language used by the Kyoto school philosophers before the end of the Pacific War has been more of a hindrance than a help in evaluating their contributions to world philosophy. Their choice of terms can certainly be explained historically (for example, as an indication of the influence of Hegel or the

5. SWANSON (1996) has expressed similar ideas about the use of the term “nothingness” in Nishitani, although he correctly points out that the adjective “absolute” may help differentiate it from nonbeing.

need to oppose western culture on its home ground), but it cannot be considered theoretically appropriate.

Another issue is the relationship between Buddhism and modernity. As is known, Buddhism in modern times was often interpreted in new ways by the so-called Buddhist modernists. Nishida and the Kyoto philosophers were close to Suzuki Daisetsu, one of the most renowned and influential of Japanese Buddhist modernists. Considering the deep influence of Suzuki on Nishida, we cannot ignore the role of modernist Buddhism on the Kyoto school's interpretation of *śūnyatā* in terms of absolute nothingness.

BUDDHISM AS A HERMENEUTIC PATTERN

I do not think it possible to establish a direct and textually unequivocal relationship between Buddhism and Nishida's philosophy. A rough comparison of the number of occurrences and quotations from Buddhist texts with those from western philosophers in his *Complete Works* shows a striking imbalance. Western philosophers are cited far more numerous and accurately, while citations of Buddhist texts and authors are rare and rather general. Nishida's use of Buddhist *sūtras* is anything but precise. As Kopf (2005) has pointed out, Nishida never seriously discussed any Buddhist idea. How then can we be sure that he is really referring to Buddhist concepts at all? According to Girard, the extreme variety of interpretations of emptiness in the history of Buddhism, together with the never explicit textual reference to Buddhist writings, makes any attempt to draw connection to Nishida's idea risky, if not entirely arbitrary (GIRARD 2008, 48–9). This is certainly true from a textual point of view. If any fruitful comparison is to be made, it must be philologically aware, yet this is precisely what we seem unable to do with the texts Nishida left us.

Meantime, DALISSIER (2009) has shown precise connections between Nishida's philosophy and classical Chinese thought. Still, it is going a bit too far to conclude that there was a strong influence. Nishida may have studied Chinese literature, but this does not necessarily mean that his ideas may be directly correlated to counterparts in Chinese philosophies.

All we can show is that he was a man of his times, with a refined education that included a knowledge of Chinese classics. Can the same be said of his knowledge of Buddhism? Was it anything more for Tanabe and Nishida than one part of the general cultural heritage they were exposed to? I think not, although there is no strictly textual evidence to support this position. Non-textual elements need not be ruled out, however. For example, we know from Nishida's diaries that at the time of his first work, *A Study of the Good* (1911), he practiced Zen meditation assiduously. Does this qualify his ideas as Buddhist? Of course not, but it does say something about the tacit—though not hidden—presence of Buddhist ideas in his writing.

To examine this assumption, we need to shift our approach from philology to hermeneutics. We have to understand how a text is created, and in particular how it interacts with its surrounding world, especially where the cultural context is far removed from our own. A text is not only to be read but interpreted, which means that it must interact within the interpreter's horizon of meanings, images, and words. Where a text is obscure—which is not uncommon in Nishida's philosophical essays—some insight into the cultural environment and the personal life of the scholar may be essential for its comprehension. Such an appeal to hermeneutic form may not be as persuasive as direct textual evidence, but it cannot be discarded as altogether insignificant.

Nishida's approach to Buddhist texts is quite different from that of Buddhist specialists like Nanjō Bun'yū (1849–1927), who went to Europe, to study Sanskrit and Indian philosophy with F. Max Müller and soon became one of the most important and renowned Buddhist scholars of his day. In premodern Japan, religious texts were generally read more as a form of practice than as a guide to rational understanding. It was more important that a text be recited and memorized than that it be intellectually understood and critically discussed. We may assume Nishida was used to thinking of Buddhism from the standpoint of a practitioner rather than as a scholar.

This gives us cause to reflect on the importance of the linguistic and cultural context in the textual tradition of the Kyoto school. What kind of texts are we facing when we read an essay by Nishida? Does it follow western academic conventions? I find him swinging between academic

philosophical essays and the Japanese textual tradition. This does not mean that his thinking is untranslatable, only that the cultural context is crucial to reading him correctly. Taking into account his non-western origins also means considering the importance of *indirect* citation in the Japanese literary tradition, which is reflected in the paucity of annotation in academic publications. Not all of Nishida's faults as a writer are his own; he was very much influenced by the conventions of composition in sway at the time.

