

# Nishitani on Emptiness and Historical Consciousness

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**Abstract** This essay focuses on NISHITANI Keiji's 西谷啟治 early and late thinking, in the discourse on world history and modernity during wartime and the postwar meditation on emptiness and historicity in *Religion and Nothingness*. Following the first part of the analysis, I will trace Nishitani's critical indebtedness to Heidegger's existential-phenomenological analysis of historicity in *Being and Time*, and thereby analyze how Nishitani attempts to solve the aporia of modernity by recourse to the Buddhist doctrine of emptiness. The essay will conclude with some critical remarks that discern the limits and hidden dangers in Nishitani's philosophical project.

**Keywords** NISHITANI Keiji 西谷啟治 · Heidegger · Emptiness · Modernity

## 1 Introduction

Among the modern thinkers in East Asia, NISHITANI Keiji 西谷啟治 (1900–1990) is one who profoundly meditated on the problem of historicity from the perspective of the Buddhist philosophical tradition.<sup>1</sup> In this essay, I will focus on his early and late thinking with regard to the issues concerned here, that is, his discourse on world history and modernity during wartime (1941–1942) and his postwar meditation on emptiness and historicity in *Religion and Nothingness* (1954–1955, 1961). Following the first part of analysis, I will trace Nishitani's critical indebtedness to Heidegger's existential-phenomenological analysis of historicity in *Being and Time*, and thereby analyze how Nishitani attempts to solve the aporia of modernity by recourse to the Buddhist doctrine of emptiness. This essay will conclude with some critical remarks that discern the limits and hidden dangers in Nishitani's philosophical project.

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<sup>1</sup>This essay was presented at the Workshop on “Is There a ‘Dharma of History’,” convened by Axel Schneider at Leiden University on March 29–31, 2006. It was also presented at the Forum of Japanese Philosophy, Kyoto University, hosted by MASAKATSU Fujita 藤田正勝 on July 29, 2006. Following the guideline of the workshop, the essay examines the thought of NISHITANI Keiji with an emphasis on his Buddhist background. For NISHITANI Keiji's intellectual life, see Van Bragt 1982: xxxiv–xxxix; Heisig 2001: 183–255.

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## 2 War, Buddhism, and Historical Consciousness

During the Second World War in 1941–1942, NISHITANI Keiji actively participated with other members of the Kyoto 京都 School in two roundtable discussions on the issues of world history and modernity. Since there has been ample research on these two discussions (e.g., Minamoto 1994; Horio 1994; Mori 1994), I will not repeat the entire story. What we need to bear in mind is that their discourses on the problem of world history, particularly the status of Japan in world history, are the best testimony for their own philosophical and political practice. Although history has falsified their belief that “the truth of Japan is gradually unfolding through the Greater East Asian War” (Kōsaka et al. 1943: 6), this hindsight should not prevent us from re-examining and re-evaluating the complex historicity of their historical consciousness entangled in war, politics, religion, and philosophy (Heisig 2011). There is neither doubt about the strong nationalist and patriotic tone in their discussions, nor doubt about the fact that a group in the Kyoto School had been deeply involved in the political cooperation and struggle within the Japanese military government.<sup>2</sup> The political involvements should rather be taken to explain the practical character of their historical thinking. They did not simply talk in vain. On the contrary, they were not only clearly aware of the inseparability of politics, history, and culture, they also attempted to prophesy a political and cultural alternative to European modernity. In their philosophical prophecy, especially with regard to their account of history, how did they appeal to the Buddhist philosophy of nothingness? Regarding this question, I will focus on NISHITANI Keiji only to see how the Buddhist standpoint was taken to shape a new historical consciousness for countering European modernity.

I will start with reviewing and analyzing NISHITANI Keiji’s “Essay on ‘The Overcoming of Modernity,’” an essay that appeared in the roundtable discussions of *The Overcoming of Modernity* in 1942, because, in comparison with the talk records in roundtable discussions, Nishitani’s viewpoint was clearly and systematically presented in this written piece (Nishitani 1979: 18–37).<sup>3</sup>

First, in this essay Nishitani diagnosed the crisis of European modernity as a process of disintegration. During the Meiji 明治 restoration modern European culture was introduced to Japan. However, different sectors of culture were taken separately from the West without a sense of unified totality. This was reflected in the cultural crisis Japan encountered, especially in the post-Shōwa 昭和 period. As Nishitani pointed out, a similar crisis of modernity characterized by cultural disintegration had already occurred in early modern European history. Three trends of European history, that is, Renaissance, Reformation, and the rise of natural science, represented three respective sectors of culture, namely humanities, religion, and science. These sectors became mutually independent and conflicting with each other without a fundamental unifying ground. The Christianity of Reformation viewed human beings as mere existence of sin and mortality in contrast to the absolute power of God. On the other side, natural

<sup>2</sup> See Ōhashi 2001, in which the Ōshima 大島 Memos were published for the first time. See Williams 2004 for a study on the basis of these documents. Although Williams’s work is somehow disturbing for his oversimplified journalist style, at least I agree with one of his remarks: “We must complement our sophisticated understanding of the Kyoto School as a philosophy of religion with a critical but constructive assessment of the Kyoto School achievement in the sphere of politics, history and society” (Williams 2004: 80).

