



Abe, Masao. *Zen and the Modern World: A Third Sequel to Zen and Western Thought*. Edited by Steven Heine

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THE “THIRD SEQUEL” to Masao Abe’s *Zen and Western Thought* constitutes yet another testimony to the contribution Abe’s work has made to comparative philosophy and inter-religious dialogue. His highly accessible prose and compelling style have gone a long way to bring to the awareness of the English reading world the ideas that Buddhism not only presents a subject for the historical and textual studies but also offers a valid philosophical approach, that there are valid models for inter-religious dialogue outside of the generally assumed triad of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism formulated within the context of a Christian framework, and that there is an original philosophy made in Japan. I completely agree with Abe that a non-dual philosophy framed as philosophy of Absolute Nothingness not only constitutes a philosophical standpoint generally ignored in the mainstream discourses in philosophy, ethics, and inter-religious dialogue, but also tackles some of the most fundamental, perennial problems inherent in these discourses. Non-dualism offers interesting solutions to some of the most tenacious philosophical problems, such as the mind-body problem; it suggests an ethics that neither privileges the individual over society nor submerges it therein; finally, as Abe suggested in his “A Dynamic Unity in Religious Pluralism,” published in *Buddhism and Interfaith Dialogue*, this position provides a model of religious pluralism that safeguards differences between and idiosyncrasies of individual religious traditions without privileging one over another. It is for this reason that Abe’s work should be applauded and held in the highest regard. The editor of the present work, Steven Heine, has not only done a marvelous job collecting, editing, and contextualizing these essays, his collection of Abe’s various and variously published essays into the three thematically organized volumes has ensured that Abe’s pioneer work and intellectual creativity have been made easily accessible to the English speaking world. Abe’s attempt at a Zen Buddhist philosophy as philosophy of Absolute Nothingness has thus been given the place and recognition in academia it deserves.

Abe’s *Zen and Western Thought*, edited by William LaFleur, despite the provocative title of the first essay “Zen is not a philosophy but...,” introduced Abe’s take on a Zen philosophy and compared it with leading philosophers, such as Nietzsche and Whitehead. *Buddhism and Interfaith Dialogue* introduced Abe’s theory of and engagement in the inter-religious dialogue. *Zen and Contemporary Studies* built on *Zen and Western Thought* in that it expanded Abe’s reading of Buddhism to the discussion of “god,” “death,” “time,” and “education,” revisited Abe’s dialogue with Whitehead’s

process philosophy, and contrasted Buddhist ideas with those of Aristotle and Plato. In the present volume, Heine presents Abe's essay on Nishida Kitarō and the social and theological implications arising from Abe's reading of Nishida's philosophy. It is here that the reader encounters Abe's philosophical position along with the significance it has for contemporary discourse. This makes the present volume somewhat the jewel of the trilogy.

Since it is impossible to do justice to all of the ten essays presented in this volume, I will focus on some of the most fundamental ideas presented therein. To begin with, Heine has succeeded in providing a good context for the essays in his introduction and with footnotes provided by him and James Fredericks, the translator of two essays. Heine places Abe squarely in the context of the Kyoto School founded by Nishida Kitarō. With regards to the Kyoto School, the question of membership has been always a difficult issue in general, but this is particularly so in Abe's case. On the one hand, some of the most authoritative accounts of this philosophical school, Fujita Masakatsu's *Kyoto gakuha no tetsugaku* (2001) and Takeda Atsushi's *Monogatari "Kyoto gakuha"* (2001), do not mention Abe as a member; on the other hand, there is no doubt that Abe's work is strongly influenced by the Nishitani/Hisamatsu wing of the Kyoto school and that he popularized Kyoto School philosophy amongst English readers. While a division of the Kyoto school would be haphazard and probably unwarranted, the association of Abe with the thought of Nishitani Keiji and Hisamatsu Shinichi is significant. Not only was it these two thinkers who, together with Ueda Shizuteru, stylized Nishida philosophy as Zen philosophy, they themselves strove to develop a philosophy grounded on a Zen paradigm, while other members of the Kyoto school revealed leanings towards Marxism, humanism, or even Pure Land Buddhism. In a similar way, Abe reads Nishida philosophy in juxtaposition to "Western thought," which he finds exemplified by Aristotelian and Cartesian philosophy. It is thus in the tradition of the Kyoto school thinkers who employed Nishida philosophy as a heuristic device to read Buddhism and formulate a Buddhist position that Abe's thought should be understood.

