

# Transcendence

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**C**URRENTLY IT WOULD appear that transcendence is out of fashion, outdated. Martin Buber expresses this situation in his book *Eclipse of God* by quoting from Sartre's book *Situations*:

This silence of the transcendent, combined with the perseverance of the religious need in modern man, that is the great concern today as yesterday. It is the problem which torments Nietzsche, Heidegger, Jaspers.<sup>1</sup>

Needless to say, the situation has worsened considerably by now.

I should like to discuss two twentieth century thinkers who attempted to think transcendence in a completely nontraditional way. Those thinkers are Karl Jaspers and Nishitani Keiji of the so-called Kyoto school of philosophy. Of course, the kind of transcendence they think cannot be said to be the same; but I believe there is a definite compatibility and perhaps even an affinity. What Jaspers and Nishitani have in common is that their kind of transcendence is not to be found beyond this world. We might call it provisionally a nonmetaphysical transcendence.

But the label is not important. Given the limited scope of this essay I

<sup>1</sup> Martin Buber, *Eclipse of God* (New York: 1957), p. 67.

shall confine myself primarily to *Philosophy of Existence* of Jaspers and to the article "The Personal and the Impersonal in Religion" of Nishitani.

Jaspers' main objection to religion's treatment of transcendence is that it tends to objectify transcendence in fixed symbols which are dogmatically proclaimed. In good Kantian fashion Jaspers states that all ontology is to be rejected.

For ontology, everything was only what thought conceives it to be; for philosophizing, everything is simultaneously permeated by the encompassing, or else it is as good as lost.<sup>2</sup>

Briefly put, I can attain the encompassing only by taking the existential leap from the immanence in which I am trapped to transcendence. In the leap to transcendence I become free. The encompassing to which I transcend is in no sense of the word any kind of being.

The encompassing always merely announces itself—in present objects and within horizons—but it *never* becomes an *object*. Never appearing to us itself, it is that wherein everything else appears. It is also that due to which all things not merely are what they immediately seem to be, but remain transparent.<sup>3</sup>

The encompassing is no particular being or thing, but that within which all things are. The fact that things are not what they immediately seem to be, but are transparent, means that things offer access to the encompassing. We do not need to climb beyond (transcend) things to encounter the encompassing, but in realizing the transparency of things we touch upon the encompassing or, as Jaspers also calls it, upon reality.

In our thinking, we would like to press on to the point where thought is identical with reality; but as we do so we experience the blow of thought rebounding from reality. As thinking transcends itself in the experience of this blow, it can make

<sup>2</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy of Existence*, trans. Richard Grabau (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), p. 22.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 18.

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reality present to the thinker in an indirect and irreplaceable way.<sup>4</sup>

Reality rebuffs thinking, and yet thinking was able to touch reality for an instant. Why should reality rebuff thinking? Jaspers does not tell us here. He seems to accept it as a given fact. But perhaps we can conjecture that the nature of reality is not such that it permits prolonged contemplation. Perhaps reality does not exhibit the static persistence of a Platonic Form. Jaspers states that reality cannot be grasped directly with the categories of our thought. Thus we can say neither that it is some kind of substance nor being. To say that it is "verbal" is not much help either.

Thought recoils from reality; it runs aground or gets stranded (*scheitert*) on reality. But reality was "there."

Jaspers states that after breaking through to the realm of the encompassing through an existential leap we encounter a double possibility, a Kierkegaardian either-or. Either I remain blind to the encompassing and face to face with nothingness; or in the encompassing reality itself comes to meet me and I receive myself as a gift.

Both alternatives are possible. In losing the substance of myself I sense Nothingness. In being given to myself I sense the fullness of the encompassing. I can force neither of these two.<sup>5</sup>

To sum up, Jaspers countenances a transcendence that is neither behind nor beyond things nor can it be flatly equated with things as they first seem to present themselves. Things must become transparent to allow reality to be touched upon. We shall return to this all too brief characterization after some discussion of Nishitani.