As JULLIEN (1995) and KASULIS (2010) have indicated, the preference for evocation, intimation, allusion, and silence over clarity of expression is not simply a matter of "style." It indicates an essentially different approach to theoretical problems, a different way of considering the aims of philosophy. One may argue that Nishida's philological failures regarding Buddhist sources have much to do with an approach to the role of texts shared with his cultural surroundings. Since he wrote in Japanese, he will have assumed that, however unorthodox his manner of expression, his readers would share a common base of knowledge that would make his work accessible. Such a conclusion seems preferable to direct accusations of a schizophrenia between his practice of Zen and his philosophical theory, or between his approach to a few, dimly perceived eastern sources and to a large number of carefully parsed western texts.

If this hypothesis is correct, we may say that whenever Nishida deals with a Buddhist idea, he proceeds by way of allusion and silence rather than by citation and explicit statement. He seems to rely on an unspoken, practical cultural heritage that envelops him and his readers. Attention to the unsaid as of more importance than the said may also illuminate for us the way in which he deepened his relationship with Buddhism. A Buddhist orientation could then provide a beneficial model for interpretation. This is not to say that Buddhism could provide a comprehensive horizon against which to read Nishida's philosophy. Nor do I mean to transform Nishida into a pious Buddhist believer. Instead, Buddhism could serve us as a kind of compass in order to navigate our way through some of his most difficult passages and help us grasp the general direction of his technical terms, his ambiguities, and his silence. A background reference to Buddhist themes could provide a hermeneutic key to *encourage* certain interpretations of Nishida and *discourage* certain others. This in

turn would give entry to some of the critical preconceptions behind the unfolding of Kyoto school philosophies. Far from encouraging an arbitrary reading of the texts, these hermeneutical considerations are meant to draw some provisional parameters within which to decide from a variety of possible interpretations.

This idea of using Buddhism as a hermeneutic pattern for the interpretation of Nishida's philosophy is not without its limitations. For one thing, it is hypothetical, since it is not supported by direct textual evidence. For another, its utility in illuminating our reading of the Kyoto school risks producing wildly unsupported conclusions. What is more, using modern philosophical ideas to clarify historical Buddhist thinking runs the danger of anachronism, exoticism, and colonialism, and on those grounds alone should be avoided. For these reasons, we must remain alert to the possibility of oversimplifying the connections between Kyoto-school and Buddhist ideas. As long as these restrictions are kept in mind, however, Buddhist hermeneutical patterns can provide a valid aid for translations and critical commentary, especially in the case of Nishida, where an enhanced understanding of Buddhist *śūnyatā* can help highlight important allusions, suggestions, echoes, indications, and traces scattered between the lines of his writings.

THE NON-CONCEPTUAL NATURE OF EMPTINESS

Can we still speak of absolute nothingness as a Buddhist notion? Is there still anything Buddhist about Nishida's ideas? This discussion implies that there is something like a generally definable meaning for Buddhist *śūnyatā*, or at least a descriptive indication of its range of meanings. In fact, I do not think it possible to decide on one *particular* definition of emptiness, given by one master, which could be considered valid for the entire history of Buddhism. On the contrary, a more indirectly suggestive kind of semantic orientation would probably be better suited to the way the Buddhist tradition treats its own concepts.

The word *śūnya* means “void,” “open,” “without,” “nothing,” “non-existent.” The term *śūnyatā* therefore connotes emptiness, openness, nonexistence, or relativity. The word does not have a clear or system-

atic meaning, but is more akin to a remedy for spiritual ailments that is adjusted according to the needs of the one who is ill. Unlike modern western philosophical notions, it presupposes practice, which entails concrete ethical behavior, wisdom, and meditation exercises (the three moments of *śīla*, *samadhi*, and *prajñā* in the Buddhist path of salvation). *Śūnyatā* does not only point to the transiency and interrelatedness of things, to the fact that things are void of intrinsic essence and that their true being is radically relative (which may also be something wonderful and unexpected, as in the case of *tathatā*). It is also and at the same time *a practical attitude towards the world, our lives, ourselves*. In its purest form, it supersedes conceptualization, despite the numerous definitions of what it is and what it is not. It is fundamentally *an attitude of mind*, a way of looking at reality (cf. STRENG 1987).

