

IT WAS NOTHING

A Conversation with Heidegger and the Kyoto School on Nothingness

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In his exploration of anxiety, Heidegger remarks that once our anxiety has subsided we are inclined to say, “it was really nothing.” “This way of talking,” he observes, “indeed, gets at *what* it was ontically.”¹ Heidegger takes the state of anxiety to reveal the nature of *nothingness* to us, and in this insight lies a complex story. The mundane appearance of nothingness often serves to conceal our failure to be clear on the true nature of nothingness. Though we think we understand nothingness plainly, we often find ourselves tied up in knots when we are questioned about it. These questions are only further complicated by the differing notions of nothingness that have developed in the philosophical conversations in the East and West. However, recent developments in the philosophical conversation in Europe have opened up new avenues for engagement between the two traditions. Beginning in the early 20th century, a handful of Japanese philosophers, who later came to be called the Kyoto School, sought to engage with the philosophical conversation that was taking place in Germany and France. In particular, the thinkers of the Kyoto School found Martin Heidegger to be a fruitful conversation partner, even going so far as to study under his tutelage in Germany.² Though these Japanese thinkers

1 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2010), 165. (All pages are marginal pages from the 2nd edition of Stambaugh’s translation.)

2 As with any movement, speaking about the school as a ‘movement’ overlooks crucial nuances. However, one may broadly say the school is composed of Nishida Kitaro (1870-1945), his student Tanabe Hajime (1885- 1962),

were well trained in the texts of the Western conversation, their fundamental commitments remained with the Zen Buddhist tradition, which allowed them to arrive at a unique viewpoint on the West's philosophical questions and to facilitate new ways forward in the midst of those struggles. In this paper, I will seek to explore Nishitani Keiji's critique of Western nihilism—a critique that Nishitani extends to Heidegger's thought. I will attempt a conversion project in order to allow for smooth and productive dialogue between these two parties. Due to deep differences between their respective traditions, however, Nishitani and Heidegger appear to eventually reach an impasse. I will attempt to identify the source of this impasse, and to sketch potential ways to move forward. In short, though this paper can only serve as a catalyst for further conversations, I hope that it will nonetheless clarify the terms of the conversation so as to bear fruit at a later date.

Though anxiety provides us with an opportunity to engage in the conversation between the East and the West, the goal of this paper is not, ultimately, to comprehend anxiety. This paper's true aim is to understand the questions and concepts that gave shape to Heidegger and Nishitani's thought. With that in mind, let us start with §39 of *Being and Time*, where Heidegger proposes to determine the mode of attunement that presents Dasein to itself in the most naked manner possible.³ For Heidegger, a mode of attunement (or 'mood') reveals our orientation towards our thrownness⁴, which is our already having found ourselves having a world.⁵ We experience our particular situatedness in our world as thrown because we find ourselves already being there, rather than having chosen to be there. Essentially, we discover that we have already arrived at the place of having a finite set of possibilities. Attunement reveals Dasein's structures of being-in-the-world through an examination of how Dasein orients itself to its thrownness. Heidegger proposes anxiety as that mode of attunement that can bring Dasein to presentation in the wholeness that it possesses primordially.⁶ In an intriguing turn, Heidegger surmises that those attunements, which involve a *flight from* Dasein, actually disclose Dasein with the least amount of pretense.⁷ Why would this be the case? Heidegger takes it that if Dasein flees from itself, then it flees precisely from *itself*, which is there disclosed. In fleeing from itself, Dasein recognizes itself as itself. In this case, anxiety serves as an orientation of Dasein that turns away from its thrownness with trembling, but does so precisely because it sees itself as thrown.

and his other student Nishitani Keiji (1900-1990). There are others who trace themselves to this school, such as Abe Masao (who's philosophy I will be employing in this paper). The Kyoto School tradition still remains a crucial part of the identity of the philosophy department at Kyoto University to this day. For an excellent introductory text to the Kyoto School, see James W. Heisig, *Philosophers of Nothingness: An Essay on the Kyoto School*. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001).

3 Heidegger, 181-182

4 *Ibid.*, 139.

5 *Ibid.*, 135.

6 *Ibid.*, 187.

7 *Ibid.*, 184-186.

