

## REVIEW ARTICLE

James W. Heisig, *Philosophers of Nothingness: An Essay on the Kyoto School*  
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## 1. DEATH IN DEEP SPACE

There is a motif commonly found in science fiction, which derives from earlier narratives of nautical adventure and stories of castaways. The motif is that of the sole human being, unmoored, set loose, and adrift in space. One of the most popular versions of this is found in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, in which astronaut Frank Poole is set loose by the intelligent supercomputer HAL to drift aimlessly into the depths of deep space. In the film Kubrick portrays the scene without a soundtrack or, for that matter, any sound at all. The scene of being set adrift into space is depicted with silent horror: all we as viewers see is a lone figure speeding off into a black abyss.



During the Golden Age of science fiction in the 1920s and 1930s, pulp authors tended to depict the “adrift in space” motif as being “lost in space,” that is, as a by-product of inter-galactic adventure narratives. One was only lost in space until the next adventure, the next battle, the next conquest. However, for earlier works—most notably Camille Flammarion’s metaphysical science fiction *Lumen*—being adrift in space is less a by-way to yet another adventure, but a speculative opportunity in and of itself. Being adrift in space *is* the story itself, so much so that Edgar Allen Poe could pen entire cosmic dialogues around the theme, without character, plot, or setting.

Being adrift in space is not only a moment of horror, but also a moment of speculation. It is, first, a confrontation with the certitude of death. The lone body, drifting into deep space, will inevitably dissolve itself into that abyss, both literally and metaphysically. When one is lost at sea, there is at least the reliable dichotomy of surface/depth or land/sea, to orient one’s being lost. Similarly, when one is lost in space, one is simply moving from one planet to the next (using the reliable dichotomy of earth/sky), perhaps with the stars as one’s guide. But the motif of being adrift in space lacks all these reference points. There is no ground, no horizon, no perspective—for that matter there is no depth of space itself, there is only blackness, an abyss that is at once flat and infinite.

This science fictional motif of being adrift in space is an allegory for a certain type of metaphysical crisis that goes by the name of “nothingness.” As Pascal once noted, “the eternal silence of these infinite spaces terrifies me.” When a philosophy loses its ground—or when it discovers that the ground it had assumed is actually groundless—then philosophy is confronted with a few choices. It can accept this loss of ground as a fact, and then opt for either mysticism or science, poetry or facts. But there are also those philosophies that resist this move, and attempt to paradoxically subsist in the loss of ground. In the Western tradition thinkers such as Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche are typically given as examples of this kind of thinking. But there is also a whole tradition of non-Western thinking that engages with this question, specifically in Japan, where the intersection of Buddhist and European cultural influences produced one of the most fascinating philosophical approaches—that of the so-called Kyoto School. James Heisig’s book *Philosophers of Nothingness: An Essay on the Kyoto School* is not only a cross-cultural examination of the Kyoto School philosophers, but in a more general sense it contributes to a larger discourse concerning philosophy and its ground or groundlessness, or, perhaps, of philosophy adrift in deep space. While it was published a few years ago, Heisig’s book will, I believe, come to be an indispensable guide for those interested in comparative philosophy, especially as many of the works Heisig discusses are gradually being made available in translation.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. ON NOTHING

At the center of Heisig’s book are three philosophers, each of whom brings with them some degree of training in Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy generally, and Sōtō Zen in particular. These philosophers are Nishida Kitarō (1870-1945), Tanabe Hajime (1885-1962), and Nishitani Keiji (1900-1990). The moniker of the “Kyoto School” seems to have been made quite early, which Heisig dates to a 1932 newspaper article. Then, as now, the term refers to a generation of philosophers who worked and taught at Kyoto Imperial University, and who brought together Western-European and Eastern-Buddhist ideas, and who have had a significant degree of influence on modern Japanese culture, philosophy, and politics. Their influence also stretched outside of Japan—Nishida was a colleague and friend of D.T. Suzuki, who went on to popularize Zen in America, and both Tanabe and Nishitani studied and lectured outside of Japan.

