

Introducing the Kyoto School as World Philosophy
Reflections on James W. Heisig's
Philosophers of Nothingness

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JAMES Heisig has provided the growing worldwide community of scholars and students of the Kyoto school with a much needed and long awaited book. *Philosophers of Nothingness: An Essay on the Kyoto School*¹ is an immensely insightful and thoroughly researched commentary on the three principal figures of this school, Nishida Kitarō 西田幾多郎 (1870-1945), Tanabe Hajime 田辺元 (1885-1962), and Nishitani Keiji 西谷啓裕 (1900-1990). Let me begin my reflections by disagreeing with the author's statement that "there are any number of people well suited to the task" (p. ix) of writing such a book. Even if there are a handful of eligible scholars, there is hardly anyone so uniquely qualified as Heisig to take up the truly daunting "challenge of producing a general overview" of the Kyoto school, a challenge that—despite a steady rise in interest and the appearance of more general and more specialized studies—has indeed "gone unanswered both in Japan and abroad" (p. ix). No previous work has treated, in detail, the whole scope of the intertwined thought of these three philosophers; Heisig's book brilliantly manages to do this in both an introductory and critical manner.

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¹ James W. Heisig, *Philosophers of Nothingness: An Essay on the Kyoto School* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001). Page references to this work will be given in parentheses in the text.

Despite his own insistence on the possibility, and even the *necessity*, of reading the Kyoto school in translation, Heisig's own exceptional linguistic abilities are no doubt a major basis for the book's accomplishments. There are still few western scholars (fewer still with a background in philosophy) that know Japanese to the point where they can go beyond a selective reading of primary texts to read widely in the secondary literature and participate in discussion and debate with scholars in Japan. Heisig has done just that for over two decades now. Moreover, together with a solid background in (western) philosophy, theology and psychology, Heisig brings to bear on his work a remarkable command of most of the major western languages, a dexterity evidenced by the fact that the book at hand was first composed in Spanish as *Filósofos de la nada*. The end product is a book that not only outlines the main contours of the Kyoto school, but also introduces us to the full range of research and debate that has taken place both in Japan and abroad. Heisig writes between languages, cultures and fields of speciality; he is a "translator" in the highest sense of the word in that he carries the reader from one world to the next, opening up borders and enabling dialogue, but never giving in to the eclectic temptation of blurring distinctions and confusing "vocabularies."

It is important to note, however, that Heisig is not merely a "translator" and the book is not merely an "introduction," even in the fuller senses of these terms. Heisig himself is hardly content to sit and observe from the sidelines, and he does not hold back his own insights and conclusions regarding the Kyoto school, nor does he pull any punches in criticizing the critics. The book not only deals with three thinkers, but also combines three approaches: interpretive summary of the primary texts, introduction to the ongoing debate surrounding these texts, and critical participation in this debate by the author himself. Not only with regard to the political controversy, but in many respects Heisig boldly attempts to walk a middle path between enthusiastic exposition and critical response. His own writing style is clear yet willing to follow complex ideas through to the end, subtle when necessary yet forceful when making a point.

A reader just approaching the Kyoto school could do no better than to use this book as an introduction. Those already familiar with its thought and with much of the debate surrounding it, will find here Heisig's own informed opinion on the issues. The breadth and depth of what he has accomplished in the space of three hundred and fifty pages is truly amazing; it will no doubt be many years before another introduction of equal caliber appears. On the

other hand, it is precisely the success of Heisig's combination of clear presentation/summary and powerful interpretation/criticism that may pose a problem for anyone using this book as the *sole* source of introduction to the Kyoto school. Heisig is aware of the risks of his approach, and deemed them—correctly I think—well worth taking. He skillfully employs the dual structure of text and notes to help mitigate the danger of readers identifying his “neutral presentation” of its thought with his own interpretations and conclusions regarding that thought. At the end of his introductory chapter, Heisig writes:

As seasoned readers of the writings of the Kyoto school philosophers will notice, this is as much a book of conclusions and judgments as it is an introduction. While I have made no attempt to disguise my own interpretations, or differences from others, I do not wish them to distract from the broader picture I am trying to paint and have therefore relegated most of the debate to the notes. (pp. 25–26)

Yet not all of Heisig's contributions to the debate are restricted to the notes. As Heisig is well aware, an introduction always also introduces an interpretation, and the broader a picture is painted, the more powerful become the lines of interpretation employed. This is a hermeneutic necessity and not a criticism of Heisig's approach. Nevertheless, it is the role of the “critic” to direct one's attention to the way these lines are drawn, to point out the interpretive conclusions and judgments that are not, indeed could not have been restricted to the notes. It would seem particularly important to highlight what makes this work distinctive, given that many readers may be looking into the writings of the Kyoto school for the first time. Such readers should be aware of what sort of lens they are using as they do their looking. The present article will not summarize Heisig's summaries, so much as attempt to elucidate the general contours of his interpretive lens and comment on some of his conclusions.

Defining the Kyoto School

To begin with, there is the thorny issue of defining the “Kyoto school.” Heisig relates how the label first appeared in print in a partially laudatory and partially critical article by a student of Tanabe's, Tosaka Jun 戸坂潤 (1900–1945), who later became well known for his own Marxist writings. The term

has since been used (and at times abused) to refer to the group of thinkers influenced by Nishida and Tanabe, a group whose membership is as controversial as the general appraisal of this school. Tosaka himself is sometimes included as a member of its “left wing” as opposed to the “right wing,” which would include Kōyama Iwao 高山岩男 (1905-1993), Kōsaka Masaaki 高坂正顕 (1900-1969) and sometimes Nishitani. In fact, although they receive little attention in the west, Kōyama and Kōsaka are nearly always included as members of the Kyoto school in Japan.² Ōhashi Ryōsuke 大橋良介 (1944-) includes them in his influential German anthology, *Die Philosophie der Kyōto-Schule*, along with Nishida, Tanabe, Nishitani, Hisamatsu Shin'ichi 久松真一 (1889-1980), Shimomura Toratarō 下村寅太郎 (1902-1995), Suzuki Shigetaka 鈴木成高 (1907-1988), and the next generation of Takeuchi Yoshinori 武内義範 (1913-2002), Tsujimura Kōichi 辻村公一 (1922-) and Ueda Shizuteru 上田閑照 (1926-).³ Abe Masao 阿部正雄 (1915-) is a well-known representative of the school in the west, but less known in Japan where Ueda is generally held to be its leading representative today. While the widest definitions of the school in Japan sometimes include other famous philosophers such as Watsuji Tetsurō 和辻哲郎 (1889-1960) and Kuki Shūzō 九鬼周造 (1888-1941), Heisig points out that it is a mistake to include D. T. Suzuki 鈴木大拙 (1870-1966), despite his life-long friendship with and influence on Nishida.

Heisig pays due consideration to the various ways the school has been defined, but ultimately chooses to follow Takeuchi's suggestion that “the clearest way to define the school is to ‘triangulate’ it around Nishida, Tanabe, and Nishitani”(p.276). “It is from these three figures,” Heisig writes, “that the Kyoto school radiates as a philosophical movement” (p. 5). While this “school” does not permit exclusive definitions of membership, he wisely chooses to limit the focus of his book to these three central figures, for it is just this balance of breadth and depth that gives his book its unique significance. For the purposes of this article, I shall follow Heisig in using the term “Kyoto school” to refer primarily to these three thinkers.