The illuminating nuance of Heidegger's concept of anxiety becomes clearer when anxiety is contrasted with fear. When an individual experiences fear, Heidegger says, that individual becomes oriented toward innerworldly beings.⁸ For instance, I can be afraid of clowns or the dark. These phenomena are definite beings within our world, and are thus objects to Dasein. However, anxiety differs from fear in that anxiety does not have an object as such. Anxiety is anxious about nothing, for anxiety is Dasein's being anxious about being-in-the-world *itself*.⁹ Anxiety confronts Dasein with the sheer possibility of possibilities that make up Dasein's world and thus make up Dasein itself, because Dasein is essentially that being that understands itself in terms of its own possibilities for being.¹⁰ Because anxiety lacks an ontic referent, it transcends the realm of objective presence and alerts Dasein to its own fraught relationship with the world, which it has actively tried to anaesthetize by absorbing innerworldly beings into the forgetfulness of the horizon that determines those beings in their Being. Thus, when anxiety unmasks absorption in innerworldly beings as being essentially determined by nothing, Dasein finds itself unmoored at sea, in a world of pure possibility-for-being-in-the-world, which is to say, nothingness. All innerworldly beings have fallen away and have been revealed as ultimately meaningless by virtue of their lack of foundation. Dasein is awakened to the ipseity of its ownmost possibility for being-in-the-world. Dasein comes to realize that only it can choose the possibilities before it. Yet, Dasein also realizes that all those possibilities have been problematized by their essential lack of grounding. These possibilities hang over the abyss of nothing, and thus Dasein finds itself hanging over this same abyss. Naturally, Dasein finds itself terrified and seeks to flee from itself and back into the realm of innerworldly beings. This is precisely because Dasein has realized the depth of the nothingness that lies at the ground of the whole world, and even of itself.

Heidegger's account of anxiety allows us to bring the Kyoto School into the conversation, for the question of anxiety lies at the heart of Buddhism. Nishitani says, "We become aware of religion as a need, as a must for life, only at the level of life at which everything loses its necessity and its utility...When we come to doubt the meaning of our existence in this way, when we have become a question to ourselves, the religious quest awakens within us."¹¹ Buddhism seeks to confront this problem of anxiety through an analysis of self-consciousness. When we find ourselves anxious, often we say that we are being 'self-conscious'; that is, we are hyper aware of our own selves as selves. Abe Masao argues that this problem of being self-conscious is actually peculiar to humans. Plants and animals do not suffer from this problem; they simply are themselves. They do not present themselves to themselves so as to compare

8 Heidegger, §40.

9 Ibid., 186 - 187

10 Ibid., 187-188.

11 Nishitani Keiji, *Religion and Nothingness*, trans. Jan Van Braght (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 3.

themselves to others, or as to cast judgments on themselves or others.¹² A bird birds. The world worlds. However, humans suffer from this unique phenomenon where we compare ourselves to other people and are thereby conscious of ourselves as selves. Zen takes this to mean that we have objectified ourselves (and thereby others).¹³ I have become an object to myself, and I have made others an object to myself. I may only see myself from the “outside,” so to speak. In this realm of self-consciousness, I find myself on the plane of the subject-object relation. This plane is where self-consciousness introduces a rupture in the primal unity of all things by relating to them as other, or as “outside” of self-consciousness. The world becomes a field where objects are given to subjects and viewed as objects because the subject takes itself to not be the object. Zen seeks precisely to transcend that plane in order to reside on the plane where all things are realized as absolute nothingness.

How does one break through this plane of the subject-object in order to realize the nature of all things as absolute nothingness? This process unfolds in three steps, each of which prepares the way for the next. In the first step, one must realize the nothingness that lies at the ground of the subject-object relation, and thus see this subject-object relation for the groundless relation that it is. One must discover its inadequacy before one can move forward. Abe proposes an exercise¹⁴ in which one asks, “Who am I?” He then asks, “Who is the one asking, ‘Who am I?’” He wants us to realize that there are now two ‘I’s. The I which is inquired after and the I which does the inquiring cannot be the same I, for one is the subject and the other is the object. One is offered to the other as object, yet it is precisely the ‘subject I’ after which one is seeking to inquire after. Thus, one is caught in an infinite regression of I’s asking who they are and offering themselves to themselves as objects. He compares this act to a snake attempting to eat its own tail.¹⁵ In this way, Zen becomes a practice that seeks to undermine and unsettle the individual’s conviction in the self’s knowledge of itself. However, this unsettling can never become an end in itself, because this unsettling serves the ultimate purpose of preparing one to pass into the next phase.