One of the distinguishing aspects of the Kyoto School is their unique combination of Mahāyāna Buddhism and German Idealism. Nishida speaks frequently of “pure experience,” Tanabe of “absolute mediation,” and Nishitani of “absolute nothingness.” The concept of the absolute haunts nearly all their works, whether they are discussing subjective experience or the physics of the material world. This development of a hybrid philosophical language was no accident. In the early 1920s, Tanabe received a scholarship to study abroad, where he worked with the Kantian philosopher Alois Riehl, before his attraction to Husserlian phenomenology. Apparently, Tanabe was invited to Husserl’s home to give a paper, where the latter hoped to make Tanabe a prophet of phenomenology to the East, a task to which Tanabe was not sympathetic. Tanabe eventually

befriended a young Heidegger, who tutored Tanabe in German philosophy and introduced him to the works of Hegel, Fichte, and Schelling. Likewise, Nishitani grew up reading Dostoevsky, Schelling, and above all Nietzsche, while also enjoying the novels of Natsume Sōseki. In the late 1930s Nishitani received a scholarship to study abroad with Henri Bergson. When news of the French vitalist's failing health reached Nishitani, he was offered an alternate: to go to the University of Freiburg to study with Heidegger. During this two-year period, Nishitani not only attended Heidegger's lectures on Nietzsche, but he wrote a thesis for Heidegger on Nietzsche and Meister Eckhart.

These cross-cultural elements make for a fascinating—if sometimes ambiguous—example of what a post-national, global philosophy might look like. For the Kyoto School philosophers, this particular mix of influences is best exemplified by what is arguably their major contribution: the concept of nothingness. The term *śūnyatā*, conventionally translated into English as either “nothingness” or “emptiness,” brings with it a whole host of meanings that are as much religious as philosophical. In the Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition, *śūnyatā* is the groundless ground of all things, the principle or essence that is not itself a principle or essence. It is that which is prior to all duality of being and non-being, beyond all subsequent divisions of subject and object, and that which persists beyond or behind all that subsists as phenomena. But nothingness is also inherently self-negating; the thought of that which defies the very categories of thought, primary among them being Aristotle's famed principle of non-contradiction. Such a thought requires a deft philosophy able to handle the nuances of contradiction, as the Kyoto School thinkers would find in the work of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century dialectician Nāgārjuna, and in Dōgen, the 13<sup>th</sup> century philosopher and founder of Sōtō Zen.

But as Heisig repeatedly notes, the Kyoto School philosophers were never content to simply add on Eastern ideas as a supplement to the Western canon, the former playing the role of the intuitive, poetic loosening of ideas, the latter establishing the rules and rigor of science. Instead, what we find is that, in different ways, each of the Kyoto School thinkers brings together disparate philosophical traditions in a way that ultimately questions philosophy *tout court*.

For Nishida, himself personally and professionally inspired by Zen, the challenge was discovering the common thread between Eastern and Western philosophy. Nishida's reference point here is Kant, and the impasse the Kantian critical philosophy poses between self and world, an impasse that Nishida is convinced can be rethought. The path for doing this lies in Nishida's mixture of a Fichtean Buddhism:

For some time now I had it in mind to try and explain all of reality in terms of pure experience... Along the way, I came to think that it is not that there is an individual that has the experience, but that there is an experience that has the individual, that experience is more basic than any distinction individuals bring to it. This made it possible to avoid solipsism, and by taking experience as something active, to harmonize it with transcendental philosophy after Fichte.<sup>2</sup>

The passage is from Nishida's best-known work, *An Inquiry into the Good* (1911). As Heisig notes, Nishida's search for “a single, all-encompassing, acting absolute” led him first to question the categories of self and experience laid out by Kant and recapitulated by post-Kantian thinkers such as Fichte. In passages like these, the contemporary reader may be reminded of Deleuze's impersonal “a life,” or James's radical empiricism. Of course, the problem Nishida runs into quite early is the same one encountered by mystics when they speak of a mystical union with the divine. That problem is not just about psychologism, but about the tension between intuition and reflection, key terms in Kantian (and Bergsonian) philosophy. Heisig summarizes the problem: “As *intuition* it [the subject] needs to be aware of a flowing, continuous reality unbroken by subject or object, and as *reflection* it needs to step outside of the flow of reality to recognize it.”<sup>3</sup>

