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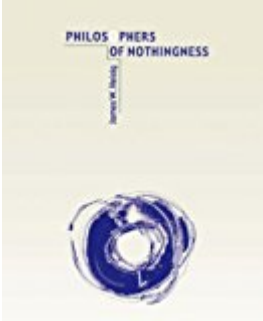
James Heisig. *Philosophers of Nothingness: An Essay on the Kyoto School.* Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001. xi + 380 pp. $23.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-8248-2481-5.



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James Heisig's *Philosophers of Nothingness*, the English version of his *Filosofos de la nada*, appeared in 2001 and has ever since provoked a series of superlative reviews, published in the common venues dealing with Japanese thought and comparative philosophy, praising it, for the most part, as a brilliant milestone in the scholarship on the Kyoto school. And such it is in many ways. In this book, Heisig presents a clear, insightful, and accessible exposition of the philosophy advanced by the three arguably most important thinkers of the so-called Kyoto-school--Kitarou Nishida, Hajime Tanabe, and Keiji Nishitani--that was sorely lacking in the English and German speaking world as well as, I assume, in most languages other than Japanese.

In three sections, which are enclosed by an orientation and a prospectus, Heisig portrays the philosophies of Nishida, Tanabe, and Nishitani, focusing on their conceptual achievements, the ventures into political thought all three thinkers engaged during the militarism of Shouwa Japan, and the religious dimension central to these philosophies. He does this in an extremely engaging style that draws the reader into the world of Kyoto school thought and kindles a passion for the issues Nishida, Tanabe, and Nishitani had been struggling with throughout their careers. In addition, Heisig's strategy to separate technical arguments from the main body of the text is, in my opinion, brilliant. This method makes not only the text immensely readable, but the narrative notes Heisig presents in an addendum of roughly seventy pages also constitute the perfect venue for following up different arguments that, while sometimes only tangential to the main thread of the book, nevertheless provide insightful, if not necessary, information. Since Heisig thus gathers the notes by section rather than assigning them to individual terms or citations, Brett Davis suggests that this method may make "the task of tracking down a particular reference a bit cumbersome."[1] Yet, citing the references in the order in which the quotations appear would make them easily accessible and still maintain an otherwise superb format.

One of the main contributions of Heisig's book is his argument that the thought of the Kyoto

school thinkers constitutes essentially a world philosophy or, at least, a call for one. In short, Heisig contends that Kyoto school philosophy transcends the borders of a parochial philosophy and provides the impetus and the method to do philosophy that draws from various philosophical traditions. Heisig argues that "even this very idea of comparative philosophy ends up confirming the assumption that the only ***world*** philosophy is philosophy done in the western mold. This is the mold that Nishida, Tanabe, and Nishitani have broken, though the consequences of that rupture have only just begun to affect those engaged in the classical western philosophy around the world" (p. 8). Heisig here not only describes the project of the Kyoto school but further boldly and justifiably challenges the hypothesis that philosophy must be "philosophy in the western mold." In addition, he points out, whether consciously or not, the irony with which Heidegger's claim identifying philosophy with the tradition emerging from the Greeks declares a geographically restricted philosophy to be universal.