² A recent anthology published in Japan, however, does not include either Kōyama or Kōsaka, but does include Miki Kiyoshi 三木清 (1897-1945) and Tosaka along with Nishida, Tanabe, Kimura Motomori 木村素衛 (1895-1946), Hisamatsu, Shimomura, and Nishitani. See Fujita 2001.

³ Ōhashi excludes not only Tosaka, but also Miki on the grounds of their “later turn to Marxism.” See Ōhashi 1990, p. 12.

The Structure of the Book

The unique structure of Heisig's book merits some comment. Its main text is composed of five chapters: an Orientation at the beginning, a Prospectus at the end, and one chapter each on Nishida, Tanabe and Nishitani in the middle. These chapters are further subdivided into a total of seventy-one sections. After nearly three hundred pages of main text, we are provided with approximately seventy pages of notes. Each note corresponds to a whole section of the text, and contains not only references for all quoted passages in that section, but also a discussion of relevant debate in the secondary literature and more detailed comments on certain points. Grouping all this information together, and separating it from the body of the text, allows the book to be read smoothly and without interruption.

I found that this structure works very well for dealing with the secondary literature and for keeping potentially distracting, but nevertheless highly interesting, details from disturbing the flow of the text. I am a bit less enthusiastic about the way page references for quotations are grouped all together at the end of the one note per section. In a conversation I had with the author—who is well known for his liberal and untiring support of fellow translators and writers—he seemed cheerfully resigned to the fact that many less conscientious writers would make use of the wealth of material gathered in the book's pages without paying due respect to the labor and insight of the gatherer; but I fear that the method of citation employed may inadvertently make the task of tracking down a particular reference a bit cumbersome, not only for scavengers, but also for conscientious researchers.

As for the organizational problem of how to present this "school" through three independent yet mutually influencing thinkers, although Heisig treats them one at a time, he handles the problem of overlap in thought by giving a common idea fuller exposition in one of the chapters and only abbreviated attention in the others. "The result is that, contrary to appearances, none of the chapters stands independently on its own, but each relies to some extent on the others" (p. 24).

A further noteworthy aspect of Heisig's method of presentation is his decision not to always follow a strictly chronological order of presentation, explicating ideas rather only "more or less in the order in which they appeared," and indeed "freely using later writings to interpret earlier ones without always drawing attention to the fact" (p. 24). This is, in fact, a bold interpretive decision, and one that goes against the grain of much of the

chronological step by step research carried out in Japan, and to a lesser extent in the west. In this regard, Heisig writes:

I have avoided the customary carving of the careers of Nishida and Tanabe into stages because I felt it more important to concentrate on recurrent themes as far as I could. In the case of Nishitani . . . to impose a structure on a thinking as organic as [his] was . . . risks obscuring what is most distinctive about it. . . . With the exception of his excursus into political ideology, we can describe these motifs with a minimum of attention to their dating or locating them in the development of his ideas. (p. 190)

The political writings certainly deserve careful dating, and Heisig is clear about chronological matters in this regard. I concur that the only *major* shift in Nishitani's thinking took place with regard to his turn to, and then away from, politicizing his critique of modernity.⁴ In the end, I think Heisig's method works best with Nishitani and least well with Nishida, where the customary treatment of the latter's thought in developmental stages may be more justifiable than Heisig gives it credit. I will return to this issue at the end of this article.

Presenting the Kyoto School as World Philosophy

Let us turn now to the basic thesis of the book, namely, that the Kyoto school deserves to be read not merely as a bygone moment in the history of Japanese ideas, but as a major and still contemporary contribution to "world philosophy." Heisig argues that, despite the fact that "no one has tried to place the Kyoto philosophers in the history of philosophy as a whole" (p. 279), "this group of philosophers represent[s] Japan's first sustained and original contribution to western philosophical thought" (p. 3). They have "given us a world philosophy, one that belongs as rightfully to the inheritance as much as the western philosophies with which they wrestled and from which they drew their inspiration" (p. 9). They also, of course, drew inspiration from eastern and particularly Buddhist sources, and this is precisely what has allowed them to "break the mold" of assuming that "world philosophy" in the "strict sense" has been and can be only done in the west and according to the western model. One may want to question Heisig's assertion that the tradition of western philosophy "in the strict sense of the term has never

⁴ See Davis 2003.

been broken, spliced, enlarged, or seriously challenged by Asian thought” (p. 8)—for did not Schopenhauer’s “appropriation of eastern ideas into western philosophy” (p. 260) leave its mark on the nineteenth century, and have not modern Indian thinkers such as Aurobindo and Radhakrishnan also challenged the strictly western contours of philosophy? Nevertheless, Heisig’s argument that the Kyoto school provides us with a highly significant, and in many respects, unique contribution to “world philosophy” stands.

While forcefully making this argument, Heisig is at the same time careful to keep in question both terms of this locution: “world” and “philosophy.” What does the adjective “world” mean here? Heisig is certainly no trumpet blower at an inauguration parade for the “global village,” an idea he roundly criticizes elsewhere by way of Tanabe’s logic of the specific.⁵ If there is a “one world” in the making, it needs to be built one step at a time, and should not have as its goal the inevitably imperialistic abolishment of differences. One of the most important achievements of the Kyoto school is the effect its thought has had on pluralizing the *dialogue* of “world philosophy.” Heisig writes in the concluding paragraph of his book:

If we are poised at the brink of a new age of world philosophy, one in which the confluence of east and west will take up the task of redefining one another without either reducing the other to one of the available common denominators, the thought of Nishida, Tanabe, and [Nishitani] may help push the weak in spirit to take the next step. (p. 272)

The adjective “world,” then, does not signify an annihilation of the specific, but rather designates the dialogical space in which one can recognize the unique contributions of different traditions to an intercultural conversation of philosophy.

The term “philosophy” is, of course, no less tricky here, given its semantic roots in the western tradition. The task is to see just how far one can expose “(western) philosophy” to its often still unacknowledged cultural roots, that is, to its residues of a parochialism dressed up as a universalism while at the same time acknowledging and carrying forth its own traditional contributions, which include that of a strong “tradition” of rational, dialogical discourse and radical self-critique. The Kyoto school thinkers, Heisig writes,

⁵ Heisig 1995, pp. 198–224.

were aware that “philosophy” would always include at least western philosophy, and they accordingly assumed responsibility for understanding the past and present of that tradition. “Their contribution would have to be not at the expense of everything philosophy has been, but at its enhancement” (p. 8). Their own “Japanese philosophy,” decisively inspired though it was by eastern sources, was nevertheless aimed outward. If, for the sake of original and authentic thinking, they found it necessary to return to their roots and to the wellsprings of eastern thought, this was not a retreat from the world that the west had—forcefully and peacefully—opened up, but for the sake of enhancing the worldliness of this world. “Let there be no mistake,” Heisig writes, “the Kyoto philosophers are eastern and they are Buddhist. But their aim and context is neither eastern nor Buddhist” (p. 8). Far from “simply reupholstering traditional philosophical questions in an oriental décor,” the Kyoto school presents us with “a disciplined and well-informed challenge to the definition of the history of philosophy itself” (p. 3), a challenge that not only provides new answers to old questions but also attempts “a reframing of the questions from a standpoint all their own” (p. 24).