In Heisig's analysis, Nishida's great insight is to shift his direction: instead of establishing a continuum beyond subject and object from the inside-out, Nishida re-casts his method, moving from the outside-in. This shift is detected at the micro-level of Nishida's philosophical vocabulary, which in earlier texts favored phrases such as

“pure experience” to talk about the anonymous, impersonal quality of experience. In *An Inquiry into the Good* and his later writings, Nishida reserves the phrase “absolute nothingness” to talk about this continuum underlying all divisions (not just of subject and object, but of being and non-being as well). Instead of attempting to reach the continuum as a subject would an object—a project destined to fail, since the Absolute Nishida discusses is not, strictly speaking, an object—now Nishida opts for the language of negation borrowed in part from his study (and practice) in Zen Buddhism. In the practice of *zazen*, one does not so much “look at” nothingness, as one allows the nothingness that pervades all things, including the self, to emerge. In this way, it is through an ontology of negation that Nishida attempts to move from psychology to ontology—a move echoed a century earlier by thinkers such as Fichte. Heisig neatly summarizes this shift in Nishida’s thinking: “To call it absolute *nothingness* is to say that it does not itself come to be or pass away, and in this sense is opposed to the world of being. To call it *absolute nothingness*...is to say that it is beyond encompassing by any phenomenon, individual, event, or relationship to the world.” Again we see this motif of the groundless ground, the insubstantial substance. “Its absoluteness means precisely that it is not defined as an opposite to anything in the world of being...Nothingness opposes the world as absolute to relative.”<sup>4</sup>

Whether or not such a philosophy does escape the pitfalls of subjectivism or solipsism is up for debate; but in shifting his terms in this way and opting for a negative ontology, Nishida’s thought open onto another problem, one different from that of subjectivism. That problem has to do with contradiction itself, a problem already latent in Nishida’s early work. The relation between contradiction and negation in philosophy has a long history, to be sure. But, if we are to follow Aristotle’s and Kant’s statements on the topic, it appears that even contradiction must observe certain rules, such that it can be inculcated within philosophy itself as a subset of logic. Contradiction must make a certain sense. In Heisig’s reading, the Kyoto School questions even this. As he notes, “to call reality itself *absolute nothingness*, then, is to say that all of reality is subject to the dialectic of being and not-being, that the identity of each thing is bound to an absolute contradictoriness.”<sup>5</sup>

### 3. TOWARDS A DARK MEONTOLOGY

In a sense, where Nishida leaves off, Nishitani begins. Also deeply influenced by Zen Buddhism, Nishitani was an attentive reader of Western thinkers such as Eckhart, Schelling, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. More directly engaged with the social, cultural, and political issues of his time—though not without some controversy—Nishitani highlights the “problem of nihilism” as it impacts modern Japanese culture.<sup>6</sup> It is from this basis that his own engagement with the concept of nothingness derives. Writing after the war, Nishitani notes that nihilism has come to mean something different in Japan. Whereas, as per Nietzsche’s diagnosis, European nihilism emerges as the result of a crisis in religion and the ascendancy of scientific rationality, in Japan the foundation has simply withered away, without a great announcement and without anything taking its place. It is, in a sense, the most perfected example of nihilism. Nishitani notes that “[t]he worst thing is that this emptiness is in no way an emptiness that has been won through struggle, nor a nihilism that has been ‘lived through.’ Before we knew what was happening, the spiritual core had wasted away completely.”<sup>7</sup>

Nishitani takes his cue from Nietzsche. Both identify a crisis that is as much a social, cultural, and political crisis as it is a philosophical one. Both agree that it will not do to simply set up a new idol (technology) to replace the old one (religion). And both agree that the way beyond nihilism is through nihilism. But, interestingly, whereas Nietzsche opts for an affirmative ontology of non-human will, force, and quanta of power, Nishitani does nearly the opposite, and opts for a negative ontology filled with contradictories—the ground of nothingness, a religion without God, an ethics without selfhood. As Nishitani notes, “ontology needs to pass through nihilism and shift to an entirely new field.”<sup>8</sup> What that new field is, is the subject of Nishitani’s major work, *Religion and Nothingness*. Using contemporary terms, we might say that, whereas Western philosophy concerns itself primarily with being, the philosophy that Nishitani points to concerns itself primarily with non-being or nothingness; whereas Western philosophy is centered around the question of ontology, the philosophy that Nishitani is thinking of is instead a *meontology*, a paradoxical ontology of non-being or nothingness. But this nothingness cannot simply be privative or relative, else Nishitani has done nothing other than re-cast Hegel or Kant. Neither can this

