

ORIENTING PHILOSOPHY 1
FROM NIETZSCHE TOWARDS ASIA

STUDIA PHILOSOPHICA

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Orienting Philosophy 1

From Nietzsche towards Asia

GRAHAM PARKES



CHISOKUDŌ

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Preface

“I’m sure you’ve published dozens of good essays that are hidden away in academic journals that nobody reads. Why don’t you gather the best ones together and see if you can come up with a volume or two that we could publish with Chisokudō?” Jim Heisig and I were having lunch between sessions at a conference on Japanese philosophy a few years ago when he asked this unexpected question. The idea sounded worth exploring, and on getting back to Vienna after the meeting I took stock of the essays I’d published over the previous forty years. It turned out there would be enough of them good enough to fill three volumes, and that they constituted a project I’d been working on without having formulated it: namely, *orienting* philosophy.

My own philosophical orientation came mainly from studying Nietzsche.¹ I was impressed by his recommending the hermeneutic distance to be gained from “intellectual nomadism,” “getting away from your present situation and wandering through works of history and ancient halls of memory and imagination. Then when you return to your own culture you can enjoy “the advantage of understanding it better as a whole than those who have never left it.”² He envisages a twofold orientation of philosophy itself: giving directions that take it beyond traditional paths and indicate other ways of living; and then

1. How these essays mesh with my career of wondering and wandering will be the topic of the Afterword to *Orienting Philosophy* 3.

2. Nietzsche, AOM 211, MA 616. See also WS 188, AOM 223, 228. There’s a key to the abbreviations at the beginning of the Bibliography.

going beyond the European philosophical tradition altogether in order to “think more orientally.”

Nietzsche wants to direct philosophy away from grand abstractions like the Absolute, the Good, and the world beyond, back toward the Earth, the natural world, and the “nearest” and “most everyday things” in our lives.³ Furthermore, in *Beyond Good and Evil* he proposes a psychology (and philosophy) that dares to “go into depth, liberated from all moral prejudices and fears,” and to acknowledge the necessity for life of all the “negative” drives such as “hatred, envy, greed, and lust for domination.” But there’s a price to pay for such a transgression: the psychologist will at first “suffer from such an orientation [*Richtung*] of his judgement as from seasickness.” The floor begins to tremble. But the true depth psychologist will have the courage to launch into high seas and “sail straight over and beyond morality... and dare to travel *that way* [*dorthin*], out there.”⁴

Correspondingly, the few genuine philosophers for Nietzsche are those “who determine the Where to? and To what end? for human beings,” insofar as they understand “a new, hitherto untrod way for making them greater.” They are that rare breed who say to their contemporaries who cling to the old virtues: “We must go that way, out there [*dorthin, dorthinaus*], where *you* of today are least at home” (BGE 211–12). Most of us Europeans and Americans are often least at home with Asia and the Far East—which is one reason why Nietzsche wanted to orient philosophy through a turn towards Asia.

“I imagine future thinkers,” he wrote in 1876, “in whom European-American restlessness is combined with the hundredfold-inherited contemplativeness of the Asians: such a combination will bring the riddle of the world to a solution.” Several years later he made this fascinating resolution: “I must learn to think *more orientally* [*orien-*

3. WS, 5, 6, 16.

4. BGE 23 (emphasis added). In *Things Human, All Too Human*, Nietzsche writes that greatness of spirit consists in “giving direction” (*Richtung-geben*) to already flowing and incoming currents (HA 521).

talischer] about philosophy and knowledge. *Oriental* [*Morgenländischer*] *overview of Europe*.”⁵ This intention was apparently fulfilled: Nietzsche announces in *Beyond Good and Evil* that he has “looked into the most life-denying forms of pessimism with an Asiatic and trans-Asiatic eye.” And near the end of his career he thanks his old friend Paul Deussen for demonstrating “the one great [ancient Indian] parallel to our European philosophy,” and attributes his own commendable freedom from prejudices to his “trans-European eye.”⁶

For my orientation to the philosophy of the Orient—the direction of the sun’s rising (*oriri*)—Nietzsche provided an initial foothold and direction for first steps. Later steps landed me in the “far East,” and so the essays I’ve collected in response to Jim Heisig’s suggestion follow this sequence (also the path of Buddhist teachings as they spread eastward from India). The encounter with East-Asian thought, where philosophy tends to involve practices capable of transforming one’s experience, introduced a further dimension to the orienting project. Disillusioned by the abstract and “ivory tower” stance of the analytic philosophy I’d studied at the start of my career, I welcomed an orientation toward the more concrete and practical. This shift is also compatible with Nietzsche and his focus on “the smallest, closest, and most everyday things” in our lives.