Moreover, Heisig argues, the Kyoto school’s efforts to bring the west out of its unrecognized parochialism was simultaneously an attempt to open Japan up to the wider world. Despite their own temporary excesses and aberrations with regard to culture and political theory, their dual aim was that of “an introduction of Japanese philosophy into world philosophy while at the same time using western philosophy for a second look at Japanese thought trapped in fascination with its own uniqueness” (p. 270). They fought a battle on two fronts, as it were, in order to bring Japan into the world and the world into Japan. Their battle on the home front was also a call for the west to finally enter into dialogue with the world it had yet only sought to conquer in the name of empire, capital or spirit.

Heisig’s book succeeds not only in introducing the Kyoto school as a major contribution to world philosophy; he also convincingly reveals how its contribution remains a major impetus and resource for actualizing the still tenuous possibility of genuine world philosophy as a multi-traditional dialogue.

Political Thought as Aberration

The great irony, which continues to threaten the development of the Kyoto school and its reception and transplantation abroad, is the fact that this first

Japanese attempt to contribute to (the birth of) world philosophy took place at a time when Japan was shutting its doors once again to the world, and this time threatening to take a collection of Asian colonies back in with it. This was a turbulent time, a time where “ideas that had once been right were left, and left right. National and ethnic identity, the rejection of wholesale western-style democracy and culture, the recovery of Asian roots, and so forth, were all usurped by a scrappy set of ideas that advertised itself as a philosophy of ‘the imperial way’” (p. 5). The Kyoto school thinkers unfortunately did get caught up in this whirlpool, and their attempts failed at changing its direction or, at least, keeping it from spinning out of control. During this time of “all-out war,” all three of these thinkers developed and applied their thinking in ways that we cannot endorse today, and there are many passages and several texts that simply defy attempts at interpretive rescue.

In many ways, the tides have changed and changed again since the end of the war, with the academic world of the past several decades often showing a willingness to question the “cultural imperialism” of western values and traditions, and to ask how these are sometimes reflected in the very logic of our thinking. This has made possible a resurgence of interest in these Japanese philosophers, and “the respectable connotation that the name ‘Kyoto school’ enjoys in the west has more or less rubbed off on Japan as well” (p. 7). There are signs, however, of yet another twist. Just as the Kyoto school has begun to regain its audience at home, certain western critics, reacting to a lacuna in the first wave of interest there, have begun overemphasizing the political misadventures of the school’s members while seeking to characterize it as merely a reactionary encounter with modernity. All too often the debate over the politics of the school takes place in a vicious circle. Attackers—often taking lines and texts out of context—accuse the Kyoto school of being nothing but ideologues of fascism, while the defenders refuse to acknowledge—and self-critically work through—any element of political misjudgment.

Heisig has done more than just about any other scholar, either in Japan or abroad, to break this deadlock. To begin with, he helped bring all but the most strident ideological attackers to the discussion table for a landmark conference in the mid-1990s, which resulted in a volume that he edited together with John Maraldo (another remarkable scholar in this regard).⁶ In *Philosophers of Nothingness*, Heisig once again attempts to “strike a bal-

⁶ Heisig and Maraldo 1994.

ance” (p. 6) on this issue, and he succeeds in clearing a middle path between what he aptly names elsewhere the competing camps of “side-swipers and side-steppers.”⁷ On the one hand, he does not flinch from the task of quoting and critically commenting on the most condemning passages from the political writings of the Kyoto school in the 1930s and 1940s. On the other hand, he persuasively argues that such passages and texts represent aberrations from the core of its philosophies. He states his conclusion up front and in no uncertain terms:

One has, deliberately or otherwise, to ignore the greatest bulk of the writings of these thinkers to arrive at the conclusion that anything approaching or supporting the imperialistic ideology of wartime Japan belongs to the fundamental inspiration of their thought. Insofar as any of them did willingly add support, it may be considered an aberration from their own intellectual goals. (p. 6)

As an example of such aberration, Heisig shows how Tanabe failed to apply the insights of his “logic of the specific” to his own concrete historical situation. When Tanabe takes the unnecessary—“if not outright inconsistent with the principles of his own logic”—step of raising the “relative absolute” of his own nation above others, it “is as if Tanabe were quoting himself out of context” (pp. 136–137).⁸

In general, I agree with Heisig’s judgment that the overtly political writings of the Kyoto school are best read as aberrations from the fundamental inspirations of its thought. The gray area that requires further attention is its more general works on culture and intercultural relations; for there is much to be salvaged there—not only for the sake of squaring it with our views today on such issues, but as challenges to problems and presumptions that have not gone away in the last half a century—even if there are also many slippery slopes back down into the problematic political theory that need to be carefully uncovered and criticized. Heisig himself, at the end of the book, suggests that one area for further research is that of the “vast web of connections between their thinking and the historical changes of the day” (p. 263). But even if some of its ideas can be fruitfully read as “metaphors of the ambiguities that marked Japan’s entry into the modern world” (p. 262), the

⁷ Heisig 1990, p. 14.

⁸ Elsewhere Heisig concludes on this subject: “Tanabe’s political conclusions are in no sense a natural outflowing of the logic of the specific; they are a refusal by its author to take the idea as seriously as it deserved.” in Heisig and Maraldo 1994, p. 288.

Kyoto school can no more be reduced to “a product of its time” than it can be wholly abstracted from its historical context. We ourselves still have much to reflect on by way of its texts with regard to our own changing historical context, and in regard to that which has not changed—as well as that which perhaps does not change—in the relations between cultures.

An Insistence on Translatability

Given the fact that the rehabilitation of the reputation of the Kyoto school in Japan occurred during a time of general reaffirmation of “Japaneseness” in the face of an increasingly westernized world, Heisig’s insistence on the translatability of the writings of the Kyoto school marks an important thesis of his book. There is a tendency of some Japanese commentators to overly stress the uniquely Japanese aspects of its thought and language, and hence to assert, or at least imply, an inherent untranslatability—particularly into western languages, which are taken to be rigorously structured according to a grammatical subject/object split (see pp. 300-301). Heisig calls into question this alleged “linguistic incompatibility,” and indeed argues that “for the goal of the Kyoto philosophers—a grafting of Japanese thought on world philosophy—to be fulfilled, they must be read in translation (not only in the original)” (p. 20).