Buddhist emptiness is often linked to the early Buddhist conception of *anatta*, or the middle path of Nāgārjuna, but it is not only that. As we have said, its philosophical content includes both a way of understanding our relationship with the world as well as a way of understanding how to reach the truth of received doctrines. In both cases it implies non-attachment and freedom from the cravings and illusions that lead to dualistic polarizations. As far as philosophical doctrines are concerned, emptiness shuns the extremes of eternalism and of annihilationism. As a *practical attitude*, it can never be reduced to a conceptual tool for dominating reality or exercising control over the world. On the contrary, it is aimed at modifying the practitioner's mind. This is the reason for insisting that conceptual emptiness needs itself to be emptied if it is to see and inhabit reality. Mere thought content leads to a conceptual position that in turn implies attachment, cognitively self-centered and dualistic abstraction—that is, to the fundamental craving of reason. Emptiness resists definition precisely in order to resist such a position.

NISHIDA'S LOGIC OF PLACE

Before taking up the idea of absolute nothingness in the philosophy of Nishida, something needs to be said of the final theoretical context within which he used the term, namely, the logic of place or *basho*

(場所の論理). A great deal of commentary has already been written on this matter,⁶ but here I would like to suggest that it may be read as a speculative discourse on the mind.⁷ I mean this not in the sense of an *epistemological* or formal analysis of the rules that control correct reasoning but rather as an *ontological* inquiry into interiority and the mind.

Nishida's aim in the middle period of his development was to find a logical and ontological way of dealing with the problem of the true self. He had already explored the notion in previous works but had been disappointed with the results. The logic of place, which sought to address the problem more radically, began with a discussion of judgment and subsumption, or the deepest structures of our thinking. Absolute nothingness provided the high point of the inquiry, a universal or all universals—and in that sense, a non-universal—that lay beyond both dichotomous thinking and the transcendental apperception of Kant's *Ich denke*. Nishida's focus on the problem of the mind should not be taken to imply that, like Hegel, he took thinking or the rational subject as the *meaning* of reality. On the contrary, the logic of place was aimed at finding traces of reality within the very act of thinking. Thus even if the structure of place seems to converge with Kant's critique, the orientation is completely opposite.

As a logic of mind, the logic of place sought to overcome subjectivism, arriving finally at a kind of intuitionism that encounters “things as they are,” as if reflected in an empty mirror without any possibility of distortion by thought or will. This is the realm of what he called “the intelligible world” (叡知的世界). In addition, this “logic of mind” gradually turned to the “logic of things” in Nishida's final writings, suggesting a movement from interiority to a more comprehensive *basho* in which this

6. For example SHIKAYA (1984) considers it as an idealist philosophy. NAKAMURA (1993, 69–81) interprets it in strongly psychologistic sense. I cannot agree with either of them. Contrary to Shikaya's views, Nishida's position is never simply idealist but deliberately sets out to overcome idealism. As for Nakamura's criticisms, it need only be pointed out that Nishida's logic was designed precisely to avoid the psychologistic and mystical tendencies he ventured near in early works.

7. This reading develops in a slightly different sense the insights of critics such as Miki Kiyoshi, who saw Nishida's philosophy as more a “technology of mind” (心の技術) than a “technology of things” (物の技術), with the result that he accused the logic of place as leaning toward contemplation or psychologism (MKZ 18: 525).

interiority and mind are enveloped and grounded. This final *basho* is the result of a transition from the place of absolute nothingness to the dialectical world (弁証法の世界). Consequently, the logic of place becomes a logic of absolutely contradictory self-identity (絶対矛盾の自己同一). Nishida's talk of the dialectical world speaks from the perspective of the world itself, the bottomless ground of thinking and mind.⁸ The structure of the dialectical world, as described in the logic of absolutely contradictory self-identity, is not only a description of the realm of thinking, but also of the world *in which* thinking is located and *of which* thinking is a manifestation, that is the realm of the self-determination of the world itself. Notwithstanding the differences between absolute nothingness and absolutely contradictory self-identity, the latter derives from the first and both point to the same reality: the foundations of human existence conceived in terms of its structural relationship with the world and expressed by means of logical constructs.