In this article "The Personal and the Impersonal in Religion," now incorporated into his book *Religion and Nothingness*, Nishitani tackles the difficult question of "person" in God. Remarking that Nietzsche wanted to establish a new way of being human, Nishitani cautiously proceeds in the direction of finding something like a transpersonal

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p. 28.

dimension in God. For this he has at least one predecessor, Meister Eckhart with his notion of Godhead. The Godhead is beyond the trinity of persons. It is the place within God where God is not himself. Just as Heidegger sees *ekstasis* in human being and in temporality as such, Nishitani can say that *ekstasis* is applicable to the existence of God as well.

Citing a passage from Matthew, Nishitani sees the perfection of God in his nondifferentiating love which causes the rain to fall on the unjust as well as on the just. This selfless, compassionate love stems from God's having emptied himself.

If the work of love has a personal characteristic (as I think it does), then it must be thought that God's perfection (and love as perfection) is an even more fundamental thing than being a "personal" entity, and that it is as the imitation or embodiment of this perfection that the "personal" for the first time comes into being.<sup>6</sup>

The personal first comes into being as an imitation of transpersonal perfection. Nishitani states that the conception of man as a personal being is the highest idea of man hitherto attained. But this idea of man is person-centered, self-centered, ego-centered. With the *ego cogito*, Descartes trapped himself in self-immanence from which he was unable to extricate himself. Actually, he most likely did not even see the desirability or necessity of extricating himself.

For Nishitani, the personal appears from that which cannot itself be called personal. This he calls absolute nothingness. It contains no form of confinement. It is wholly other than person, but it is not some *thing* different from person. It brings person into being.

Absolute nothingness brings person into being. Yet it does not stand behind the person. Nishitani appeals to the derivation of the word person from *persona*, mask. A person is literally *per-sonare*, a sounding through. When the person-centered mode of thinking is dropped, personality becomes the "mask" of absolute nothingness.

Were nothingness thought apart from its mask, it would

<sup>6</sup> Nishitani Keiji, *Religion and Nothingness*, trans. Jan Van Bragt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), pp. 59-60.

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become an idea. Were we to deal with the mask apart from nothingness, personality would invariably be self-centered.<sup>7</sup>

If nothingness is thought by itself, thus objectified, it becomes an idea. It must be *lived* existentially, not just thought. The mask by itself falls back into the ego-centered idea of person. We need both absolute nothingness and mask. Then what is their relation?

Person or mask is an *appearance* of absolute nothingness. It is the only way absolute nothingness can appear at all. Needless to say, absolute nothingness is not the noumenon or thing in itself behind the appearance. There is nothing behind the appearance.

For, while the self and the other as "men" are entirely different from each other, "man" (that is, conscious personality) is, in spite of all his living activities and modes of being, fundamentally an appearance which is presenting itself as "man" in oneness with what is not "man," i.e., with absolute nothingness. Looked at from that aspect, every "man" is, just as he is in his real suchness, not "man," i.e., he is impersonal. In other words, he is "man" as an appearance with "nothing" behind it, of which he is an appearance.<sup>8</sup>

This involves the "dialectic" for which the twentieth century Kyoto school of Japan is well known: it has its roots in the Diamond Sutra's formulation: A is not A, therefore A is A. In a more concrete formulation: Before enlightenment mountains are mountains and rivers are rivers; during enlightenment mountains are not mountains and rivers are not rivers; after enlightenment mountains are *really* mountains and rivers are *really* rivers. The closest approximation to this in Western thought might be Heraclitus: not the fragment that states that we cannot step in the same river twice, but the one that says: we step and we do not step in the same river twice.

Nishitani's "dialectic" plays itself out between absolute nothingness and person or mask. In the language of Western theology:

Subjective existence is established in *ekstasis*; that is, it is established in

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, p. 72.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, p. 78.

the mode of being in which the self has within itself the place where it has stepped beyond itself. If we proceed a step farther, however, such a standpoint—*ekstasis* in this sense—proves to be still insufficient. There remains the more inclusive, more thorough position referred to before, that of absolute negation-*sive*-affirmation. *Ekstasis* consists in the direction from self to the “ground” of self, from God to the ground of God; that is from being to nothingness. Negation-*sive*-affirmation consists in the direction from nothingness to being.<sup>9</sup>