A passage from the chapter on Nishida persuasively makes this point:

His novelty had to be philosophical and at the same time non-western. . . . Only then could he expose world philosophy to the hypocrisy of universal aspirations carved in the stone of parochial biases. . . . Those of his Japanese readers who gloat over his neologisms as having no equivalent in western philosophy and not even any possible translation, which makes them only really intelligible to those who share Nishida’s culture and linguistic background, not only miss the point of his goal, but [they] push his ideas in the opposite direction he was headed. . . . The distinctiveness of the Japanese is only a local value; it is enhanced when its core can be extracted and translated into something of world scope. (pp. 37-38)

Heisig’s affirmation of the translatability of the Kyoto school is best understood, I think, as a counter-argument against those who would construct, out of their linguistic particularity, a tool for the assertion of what has been

called “the myth of Japanese uniqueness.” The Kyoto school philosophers themselves were certainly far from simple ideologues of Japanism, and the language of their text was often as much, if not more, influenced by their own translations of western philosophy as by the grammar and literature of their native tongue. As an antidote to the “fantasy of linguistic incompatibility” (p. 281), Heisig is certainly right to “deflate the idea that reading them in translation is the major disadvantage that it is often made out to be in philosophical circles,” and even to provocatively assert that “their writings are almost more accessible to the western philosophical reader in translation than they are to the average Japanese reader in the original” (p. 18).

On the other hand, although Nishida was, to be sure, “a world philosopher precisely because he believed he could understand the west, and the west him” (p. 88), the hermeneutic endeavor still needs to proceed in both directions. This means that it is as important for westerners to learn Japanese as it was for the Kyoto philosophers to learn western languages. It is true that Nishida’s prose is far from “typical Japanese,” and that he was “forging a new language” (p. 19) that was highly influenced by translation of western philosophical idioms; but precisely in order to sort these matters out, there must be those who are acquainted with both linguistic bases. Nishida himself refers to his topology as a “logic of the east,” and there has, in fact, been some interesting work done on the relation of his thought to the grammar of the Japanese language.⁹ One can no more abstract Nishida wholly from his cultural and linguistic background than one can wholly reduce him to it. Nishida can and should be read in translation. But we need also to continue to correct the imbalance—an imbalance that Heisig too laments—that has existed between non-westerners who learn western languages and westerners who remain for the most part comfortably within their own linguistic horizons.

It is indeed not a fact to be regretted that—as Gadamer puts it—understanding is always understanding differently.¹⁰ The philosophies of the Kyoto school have already begun their journey of “productive translation” into the discourses of the west, just as western philosophy continues to be productively translated into Japanese. Yet this project of creative interpreta-

⁹ See the following works that suggestively relate Nishida’s logic of locus to “Tokieda grammar” which diagrams the Japanese sentence using concentric circles of enveloping words: Nakamura 1983, pp. 94–102 and Fujita 1997, pp. 36–54.

¹⁰ “Not just occasionally but always, the meaning of a text goes beyond its author. . . . [We] understand in a different way, if we understand at all.” Gadamer 1994, pp. 296–297.

tion needs always to be complemented by careful attempts to understand the Kyoto school texts, as far as is possible, “in their own terms,” and this involves tracing the emergence of their thought out of their own cultural context and language. Both of these directions of research are necessary, on the one hand to welcome these Japanese philosophers into the dialogue of world philosophy, and on the other hand to pluralize this dialogue by introducing essential elements of their culture and language along with their thought. It is no more necessary to strip them wholly of their Japaneseness than it is for us to wholly become Japanese in order to understand them. Both extremes—neither of which is in the end possible—are inimical to the construction of world philosophy as a dialogue between interconnecting worlds.

Against Abstractions of East and West

I think Heisig would basically agree that both of these complementary directions of research should be promoted. He strongly resists, however, the idea that Nishida’s “logic of the east” cannot be expressed by western languages, and protests that such conclusions are reached only by overly abstracting and rigidifying western thought and language. All too often, Heisig complains, the living culture and language of Japan, in all its richness and flexibility, gets compared to a formal and selective understanding of the west. Moreover, he argues, this tendency is found not only among later generations of Japanese commentators, but can be traced back to the Kyoto school thinkers themselves, who tended to “approach western thinking *as a whole*” (p. 13). Heisig critically remarks:

The west of which they write is a highly selective one, centered on intellectual history, and within intellectual history on philosophy, and within philosophy on the Continental philosophy from Descartes to Heidegger. The art and literature that has been important in that history also figure in their writing, though to a greatly diminished extent. But the living culture of the west within which that history took shape is absent. And more than absent, it is assumed—usually without adequate reason—to be radically different from the living culture of Japan. (p. 271)

Furthermore, according to Heisig, this abstraction of “the west” is often confounded by an equally abstract and restrictive self-understanding of “the east.” “At best,” he writes, “the east” that these thinkers often write in the

name of, is “one constellation of a heritage too long and too plural to be represented fairly by Japan” (p. 271). Despite the rather severe tone of this criticism, however, he does not lump the Kyoto school together with the likes of Okakura Tenshin 岡倉天心 (1862-1913), who, after famously proclaiming that “Asia is one,” goes on to assert that it has been “the great privilege of Japan to realize this unity-in-complexity with a special clearness,” for Japan alone is “the real repository of the trust of Asiatic thought and culture.”¹¹ While critical of Nishida’s excessive abstractions of “western being” and “eastern nothingness,” Heisig resists those who read his theory of culture as anything like an unabashed Japanism or as merely an ideological foreground for his political misadventures (see p. 87).

“The east” of which the Kyoto school philosophers speak in their better moments, is perhaps not to be wholly sacrificed to the museum of outdated ideologies, even though it is certainly not to be handed over to those who would use it to reify cultural polarities. Indeed, Heisig himself freely makes use of this term when he affirms that the primary inspiration of the Kyoto school is something “eastern and . . . Buddhist” (p. 8) and concludes that these thinkers “give the west a way into the east like none other” (p. 272). The *qualified* usefulness of the terms “east” and “west” may thus survive, even if one must always attend to the danger of ideological abstraction.

I would also add that it is, at times, precisely the boldness of some of the Kyoto school’s “abstractions” which opens up interesting questions. I myself must confess to experiences of both frustration and illumination in looking back at “the west” through the vantage point of its distance. As Nietzsche writes concerning the hermeneutic advantage an ocean of difference can provide: “Looking back at the coast from this distance, we command a view, no doubt for the first time, of its total configuration.”¹² Abstractions conceal, yes, but let us not forget what they can sometimes reveal. What is after all comparative thinking—if not indeed thinking as such—other than a dynamic between, on the one hand, venturing conceptual generalities and distinctions, and on the other hand, critically dismantling those structures that conceal more than they reveal and shaving off the excesses of those which can be allowed to stand for a while? While many of their broad brushstrokes need to be filled in today with more accurate and fewer polarizing details, the critical boldness of the Kyoto school did man-

¹¹ Okakura 2000, pp. 1 and 5.

¹² Nietzsche 1996, aph. no. 616. Cf. Scheffele 1991, pp. 31–47.

age to clear a field of comparative inquiry like no other group of thinkers in modern Japanese intellectual history, and in many ways like no other group anywhere in the post-Kipling history of the encounter between east and west.

The Provocative Problem of "Religious Philosophy"

One crucial difference that Heisig incisively points out between the Buddhism-inspired philosophies of the Kyoto school and the western intellectual tradition, concerns the relation of "philosophy" to "religion." He explains that underlying the philosophies of Nishida, Tanabe and Nishitani, "there is an important assumption that is *not* shared with western philosophy as a whole: the clear delineation between philosophy and religion" (pp. 13–14). Hence, one of the things that the Kyoto school discloses about the modern west is the particularity of the latter's assumption of an irreconcilable opposition between these domains.