If the foregoing interpretation is correct and if the logic of place has mind as its main theme, this would mean that our ordinary, everyday world is not being approached by way of realism, as if there were “an outer reality” separated from “an inner consciousness.” Instead, it is an ontological explanation of mind in which our customary acceptance of the outside world is seen as a mental fabrication. This is one way of understanding the subsumption of being within the *basho* of relative nothingness. The idealism is only apparent, or perhaps more accurately, limited to the epistemic conditions of dualistic thinking. In fact, it is in the depths of the mind that Nishida seeks the traces of things as they truly are. During his final period, he speaks of this as the dimension at which the historical, dialectical world, including self-awareness, takes place.⁹ The “being” enveloped in the *basho* of being does not correspond to the world in the sense of realism, but it is what is subsumed by the “I think.” “Things as they are” (有りが儘) prior to our thinking about them

8. We may therefore speak of a “noetic” period in Nishida's thought that gradually gave way to a “noematic” phase, or, following Kosaka Kunitsugu's definition, a movement from an *ōsō* 往相 (“going to the absolute”) to a *gensō* 元相 (“returning from the absolute”) period (1997, 103).

9. For a detailed analysis of the philosopher's path from the first works to the logic of place, see UEDA 1991.

are manifest in the *basho* of absolute nothingness, which determines itself through self-negation, thereby giving rise to subject and object.

This philosophical orientation overlaps with traditional metaphysical themes and categories. Indeed, Tanabe's criticism of Nishida's logic and his attempt to clear up the ambiguities of the logic of place was probably due precisely to this overlap. Nishida's own gradual move away from a logic of place to a philosophy of the dialectical world may also be seen as an attempt to overcome the metaphysical limitations of his logic.

We may also observe that this general orientation is closer to Yogācāra teachings than it is to Kantian idealism. As TRIVEDI (2005) has argued, a major difference between the two lies in Vasubandhu's view of the delusional nature of the everyday world and consciousness. Nonetheless, he considers it possible to know the world as it is through the practice of meditation and Yoga. Kant was steadfast in asserting that philosophy can only proceed by way of practical reason, but this claim is limited to the level of *theory*. Moreover, he excludes any possibility of knowing the world as it is in itself. Vasubandhu, in contrast, leaves the path to reality open as a result of *practice*. Nishida's position is similar insofar as it does not stop at the distinction between knowable phenomena and unknowable noumena, but goes further to claim that at its deepest level the mind is already in touch with the true form of things and that this true form of things is manifest in absolute nothingness. That said, his *basho* logic did not find a place for practice.

NISHIDA'S ABSOLUTE NOTHINGNESS

For the philosophers of the Kyoto school absolute nothingness is far from a univocal concept. MARALDO (2001) even goes so far as to suggest that it functions like a "floating signifier," which would help account for the occasionally bitter confrontation between Nishida and Tanabe regarding the notion. In fact, this polysemic quality may even be essential to talk of absolute nothingness, just as we have seen it to be in the case of the Buddhist notion of emptiness.

May we then speak of "characteristics" of Nishida's absolute nothingness? Is it not better to leave it ineffable? This is hardly a solution, since

reducing it to the opposite of language still uses language as a measure. What is more, such a reduction would forfeit the positive significance of the ambiguity, which is rooted in the nature of the world itself: speakable but not completely so, unspeakable but not completely so. The ambiguity is a function of the permanently transitional character of the world and the impossibility of ever defining it fully. The world is not only ambivalent, it is manifold, perhaps even infinite, in its possibilities. In this sense, absolute nothingness points to the never-completely-objectifiable quality of both world and mind, their ineluctable otherness to thinking.

In listing the basic traits of Nishida's absolute nothingness, it is important to keep in mind that certain, though not all, of the traits are also predicable to other *basho* (such as the *basho* of being and of relative nothingness), overlap with them, and entail them. We may thus outline the traits of absolute nothingness as follows:

Borderline. Absolute nothingness has a borderline character. Nishida refers to it as the outer limit (*Grenze*) of self-awareness, the final universal, and so forth. In this sense, it is the point at which conscious thinking ceases, allowing things to appear in their true reality. Nothingness is neither an object of thinking (being), nor a function of unification (relative nothingness). Since it is not a possibility of thinking, it is the end of consciousness. (See NKZ 4: 232)

Empty. Absolute nothingness is empty like a mirror that reflects everything within itself by virtue of having no characteristics of its own. It is not a being (*Seiend*), but neither is it a completely undifferentiated (hidden) being standing in opposition to differentiated being.