Because person and mask are different from absolute nothingness or selfhood, they are entirely provisional and shadowlike; because they are wholly one with it, they are utterly real in their true suchness. We can perhaps find a weak Western analogy in the highly problematic relation of authenticity and inauthenticity in Heidegger’s *Being and Time*. Everyone is inauthentic, person and mask, a great deal of the time. But many break through to authenticity in intense, rare experiences of angst, anticipating death, or joy. Thus many people embody both authenticity and inauthenticity. Yet it is only authenticity and authentic temporality that can lead us to the dimension of the meaning of being. An authentic person can understand inauthenticity; he often is it. An inauthentic person cannot understand authenticity; he has no conception of it. The fact that the Heidegger of *Being and Time* was still thinking in Kantian terms of the ground of possibility and embroiled himself in contradictory statements about which grounds which need not concern us here.<sup>10</sup>

Other “instances” of this nonduality, which is not simply a flat equational identity, might be Heidegger’s phrase from his later thought: the thinking of being (*das Denken des Seins*). Here being functions both as an objective and as a subjective genitive; being is at once the object of thought, what is thought, and the subject of thought, what is thinking.

Another, still more paradoxical instance might be from the Heart Sutra: Form is emptiness, emptiness is form. This appears to be a flat-out contradiction until we realize that emptiness is not a thing and thus cannot stand in contradiction to anything. A further problem with both of these “instances” is that they are not instances of anything

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, p. 79–80.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. J. Stambaugh, *The Finitude of Being* (Albany: SUNY 1992).

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else. They simply do not instantiate anything else.

Adopting yet another interpretational stance, Nishitani speaks of Vimalakīrti suffering illness out of compassion because all sentient beings suffer illness. His illness is in no sense feigned nor should it be understood as a metaphor. His suffering is thoroughly real. Nevertheless, it is empty. This does not mean that behind the illness there is health. The real illness is, just as it is, emptiness.

Nishitani often cites at least three examples to explicate the theme of the Diamond Sutra: A is non-A; therefore A is A. The examples are: the eye cannot see itself; therefore it can see, i.e., function as an eye. This was also stated by Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* (5.633–5.6331). “You say that this case is not altogether like that of the eye and the field of sight. But you really do *not* see the eye. And from nothing in the field of sight can it be concluded that it is seen from an eye. For the field of sight has not a form like this: Eye.” Nishitani continued: Fire cannot burn itself; therefore it can burn other things, i.e., function as fire. Water cannot wet itself: therefore it can wet other things, i.e., function as water.

These examples are viewed, not from the perspective of representation and *logos*, but on the field of emptiness, on the field of things as they are in themselves (*jitai*).

We may remember that fire is really fire burning everything simply because fire in itself does not burn itself. In the notion of *jitai*, the true reality of things is fully realized as it is. Thus for Nishitani, *jitai* or, “in itself” is simply another term for *sunyata*.<sup>11</sup>

A thing “in itself” (*jitai*) is a thing not represented as an object, but seen, as it were, from within the thing.

A Western thinker who comes close to this manner in a somewhat less radical and precise way is Bergson.

And what I experience will depend neither on the point of view I may take up in regard to the object, since I am inside the object itself, nor on the symbols by which I may translate

<sup>11</sup> Masao Abe, “Nishitani’s Challenge to Western Philosophy and Theology,” paper delivered at the Annual Meeting of the AAR, 1983, p. 32.

the motion, since I have rejected all translations in order to possess the original. In short, I no longer grasp the movement from without, remaining where I am, but from where it is, from within, as it is in itself.<sup>12</sup>

Yet the Eastern mode of access to a thing goes beyond Bergson in that it not only does away with representation, but also abolishes the substantiality of the thing. It does not just "get inside" the thing as a substance. Thus the transcendence at stake here not only gets beyond representation, but also beyond substantiality, or what Heidegger polemicized against all this life as objective presence (*Vorhandenheit*).

Since much of Eastern thought engages in some kind of "practice" that involves the body as well as the mind, we have here not only a rejection of any subject-object duality, but in some cases actual attempts to describe the experiential nature of that practice. This practice involves seated meditation (*zazen*) and also many "artistic" activities such as calligraphy, the tea ceremony, the so-called "martial" arts as well as the simple activities of daily life carried out in a collected, mindful way. Thus in speaking of *samādhi* (a state of mental concentration), Nishitani does not restrict that state, as one would expect, to human beings, but relates it to fire, a falling leaf, flying birds and swimming fish as well.