When the self finally reaches the second stage, it becomes completely despairing of ever knowing itself. The self discovers the nothingness that resides beneath its feet. It suddenly must confront its own groundlessness. The self and everything around it become nothingness and meaninglessness. This nihilism Nishitani describes as the state of the welling up of “The Great Doubt,” where the entire self becomes doubt and, in fact, becomes the site where the world doubts itself.¹⁶ We can visualize this as a person hanging over an infinite abyss of nothingness. You can’t tell if you’re falling or not, which way is up, down, right, or left, and you have no idea where you are or how you got there. There is truly *no place* to stand, as nothingness becomes present

¹² Abe, Masao *Zen and Western Thought* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985), 223.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 225-226.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 226.

¹⁶ Nishitani, 18-19.

both within and without. In this stage, one sees nothingness as encroaching upon oneself; nothingness flings one into a state of vertigo. Crucial for the account of Zen, however, is that one cannot remain in this stage. One must surpass this stage in order to break into the third stage, where all things become absolute nothingness. This is enlightenment.

At this point, Westerners such as us may be asking, “Why does this second stage require surpassing?” Zen understands the second stage as problematic because, in this second stage, one still remains trapped within the subject-object relation. When the ego-self (the self in a state of attachment to itself as object) finally hits “rock-bottom”, and must confront the abyssal nothingness that resides right at its feet, it has still only managed to make nothingness into an object, and still conceptualizes nothingness as that which opposes itself to being. Thus, one has only succeeded in constituting themselves as a self through confronting this nothingness as an object. However, the goal of Zen is to break through the plane of the subject-object relation altogether. In the second stage, one no longer objectifies things in general, but, rather, one objectifies nothingness itself. Thus, in order to pass to the third stage, emptiness must be emptied of itself. Even our representations of nothingness, as a *something* that is out *there* while I am in *here*, must be surpassed.

In *Religion and Nothingness*, Nishitani offers an extended critique of Western philosophy, where he presents the philosophies of Descartes and Sartre as embodying the first and second stage of Zen, respectively. In order to better understand why the second stage must too be broken through, we will trace Nishitani’s progression from Descartes to Sartre. Nishitani takes it as given that Western humans understand themselves primarily as a Cartesian *ego*. In his critique, Nishitani reveals the problematic nature of Descartes’ *cogito ergo sum* by following a line of questioning that is similar to the state of aporia that Abe’s thought experiment seeks to create in the self. Nishitani does not question that the *cogito* seems to be the most self-evident truth. Instead, he calls into question whether or not the *cogito* is actually the proper standpoint from which to consider the *cogito*. He takes Descartes’ unquestioned and seemingly harmless presupposition to be far from self-evident.¹⁷ We can already see the cracks in the foundation of Descartes’ presupposition when Descartes describes himself as a thinking ‘thing,’ and thus reveals that he has only succeeded in calling himself before himself as an object. Nishitani observes that the nature of the *cogito* itself covers over this problematic. He says, “But because this ego is seen as self-consciousness mirroring self-consciousness at every turn, and the *cogito* is seen from the standpoint of the *cogito* itself, ego becomes a mode of being of the self closed up within itself.”¹⁸ This means that the *cogito* can only secure itself through reference to itself.¹⁹ Through constantly mirroring itself, the *cogito* deceives itself into believing

¹⁷ Nishitani, 14.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

that it has a pure and immediate understanding of itself. However, this sounds like nothing more than self-deception. Is it not rather the case that this endless cycle of securing the self through reference to the self is actually groundless? Much like in Abe's experiment, the Cartesian *cogito* collapses in an infinite regression of mirroring itself.

Thus, Nishitani believes that Western nihilism has arrived at the second stage of Zen, because the *cogito*—what Descartes describes as a thinking “thing”, and which enshrines the cycle of self-objectification—has had the rug pulled out from under its feet. Starting in the 19th century, many Western philosophers hit rock bottom and realized the bankruptcy of the attempt to make sense of the world in terms of the subject-object relation. In essence, Western philosophy is still figuring out how to live in the wake of the failure of the Cartesian *ego*. Thus, Nishitani wants to affirm thinkers like Sartre and Nietzsche for realizing the nothingness that lies at the ground of all things. While Nishitani believes that Jean-Paul Sartre and Friedrich Nietzsche have successfully entered the second stage, he also critiques them for remaining stuck in this phase. Nishitani believes that the West is fundamentally lacking the resources to advance to the third stage because the Western tradition is too deeply attached to the subject-object relation. However, Nishitani also hopes that his work will supply those resources that the West requires to finally break into the third stage.