The Kyoto school philosophers suggest an alternative methodologically by interweaving "Western" and Buddhist ideas in the case of Nishida, and arguments in the case of Nishitani, and conceptually in the form of Nishida's "global world" (***sekaitekisekai***) or "world of world history" (***rekishitekisekai***) and their variations on the notion of "absolute nothingness" (***zettaimu***).[2] I will return to the latter concept below. The key to the conundrum of "world philosophy" lies, as Heisig is well aware, in the very terminology "philosophy" itself. Of course, the academic discipline of philosophy takes its name from the Greek word ***philosophia***, first used by Homer and Herodotus, but the etymology of a name does not preclude other traditions. P. T. Raju argued in 1962, in his ***Introduction to Comparative Philosophy***, that the Sanskrit ***darshana*** and the Chinese ***jia***similarly denote a philosophical discourse in the narrow sense. Gene Blocker's ***World Philosophy: An East-West Comparative Introduction to Philosophy*** more forcefully attempts to create one world philosophy by combining the foundational thinkers of Greece, India, and China to introduce and discuss the fundamental issues of and arguments in metaphysics, epistemology, etc. It does seem, therefore, more than appropriate that the push towards a world philosophy initiated by the philosophers of the Kyoto school and their contemporaries in India, such as Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, is supplemented by fundamental discussions on the nature of philosophy. Heisig's three-level definition of philosophy as a "more or less conscious myth or framework of values," a "more critical body of thought dealing with ultimate questions, systematically recorded and transmitted," and the "particular tradition that began in Athens" offers a good starting point (p. 7), but the fact that he is now preparing a symposium on "Re- defining Philosophy" illustrates the importance rethinking of philosophy has for the project of a world philosophy.[3]

Let me state very clearly that I completely agree with Heisig's argument and sympathize with his concerns; however, the project of a "world philosophy" raises a few important questions, especially with regards to the categories we use. I would like to focus here on those pertaining to Heisig's project in ***Philosophers of Nothingness***. A malicious intent could misconstrue his argument that Kyoto school philosophers, as the most prominent representation of Japanese philosophy, laid the foundations for a world philosophy to equate the three terms Kyoto school philosophy, Japanese philosophy, and world philosophy. This is of course not the case, but headings such as "Japanese Philosophy as World Philosophy" beg the question of what our categories mean. Is membership in the Kyoto school defined by direct lineage or even as closed society limited to "Nishida, Tanabe, and their disciples," as Masakatsu Fujita suggests, or is it possible to define Kyoto school philosophy by method or content as the title ***Philosophers of Nothingness*** implies?[4]

Similarly, is Japanese philosophy defined by geography, ethnicity of the author, language in which it is conducted, or by some intangible essence evoked by, among others D. T. Suzuki and, more recently, Takeshi Umehara? What are the parameters of a world philosophy that transcends provinciality and invites a variety of traditions and methodologies without becoming a meaningless label? These questions are, of course, immensely difficult and Heisig does an exemplary job of negotiating the difficulties of and traps inherent in these definitions. For example, he presents the etymology of the term "Kyoto school" invented by Jun Tosaka in 1932 and varying lists of members suggested by the 1998 ***Dictionary of Philosophy and Ideas*** (***Tetsugaku shisou jiten***) and a number of scholars ranging from Yoshinori Takeuchi to Futoshi Shibayama, in his notes. He also is actively pursuing the question of what constitutes Japanese Philosophy in a source book he is presently preparing together with Thomas Kasulis and John Maraldo.[5] Finally, his decision to limit his discussion to the triad of Nishida, Tanabe, and Nishitani is warranted since his focus is the variations on the philosophy of nothingness of which Nishida, Tanabe, and Nishitani represent three fundamental approaches; and it was probably the works of Tanabe and Nishitani that brought the philosophies of Nishida and the Kyoto school to the prominence they have today. This of course does not preclude the observation that an English language exposition of Kyoto school philosophy that includes the so-called minor thinkers of the Kyoto school in addition to the already available ***Sourcebook of Modern Japanese Philosophy*** by David A. Dilworth, Valdo H. Vieglielmo, and Agustin Jacinto Zavala would make an important contribution to comparative philosophy.

My sole disappointment with this book is that Heisig did not make more of the title ***Philosophers of Nothingness***. Not only could this phrase be used to avoid the question of whether or not to define the Kyoto school by lineage and to simultaneously highlight the main contribution of these philosophers, it also leads straight to the center of philosophies of Nishida, Tanabe, and Nishitani. In fact, I believe that the notion of nothingness, even though it is not the one I would choose, could be used as a heuristic device to unlock the intricacies of their philosophies. Nishida, as Heisig states rather succinctly, was driven to find the one absolute principle that grounds all of thought. In fact, his work can be read as an exploration of possible candidates to function as such a principle. In some sense he found it in the notion of "absolute nothingness" "that is 'absolved' of any opposition that could render it relative, so that its only opposition to the world of being is that of an absolute to a relative" (p. 62) and, at the same time, that "it allowed individuals, just as they are, to stand in opposition to one another as ***absolute*** contradictories" (p. 64).