Fundamental to Nishida philosophy is, according to Abe, the notion of place (*basho*). Abe suggests that Nishida bases his philosophy not on the paradigm of particularity, as Aristotle did, but on that of the "concrete universal," that is, a universal that "includes the principle of particularization and individuation" (73) and, thus, transcends the dichotomy of universality and particularity. Such a concept, Abe continues, does not render a formal, abstract judgment, which subsumes the individual in the universal, but the "true judgment" that subsumes the particular "just as it is without any removal of its specific differences" (73). In the "true judgment" the universal actualizes itself in the particular, the universal "dogness" in the instance of a concrete dog. Talking about the particular dog "Ralph," Abe explains this position: "Ralph is not the self-determination of anything external to or beyond himself—Ralph is the self-determination of Ralph himself.... As a unique individual Ralph stands in infinitely deep nothingness with nothing supporting or grounding

his existence” (83). The terminology of the concrete universal reflects the logic of the historical world where individuals interact with and determine each other. The world as universal determines itself in the self-determination of individual objects as well as the interaction among individuals. The formal judgment central to “Western” philosophy is based on reflection, the true judgment based on intuition; it indicates the standpoint prior to all philosophy, the “positionless position” (10). It is a position, “a subjective logic” to be exact, which transcends the subject-object dichotomy characteristic of “all forms of traditional Western ‘object logic’” (87).

The merit of such a positionless position is fourfold. First, it renders an inclusive conception of god and thus fosters tolerance between and among religions. A subjective logic does not objectify god and freeze god into dogmas but rather renders god as “self-negating, relational, and non-substantial” (10). Such a conception of god discloses the interrelatedness of not only all human beings but also religious beliefs and, subsequently, fosters compassion and wisdom. This wisdom reveals “the affirmation and recognition of everything and everyone in their distinctiveness or in their suchness” (12) and urges inter-religious dialogue as a means to an expression of this wisdom and compassion. Subsequently, differences between traditions do not imply the necessity to choose one and exclude the other, but rather call for the inclusion of all religions since only their plurality expresses the fullness of truth in the same way in which the plurality of red objects express the fullness of the universal redness. Abe subsequently suggests using the concept “self-awakening” rather than “faith” as a basic category to describe the religious project. Contrary to “faith,” “self-awakening” is “free from will and intellectualization” (43), it de-centers the religious discourse by rejecting the privileged position of either self or god, and abandons the teleological view of faith by focusing on the present rather than the future. Abe’s terminology that faith follows the object logic, self-awakening the subjective one simply implies that faith reifies one position as the truth, while self-awakening affirms the plurality of religious beliefs and experiences. It is, therefore, imperative to conceive of religion as self-awakening in order to enable religious tolerance and inter-religious dialogue.

Ethics as well has to be based on such a notion of self-awakening and a positionless position, otherwise it is bound to privilege one self, one position, one time period, and one people, and cannot do justice to all phenomena and thus reality as it is. A universally applicable ethics must, then, affirm each individual and “the transhuman divine reality” of god (25). This inclusion of transcendence and immanence is, to Abe, only given in the Buddhist position of emptiness. Similarly, it is only this positionless position that provides answers to the questions “how,” asked by science, and “why,” asked by religion. It is therefore neither exclusively mechanical-causal nor exclusively teleological and subsequently provides a framework for both religion and science. In this sense, finally, the positionless position as philosophy of self-awakening provides, Abe suggests, the postmodern standpoint “capable of vanquishing that ego” (151). This conclusion follows consequently from his analysis. If the boundaries between religions, human beings, as well as religion and science are

created by the ego and its modalities of reflective thought, objective logic, and binary thinking, it is the erasure of this ego that subverts all dichotomies. To Abe it is only the standpoint of self-awakening that accomplishes this feat. This so-called postmodern standpoint of the positionless position unites the simple cosmology of the prehistorical period with the anthropocentrism of “Modern Europe” and liberates “East and West in a genuinely religious sense” (152).

I have to admit that I find Abe’s vision very attractive. I also think that Nishida’s non-dualistic philosophy, if developed carefully, possesses an immense potential to contribute to the very areas Abe suggests. However, his presentation of non-dualism is problematic in more than one instance. In the remaining paragraphs I would like to point out what I consider the biggest weaknesses of Abe’s position. I do not offer these as a criticism—as I mentioned before I have the utmost respect for his work—but rather as suggestions to strengthen his argument. These weaknesses are based on a certain naiveté, rather than factual mistakes or logical fallacies.

One of the most evident problems of Abe’s work in general is his tendency to work with overgeneralizations and the assumptions of monoliths that simply are no longer tenable. He, for example, contrasts “East” and “West,” on the one side, and Christianity and Buddhism on the other. His argument similarly thrives on the juxtaposition of opposites, such as objective logic and subjective logic, personal theology and impersonal theology, dualism and non-dualism, which he associates, for the most part, with his distinctions by geography and tradition. The problem with this rhetoric of course is not only that it constructs what J. J. Clarke refers as the “glass curtain,” implying the incompatibility and irreconcilability between the two systems separated and the impossibility that the adherent of one system is capable of understanding the other; it also negates plurality and diversity within the respective systems themselves. The fact is, however, there is not only one but a multiplicity of “Eastern,” “Western,” “Christian,” and “Buddhist” positions on various issues. There is also not only one Kyoto school approach, as I indicated above, but quite a few; even Nishida’s philosophy itself underwent significant changes. In an ironic twist Abe argues that in Nishida’s philosophy, the universal does not “subsume” the individual, whereas Nishida’s early version of the logic of *basho*, developed between 1926 and 1929, suggests just that. This binary framework that postulates two basic worldviews is of course not Abe’s construct: he simply inherited it. However, while it may be possible to excuse authors who wrote of this rhetoric one hundred years ago, it has become rather difficult to justify it in articles written in the 1990s and published in 2003. James Heisig suggested in a private conversation that Abe failed to execute the move from the “the” to the “a.” In short, despite his rhetoric, Abe does not present the Buddhist position but a Buddhist philosophy. I think if his thought can be developed as such it would be more difficult to dismiss his work, as has been increasingly done by philosophers and Buddhologists alike. In addition, it does seem odd that Abe suggest on the one hand that he himself, Nishida and, in Abe’s rhetoric, Buddhism and the “East,” propose a non-dual framework, while, on the other hand, he consistently contrasts this framework with the dualistic one of