In examining the nature of the second stage, Nishitani presents Sartre as one who has failed to break into the third stage, and as one who is paradigmatically unable to fully let go of Descartes's *cogito*. Though Sartre rightly observes that nothingness resides at the ground of subjectivity, he takes this nothingness to be that which awakens us to our subjectivity and constitutes our freedom as subjects.²⁰ Sartre's atheistic project does not say that God is the ground and guarantor of our subjectivity (to which Descartes resorts), but instead asserts that nothingness should assume the function of God.²¹ If nothing undergirds us, then we are free to endlessly project ourselves out over that nothingness.²² This form of subjectivity, which Nishitani says is a type of *ekstasis*, casts itself forward endlessly and allows the self to affirm itself through its undertakings.²³ Essence is a groundless illusion; there is only the courageous adventure of choosing whom you will be in the next moment. However, Nishitani sees in this the same failures of Descartes, only disguised by the language of nothingness. Though Sartre has realized that the project of consciousness being its own self-ground has become untenable, he has made the more sophisticated mistake of making nothingness into the ground of the self.

When Nishitani himself says that nothingness is the ground of the self, he does not mean what Sartre means. Nishitani intends for us to realize that nothingness *is* the

20 Nishitani, 31.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

self and that this nothingness is literally *no place*. It is not a ground in the sense that Sartre uses it. Nishitani sees in Sartre's attempt to make nothingness the ground of the self a setting up of a floor that shuts the self up inside of itself. This rock hard nothingness becomes a wall at the bottom of the ego that traps the ego in its own private cave.²⁴ He says, "As long as this nothingness is still set up as something called nothingness-at-the-bottom-of-the-self, it remains what Buddhism repudiates as 'emptiness perversely clung to.'"²⁵ He sums up, "The self that sets up this nothingness is thereby bound by it and attached to it."²⁶ Whereas in Descartes, the Cartesian *cogito* was attached to self as self, Sartre's *ego* has attached itself to an objectified nothingness that it employs like a "springboard" to endlessly extend itself precisely as a self.

Where, then, do we find ourselves? Nishitani has accused Western nihilism of being stuck in the second stage of Zen. What does Nishitani propose as the way forward? What happens when we are emptied even of our representations of emptiness? What sort of an account of things does one give when one has broken through the plane of the subject-object relation to the plane of absolute nothingness? In order to begin to answer these questions, I will again begin with the more practically oriented answers of Abe before moving into Nishitani's more philosophical formulations. This will help us to understand the translation project that Nishitani is trying to perform.

In his essay, "Emptiness is Suchness," Abe worries that the language of Zen has often posed an obstacle to mutual understanding with the West. Abe explains that the phrase, "everything is emptiness" may be more adequately rendered: "Everything is just as it is."²⁷ The third phase, which one enters upon breaking the subject-object plane, is precisely where this realization that 'everything is just as it is' takes place. Why could this realization not take place in the other two phases? In the first phase, one is still attached to the self and thus unable to see things as they are simply in themselves. As subject, one takes things to be for one or given to one as objects, but this means that a thing is only a thing in so far as it is for the self. Abe calls this "self-centeredness," an obstacle to truly knowing other things. This concept of the various modes of 'centeredness' will play a vital role in Nishitani's own account.

In the second phase, the objectification of nothingness is the ground of the self, a state that either vindicates or threatens the self. In either case, one still clings to the self, either through standing on nothingness and using nothing to extend the self as self, or fleeing from nothingness in hopes of preserving the self as self. However, in the third phase, these projects fall apart and the realization of the self as nothingness

²⁴ Nishitani, 33.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Abe, 223.

becomes true freedom. No longer is nothingness viewed as the ground beneath the feet of the self, nor is nothingness seen as an alien invader impinging upon the self's being, but instead the self becomes the site of the realization of nothingness, or, "the unattainable."²⁸ While one may have legitimately said during the second phase that 'the self is nothingness,' the self, in this sentence, is still subject, and nothingness is still an object. In the third phase, by contrast, Abe believes it more proper to say that "Emptiness is the self."²⁹ The self becomes no-self because the unattainable is the true nature of the self. Only in this state of no-self (non-ego) can all things be precisely what they are. In a seemingly ironic move, this emptying of our representations of emptiness (the negation of a negation) becomes the positive and full affirmation of all things, but of all things in their suchness and with no competition between them.