nothingness be the subjective experience of ungroundedness, as one finds in Sartre. Instead, in Heisig's terms, nothingness has to be understood as "the nullification of the self by the nullification of the ground it has to stand on." This in turn leads to a further stage in which "that nihility is itself nullified...in the awareness that the world of being that rests on the nihility of the self and all things is only a relative manifestation of nothingness as it is encountered *in* reality."<sup>9</sup> As with Nishida and Tanabe, one finds with Nishitani a preoccupation with some form of a subtractive, absolute monism, a sense that, in Heisig's words, "beneath that world, all around it, there is an encompassing absolute nothingness that *is* reality. Nihilism is emptied out, as it were, into an absolute emptiness, or what Buddhism calls *śūnyatā*."<sup>10</sup>

The lengths to which Nishitani was willing to go in his development of the concept of nothingness inevitably leads him to think about religion. As Heisig points out, however, while all the Kyoto School thinkers drew in different ways on Buddhism, they were in disagreement about the relation between philosophy and religion. In a way, they replay the debates of the Scholastics concerning faith and reason. In Nishida's more poetic works, philosophy tends to turn into religion, while at other times it is philosophy's function to explicate the truths revealed in religion. For Tanabe, who remains more committed to the scientific rigor of philosophy, religion and philosophy are analogous but separate endeavors. However even Tanabe implies that if the "absolute insolence" and freedom of philosophical thought is pursued to its extreme, it enters into a shared space with religion. Nishitani takes yet another position: "nothingness is deepened to the point that it can assault the very throne of God. The nihility that has untied itself from any and all support wrestles with God for authority and succeeds in offering itself as the absolute groundless ground."<sup>11</sup> One senses that, for Nishitani, there is a horizon of thought shared by religion and philosophy, though they may each come to that horizon from different places. As Heisig comments, "only by pursuing philosophy to its limits does it self-negate and open into religion."<sup>12</sup> There is, perhaps, another history of philosophy to be written, one that would begin not from an ontology of being or becoming, but from a negative ontology—or really, a dark meontology for which contradiction is, paradoxically, not only fundamental but also necessary.

Though their positions differ greatly, the Kyoto School philosophers not only provide a relevant example of a tradition of comparative philosophy, but they also intervene, from stage left as it were, into the major philosophical debates of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nishida is the clearest on this point: "I think that we can distinguish the west to have considered being as the ground of reality, the east to have taken nothingness as its ground."<sup>13</sup>

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## NOTES

1. In addition to the anthology *The Buddha Eye: An Anthology of the Kyoto School*. Ed. Frederick Franck. (San Diego: World View Press, 2004), other examples include Masao Abe's *Zen and the Modern World*. Ed. Steven Heine (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003), Kitaro Nishida, *Last Writings: Nothingness and the Religious Worldview*. Trans. David Dilworth (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1993), Keiji Nishitani's *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*. Trans. Setsuko Aihara and Graham Parkes (New York: SUNY Press, 1990) and *On Buddhism*. Trans. Seisaku Yamamoto and Robert Carter (New York: SUNY Press, 2006), and Hajime Tanabe's *Philosophy as Metanoetics*. Trans. Takeyuchi Yoshinori (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).
2. Quoted in Heisig, 44.
3. Heisig, 48.
4. Heisig, 62.
5. Heisig, 63.
6. One of the issues that Heisig discusses throughout his book is the often confused and conflicted relation between philosophy and politics in modern Japan, particularly surrounding the Kyoto School's flirtations with nationalism. Heisig neither excuses nor condemns the Kyoto School's attempts to link philosophy with politics, and, interestingly, religion often comes to serve as a mediator between them.
7. Quoted in Heisig, 216.
8. Quoted in Heisig, 221.
9. Heisig, 220-21.
10. Heisig, 221.
11. Quoted in Heisig, 230.
12. Heisig, 218.
13. Quoted in Heisig, 61.