This first volume of *Orienteering Philosophy* takes its bearings from Nietzsche’s ideas (and, in some essays, from Heidegger’s) to explore comparable features of Mahayana Buddhist thought in India, and its later incarnations in East Asia. The arrangement is chronological, to show how interweaving lines of thinking let topics like the Promethean spirit, the divinity of nature, the power of rock, and the fragility of the biosphere gradually come to the fore. These themes also wind their way through the essays to come, and the work of Nietzsche and Heidegger continues to provide standpoints from which the ori-

5. KSA 8: 17[55]; 11:26[317].

6. BGE 56; letter to Deussen, 3 January 1888, KSB 8: 222. See also below, 55–6.

entations of the succeeding volumes proceed, towards China in the second and towards Japan in the third.

Too late I discovered Werner Stegmaier's fascinating work on orientation: *Philosophie der Orientierung* (2008), and the shorter version in English, *What Is Orientation?* (2019). Stegmaier uses insights from phenomenology and pragmatism as well as Nietzsche to give a philosophical account of the many ways we are always orienting ourselves in time and space, physically and mentally. "Nobody else," he writes, "characterized the force and momentum of this kind of philosophical investigation as clearly as Friedrich Nietzsche."⁷ Although he discusses orientation in animals, plants, and particles as well as in humans, Stegmaier stays within the Western tradition for the philosophy. This orienting project of mine, though comparatively rudimentary, is very much in line with his—but ranges farther, towards Asia.



Being a slow writer, I refrained from rewriting the essays reprinted here. I was tempted occasionally, as I worked through them—a temptation dispelled by the fear that death would then have more time to strike before the deadline for submitting the manuscript. I have, however, corrected the occasional error and infelicity; updated Wade-Giles romanization of Chinese to Pinyin; substituted better translations that have appeared since the essay was written; and standardized the reference system. Abbreviations of titles referred to frequently are listed at the beginning of the bibliography.

I hope that these essays will persuade the reader, should he or she need persuading, of the benefits of orienting philosophy towards Asia and the role Nietzsche can play in this venture.⁸ We gain a better sense

7. Werner Stegmaier, *Philosophie der Orientierung* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008), and the shorter version in English, *What Is Orientation?* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2019). STEGMAIER 2019, XV.

8. Comparable benefits are of course to be gained by orienting philosophy toward

of the Western tradition when we gain some distance from it, and a better understanding of the world when we think from non-Western perspectives as well. And if readers of Nietzsche are prompted to inquire into East-Asian ways of thinking, a comparative-philosophical approach beginning from his work will afford support on the way.

Many thanks are due to Denise Ho for her patient and efficient help in the production of this book.

I dedicate this project to James Heisig, in recognition of his generous contributions to scholarship through his books, his translations, and his selfless support of other teachers and researchers. It was almost forty years ago, on a week's visit to the Nanzan Institute to revise a draft translation, that I first experienced the power of Hurricane Heisig, which leaves in its trail fine works of scholarship and inspires collaborators to aspire to such high energetics too. Now again I find myself moved by the gale force—at a distance of nine thousand kilometers this time—to keep on working on orienting philosophy.

Graham Parkes

Vienna, 26 January 2026

Africa, Latin America, and other places, and by enlisting other thinkers (Bergson, Dewey, James, Merleau-Ponty, et al.) in the intercultural dialogue.

Nietzsche and Nishitani on the Self over Time

I hesitated at first to begin with this essay, one of my first attempts at a comparative approach to doing philosophy, because it's the most abstract or theoretical of the pieces in this collection. But it's significant because it shows how an appreciation of the Indian Buddhist idea of praṭītyasamutpāda (interdependent arising and perishing) highlights the centrality of interactivity to Nietzsche's philosophy of will to power.

*I wrote this essay during my first visit to Japan in 1983, when I spent a sabbatical semester at Kyoto University and made the acquaintance of one of the foremost thinkers in the tradition of Japanese Buddhism, Professor Nishitani Keiji. For this reason I'm prefacing the essay with a brief account of my conversations with him, the first part of which I wrote at the time (1983), and the rest when I was invited to contribute to a special memorial issue of *The Eastern Buddhist* several years later.*

Nishitani was kind enough to give me an inscribed copy of the German translation of his masterwork 『宗教とは何か』, Was ist Religion?. (Not having a book to present, I seem to remember giving him macadamia nuts from Hawai'i.) Our first conversation inspired me to study that formidable work, and later to write this essay comparing the Zen Buddhist understanding of time with Nietzsche's.

The opening prefatory remark is from "A Citizen of the Cosmos?—Ridiculous!" *The Eastern Buddhist* 25/1 (1992): 105–9, and the essay originally appeared in *The Eastern Buddhist* 17/2 (1984): 55–74. They are reprinted here by kind permission of the Eastern Buddhist Society.