This principle constitutes Nishida's response to the philosophical problems evoked by the dualism of European enlightenment thought, especially Kantianism, and, at the same time, the founding block of his philosophy on which he built, or tried to erect, his philosophies of history and religion. The place where Nishida succeeded most in developing this notion of "absolute nothingness," that combined the oppositions of self and other, subject and predicate without dissolving them, was his philosophy of religion, to be exact, his notion of "inverse correspondence." This concept summarizes Nishida's belief that "the stronger the opposition, the more deeply rooted the identity" (p. 103). Tanabe reinterpreted the notion of "absolute nothingness," he had inherited from his teacher Nishida, and located it squarely within the immanent realm of oppositions. While sounding frequently similar to Nishida's later philosophy, which undoubtedly received some influence from Tanabe's thought, Heisig clearly identifies their main difference: "For Tanabe absolute nothingness ... is not an unmediated universal ... itself lacking in differentiation.... It does not ***belong*** to being, but at the same time its activity is only ***manifest*** in the world of being, refracted, for ex-

ample, in the ethical activities of self-negating praxis" (p. 120). While Nishida's "absolute nothingness" shares this ambivalence of transcendent yet immanent, it does privilege the moment of identity, if only by virtue of Nishida's terminology.

Tanabe's version of absolute nothingness instead is historical, in that in the form of the "specific" (***shu***) it mediates, but does not identify the universal and the individual. Similarly, it is this perseverance of the moments of differentiation and otherness in the form of "other-power" (***tariki***) that enables his "absolute critique" of "the hubris of reason" (p. 161) and a methodology Heisig describes as "philosophy-***in***-religion" (p. 162). Finally, Nishitani replaces the notion of absolute nothingness with that of emptiness to stress its indebtedness to the Buddhist tradition and to shift from the search for a foundational logic to the rhetoric of the standpoint. This "standpoint of emptiness, then, is not so much a philosophical 'position' as it is the achievement of an original self-awareness ... compared to which all other consciousness is caught in the fictional darkness of ignorance" (p. 222). Nishitani bases on this standpoint and the notion of selflessness it entails not only his philosophy of religion or what can be called one attempt at a Zen philosophy, but more concretely an ethics and philosophy of science that conquers the alienation engendered by egocentrism in its philosophical sense and nihilism. In this way, the notion of nothingness does facilitate a comparison that brings out the differences between the three main Kyoto school philosophers and, simultaneously, focuses their contribution to a world philosophy.

The questions, however, that remain in my mind are as follows: how will these variations on the philosophy of nothingness "be seen to have made a more lasting impact on twentieth century philosophy" than neo-Kantianism (p. 260)? How can these philosophies be extracted from "their naïve contexts" (p. 264) and be evaluated, not merely as an interesting historical phenomenon, but rather a major contribution towards a world philosophy? Or as Joseph O'Leary puts it, "how can we sift what is living from what is dead in the philosophy of the Kyoto school?"[6] My suspicion is that the answer to these questions lies exactly in developing something akin to a philosophy of nothingness from the sources of the Kyoto school thinkers that does not take as its orientation Kantian or neo-Kantian philosophy, but, as Heisig implicitly suggests in his prospectus, contemporary thought. If this can be done successfully, I believe, the philosophies of the Kyoto school and especially the principle or standpoint of absolute nothingness will be able to provide a promising paradigm for a philosophy beyond parochial mindsets and boundaries.