All-encompassing. Absolute nothingness is the most inclusive of all *basho*. This aspect is its "locational" (場所的) character. It is absolute nothingness *qua* "place" (or universal). It includes everything. It grounds all activities, all dialectics, and all objects.

Beyond opposition. As all-encompassing, absolute nothingness is beyond the opposition of being and nonbeing, of mobility and immobility. This is why it is called *absolute* (絶対), "not depending on opposition." This is what enables it to situate and determine all opposites without becoming entangled in opposition itself (see NKZ 4: 213).

Self-negating. Unless absolute nothingness is self-negating, it is only one kind of being. Self-negation is the principal activity of absolute nothingness, that which makes all its other characteristics possible. Its emptiness and all-encompassing nature depend on self-negation understood as a reflexive act. As *self*-negation, it does not negate things themselves insofar as they are objects for consciousness. Here the universal disappears (NKZ 4: 207), which leads us to the final two traits.

Active. Absolute nothingness is active, but only in the sense of a seeing without a seer. It reflects all things as they are, without affecting their individuality. It accepts everything without judgment. It allows things to appear as they really are and yet as shadows (or reflections) of a final *basho*. This activity is also referred to as “self-negation” within Nishida’s system, but if this self-negation were “statically” empty and not a ceaselessly active self-negating, absolute nothingness would become a mere *position* of emptiness, that is, a mode of being.

Reflexive. The activity of absolute nothingness is directed toward itself. It reflects itself as within a mirror, opening a horizon wider than consciousness. This character is its self-aware (自覚的) aspect: what is thought is also what thinks. In Nishida’s later terminology, the dialectical world thinks itself through human thinking.

Looking at the relationship between Buddhism and the logic of place from the merely formal point of view, then, it is possible to distinguish three classes of distinguishing traits:

1. notions presumably deriving from western philosophy (among which I count its all-encompassing quality, which is *not* a Buddhist problem in the metaphysical conceptual sense).
2. images originating in Buddhism (for example the image of void, or mirror. These images cannot be found, at least with the same meaning, in western philosophy).
3. ambiguous notions, that may be traced to both western philosophy and to Buddhism, which can affect one’s overall reading of Nishida’s thought, and whose interpretation depends on the shared cultural background of the reader and the writer as much as on the immediate context of his arguments.

The ambiguous notions, it should be noted, shift meanings “obliquely.”¹⁰ That is to say, the change is not clearly formalized but takes place in the unfolding of the text. Among them, we may certainly count the idea of negation, whose importance to all the traits of absolute nothingness considered above needs clear philosophical expression.

OPPOSITIONAL VS. REFLEXIVE NEGATION

Negation, it goes without saying, is a cardinal theme in nearly all of western philosophy, not just in Hegelian thought. Nishida, however, takes it in a rather different direction. To understand his strategy we need to distinguish between two possible kinds of negation. The first is what we may call *oppositional negation* in which one of the opposites is held to be false and the other true. This negation lies at the foundations of the Aristotelian principle of non-contradiction, as an essential tool for the preservation of identity and its distinction from other identities. This also holds true for Hegel’s system, even though identity is subjected to a process of self-realization. From this perspective, determination, which makes something what it is ($A=A$) and *not* something else, is at the same time the negation of its identity with anything else. Therefore, each thing must have its own determination, or a limited number of determinations, as is the case in Aristotle’s principle of non-contradiction. Opposition is based on a determinate self-identity, whose positing requires a contrast with other determinations. This is clearly stated in Spinoza’s famous phrase, *Omnis determinatio est negatio*, indicating that any single determination, in order to be itself, must be different from other determinations.

In discussions of opposing relatives, the negation of the identity of different determinations does not necessarily negate the other determinations as such, but only the judgment of their identity. The problem arises when we apply this kind of opposition to a fundamental universal such as with reason or being, where the claim to absoluteness *excludes other*

10. I am referring here to JULLIEN’S idea of oblique strategies of meaning in China (1995).

determinations from reality itself. In these cases, the negation of identity is no longer a simple affirmation of difference anymore; it is a denial of the very possibility of differentiation.