For readers with a background in western philosophy, it is indeed the case that one inevitably finds oneself asking "at some point whether these thinkers have not in fact forsaken philosophy for religion" (p. 269). Heisig sharply anticipates the blunt criticism that the Kyoto school, at times, seems to want to have "the best of both worlds—to claim that it is being religiously Buddhist when a philosophical criticism hits close to the core, and that it is being philosophically western when a serious objection arises from the Buddhist side" (p. 17). Without simply denying the impact of this criticism, he argues that not only is this objection "the inevitable risk that comes from straddling two worlds the way they do" (p. 17), but that the question of whether it has forsaken philosophy for religion "cannot be answered as such, but only deflected, because it hides a fundamental confusion of categories" (p. 269). This confusion is founded on assuming the universality of the modern western either/or dyad of "philosophy-versus-religion."

Heisig quotes Takeuchi Yoshinori as writing that "philosophy has served Buddhism as an inner principle of religion, and not as an outside critique." Moreover, the "religion" that "philosophy" supports here, is not one based on a faithful submission to the irrationalities of revelation. There is no "folly of the cross" in Buddhism, but rather—especially in Zen—an experiential orientation to "awakening" that involves an exertion of "one's whole body and mind" (全身全靈).

There is, in fact, a "productive ambivalence" in the very term 宗教哲学 with which the Kyoto school thinkers often characterize their thought, a term

which can mean either “philosophy of religion” or “religious philosophy.” This ambivalence is of course not lost on Nishitani, for example, whose thought moves in the space opened up by a mutual supplement/critique between what might be called a “phenomenology of Zen experience” on the one hand, and “rational inquiry” on the other. However, this mediation is made possible largely by being able to draw on a tradition unencumbered by the presupposition of an unbridgeable chasm of faith versus reason.

In order to understand the “religious philosophy” of Nishida, Tanabe and Nishitani, it is necessary to rethink these terms from the perspective of their own cultural context. While this context is, of course, *also* one of dialogue with the western tradition from which the very terms 哲学 and 宗教 are adopted as translations of “philosophy” and “religion” (an adoption which does indeed partially legitimate the critical question with regard to their alleged “conflation”), Heisig stresses that “the primary frame of reference for the coincidence of philosophy and religion [for these three thinkers] is always Buddhist, and more specifically a Buddhism focused on the pursuit of self-awareness” (p. 270).

While he notes that the “Kyoto philosophers regularly draw on Zen, Pure Land, Kegon, and Tendai Buddhist ideas to explain their reinterpretation of certain fundamental philosophical concepts,” he confesses what he calls a “glaring omission” in his book, namely, that “in order to keep the book within the confines of traditional philosophical thought”¹³, it was necessary to have “eliminated nearly all excursions into Buddhist thought” (p. 25). Heisig should certainly be excused for having kept the book focused on the texts of the Kyoto school and its critics, not only for the sake of page limits and clarity, but also because its thought is meant to be able to stand on its own. Nevertheless, I agree that one important area for future research on the Kyoto school—one that has been neglected even, or particularly, in Japan where the “philosophers” who take up its thought are primarily trained in western philosophy, and where “very little attention has been given to the Kyoto school by scholars devoted to the classical thought and texts of the east” (p. 260)—is indeed that of clarifying the relation of its thought to the eastern traditions on which it draws for so many of its fundamental intuitions. As Heisig remarks, this is easier done with regard to Nishitani, who himself makes these connections explicit, and most difficult with regard to Nishida, whose

¹³ One might wonder at this wording, for was not the Kyoto school to have splintered and enlarged these “confines of traditional [western] philosophical thought”?

allusions to eastern thought, while occurring at decisive points in his texts, pale in comparison to his explicit references to western philosophers.¹⁴

The Fundamental Orientation of the Kyoto School: Self-Awareness

Heisig understands the primary philosophical/religious inspiration of the Kyoto school to be “a Buddhism focused on the pursuit of self-awareness” (p. 270). It is not surprising, then, that the idea “self-awareness” becomes the focus for much of his discussion; in the index of the book, we find no fewer than seventy-eight page references for the term. Although he appropriately decides to treat this idea most fully in the chapter on Nishida, he also includes a lengthy section entitled “Self and Self-Awareness” in the chapter on Tanabe (see pp. 165–171), where it is argued that the concept is central to Tanabe’s thought as well. While noting how Tanabe and Nishitani develop this idea of Nishida’s in their own somewhat independent manner, Heisig maintains that an orientation to self-awareness, together with a handful of other related key ideas such as “absolute nothingness” and “the self that is not a self,” unifies the thought of the Kyoto school. In general, the notion of “self-awareness” is at the center of both Heisig’s lucid interpretation and his sharpest criticism of the philosophy of the Kyoto school.

His own critical stance carries forward a line of critique that might be traced back, interestingly enough, to the early Tanabe himself, and which clearly appears in Tosaka’s article that introduced the label “Kyoto school.” The first mention of the term “self-awareness” in *Philosophers of Nothingness* occurs in the context of explaining Tosaka’s complaint that “Nishida had sacrificed historical consciousness to his preoccupation with the interiority of self-awareness” (p. 4). Heisig’s own chief concern involves what he sees as a loss of ethical attention to the otherness of the interpersonal you, but this too is a complaint against the self-orientation of self-awareness. Does the self-awareness of which these thinkers speak preclude a genuine other-awareness, that is to say, an awareness of the radical otherness of the other,

¹⁴ It is noteworthy in this regard that the collection of Nishida’s books that is kept in the library at Kyoto University consists almost exclusively of western works and those on western philosophy. (Nishida’s sizable collection of classical Chinese and Japanese texts is kept at a distance in his hometown of Unoke 宇ノ気.) In comparison, and in correction of the numbers Heisig cites (see p.187), Nishitani’s personal library (which is scheduled to be made available at Otani University) is said to contain approximately 4,000 western titles, 7,000 books in Japanese, and an additional 500 sewn Japanese volumes (線装本). Cf. Hase 2002, p. 13.

an ethical “response-ability” to the other of whom one can never be fully aware?

Heisig certainly does not rashly impose this line of criticism from the start on his elucidation of the notion of self-awareness. He is careful in many respects to point out certain pitfalls of misunderstanding and to develop the rich nuances of the idea. When Nishida places the dialectical event of self-awareness at the focal point of reality, this must not be simply understood as an idealistic subsumption of the world into the subjective ego. For Nishida, we recall, it is not that there is a self who has experience, but rather that there is experience in which appears a self (and an ‘other’). Thus, as Heisig notes, “Nishida had long thought there was something amiss with the preoccupation with the ‘ego’ in modern western philosophy, but at the same time he needed some way to talk about reflexive consciousness. The term ‘awareness’ filled this need” (p. 50). Nishida, attempting to root out any vestiges of psychologism that remained in his early writings, later tended to avoid the term “self-consciousness” to depict this event. “Whereas self-consciousness points to a field in which the reality is grasped *by* an individual self, self-awareness points to a field in which reality becomes aware of itself *in* the individual self” (p. 51). (According to Nishida’s later writings, I would add, the self experiences itself as a “focal point” of the self-determination of absolute nothingness, that is, as an individual that is itself self-determining, but also always in a relation of mutual determination with other individuals.)