In the final section, I would like to give a brief nod to a few topics ever present in the scholarship on the Kyoto school. First, concerning a possible interpretation of Kyoto school philosophy as Buddhist thought Heisig clearly and succinctly states that "the Kyoto school philosophers are eastern and they are Buddhist. But their aim and context is neither eastern nor Buddhist" (p. 8); rather their orientation is the Continental philosophy of their time, while their interpretations of Buddhism is idiosyncratic at best and more often than not have been rejected by Buddhologists. Second, Heisig's judgment is equally to the point when he tackles the perennial debate on whether Nishida supported the Japanese nationalism of his time. In short, while Nishida "lent validity to the question of the identity of the Japanese spirit" and while "his idea of nation shared with the ideological propaganda ... important assumptions about ... the special mission of the Japanese people," the universalism of his general philosophical system and "inspiration" was in marked contrast to his adventures into political thought. Third, even though the notion of no-self constitutes a centerpiece of Kyoto school philosophy, Heisig correctly acknowledges that Nishida, Tanabe, and Nishitani failed, for the most part, to acknowledge the polyvalence as well as the ethical implications of this

concept. All three instances reveal not only Heisig's discerning insights but also his fair evaluation of Kyoto school philosophy avoiding an uncritical adherence to as well as an equally uncritical rejection of the philosophers of nothingness.

Finally, I would like to comment on Heisig's idiosyncratic translation of "***shu no ronri***" as "the logic of the specific." I find his choice of word intriguing and preferable to the traditional, literal, rendition of the Japanese original as "logic of species," not the least because it serves to distinguish Tanabe's interpretation from Hegel's terminology (p. 314). However, this may be a case where the reader could benefit from an explanation of this choice of words or even a Kanji glossary, especially since Heisig's translation constitutes a break with not only the general use of Tanabe scholarship but also with his own rendition of "***shu***" as "species" in two essays prior to 1994.[7]

In the end, Heisig's book stands out as one of the most insightful and fascinating studies of the philosophies of the Kyoto school that simultaneously contributes to scholarship on and functions as an introduction to the philosophies of nothingness.

Notes

[1]. Brett Davis, "Introducing the Kyoto School as World Philosophy: Reflections on James Heisig's ***Philosophers of Nothingness***," ***Eastern Buddhist*** 34, no. 2 (2002), p. 146.

[2]. Ironically, Nishida developed these two concepts in the context of his politically controversial ***The Problem of Japanese Culture*** (***Nihon bunka no mondai***) to argue that Japan, as any other culture has to become "worldly," today we would say "global," in order to theorize the role Japan has in the world. It shows the tension between Nishida's "political philosophy" and his "fundamental inspirations" and supports Heisig's interpretation that the former distracted from the latter (p. 99). Kitarou Nishida ***The Collected Works of Kitarou Nishida*** (***Nishida kitarou zenshuu***), vol. 12 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1988), pp. 275-394.

[3]. For further information see http://www.nazan-u.ac.ip/SHUBUNKEN/projects/projects.htm.

[4]. Masakatsu Fujita, ***The Philosophy of the Kyoto School*** (***Kyoto gakuha no tetsugaku***) (Kyoto: Shouwadou, 2001), p. ii.

[5]. For further information see http://www.nazan-u.ac.ip/SHUBUNKEN/projects/projects.htm

[6]. Joseph O'Leary, "Philosophers of Nothingness: An Essay on the Kyoto School," ***Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*** 29, no.1-2 (2002), pp. 97-102.

[7]. James W. Heisig, foreword, ***Philosophy of Metanoetics***, Trans. Takeuchi Yoshinori, Valdo Vigliemo, and James Heisig (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), pp. vii-xxx; and James W. Heisig, "The 'Self That is Not a Self': Tanabe's Dialectics of Self-Awareness," in ***The Religious Philosophy of Tanabe Hajime***, ed. Taitetsu Unno and James W. Heisig (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1990), pp. 277-290.

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