<sup>3</sup> As James Heisig points out, for some reason unknown to us this important essay was not collected in Nishitani’s *Collected Writings* (Heisig 2001: 208).

science regarded the whole world, including human beings, as ruled by mathematical and physical laws only, while the Renaissance's humanism affirmed human nature that manifests in sensation and reason. The immanent harmony among God, world, and soul in the Western tradition, or among Heaven, Earth, and Human Beings in the East Asian tradition, was completely lost in the modern age. This disintegration is considered the deep cause for the crisis of modernity. The pathology of modernity was also reflected in the sociopolitical ideological conflict of individualism, nationalism, and cosmopolitanism that arose in parallel with the disintegration of individual, state, and world. As a consequence, the self-understanding of human beings becomes completely disintegrated and fragmentary.<sup>4</sup>

Second, the crisis of modernity is basically construed by Nishitani as a religious crisis. That is, the Christian faith is no longer capable of serving as the foundation of modern culture, because of its incompatibility with humanism and natural science. In this regard, Nietzsche's "God is dead" is nothing but a declaration of fact. For Nishitani, however, it does not mean that the only solution is to embrace scientism. On the contrary, Nishitani appeals to the Buddhist notion of the subjectivity of nothingness, arguing that it can serve as the ontological ground of modern religiosity. Obviously following Nishida's 西田 footsteps, Nishitani adopts the notion of "subjectivity of nothingness" from the Buddhist tradition. By referring to Dōgen's 道元 famous phrase, "casting off of mind-body" (*shinjin-datsuraku* 身心脱落), Nishitani contends that the subjectivity of nothingness can be attained through the negation of Cartesian duality of mind and body. Although in the essay Nishitani did not deliberately pinpoint Descartes' mind-body dualism as the main cause for the pathology of modernity, there is no doubt that he fully believed in overcoming modernity through the subjectivity of nothingness.<sup>5</sup> The notion of the subjectivity of nothingness is also called "no-self," "no-mind," "true self," and "true mind," that, according to the Buddhist tradition, is attainable only through the phenomenological negation of the duality of mind and body. Accordingly, this subjectivity of nothingness is said to be absolutely free, free from the bondage of causality that governs the existence of mind and body. Nishitani further contends that this subjectivity is the ontological-existential ground on which authentic freedom can be practically realized.<sup>6</sup>

Following both the Heideggerian and Buddhist analysis, Nishitani also draws an ontological distinction between *ontological* subjectivity, which refers to the "subjectivity of nothingness," and *ontic* subjectivity, which refers to the Cartesian subject. For Nishitani, the subjectivity of nothingness can be attained only through the negation

<sup>4</sup> Surprisingly, Nishitani's conception of modernity anticipated Jürgen Habermas who, following Max Weber's analysis, "characterized cultural modernity as the separation of the substantial reason expressed in religion and metaphysics into three autonomous spheres" (Habermas 1981: 8). These spheres are science, morality, and art, which had been differentiated because the unified world view of traditional religion and metaphysics fell apart. Although Habermas did not specify, we also come to know that the separation of three sectors was also exemplified in Kant's three *Critiques*.

<sup>5</sup> Later in *Religion and Nothingness*, Nishitani frequently criticized Descartes' dualism as the cause of the "cold and lifeless world of death," in which "the things in the natural world came to appear as bearing no living connection with the internal ego" (Nishitani 1982: 11; in this essay all references to Nishitani 1982 were also cross-checked against Nishitani 1961, the original Japanese text).

<sup>6</sup> Freedom and subjectivity are also the main motif in German Idealism. The German Idealists, including Kant, Fichte, and Hegel, are concerned with the questions: "What is the foundation of our consciousness of ourselves as free beings? Could such a foundation be found in a privileged access that we have to our mind?" (Mohr 1995: 31)

(“casting off”) of the Cartesian subject of mind and body, while the mind-body will be dialectically affirmed again on the ground of the subjectivity of nothingness. Such dialectical affirmation is predicated on the logic that absolute negation *is* (*soku* 即) absolute affirmation. Science, ethics, and history, which are possible to coming into being at the ontic level, are also dialectically affirmed through absolute negation. Here we see the philosophical antidote taken from the East Asian Buddhist tradition as an alternative of solution to the crisis of Western modernity.