Although Heisig suggests that the term 自覚 could often be well translated simply as “awareness,” he also gives us an interesting double interpretation of the term by referring to two ways of understanding the ‘self’ of “self-awareness,” the 自 of 自覚. On the one hand, it refers to the “true Self” of which one becomes aware, the self that transcends the self-enclosed ego by negating itself. On the other hand, the character signifies that something is not controlled or effected from the outside but rather occurs of itself, naturally. On the one hand, then, self-awareness “was a person’s awareness of one’s innermost nature; and on the other hand, it was an awareness that was not so much accomplished by the person but allowed to take place spontaneously, of itself, and without interference. In other words, *awareness* in Nishida came to carry the combined sense of an *auto-awareness of the self* (p. 50).

What then is this “self” that becomes aware? The importance of “the ‘self’ question” in the philosophies of the Kyoto school is reflected in the fact that besides the term “self-awareness,” there are no fewer than thirty-

nine other terms listed in Heisig's index that begin with "self-"! This apparent self-obsession might seem ironic given the fact that the Buddhism-inspired point of their philosophies is to negate the ego and return to the no-self, the non-ego or non-I (three more terms listed in the index). However, one must also recall that the path of Buddhist practice is one of, to paraphrase Dōgen, studying the self in order to forget the self and be enlightened by the ten-thousand things of the world. Self-obsession is the pre-existing problem to be dealt with, not the point of their philosophies—that point being rather a conversion from the self-enclosed ego to what Nishitani refers to in his early writings, as the "elemental subjectivity" of one who has "become aware of the bottom dropping out" (脱底の自覚) from any attempt to ground or substantialize the self, and later on calls "the self that is not a self" (自己ならぬ自己). The self-aware self is thus the self that has broken through the walls of its individual ego to non-dualistically identify itself with (the concerns of) others.

Nevertheless, despite the best efforts of all manner of philosophers, the problem of egoism often remains deceptively multilayered and intractable. Furthermore, the notion of a transpersonal "higher Self" often sublimates and disguises the problem more than helping to resolve it. The contemporary radical critiques of idealism—with their insistence on the non-sublatable "otherness of the Other"—have attuned us to the many subtle manifestations of this problem. Is the philosophy of "self-awareness," in the end, another version of subjective idealism with its forgetfulness of radical otherness? Is the Kyoto school yet another example of where, as Levinas puts it: "Philosophy is an egology"?¹⁵

Questioning the Place of the Other in a Philosophy of Self-Awareness

At the end of his book, Heisig raises the question of "the relation of self-awareness to the critique of the anthropocentric view of reality" (p. 265), a question that once again suggests a problematic affinity between the phi-

¹⁵ Levinas would presumably call into question not only the "true Self" of self-awareness, but also what Heisig calls its "spontaneity." Levinas writes in this regard: "The strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics." The crucial question from the standpoint of Levinas' thought is whether or not Nishida's logic of "the locus of absolute nothingness" ultimately manages to become something essentially different from "ontology" defined as: "a reduction of the other to the same by interposition of a middle and neutral term that ensures the comprehension of being." Levinas 1969, pp. 43-44.

losophies of the Kyoto school and subjective idealism. On the one hand, he notes that “[Nishida’s] logic of locus, [Tanabe’s] logic of the specific, and [Nishitani’s] standpoint of emptiness all stand or fall on [their] critique of tailoring the real to suit the purposes of subject-centered consciousness” (p. 265). The dynamic of self-awareness culminates in a breakthrough beyond being and beyond any subjectivity that reduces objects and other persons to representations of its own conscious designs. This would hardly seem to be an easy target for contemporary critiques of subjectivity; indeed one might expect a fruitful dialogue here.

On the other hand, Heisig questions the extent to which these philosophies of “self-awareness” can, in the last analysis, escape the criticisms levied against idealistic philosophies which center reality on—or even reduce it to—“subjective consciousness.” With regard to the suspicion of anthropocentrism, he remarks how “again and again it has been noted in these pages how the idea of a self-awareness without a subject was made to function as a paradigm for the structure of reality itself” (p. 265). Insofar as this structuring thesis is “not directly questioned, let alone justified,” Heisig contends, “much of the anthropomorphism that is thrown out the front door returns creeping in through the back” (p. 266). Although in this passage he is reacting to the marginalization of animals and other non-human beings, in several places throughout the book he directs his concern to the status of other persons. The place of the interpersonal other in these philosophies of self-awareness is the site of Heisig’s sharpest criticism. This issue may very well also prove to be one of the most controversial aspects of his interpretation. I will attempt here only to note his critique and raise a few counter-questions.

In his presentation of Nishitani’s reflections on the self-other relation, Heisig quotes one of Nishitani’s programmatic, if perhaps somewhat enigmatic, characterizations of the logic of authentic encounter: “Within the absolute two, one and the same absolute openness dominates. Absolute discrimination is here the same as absolute equality. . . . Thus absolute opposition is at the same time absolute harmony. . . . *Self and other are not one, and not two.* To be not one and not two means that they are related, with each retaining its absoluteness, and while still being relative are never for a moment separated” (p. 234). It is when the ego that insists on its own autonomy is broken through, Heisig elaborates, that genuine love is possible, namely “love as a non-ego in which the other is ‘present’ as other and not simply as a ‘projection of one’s own ego’” (p. 234).

And yet, despite this positive elucidation of Nishitani's attempt to think the relation of self and other in such a way that neither is alienated from or reduced to the other, Heisig has already somewhat preemptively concluded that: "As with Nishida, the I-you relationship in Nishitani is given a place of special importance but does not form part of the paradigm of all of reality. In a word, interpersonal encounter is made the handmaiden of self-awareness, and within it the 'other' is viewed as a dimension of no-self" (p. 233). Elsewhere Heisig writes that "the concept of the no-self functions as a metaphor for the pursuit of a state of complete awareness" (p. 16); thus he sees the relation to the other as ultimately being subordinated to the self's coming to awareness of itself. Looking back at the section of the Nishida chapter entitled "Self and Other," we find that Heisig lays precisely this critical judgment forth in no uncertain terms:

The initial impression that the I-you relationship looks to be no more than a secondary, derivative function of self-reflection on the field of absolute nothingness, is confirmed again and again. The encounter of an I with a you is simply one instance of the I en route to its own negation in self-awareness of nothingness. . . . [The] self sees an absolute other [in the depths of its self], but this other is not a you but only the self itself recognized through the you. What unites seer and seen, what determines without anything doing the determining is the universal of nothingness in which all personality, and therefore also all personal encounter, has been abolished. (p. 83)