*Samādhi* is not ordinarily attributed to things like fire, birds, and fish. Nishitani's text softens the surprise a bit by playing on the traditional Sino-Japanese character for *samādhi*, *jo*. The Japanese verbal compound *sadamaru* has the meaning of being settled in a position. For Nishitani this meaning naturally suggests being gathered together or concentrated, not scattered, as the mind would be in state of *samādhi*. The meaning associated with the character *jo* thus allows Nishitani to interpret a state of mind as a state of being. *Samādhi* being is the mode of being or form of something as it is, determining it as the definite thing it uniquely is.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Henri Bergson, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. T. E. Hulme (New York: Macmillan, 1955), pp. 21-22.

<sup>13</sup> John C. Maraldo, "Practice, *Samādhi*, Realization" in *Eastern Buddhist* XXV-1, p. 17.



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What is difficult for us Westerners is to grapple with the process of encountering things in a truly nonrepresentational, nonobjectifying way. It is one thing to say we must overcome the subject-object split, as many philosophers of this century are saying. It is another to actually "see" something in a different way. The closest analogue in the West to this kind of "seeing" is to be found in Plotinus.

The designation "samādhi-being" not only shifts our understanding of a supposed state of mind to a state of being; the conception of that state of being is thus radically altered. It is not "being" in any substantial sense. It cannot appropriately be called "being" at all.

There is no reason not to presume instead that a samādhi is a be-ing and that people and other things are manifestations of that be-ing.<sup>14</sup>

Here "be-ing" is conceived as an "activity" preceding and manifesting both people and things. The terms Nishitani and the Kyoto school in general have for this activity are emptiness, absolute nothingness and suchness, to list a few of the dominant ones. Westerners are apt to be repelled by terms such as emptiness or nothingness, tending to find that they smack of nihilism. But since philosophers in this century seem to be trying to get out of substantialist metaphysics (Wittgenstein, Heidegger, also in his own way Derrida), we should perhaps at least be willing to try to see what is being discussed here.

In an attempt to lay foundations for a Buddhist-Christian dialogue, the Catholic theologian Hans Waldenfels quotes Leslie Dewart, *The Future of a Belief*.

In other words, the reality of being is not distinct from the being of real being; but reality as such is not being. Reality as such is that in which being can be real: reality is that in which existence can be and essence can be understood. . . . God is, to speak properly, not "ultimate" reality, since he is not the reality which exists "after" immediate reality: he is the reality *in relation to which* any other reality is real. God is reality as such. Thus, whatever is true of any being is true because it is real (and not only because it is). On the other hand, reality *as*

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, p. 17.

*such* does not exist, and therefore the reality of any given being, or the reality of being as such is not the same as reality as such.<sup>15</sup>

This passage must come as a shock to us. Reality or God does not exist? But we must stop and consider what is meant here by the term "exist." To exist in the sense intended here means to persist statically as objectified substantialized being. For Buddhists nothing whatsoever exists in this sense since everything is impermanent and transitory. Accordingly, this meaning of existence is utterly deluded and stems solely from our habitual way of conceptualizing and objectifying things.

Reality does not exist. But then what "is" it, or, if we cannot speak in this way, what does it "do"? What does the word "real" mean?

It is unfortunate that the etymology of the English word "real" leads back to *res*, thing, as in the Cartesian *res cogitans* and *res extensa*. In his essay "The Thing" Heidegger has made a very interesting and provocative attempt to think the thing as the locus where the Fourfold of earth, the heaven, the godlike ones and mortals come to presence. We cannot pursue this attempt further here.

Another way to think reality is to contrast it Aristotelian fashion with potentiality. Reality is then the actualization of what is possible or potential. However, since the Buddhist theory of time as momentariness or instantaneity undercuts any possible temporal substratum providing the continuity for such a transition from potentiality to actuality, this conception of reality is inappropriate for our purposes as well.