This emptied emptiness of which Abe speaks, Nishitani calls 'absolute nothingness' (*sunyata*), and this absolute nothingness forms the basis of his ontology. At the point that one breaks through to the third phase of Zen, one comes to realize that all things are the presentation of absolute nothingness. By this, Nishitani does not mean to express an objectified nothingness like Sartre, as if the 'thing' we encountered were composed of the material of 'nothingness.' Rather, things spring up on their home-ground in union with nothingness, which is to say, things are nothing at all. Nishitani takes this to mean that the essential character of all things is 'illusory.' But he cautions us against taking this appearance as illusion to mean that there is *something* that does an appearance, as if the things itself resided behind the appearance.³⁰ No, the thing is itself precisely in its being mere appearance. To help us understand the identity of non-identity, Nishitani employs the analogy of fire. What makes fire fire? That fire burns things seems essential to what fire is. Yet, fire does not burn itself. So, fire is itself precisely in not being itself? Non-fire is fire.³¹ This means that we can only say that the fire we experience on the plane of sense or reason is an illusion—but an illusion with nothing behind it simply is itself. The shapes that these illusions present to us emerge when things are uprooted from their home-ground and transferred into our consciousness.³² In other words, the emergence of each thing is an emergence in ekstasis from itself.³³

Conversely, Nishitani maintains that a thing must be known from within its "Samadhi-being." The word *samadhi* means 'settling' and refers "to the mode of being of a thing in itself when it has settled into its own position."³⁴ This concept was hinted at earlier, in relation to Abe's critique of self-consciousness as 'self-centered.' In the first and second stages, the self is self-centered because it takes things to be

28 Abe, 9.

29 Ibid., 13.

30 Nishitani, 129.

31 Ibid., 116.

32 Ibid., 130.

33 Ibid., 126.

34 Ibid., 128.

what they are for the self; it makes itself the center. But Nishitani says that all things are already centered in themselves. Why, then, does Abe consider a human's self-centeredness to be a problem? Because self-centeredness presumes that other things are not settled within themselves and not sufficient unto themselves. The one who is self-centered has only understood half the truth and thus has missed the whole thing entirely. Instead, Nishitani says, "on the field of sunyata, *the center is everywhere*."³⁵ If the center is everywhere, each thing dwells upon its home-ground precisely in its suchness, with no competition between any beings. Everything is exactly what it is.

How can the center be everywhere? The concept of *ekstasis* helps elucidate how this might be. If the center is everywhere, then each thing is completely and utterly unique. This means that each thing remains the absolute center of all things. It is as though each thing is the master of all things. This is the half-truth that the self-centered consciousness grasps. But the self-centered self-consciousness has missed the other half entirely, for Nishitani also says that each thing is simultaneously in the position of being the servant of all things.³⁶ Thus, each thing is both master and servant to all things. How can this be? "To say that a certain thing is situated in a position of servant to every other thing means that it lies at the ground of all other things...making it to be what it is and thus to be situated in a position of autonomy as master of itself."³⁷ Here, on the field of absolute nothingness, every thing empties itself into every other thing, and is thereby fully itself in being fully not itself. "To say that a *thing is not itself* means that, while continuing to be itself, it is in the home-ground of everything else."³⁸ The corollary of this is that, when a thing is on its own home-ground, every other thing is there with it.³⁹ Every other thing becomes the constitutive element of everything else; all things are interconnected, and fully in harmony. We may think again of the example of fire being non-fire. Because fire burns everything except itself, we can see that the essence of fire arises only in its interaction with other things. This means that fire finds its identity through its illusory appearance as not-itself, for this is precisely to be itself. Everything is nothingness. Nothingness is everything. Every appearance is the appearance of nothing. Every appearance of nothing is an illusion. Every illusion is the true self. Nothingness is the true self.

We now have a clearer notion of what Nishitani wants to do when he engages in dialogue with Heidegger. Though Nishitani studied under Heidegger, and even had discussions with Heidegger about Buddhism,⁴⁰ he still believes that Heidegger

35 Nishitani, 146.

36 *Ibid.*, 147.

37 *Ibid.*, 148.

38 Nishitani, 149.

39 *Ibid.*

40 When Nishitani was studying at Freiburg in 1938, he gave Heidegger a copy of D. T. Suzuki's *Essays in Zen Buddhism* and Heidegger invited Nishitani over to his house in order to discuss the book because *he had already read it!* Not only had he read it already, he was also eager to discuss it with Nishitani, see Graham Parkes,

remained stuck within this second phase along with the rest of Western Nihilism. Nishitani believes that, though Heidegger's philosophy is superior to Sartre's, Heidegger had not escaped the representation of nothingness as an object. In the following paragraph, Nishitani explicitly accuses Heidegger of failing in this respect:

Nevertheless, nihility is still being viewed here from the bias of self-existence as the groundlessness of existence lying at the ground of self-existence. This means that it is seen lying outside of the 'existence' of the self, and therefore also as something more than the 'existence' or distinct from it. We find this, for example, in Heidegger's talk of self-existence as 'held suspended in nothingness,' despite the fundamental difference of this standpoint from other brands of contemporary existentialism or nihilism. The very fact that he speaks of the 'abyss' of nihility already tells us as much. In Heidegger's case, traces of the representation of nothingness as some 'thing' that is nothingness still remain.⁴¹

Let us return to Heidegger's explication of anxiety in order to consider Nishitani's critique: that Heidegger still represents nothingness as something that remains other than the self. As was said before, Heidegger takes anxiety to be a mode of attunement that most clearly reveals Dasein as that being that orients itself towards the world in terms of its possibilities. However, he notes that anxiety does this precisely by trembling and fleeing from manifest reality. In this way, the act of turning away would actually seem to be an act of objectifying nothingness, because any turning away always assume an object from which to turn away. However, doesn't Heidegger say that this nothingness from which Dasein flees is ontically nothing and thus is not an object? This harkens back to Heidegger's earlier assumption that those modes of attunement that flee from Dasein reveal Dasein in its primordial wholeness. However, we now have reason to question this claim, for is it not rather the case that to flee *from something*, one must precisely see it as a thing from which one can distance oneself? When Dasein is awakened to its own nothingness in anxiety, it is awakened immediately to a nothingness from which Dasein believes it can flee. Anxiety labels the nothingness of pure possibility-of-being-in-the-world as a threat to its existence precisely because anxiety formulates this nothingness as that which it is not. This would seem to betray the fact that the nothingness called before the self in anxiety actually is an ontic representation of nothingness and not nothingness itself. This objectification serves only to enclose oneself in one's self further, because anxious Dasein reacts by fleeing back into absorption in innerworldly objects. Anxiety as a mode of attunement reveals that nothingness is the ground of being, but objectifies this nothingness by turning away; thus, anxiety is unable to reveal absolute nothingness as Nishitani defines it. So, is Heidegger correct in stating that anxiety does reveal "nothing"? Yes, and no. Though Heidegger takes anxiety to

"Introduction," in *Heidegger and Eastern Thought*, ed. Graham Parkes (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), 10.

⁴¹ Nishitani, 96.

reveal *ontically* nothing, this nothingness, which is given ontically (and therefore as an object), remains wholly inadequate for the task of revealing nothingness to us. Anxiety cannot reveal the true nature of this nothingness because Dasein makes this nothingness an object in its turning away from it. Because Dasein has objectified nothingness, it will find itself endlessly anxious about itself—generating precisely the state that Zen seeks to transcend.

With these considerations in mind, we can see that Nishitani's criticism of Heidegger may have some teeth. However, a good Heideggerian might reply that while Heidegger does take anxiety to be the mode of attunement that brings Dasein before itself in its primordial wholeness, he does *not* take it to be the most authentic orientation towards that wholeness. What if it were the case that anxiety, by being an inauthentic mode of attunement, constitutes the second phase of Zen, but that an authentic orientation towards nothingness provides the path towards the enlightenment of the third stage? This reply would have us look at Heidegger's concept of being-towards-death, which he takes to be the authentic mode of being towards our thrownness and the way that one overcomes anxiety about being-in-the-world.

However, before we even have a chance to consider being-towards-death as a possible solution, we must immediately confront a preliminary consideration that seems to be an insurmountable obstacle. We must tackle a singular and fundamental difference between the thought of Heidegger and the thought of Nishitani before we can make an adequate reply by using being-towards-death as the path towards the third stage. This difference hinges on the unique status that Heidegger accords to human beings. If we were to phrase this problem as a question, we might ask, does the fact that Dasein's mode of being differs from that of other beings fundamentally prevent Dasein from ever settling into its Samadhi-being and from finding its home-ground in absolute nothingness? Can Dasein, as long as it remains Dasein, ever be truly emptied of self and comprehend its unity with all things in nothingness? This question arises due to the unique nature of Dasein as that being that is concerned in its being about its being.⁴² Heidegger takes Dasein to be that way and chairs to not be that way, thus introducing a fundamental difference between conscious beings and inanimate beings. Even though Heidegger, in *Being and Time*, does not conclusively say whether Dasein is simply *a* human mode of being or whether Dasein is how all humans *already are*,⁴³ we can at least say that Heidegger intends to convey that the structures of Dasein are specifically and peculiarly human. Understanding (or “unconcealment”) only happens for Dasein, and not for rocks. Dasein understands itself and other things in terms of a horizon, and can intend relations between itself and others. However, this account of the structural features of a human's mode of being-

⁴² Heidegger, 191.