“If you’d like to pay him a visit, I’ll telephone today and you can probably see him before you leave for Hokkaidō.” I had mentioned to Professor Takeichi Akihiro, who had invited me to Kyoto University as a visiting scholar, that I was interested in Nishitani Sensei’s work, but I had hardly expected that a meeting could be arranged so easily. When I saw him again later that afternoon he informed me that everything was set: I was to present myself at Nishitani’s home the following evening.

Having been enchanted by an earlier stroll through the neighborhood around the Yoshida hill, I had set off early to allow time for a leisurely walk through those fascinating streets that bend somewhat between intersections, causing many of the resulting angles to be anything but right. Knowing enough about the complex system of addresses in Japan work not to believe that “No. 1 Yoshida” would be of much help, I was hardly surprised to find that following the directions I had taken care to memorize was not bringing me to stand before the house that Professor Takeichi had described. For one thing, though the houses by no means looked the same, they were sufficiently unfamiliar in appearance for the first-time visitor easily to feel lost. Nor were the kanji for *nishi* and *tani*, which I was confident of recognizing, anywhere to be seen.

As I wandered the streets of the neighborhood, however, one house in particular seemed to fit the description I’d been given better than the others. Used to conversing in German with the philosophers I had met at Kyoto University, I was relieved to hear that Nishitani

spoke it fluently. And yet it was with some trepidation that I stood in front of the house in question, my finger poised to press the doorbell. I was dubious whether—if I'd picked the wrong house—my minimal spoken Japanese would be adequate to the task of explaining my intrusion. But when it occurred to me that “*Nishitani Sensei wa...?*” spoken hesitantly would probably work well enough in this neighborhood, the poised finger proceeded to press.

After a brief interval, the outer door slid open to reveal the face of the Sensei himself looking benignly down. He ushered me into a small book-filled room with a sliding door opening on to the tiny garden. Somewhat slow at first, the conversation picked up as my nervousness dissipated in the warmth of Nishitani's presence. I had a few questions that had occurred to me on reading *Was ist Religion?* In the course of the evening, prompted by an occasional lull in the conversation, I would pose one of my questions; but instead of responding to it, Nishitani would embark—somewhat to my surprise at first—upon some other, related (and usually more interesting) line of thought.

Some time later, as the conversation finally showed signs of slowing, I began to take my leave—a process I later learned would usually take quite long, since the host kept coming up with amplifications of themes discussed earlier in the evening. On looking at my watch once out on the street, I was astounded to see that several hours had passed since my arrival. Later, my friend Eberhard Scheiffle asked whether I'd noticed the peculiar passage of time in that little room, and remarked the absence of any kind of timepiece there.

Thanks to an invitation from Professor Ueda Shizuteru, I was able to return to Japan several months after my first departure, in order to attend a conference on the dual theme of the relations between Meister Eckhart and Zen and the philosophy of Nishitani. In a paper that inquired into the ideas of “the moment” and “eternity,” I had suggested that perhaps the parallels between Nietzsche's ideas and certain strands of Zen thinking on the topic could be pursued far-

ther than Nishitani seemed to allow.¹ In the course of an after-dinner conversation his smiles and nods in between puffs on his cigarette gave the impression that he thought there might be something to this suggestion. But the most striking thing about this meeting was the way most of his remarks took the form of questions, quietly posed yet intensely.

We were discussing the section *Mittags*, “At Midday,” in Part Four of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, musing over the moment in which Zarathustra feels himself fall into the well of eternity and the abyss of the heaven above him. We wondered about Zarathustra’s speaking of “this drop of dew that fell on all earthly things... this marvelous soul.” “What *is* this drop of dew?” Nishitani asked; “That dew... what is it really?” I completed the passage, one of my favorites, with Zarathustra’s question: “When, o well of eternity, you serene and ghastly mid-day-abyss, when will you drink my soul back into you?”

A few years later, I went to Kyoto to discuss with Nishitani a draft of a translation that Setsuko Aihara and I had done of his 1949 book *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*. I’d heard in advance that he had suffered an accident and illness. I went to his house alone and resolved not to stay for too long, fearful of tiring the host. After several hours of conversation I realized that two of my questions from my previous visit had been discussed, and before the night was over a third had been dealt with. A pattern was emerging: questions posed at one meeting would be answered the next time we met. This pace, which had initially disconcerted, now seemed perfect—and a consummate exemplification of the temporality lived by this ripened thinker.

The conversation took a turn to places we had traveled to and lived in. Nishitani spoke of his sojourn in Germany in the late thirties, and his travels to other countries around that time. I knew he had later visited Hawai‘i for a conference and we talked about that. He asked

1. “Unter dem Augenblick—der Abgrund der Ewigkeit,” *Zen Buddhism Today* 2 (1984): 47–59.