



James W. Heisig, *Much Ado about Nothingness: Essays on Nishida and Tanabe*

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*Much Ado about Nothingness: Essays on Nishida and Tanabe* accomplishes three goals that have driven most of James W. Heisig's academic career: it presents his vision of comparative philosophy, it examines Kyoto School philosophy, and it exemplifies affordable and accessible academic publishing. Another in an impressive shelf of books produced by the Nanzan Institute of Religion and Culture, this volume combines fourteen essays, written over the past twenty-seven years, that examine the significance of Nishida Kitarō 西田幾多郎 (1870–1945) and Tanabe

Hajime 田辺元 (1885–1962) as philosophers. The main contribution of these two giants of the Kyoto School and Japanese philosophy in general is what Heisig refers to as a “philosophy of nothingness.” In some sense, these essays continue the line of argument that Heisig advanced in his *Philosophers of Nothingness: An Essay on the Kyoto School* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2001) and, albeit to a lesser degree, *Nothingness and Desire: An East-West Philosophical Antiphony* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2013). That said, the present volume contains the mature reflections on the significance a philosophy of nothingness has for the today’s world by one of the most astute interpreters of Kyoto School philosophy in recent decades.

The essay “Much Ado about Nothingness,” which was composed in 2015 and gave this collection of essays its title, functions as the introduction to and articulates the three basic themes of the volume:

1. “All the great philosophies of the world contain the same things, only in different proportions and different configurations” (8). Philosophy is always characterized by the struggle to express universally applicable insights in specific and parochial idioms.
2. Echoing John Maraldo’s definition of philosophy as “translation of an idiom”<sup>1</sup> and Kōyama Iwao’s 高山岩男 (1905–1993) *koō* 呼応, “call-and-response,” designed to describe any dialogue situation, Heisig suggests that all philosophy implies an “idea-translation” (8) as well as an “antiphonal call-and-response” (29) and, by implication, constitutes comparative philosophy. It is comparative philosophy that lifts philosophy out of the confinement of parochialism.
3. One prime example of such a comparative philosophy is the way in which the two main thinkers of Kyoto School framed their variations on the philosophy of nothingness.

Philosophers not familiar with Japanese philosophy are frequently perplexed by the idea of a philosophy of nothingness and question its tenability and relevance. With the clarity, ease, and brilliance his readers have come to expect, Heisig outlines the reasons and benefits of such a philosophical approach: “Nothingness” as conceived of by the philosophers of the Kyoto School does not refer to a sense of nihilism that makes way to “frustration” and “meaninglessness” (14) but rather des-

1. John Maraldo, “Tradition, Textuality, and Trans-lation: The Case of Japan,” Charles Fu and Steven Heine, eds., *Japan in Traditional and Postmodern Perspectives* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), 225–44, 233.

ignates the “non-relative” absolute that grounds a worldview that is dynamic rather than static. The non-relative absolute envisioned by the Kyoto School philosophers “is not *relatively* related to anything in the way that beings in the world are but *absolutely relative to everything*” (18). This “absolute nothingness... is manifest in the things of the world but is not identical to all or any of them” (19). The worldview implied by such a conception of nothingness has four basic characteristics:

1. The world is comprised of a plurality of phenomena relative to each other.
2. These phenomena are interconnected and
3. subject to change.
4. Because the absolute that does not exist independent of the world of relativity but is manifested in it, the world does not disintegrate.

In a second step, Heisig outlines how both Christian and Buddhist metaphysics can be re-thought as “mysticism of the everyday” (28) to open up more plausible philosophical models than the traditions have rendered until now. In the two main sections of his volume, Heisig proceeds to show how Nishida and Tanabe envisioned such a philosophy of nothingness.

In seven chapters on Nishida, Heisig examines Nishida’s work as an exercise in comparative philosophy that mediates between “East” and “West,” explores Nishida’s affinity to medieval mystics, compares Nishida’s “I and Thou” to that of Martin Buber (1878–1965), investigates the shortcomings of Nishida’s first volume, *Inquiry into the Good*, reads Nishida’s conception of “no-self” (*muga* 無我) against the backdrop of Zen Buddhist theories, traces similarities between Nishida’s *basho* 場所 and Zeami’s 世阿弥 (1363–1443) work on *Nō* 能, and envisions the future of Nishida studies.