⁴³ Edith Stein raises this insightful question in her masterful critique of Heidegger's thought, Edith Stein, “Heidegger's Existential Philosophy, translated by Mette Lebeck,” *Maynooth Philosophical Papers*, no. 4 (2007): 70.

in-the-world displays a fundamental divergence between Heidegger and the Kyoto School—a divergence that threatens to halt the discussion altogether.

Returning to Abe's diagnosis of why humans experience anxiety, we remember that Abe sees the problem of anxiety fundamentally in terms of self-consciousness. If the Zen practitioner takes self-consciousness to be the problem, what models of existence do we look to instead? Zen leans heavily on examples from the natural world, employing earthy images like fire, water, trees, and stones. For Zen, the problem is that anxious humans are *not* like these natural things. Abe makes this clear when he contrasts human beings, who grow anxious through judging, with plants and rivers, which have no such problem. Nishitani's account of things as always already being settled in their Samadhi-being explains why things like plants and rivers are without anxiety. In this way, we see that Zen is interested not in explicating that humans are unique, but in explicating that humans cannot quite seem to fit in, and that they live in continual denial of how things actually are. They are anomalous, not special.

If this is the case, Heidegger seems to have found himself in a tight spot. As long as he is convinced that Dasein is this being with this particular mode of being that is concerned in its being with its being, how can Dasein possibly abandon that self-centered way of being-in-the-world, and become totally emptied so as to be constituted on the plane of absolute nothingness? Is not Dasein's problem that it is Dasein? For now, I have no answer to this question. I take this to be a fundamental rupture between these two thinkers and between their traditions. With that said, there are paths along which we may proceed to further our analysis and to inspire future dialogue.

The path forward will lead us to explore how *ekstasis* functions in Heidegger's thought. In particular, Heidegger's account of the structure of Dasein's understanding as ecstatic warrants further investigation. The discovery that *ekstasis* is the primordial unity between Dasein and the world may bear more fruitful dialogue with the Kyoto School. That all things are absolute nothingness does not preclude the possibility that this nothingness is a dynamic nothingness. Indeed, Nishitani speaks of this absolute nothingness as a 'force,'⁴⁴ and a force bespeaks movement and process. A process can be nothing and everything at the same time, and Dasein's ecstatic movement may paint for us a useful picture of nothingness' perpetual perichoretic motion.

Heidegger's account of understanding finds its underlying motivation in the desire to articulate understanding, not as the correlation of beings understood in terms of object as mere presence, but as the un-concealment of Dasein's prior unity with other things.⁴⁵ These relations are uncovered through care, which is another way of saying that what we care about commands our attention and thereby gives shape to our

⁴⁴ Nishitani, 163.

⁴⁵ Heidegger, 144-145, 200-201.

understanding.⁴⁶ This orienting ourselves towards objects in terms of what concerns us reveals those underlying relations that were always already there. Conversely, those relations that are brought to presentation through care must be grounded in a unity which is prior to the subject and the object in this relation.⁴⁷ If one begins from the standpoint of either subject or object, one will find that neither subject or object can reach far enough to meet the other in the middle. Both must possess a primordial oneness that founds the subject-object relation. This is essentially to say that the experience of knowing cannot be built up from the totality of the experience's parts—as if the experience were a mere aggregate of information bits—but that knowledge arises only from the foundational plane of the oneness of all things.⁴⁸

For Heidegger, then, knowing is not merely an intellectual act but actually a coming to expression of our fundamental interconnectedness with the world. “[W]e must remember that knowing itself is grounded beforehand in already-being-alongside-the-world.”⁴⁹ Knowledge can only arise from being-in-the-world, and thus being-in-the-world is prior to the plane of subject-object where knowledge gives an account of things. What role does *ekstasis* play in this account? Heidegger describes the paradoxical nature of knowing in terms that strongly evoke notions of *ekstasis*:

In directing itself toward... and in grasping something, Dasein does not first go outside of its inner sphere in which it is initially encapsulated, but, rather, in its primary kind of being, it is always already “outside” together with some being encountered in the world already discovered...even in this “being outside” together with its object, Dasein is “inside,” correctly understood; that is, in itself is as the being-in-the-world which knows.⁵⁰

Thus, he says, “Dasein that knows *remains outside as Dasein*.”⁵¹ So, Dasein understands by being outside itself but is itself precisely in this being outside of itself? Dasein's inside is its outside and its outside is its inside. Here I see a clearing toward which the thoughts of Heidegger and Nishitani may converge. Heidegger's statement that Dasein knows its inside by being outside of itself calls to mind Nishitani's articulation that all things are related as both master and slave. If Dasein knows by being outside of itself, then Dasein can be said to be itself through residing in the home-ground of every other thing. Yet by residing on the home-ground of everything (and thus being outside of itself), Dasein finds itself right at home on its inside. Only because the center is everywhere can Dasein simultaneously be its own center and also be in the center of everything else.