What constitutes an almost insurmountable barrier for Westerners here is our ingrained belief that what is real is what stays the same and persists throughout all possible change. If I meet a new friend and, after a few days or weeks, I find that this friendship for some reason will not work, I say that the friendship was not real. It did not last.

However, given the Buddhist conviction that everything is impermanent, this belief is simply irrelevant. We must take a closer look at the Buddhist conception of negation as absolutely crucial to any understanding of reality. Negation is not something subservient to the pro-

<sup>15</sup> Hans Waldenfels, *Absolute Nothingness*, trans. J. W. Heisig (New York: 1980), pp. 150-151.

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cess of synthesis, as in Hegel's dialectic. Hegel speaks of "the tremendous power of the negative," and makes it responsible for moving the whole historical process along.

The Buddhist understanding of negation cannot be conceived as an antithesis negating a thesis. Apart from the fact that anything like a thesis is lacking, negation is not something subsequent to a position or thesis representing an opposite position. Negation is simultaneous with the being of a thing, and constitutes an absolute contradiction. At the same time, there is nonduality involved in this absolute contradiction. Following its founder, Nishida Kitarō, the Kyoto school speaks of the self-identity of absolute contradiction. We need to get some concrete "instances" of this abstract formulation.

Let us return to Nishitani's discussion of the eye not seeing itself, water not wetting itself and fire not burning itself. This negation is the very essence of a thing. It is not subsequent to the thing, nor is it in any sense another "thing" representing an antithesis to the thing. Negation is the dimension of the thing that enables it to do what it does. If the eye saw itself, it could see nothing else. If fire burned itself, it would destroy itself and not be able to burn anything else.

Thus each thing is not simply a self-identical substance, but contains its own negation. Even this formulation is misleading. It is not the case that there is first of all a thing which then somehow gets negated. Rather, the "negation" is, so to speak, simultaneously "prior" to the thing and is what allows it to become manifest. In the language of the Heart Sutra, there is primordially emptiness (absolute nothingness, suchness) which, as it were, exudes and articulates form from itself. There is no causal or temporal relation involved. Emptiness and form are nondual. Form cannot be without emptiness and emptiness cannot "be" or become manifest without form. One can perhaps say that emptiness is more fundamental, but it does not cause form or anything else. For this reason it is more appropriate to say that emptiness is all things than that all things are empty. Emptiness "ises" all things.

Reality and illusion are inseparable. They are to be grasped as the "middle." That is, on the field of emptiness, as we have tried to show, a thing is itself in not being itself. For it is an affirmation of each being on the home-ground of emptiness inherent in which is the identity of reality and illusion.<sup>16</sup>

Reality and illusion, or emptiness and form, are nondual. This nonduality is a "double exposure," an image, incidentally, which Heidegger hints at darkly in *Vier Seminare* to characterize the "relation" between Appropriation (*Ereignis*) and Framing (*Gestell*). One might try to express this in a slightly different way as the relation between a photograph and its negative. When one looks at the negative—it is interesting to note that the original "photograph" or impression is called a negative—one sees a kind of shadowy outline of the photograph. Once one has seen the print, one can more or less see it in the negative. But, of course, this comparison, like all such comparisons, has its limitations.

We want to move toward some kind of conclusion and reestablish a contact with Jaspers and transcendence. Both the encompassing and emptiness are not something beyond man and this world, but "something" in which things are. Neither the encompassing nor emptiness is a something. This fact makes them extremely difficult to express in any language, a fact of which Jaspers with his "ciphers" was keenly aware. Heidegger was trying to move in this direction when he began crossing out the word being ("Sein"). Perhaps Jaspers was more successful in finding a word that names something that cannot be objectified or represented, and yet describes a kind of activity, that of encompassing.

Words which do not reveal reality, words which are nothing but subjective counterfeits, are called *prapanā* [diffuse, delusive, more specifically, the attachment to the subjective and the objective as self-existent] by Nāgārjuna, mere wordplay which conceals and covers reality. Words which come attached with reality, words that bespeak the "in-itself" are called *desāna* [instructive].<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> *The Religious Philosophy of Nishitani Keiji*, ed. Taitetsu Unno (Berkeley: 1989), p. 317.

<sup>17</sup> *The Religious Philosophy of Nishitani Keiji*, p. 313.