Throughout these essays Heisig develops Nishida’s philosophy of nothingness as comparative if not “world philosophy” (290). He suggests that Nishida’s philosophy of nothingness locates him in between “East” and “West” and concludes that “as dramatically different as these to modes of thought appear in their fundamental orientation..., neither side is entirely without affinities in the other” (38). He reinforces that statement by showing affinities as well as differences between Nishida and Jacob Böhme (1575–1624), Meister Eckhart (1260–1328), Nicolaus Cusanus (1401–1464), Martin Buber, William James (1842–1910), and Zeami. Key to Nishida’s philosophy of nothingness is his conception of self as epistemological subject, as dialogical interlocutor, and as expression of the non-relative absolute: “The self can never objectify itself; it remains an unattainable limit. In self-awareness one is aware of ‘infinite self within the self’ only as an ideal, ever-receding goal” (165). While the last chapter on the future is more political in nature, warning scholars of Kyoto School philosophy against addition to canons of orthodoxy, Heisig uses

the metaphor of the ever-deepening *basho* to illustrate the ever-expanding horizon of Nishida scholarship. He concludes that Nishida philosophy “like all *basho*... lands itself in internal contradictions that can only be reconciled by locating it in a broader context” (236). This broader context will give rise to even more creative thought as it is demonstrated in the work of Kōyama, Watsuji Tetsurō 和辻哲郎 (1889–1960), Kimura Bin 木村敏 (1931–), and Yuasa Yasuo 湯浅康雄 (1925–2005).

In his chapters on Tanabe, Heisig maps out Tanabe’s criticism of Nishida’s “self,” examines the notion of the “specific” as the concretization of the absolute, investigates Tanabe’s insufficient analysis and rejection of nationalism as well as his support of it, and explores Tanabe’s aesthetics, teleology, and theology. The first three essays trace Tanabe’s attempt to counter Nishida’s abstract dialectics with a concrete “logic of the specific” or “metanoetics” (*zangedō* 懺悔道) even while his philosophy fell into “what Whitehead has called the “fallacy of misplaced concreteness” (338). These chapters demonstrate that, despite its brush with nationalist rhetoric, Tanabe’s is indeed “a world-class philosophy” (263) that can stand on its own. Contrary to Nishida, Heisig suggests, “for Tanabe [nothingness] is experienced as an absolute mediation in which all relationships between the subject and the world, between the subject and another are seen to belong to history whose rhythms transcend those of our own willful praxis” (256). In addition, the logic of the specific, which stresses “socio-cultural specificity” (275) and is grounded in absolute nothingness (278), provides a cogent and necessary correction to the notion of the “global village.”

In the remaining three essays, Heisig put his thoroughgoing and keen understanding of Tanabe and his place at the intersection of the European and Japanese philosophical traditions to work in presenting Tanabe’s vision of the “‘distinct but inseparable’ relationship between art and religion” that places “religion in an apparently all-embracing position outside the compass of philosophy” (360), his unique dharmic conception of time and history, and “the notion of God as ‘absolute nothingness-in-love’” (427) despite their shortcomings as true examples of “world philosophy.”

In short, *Much Ado about Nothingness* provides an insightful, at times brilliant examination of two innovative philosophers that have been formative for the Japanese tradition and important for twentieth-century philosophy in general. While I personally think that categories such as “Eastern philosophy,” “Western philosophy” and even “Japanese philosophy” are highly problematic, they do constitute standard nomenclature for specific philosophical traditions or bundles thereof. Be that as it may, I agree with Heisig that philosophies across traditions and especially the philosophy of nothingness developed by Nishida, Tanabe, and their successors such as Kōyama and Mutai Risaku 務台理作 (1890–1974) locate philosophy “nowhere East

and West” (31) and make possible a “world philosophy” that articulates universally applicable insights in the many dialects of multilingualism. Heisig’s latest work is a perfect example of and an indispensable contribution to such a world philosophy that converts the cacophony of voices to an antiphony of arguments and insights.

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