Nishida argues that such an idea of identity, with its correlative negation, obstructs the universality of the universal. If the most fundamental universal were determined, in other words, if it were a position, it would have to align itself with one side of the oppositions. This would force things into an artificial scheme and exclude their individuality. Hence, a different kind of negation is required. We may call it a non-oppositional or *reflexive negation*.

This type of negation does not negate individuals or determinations. On the contrary, it negates itself on the grounds that the particular, determined nature of negation is a hindrance to experiencing true reality. Nishida sees opposition and its accompanying determinations as depending on notions of substance and category. But theoretical discourse, in order to be truly all-encompassing and to subsume the true self, must have no determinations—not even the determination of “not having determinations.” It cannot negate any particular determination, because negating something means taking a determined position, which would imply a partial standpoint. On the contrary, absolute negation must transcend oppositions. Thanks to its non-oppositional and non-substantial character, absolute negation guarantees access to the immediacy of things. It is not self-assertive ($A=A$), but all-encompassing.¹¹ Thus, the rational subject opens itself up to the realization that it is embraced by a wider horizon beyond the struggle of opposites. In this sense, Nishida’s philosophy is an attempt to set critical, oppositional negation within a wider, active horizon of non-oppositional, ontological difference that is not negated from the outside by reason but negates itself from within.

Nishida’s logic of place merges the quest for ontological totality (a derivative of western idealism) with a general orientation to self-detachment, which may be interpreted as deriving from his association with

11. This conception of comprehensive, non-self-assertive identity may be compared to Kasulis’s “intimacy-integrity” paradigm, where the relationship between thinking and the world is obtained not from a position of mutual opposition but from a mutual internal relation (KASULIS 2002).

Buddhist culture. More than a definite concept, self-negation is an alternative approach to a static and substantial understanding of identity, subjectivity, and being, in that it uncovers their dynamic relationship with absolute nothingness. Absolute nothingness itself must be self-negating if it is to avoid becoming just one more philosophical principle. In Nishida's case, it is plausible to interpret this as a Buddhist insight, but more often than not it is reduced to a logical-ontological strategy, to the neglect of its directly ethical implications. In so doing, absolute nothingness tends to be shunted into a framework of philosophical problems that bear no formal relation to Buddhism.

I would venture to argue that the kind of self-negation described above is the distinguishing mark that sets Nishida's ontology apart from other philosophies. Far from being an incidental quality, it goes to the very heart of his theory. Indeed, the threefold structure of *basho* highlights the two different levels of nothingness, relative and absolute, and emphasizes that *everything*, be it object or category, is ultimately relative and cannot lay claim to the status of a supreme horizon. *Only absolute nothingness, absolutely negating itself, encompasses oppositions.* If nothingness is the most inclusive universal, it must be self-effacing; only a self-negation of its identity can let things appear in their suchness. For this reason, when Nishida stresses the inner self-exhaustion of the concept of identity within metaphysics, he is in effect introducing a general Buddhist idea of *śūnyatā* into his philosophical system.

This does not necessarily imply the impossibility of constructing a quite different kind of metaphysics from his operating premises. Is absolute nothingness a philosophical principle? Yes and no. Insofar as it results from a metaphysical approach to reality, it functions as a principle in questions dealing with "universals" and "general logic." The logic of place exhibits the obvious influence of the Romantic ideas of the absolute, in particular the Hegelian concept of an absolute totality. At the same time, insofar as Nishida's absolute takes the onto-theological discourse of universals and totality to its limits, he is able both to move beyond a metaphysics of substance and to disengage the mechanism of self-negation from subjectivism. This then serves as the core of his idea of absolute nothingness. In this sense, absolute nothingness may be considered a modern philosophical variation on the Buddhist motif of *śūnyatā*.