46 *Ibid.*, 145.

47 Nishitani, 149 – 150.

48 Heidegger, §44.

49 *Ibid.*, 61.

50 Heidegger, 62.

51 *Ibid.*

We may take another step further by connecting the master and slave paradox to the dynamic perichoretic movement of hermeneutics. Paul Ricoeur's statement that, in hermeneutics, "I exchange the *me, master* of itself, for the *self, disciple* of the text,"⁵² conveys the ecstatic structure of hermeneutical understanding. I exchange the me, the ego-self, for the no-self, the servant of all things. When this exchange is made, one discovers how the hermeneutical circle traces the flow of nothingness. One is master of the text by being a servant of the text, and in becoming the servant of the text, one becomes its master. I lie at the home-ground of the text and the text lies at my home-ground. Through our continually being constituted ecstatically, the unity we already had with each other and with all things can come to proper presentation.

In the end, the conversation between Heidegger and Nishitani seems to run aground on the question of what sort of problem self-consciousness actually poses to us. Is self-consciousness ultimately the problem, or is the problem a certain sort of self-consciousness? Nishitani seems to want to say that self-consciousness itself cannot be the plane on which the truth of things can be faithfully articulated, because self-consciousness is the plane of discursive thought that traffics in the subject-object relation. Heidegger seems to want to say that we have been dominated by one mode of self-consciousness (the metaphysics of presence), but that we, therefore, must seek the more primordial mode of self-consciousness that allows Being to be un-concealed in understanding—that is, in care. However, the difference between Heidegger and Nishitani seems to originate in their respective religious traditions, rather than in mere philosophical disagreements. Nishitani's commitments reside in an ancient Buddhist debate about whether plants can attain Buddha-nature. In re-phrasing this question so as to reveal its underlying import, one might ask, "is enlightenment *attained* through practice or is enlightenment simply realizing what all things *already are*?" Though initially there was debate between the Tendai and Shingon schools in Japan, Japanese Buddhism eventually reached a consensus that all things already are Buddha-nature (emptied of self) and that enlightenment is simply realizing that one already is Buddha-nature (a view referred to as *hangaku*⁵³). Standing in this tradition of Japanese Buddhism, Nishitani sees the natural world as the exemplar from which we ought to learn, and to which we ought to conform.

Heidegger, on the other hand, displays the traditionally Christian intuition that there is something fundamentally unique and special about human beings; that is, their being made in "the Image of God." The centrality of the *imago Dei* in the Jewish and Christian faiths helps explain the Western reflex to posit humans as somehow distinct in the community of beings. This idea that humans occupy some unique

52 Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 73.

53 William LaFleur, "Saigyō and the Buddhist Value of Nature, Part 1." *History of Religions* 13, no. 2 (1973): 93-128. My account of this question and historical debate comes from LaFleur's article, which does a masterful job at locating these questions in the historical tradition of Buddhist reflection and then tracing them through the debates in Japanese Buddhist schools, which ultimately culminate in the Buddhist poetry of the monk Saigyō.

role amongst beings is evident even in the thought of the atheist Sartre, who writes that humans are condemned to freedom—a phenomenon which seems to constitute the exciting risk and glorious terror of being human. Heidegger's account of Dasein fundamentally presupposes that the way humans are in the world differs from the way that other objects are in the world, and that those different structures that we humans possess are actually to be celebrated.

Ultimately, this disagreement indicates that we can only answer these questions by thoroughly analyzing and re-envisioning the nature of the role of humans in the world of things. Are they unique? How are they unique? Is that a problem? Is the difference perhaps not fundamental, but merely situated on a continuum that loops back on itself like a Mobius strip? Is the concept of “humans” itself a problematic concept? Are we more like a process than a substance? We will need to confront such penetrating questions such as these if we desire to have any success dialoguing across the historical lines of East and West, and to secure a more just and beautiful way of being in the world. ♦

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