And yet, one familiar with the often paradoxical logic of the Kyoto school writings might be tempted to add here a "death/resurrection" (死復活) twist to the last line, making it read: ". . . the universal of nothingness in which all personality, and therefore also all personal encounter, has been abolished—and at the same time first made truly possible." This is, in fact, precisely how Ueda Shizuteru interprets and develops Nishida's thought. Ueda uses the greeting of the bow as a concrete example to illustrate how mutual self-negation—the emptying of all ego-centered presumptions and agendas—returns us to the locus of absolute nothingness, a communal place where, to borrow Jean-Luc Nancy's paradoxical manner of expression, we share nothing in common. It is only by "bowing" down into and rising back up within this open field of nothingness that a genuine personal encounter can take place. "There, by way of making oneself into a nothingness, one returns into the

infinite depths of that ‘between’ where *there is neither an I nor a you*. . . . Then, when we rise again so as to come back to life anew and face one another, this becomes a matter of, as Dōgen puts it: ‘thus am I, thus are you [吾も亦如是、汝も亦如是].’¹⁶

Heisig appears to read this complementary death/resurrection of personality rather as an encroachment on the inherently asymmetrical ethical relation of the self to the other. The “moral imperative” which he finds clearly preserved in Buber’s I-thou relation is said to be absent in Nishida.¹⁷ What remains is said to be something similar to Kierkegaard’s process of self-constitution, “where the I-you relationship is a stage in the ‘self’s relating itself to itself” (pp. 301–302).¹⁸ This is a severe criticism, and one that cannot be easily rebuked. Yet, I do not think it should be the last word on the issue. Indeed, despite the fact that the claim that “all personal encounter has been abolished” somewhat dramatically ends the “Self and Other” section of the book, the issue is further problematized by Heisig himself, in the following section, entitled “Love and Responsibility.” There, he quotes Nishida as writing that the “direct intuition” of an I knowing a you or a you knowing an I is a matter of “recognizing oneself as harboring in the recesses of interiority an absolute other and turning to that other to see it as an absolute other, not to unite with it” (p. 84). Might we not read Nishida as saying here that the other in the depths of the self breaks, rather than completes, the hegemony of the subject—that it opens one up to, rather than subsumes the otherness of the other? This direction of interpretation is supported by the fact that Nishida writes of “an ‘infinite responsibility’ of a historically situated I toward a historical you,” and that there “is no responsibility as long as the you that is seen at the bottom of the self is thought of as the self. Only when I am I in virtue of the you I harbor at my depths do I recover an infinite responsibility at the bottom of my existence itself” (p. 85).

And yet Heisig, while not neglecting to point out these passages, remains unconvinced. The no-self is said by Nishida to “give more fully to the other because it is grounded in a nothingness rather than in being.” But, Heisig

¹⁶ Ueda 1991, p. 67.

¹⁷ Heisig refers us to an article in which he compares Nishida’s ideas with Buber’s *I and Thou*, criticizes the former from the perspective of the latter, and takes issue with Ueda’s comparison of these thinkers (cf. p. 301). See Heisig 2000, pp. 179–207.

¹⁸ Nishida does, in fact, comment at length on Kierkegaard’s thought of “the self grounding itself in the absolute” in a later text. See Nishida 1979, vol. 10, p. 7ff.

complains, “no other criteria are given for judging this self-giving.” He then tersely adds: “It remains locked up within the self’s ascent to self-awareness” (p. 85). But who, we might ask, is the self that ascends, and what is the nature of the self that becomes aware? Is the self that is on the way to awareness the self that must be negated, or is it already the same as the self that becomes aware? Does this critical conclusion forget, in the end, to carefully differentiate these terms; does it collapse self-awareness back into self-consciousness and no-self back into subjectivity? Does it abandon the Kyoto school’s attempt to radically rethink the self-other relation or, only after having followed it through to the end, declare it a failure? I leave these questions open; for the powerful critique that Heisig has put forward calls for a more careful and studied response than can be given here.¹⁹

Against Reading Nishida in Stages

In order to take up this question of self-awareness that Heisig has put forward, it will be necessary among other things for one to carefully trace the alterations this term undergoes in the course of the development of Nishida’s thought. Heisig himself only does this up to a certain point when he writes: “The use of the term ‘self-awareness’ to point to something distinct from what western philosophy calls ‘self-consciousness’ only gradually came to force in Nishida’s writings,” namely during the course of his increasingly explicit and radical attempt to “deabsolutize the ordinary subjectivity of the ego” (pp. 49–50). The later Nishida did criticize his own early philosophy as not clearly enough breaking free of psychologism and perhaps, by implication, solipsism. In a sense, Heisig carries forth this self-critique into Nishida’s later writings as well, asking whether the “immanent transcendence” to the locus of absolute nothingness does not itself remain bound to a kind of self-centered worldview that does not leave room for a genuine encounter with the Other.

And yet, many interpreters read the “I and You” essay to in fact constitute

¹⁹ One must also think through the ramifications of concluding with Heisig that Nishida’s philosophy does not accommodate a genuine ethical relation to the other. Given this alleged lacuna at the very heart of Nishida’s thought, could one still claim that his political texts were, in fact, a mere aberration from “the fundamental inspirations of his philosophy” (p. 99)? Is it enough to say that “one should not expect much in the way of insight on problems of . . . morality from Nishida” (p. 71), or should one not demand from any candidate for world philosophy that it allow for a genuine ethical relation to the other?

a major advance, if not a break or a turn, in the development of Nishida's thought. Nishida, having worked out his most "idealistic" writings which purport to establish a "system of self-awareness" in *The Self-Aware System of Universals* and *The Self-Aware Determination of Nothingness*, in the essay "I and You," which appears near the end of the latter volume, strikingly claims: "There is no universal whatsoever that subsumes the I and the you."²⁰ In this essay, Nishida argues that the locus of absolute nothingness—sometimes called the "highest universal" but differing from the "universals of being" in that it alone fully negates itself in so as to let the true individual be—must be thought to also let a genuine interpersonal encounter take place. Although one may dispute the ultimate success of this attempt to account for genuine individuality and personal encounter in a philosophy that still speaks in terms of a "system of universals," it would seem that this essay marks a significant new development in Nishida's thought. It is as if he were testing the ability of his current articulations of a philosophy of nothingness to account for an encounter with the radical otherness of the Other.

Yet Heisig, unconvinced, unambiguously judges that this essay "remains more of an application of his thinking than an advance of it" (p. 80).²¹ In fact, Heisig does not recognize any major alteration in the fundamentals of Nishida's mature thought. After explicating the development of thought in Nishida's first two books, *An Inquiry into the Good* and *Intuition and Reflection in Self-Awareness*, and just before beginning the section entitled "Self-Awareness," Heisig writes: "At this point it is best if we focus on the most important ideas of Nishida's mature thought, without paying too much attention to their dating or the development of their interlocking" (p. 49). On the one hand, Heisig restricts the importance of Nishida's maiden work to "the context of the study of the development of Nishida's thought and the influence it had on others," judging that, on its own, it "does not walk very

²⁰ Nishida 1979, Vol. 6, p. 381.