As I indicated earlier, Tanabe criticized Nishida's *basho* of absolute nothingness as a substitution of the metaphysical principle of being with a metaphysical principle of nothingness. For Tanabe, everything in existence is mediated and dialectically affirmed, whereas Nishida's absolute nothingness is an unmediated and immediate ground of the world (THZ 6: 467–9). Tanabe accuses Nishida's *basho* of absorbing human finiteness into the absolute (see TAKEHANA 2006). He grants that absolute nothingness determines itself in finite beings (“that which is located,” 於いてあるもの), but argues that seeing this self-determination as direct and unmediated collapses into the “mysticism” of an unmediated relationship with the absolute. Moreover, he agrees with Nishida's idea of absolute nothingness as being-and yet-nothingness (有即無), movement-and yet-stillness (動即靜), but disagrees with his position of a “non-dialectical affirmation of dialectics” (THZ 6:473) and the consequent rendering of absolute nothingness as a direct object of intuition (直観). All of that would introduce the relativity of being into nothingness, which can never be an object of thought but only a reality of life (see e.g. THZ, 4: 305–28). In defining the world of being as relative and mediated, Tanabe cannot but criticize those elements in Nishida's absolute nothingness as reducing the notion to a kind of relative being.

These criticisms need to be rethought in the light of Nishida's understanding of self-negation, but they also lead us to consider the role of Buddhism in the objections of Tanabe, whose emphasis on the dialectical character of absolute nothingness and strong stance against substantialist thinking both color his distaste for Nishida's idea of “place” and its connotations of a “position.” Leaving aside the details of their disagreement, I would only note that fuller attention to the self-negating activity of absolute nothingness in Nishida may help to show how their positions converge more than either of them may have realized.

A BUDDHIST INTERPRETATION OF NISHIDA'S NEGATION

Nishida's closest approximation to Buddhism, I believe, is to be found in his idea of reflexive negation, according to which absolute nothingness is the final outcome of an *epistemological ethics of self-nega-*

tion. In other words, only a self-emptying absolute is truly able to accept reality in its entirety and without discrimination. The similarities of this ethic to Buddhism, though striking, are limited to ontological questions flowing into the search for the universal. Precisely as non-metaphysical response to a set of metaphysical problems, his idea of absolute nothingness is inherently ambiguous, like a non-metaphysical finger pointing to a metaphysical moon.

Can we really speak of absolute nothingness as a practical attitude? Nishida's concept of place would seem to argue against this. To be sure, absolute nothingness is involved in unending self-negation in its opening to true reality. Still, from the Buddhist point of view, its attachment to the language of universals gives it the appearance of a mere metaphysical shadow of emptiness. In this sense, Tanabe's criticism may be partially correct, though not in the sense that Nishida created a different mode of being, but rather in the sense that it did not open up to practice or action. It is not insignificant that Tanabe's own philosophy took this direction in his notions of "absolute mediation" and "metanoetics," and that Nishida himself later came to focus on the dialectical world. The transition from the logic of place to a logic of contradictory self-identity, despite the obvious continuity between the two, was profoundly affected by Tanabe's objections.

There is little doubt that reflexive negation converges with Buddhist emptiness insofar as it entails the self-emptying of emptiness. This would imply that even nothingness can turn into being to the extent that it is not radically self-negating. In Buddhism everything (Buddhist doctrines included) can become a source of attachment and defilement. For this reason, I would argue that it is more fruitful to compare *śūnyatā* with the activity of self-negation and self-determination, two ideas that permeate the whole of Nishida's philosophy. What makes absolute nothingness absolute is the inner mechanism of reflexive negation that allows "things as they are" to appear without the interfering pressures of mind. Nevertheless, as a "universal," vestiges of metaphysics still cling to the notion.

If this ambiguity between Buddhist and Hegelian elements, so to speak, is seen at a conceptual level—that is, if absolute nothingness is a concept of nothingness that gives rise to all things through its self-

negation—the Buddhist orientation is seriously compromised by the presence of a metaphysical principle. If, however, one reads the notion in terms of an active stance toward oneself and the world, the Buddhist aspect comes into clearer relief. In other words, absolute nothingness is Buddhist insofar as it is engaged in self-negation; and it is not Buddhist insofar as it is conceived realistically as a negative universal that lies at the immediate foundation of the world. Buddhist emptiness does not have to do only with awakening to the transiency of things and the self, but also with the emptiness of dualistic thinking itself.¹² Vacillating between ontology and non-foundationalism, Nishida shows his clearest affinity to Buddhism in his notion of self-negation, which lies closer to the core of his idea of absolute nothingness than its metaphysical overtones.

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12. Incidentally, I note that in the last works of Nishida this idea is clearly present, for example in his discussion of Descartes’ hyperbolic doubt. Nishida goes as far as radicalizing it into “absolutely negating self-awareness” (絶対否定の自覚), which is the doubt that doubts about itself (NKZ II: 151).

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