the “West.” A non-dualistic framework, however, does not oppose dualism, as Abe would admit, but rather incorporate it. It thus seems that Abe’s rhetoric is at odds with his philosophical position.

Further, in his essay “Toward the Establishment of a Cosmology of Awakening,” Abe suggests three stages in history: prehistory, modernity, and postmodernity. The latter one, he argues, reflects the philosophical standpoint that embraces what he refers to as the Buddhist logic of self-awakening. While this model nicely fits the dialectical affinity most thinkers in the tradition of the Kyoto School adhere to, it reveals some fundamental flaws. Not only does this model make European history the paradigm of history and recognizes the historical development of other cultures and civilizations only insofar as they reflect the European model, Abe’s interpretation thereof actually undermines itself. If Abe really identifies Nāgārjuna’s notion of *śūnyatā* as the paradigm of postmodernity he cannot avoid the paradox that, at least in India, postmodernity preceded modernity. In addition, it is difficult to use a term like postmodernity that has been given a specific definition in the philosophical discourse that Abe addresses without at least acknowledging this definition. This is especially so in this case, where there is a clear affinity between the paradigms of the postmodern discourse and Abe’s cosmology of awakening: both reject the anthropocentrism and egocentrism and, in the case of Jacques Derrida, even the logocentrism of what Abe refers to as “Modern Europe.”

Also, in the postmodern discourse, the notion of a positionless position has become untenable. Every discourse comprises reflection and thus is incapable of reaching what was before reflection. In effect, Abe’s position is not positionless but takes as its philosophical standpoint one particular interpretation of Nishida’s logic of *basho*. This becomes most obvious when he critiques Tanabe’s philosophy from Nishida’s point of view. An analysis of his analogy illustrates Abe’s prejudice especially nicely. In his essay “‘Inverse Correspondence’ in the Philosophy of Nishida,” Abe compares Tanabe’s notion of “inverse correspondence” to an infinite circle and Nishida’s position with an infinite sphere. He then argues that Tanabe’s philosophy has a center and is dualistic in the same sense in which an infinite circle has a center and divides an infinite sphere into two halves while an infinite sphere encompasses everything. First, not only am I not convinced that Tanabe’s notion of “absolute” is akin to that of monotheism, but there is also no obvious reason why Tanabe’s position is expressed by an infinite circle and Nishida’s by an infinite sphere. But regardless of that, Abe’s claim that an infinite circle is incomplete while an infinite sphere is complete is of course only true if one takes three-dimensional space as one’s absolute framework of reference; within the world of mathematics this, however, is not a given. Similarly, the infinite sphere is not the only geometric object without a center as Abe claims, but an infinite circle as well has not one but an infinite amount of centers. Finally, while a critique of Tanabe from the standpoint of Nishida’s philosophy is possible, so is a critique of Nishida’s philosophy from Tanabe’s perspective. Neither of these two critiques however can claim to be positionless. It is rather the task of the philosopher to negotiate opposing standpoints

and, as Tanabe Hajime, suggested in his logic of “absolute critique” (*zettai hihan* 絶対批判), to correct one’s own philosophical paradigm so that one’s position may asymptotically approach the position devoid of ideological prejudice without, however, ever being able to reach it.

Before I conclude, I would like to offer a brief comment to Frederick’s explanation of “acting-intuition” (*kōiteki chokkan* 行為的直観), one of the central concepts of Nishida’s later philosophy. Fredericks contends in a footnote that it is “Nishida’s technical term for designating individual subjectivity in relation to Absolute Nothingness” (164). In his essay “Acting Intuition,” however, Nishida suggests that this term describes rather the ambiguous relationship of the subject to the environment, both of which are enveloped by and placed in “absolute nothingness.”

Nevertheless, since these points do not apply to Abe’s argument per se but rather to his presentation thereof, I hope they serve to highlight Abe’s accomplishments and his philosophical standpoint. I believe that Abe’s position would not only be more accessible but also would gain wider acceptance if it was taken out of the orientalist discourse. Also, his analogy of the infinite sphere distracts from his comparison of Tanabe and Nishida more than it elucidates it. This is in some sense unfortunate because Abe’s work is not only unique but, I believe, very important for the comparative discourse on religion and ethics and, subsequently, for the solutions of some of the world’s most fundamental problems today.

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