²¹ Heisig also does not view as highly significant the subsequent addition of "the third person" (彼), even though this is often taken to be the next important step in Nishida's development (cf. p. 301). Restricting the interpersonal relation to the "I and you" runs the risk, according to Nishida, of simply expanding the subjectivity of the I to the familiar realm of one's own community (*Gemeinschaft*). Only by opening oneself in the depths of one's being to the "third person" who is not present, can one introduce an element of "objectivity." This would certainly appear to be an important development in Nishida's thought with respect to the (not always successful) attempts of the Kyoto school to situate Japan in the objective light of the "world" during the military rise of the community of the "family-state."

far in today's philosophical world, east or west" (pp. 40–41).²² On the other hand, Heisig reads all of Nishida's middle and later works without distinguishing any major alteration or advancement in the core elements of his thinking. According to Heisig, Nishida's thought "goes around in circles, ever wider circles, but circles nonetheless" (p. 104). And, unlike the locus of absolute nothingness as "a circle with no circumference and no center," the circling of his thought would have its center in a few core ideas, the most important of these being, for Heisig, that of self-awareness. This term is thus understood as a keyword for all of Nishida's thought.

This runs directly counter to many interpretations, beginning with that of Nishida's student, Kōsaka Masaaki, who saw "self-awareness" as the main idea of only one stage of the development of Nishida's thought (cf. p. 293). Heisig agrees with others (Ueda among them) who see "self-awareness" as a key term that remains in his thought to the end, and which, therefore, cannot be confined to one stage. Nishida, to be sure, does continue to use the term "self-awareness" to the end of his career, though he also continues to define and redefine it along with a number of other key terms ("locus," "intuition," and "God" among them) each time his thought attempts to apply or modify (that is the question!) itself with respect to a new theme. It may be the case that it is necessary to distinguish the concept of "self-awareness" articulated in the second stage of his thought from the "self-awareness" that continues to develop as a key term throughout the later stages.²³

Heisig, however, would likely refuse this compromise, as he explicitly rejects the idea that Nishida's mature thought undergoes any modifications major enough to divide its development into stages: "There are no great turning-points or ruptures, and this gives a kind of artificiality to attempts to distinguish 'stages' in Nishida's thought" (p. 104). This refusal to read Nishida in stages marks a major interpretive gesture on Heisig's part, one that is both

²² This negative appraisal of *An Inquiry into the Good* is likely to arouse some controversy, in Japan at least, where there is a tradition of commentary on Nishida, which runs from Nishitani to Ueda, that places an enormous importance on the groundbreaking ideas of this text. Nishitani writes that Nishida's later ideas were already "present in germ" in *An Inquiry into the Good*. See Nishitani 1991, pp. 87 and 92. Ueda writes that this maiden work's notion of "pure experience," while disappearing "like a comet" from the surface of Nishida's text, is in fact the major impetus and problematic that drives the development of his thought. It is thus, he adds, like "the beginner's mind that must not be forgotten" when reading Nishida. See Ueda 1998, pp. 33–34.

²³ This is, in fact, what many of my own teachers at Otani University and Kyoto University tended to do.

powerful and controversial. It is powerful not only in that it allows us to seamlessly weave many of Nishida's texts together and freely use one to elucidate another, but also because it sets before us, in clear connection, the few major insights and assumptions from which the many facets of his philosophy draw their life-breath. It is controversial in that what we may lose is something of the life-breathing of Nishida's philosophizing, that is to say, the movement of self-questioning that impelled this solitary thinker to continually search after new "ore," writing one book after another up until almost literally the moment of his death.

The question is whether or not an intentional lack of attention to the order of appearance of Nishida's ideas risks distorting the developmental and logical connection between these ideas. According to Kosaka Kunitsugu, who gives us one of the clearest presentations of the stages in the development of Nishida's thought,²⁴ the key ideas appear in the following sequence: 1. pure experience; 2. self-awareness; 3. absolute free will; 4. absolute nothingness and the logic of locus; 5. the system of universals; 6. the historical dialectical world; 7. active intuition; 8. the identity of absolute contradictories; and 9. radical everydayness²⁵ and inverse correspondence. Heisig treats these roughly in the order of 1, 2, 3, 7, 4, 8, 6, 4, 5, and 9. While it is certainly the case that there is much overlap between these stages and that many of these expressions remain central to Nishida's thought to the end, I found the early appearance of "active intuition" and the late appearance of "the logic of locus"²⁶ in Heisig's presentation to be somewhat puzzling. What may prove

²⁴ See Kosaka 1994, pp. 83–173 and 321–342.

²⁵ Here, I borrow Rolf Elberfeld's felicitous translation of 平常底 as "radikale Alltäglichkeit." Heisig does not treat this idea in his book. In fact, he treats the idea of "inverse correspondence between the self and God" only briefly at the end of his chapter on Nishida. There, he notes that the idea speaks against a straightforward mystical unity with God, expressing rather the fact that "the more one is an individual the more one is confronted with the transcendent" (p.103). But does Heisig consider the full weight of this idea of "confrontation" when he had already concluded, a couple of pages prior to this, that: "Like the I-you, the relation to God is subservient to the ascent of the individual to true self-awareness . . . God is a function of human interiority" (p. 101)? In reducing the thought of inverse correspondence—which is an expression, I would maintain, of Nishida's increasing attention to human finitude—to another aspect of this "philosophy of self-awareness," does Heisig pass over the major shift in development in Nishida's religious philosophy, away from early notions like "the unity of man and God" (神人合一)?

²⁶ Heisig's comments on the western sources of inspiration for Nishida's idea of "locus" (see p. 299) need to be supplemented and revised in light of the detailed research that Agustín Jacinto Zavala has done in this regard. See Zavala 2001, pp. 119–134.

to be unexpectedly perplexing to readers is precisely the fact that he does manage to introduce these ideas in a lucid logical sequence. In contrast to the numerous places where the sense Heisig “has made” (cf. p. x) does indeed give us fresh and convincing new ways to interpret the Kyoto school, one accustomed to reading Nishida’s texts strictly “in order” may find it disorienting when one idea is shown to lead directly to, or derive directly from, another idea that, in fact, appeared a decade earlier or a decade later. While some novice and advanced readers may indeed find the interpretive circling made possible by this chronological bracketing illuminating, it is likely to frustrate those trying to get a handle on the movement and development of Nishida’s thought. In any case, all of us will need to take into consideration Heisig’s challenge to the customary step by step way of reading Nishida.

Having ended my reflections with a critical look at the order in which Heisig presents Nishida’s ideas and at his criticism of the place—or rather lack of one—for an encounter with the interpersonal (or divine) Other in a philosophy of self-awareness, let me emphasize again that my intention here is to open up these issues for further discussion. It also needs to be stressed—and this is one of the most refreshing and important characteristics of the book—that Heisig himself has taken great pains to encourage such further discussion and debate by providing us with extensive documentation and references to contrary viewpoints, and by citing not only the passages that directly support his conclusions but also those in spite of which he makes his arguments. This intellectual integrity is demonstrated by the fact that I have been able to question certain of his conclusions largely on the basis of other passages and quotations that his text itself generously provides. Among this book’s many gifts, the greatest may be the model it offers of careful explication, clear interpretation, and open-minded debate over the issues, that is, over the insights and problems that together we inherit from these prolific philosophers of nothingness.

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