

MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHINGNESS

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Much Ado about Nothingness

Essays on Nishida and Tanabe

JAMES W. HEISIG



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Preface

The fourteen essays that make up this book are a measure of my engagement with Japanese philosophy, which began more than three decades ago. The first eight deal with Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945), the last six with Tanabe Hajime (1885–1962). All but two of them were published in books and journals scattered around the world; it seemed time to wrap them up between the covers of a single volume.

The subjects do not vary as widely as the table of contents might make them seem. On the contrary, repeated explanations of a small number of key ideas—Nishida’s logic of *basho* and Tanabe’s logic of the specific chief among them—should offer some degree of continuity, while the different angles from which the ideas are viewed and the different purposes for which they are called up should help preserve the pliancy their authors intended when they first forged them.

The prevalent opinion among scholars of twentieth-century Japanese philosophy, at home and abroad, has been that it was Nishida who laid the solid foundations for the Kyoto School, leaving Tanabe to occupy one of the rooms on the first floor along with others of the first generation. This never seemed fair to me; I doubt that their contemporaries would even have found it accurate. Blame for the bias—that *is* what it is—has always been thrown back on Tanabe for his lack of proper civility and deference to the senior Nishida, who had rescued him from obscurity in the Department of Natural Sciences at Tōhoku University and brought him to Kyoto University at the young age of thirty-four. There is no need to rehearse the story of their falling out, which came to a head eleven years later when Tanabe brazenly challenged the philosophy of his teacher in print.

The animosity survived the death of both men in the form of a dense fog that surrounded research on Tanabe and has only recently begun to show signs of lifting among the younger generation of Nishida scholars.

In hindsight, it seems obvious that without the kind of serious confrontation Tanabe aroused, prompted by the same ideals but critical of certain aspects of Nishida's approach, there would have been no "school" of thought. Nishida's philosophy would have had to stand on its own and Tanabe relegated to the rank of a renegade disciple. The impact on Western philosophy would have been all the poorer for it.

As nearly as I can figure, the first serious attempt at a philosophical reconciliation was made by the younger Kōyama Iwao (1905–1993) a few years after Nishida's passing.¹ Kōyama split the Chinese glyphs of the term *basho* down the middle, identifying Nishida's thought with the logic of *ba* (generic location) and Tanabe's with *sho* (specific location). To deliver both of them from abstraction he devised his own "logic of antiphony" grounded in the locus of *ko* (the individual) and its concrete give-and-take with others. Many since have acknowledged, or at least hinted at, ways to incorporate some of Tanabe's correctives into Nishida's thought, and vice versa.

In any case, these are matters for specialists to sort out in their own good time. The more immediate tests of relevance for the Kyoto School philosophy are those arising from the world of ordinary experience where the attribution of an idea to one thinker or another matters less than its power to make us think about the things of life with greater clarity and less ego. Some of this will come through in these pages, but not as much as it should have. I am convinced that the overriding challenge for those doing philosophy in the key of the Kyoto School, with their sights set squarely on self-awareness like Nishida and Tanabe before them, is to turn its attention to the wider

1. See KŌYAMA 1951, 72–110.

world and sharpen its conscience without simply giving in to the growing pressures to police the awareness of others.

As I flip through these essays and think back over the circumstances in which they were written, I have to admit that there was a great deal less election in my affinities with Nishida and Tanabe than my words let on. Sometimes it felt like Jacob wrestling with the angel; other times, more like Brer Rabbit struggling to shake free of the Tar Baby. Most of the time, I just feel humbled by what I had gotten myself into.

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1 October 2015