The third point in that essay is a critique of liberalism. Following the above analysis, there needs an axle of praxis for transformation from absolute negation to absolute affirmation. As far as one is transformed from the ontic subjectivity to the ontological subjectivity, culture, science, and history are affirmed again on the ground of the subjectivity of nothingness. Accordingly, there arise two kinds of freedom in parallel with two levels of subjectivity: the freedom *from* the world (*sekai kara no jiyū* 世界からの自由) and the freedom *in* the world (*sekai no uchi he no jiyū* 世界のうちへの自由). The freedom *from* the world attained by the ontological subjectivity should be transformed to the freedom *in* the world attained by ontic subjectivity. The former is also called “freedom *beyond* the world,” while the latter is called “freedom *within* the world.” Nishitani argues that, although “freedom beyond the world” is made possible in Christianity, both “freedom beyond the world” and “freedom within the world” can only be fully realized by the subjectivity of nothingness. As Nishitani further comments, true liberalism should be qualified by the realization of freedom in the twofold sense. By the same token, liberalism in the Anglo-Saxon tradition is criticized for its one-sidedness, namely, lack of freedom *beyond* the world.

Nishitani further developed a political philosophy, claiming that the nation-state should be firmly rooted in *moral energy* that has been manifested as the traditional spirit.<sup>7</sup> In this regard, Nishitani appeals to the thought of Shinto 神道, arguing that Japanese spirituality should be traced back to the Illuminating Pure Mind (*seimei shi* 清明心) of the Sun Goddess (Amaterasu Ōmikami 天照大神). A few historical examples might help us understand Nishitani’s reference to Shinto. During wartime, the Japanese military government propagandized the national ethics as “eliminating self-centeredness for serving the country” (*messhi-hōkō* 滅私奉公). Nishitani interpreted “*shi* 私” as “individual mind” and “*kō* 公” as “universal mind.” For national welfare, everyone was asked to eliminate the “individual mind” and recover the “universal mind” that is transcendently rooted in the Pure Mind (God’s Mind).<sup>8</sup> Nishitani further claimed that Shinto’s religiosity is in perfect accord with the religiosity of the subjectivity of nothingness. Consequently, Japanese particularism and global universalism are thus able to be harmonized with each other. In other words, Japanism as a form of particularism should be preserved in the context of universalism to the extent that national ethicality and universal religiosity are mutually interpenetrated.

For Nishitani, the supremacy of Japanese spirituality provides legitimate ground for Japan to conceive herself as a new power in the world order. It was said that the destiny of Japan was to reconstruct the world order in justice. In order to achieve this goal,

<sup>7</sup> In the roundtable discussions, the notion of “moral energy” (*moralische Energie*) was frequently employed, especially by KŌYAMA Iwao 高山岩男, as an antidote to cure the sickness of European modernity. Kōyama attributed this notion to Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886). See Kōsaka et al. 1943: 101–102, and Horio 1994: 306.

<sup>8</sup> The wartime ideology of *messhi-hōkō* can be traced to Song 宋 and Tokugawa 徳川 Neo-Confucianism.

Japan had to become strong enough to force Anglo-Saxon dominion out of Asia. Nishitani emphasized again that national strength needed to be supported by equally strong moral energy. However, moral energy should not only be taken as the basis of national ethics but also as the foundation of global ethics. Both the nation-state and the world need to be guided by the same universal principle of morality, namely of “self-negation for the common good.” Accordingly, every nation-state, including Japan, should follow the principle of self-negation in order to rebuild the order of the international community. Nishitani concluded the general principle of global ethics as “self-benefiting for other-benefiting” and “self-awakening for other-awakening,” two phrases taken from the Buddhist ethical tradition.

To sum up, the crisis of modernity was diagnosed as the conflict of the various segmented cultural sectors (religion, humanities, and natural science) and political sectors (individual, state, and world). The antidote provided by Nishitani to the crisis is to build a new ethicality and religiosity of moral energy that is grounded on the subjectivity of nothingness, which is also called “Pure Mind.” With this antidote Nishitani believed that global morality, which was also named as the “Dao of Heaven” (*tendou* 天道) in ancient times, would be actualized in the progress of world history.

We found that key notions in his discourse are derived from the various sources of Shinto (“Pure Mind”), Confucianism (“Dao of Heaven”), and Buddhism (“Nothingness”). We also have to point out that the philosophical stance of Nishitani was mainly rooted in the Zen form of *Tathāgatagarbha* thought, which emphasizes the unity of transcendence and immanence. In the conclusion, Nishitani envisioned the opening of the transhistorical religious world as the goal of the progress of world history. This relation between the historical and the transhistorical is mediated through the logic of *soku*. That is, the transhistorical, religious world *should* be realized in the historical world through the realization of the subjectivity of nothingness (“Pure Mind”). This logic of *soku* plays a pivotal role in Nishitani’s philosophy of history, which will be examined in the conclusion.

In this short essay, although many key concepts, such as “subjectivity of nothingness,” still need to be fully elaborated, the whole picture of Nishitani’s thinking has been clearly presented. As the problem of history is concerned, an ontological distinction between the transhistorical-religious world and the historical-political world is drawn in parallel with the Buddhist distinction between the ultimate (*paramārtha*) and the conventional (*saṃvṛti*). Both the ultimate (transhistorical) world and the conventional (sociopolitical) world, according to *The Awakening of Faith* (the most influential classic in the Sino-Japanese Mahāyāna Buddhism), are ontologically grounded in the Transcendental Mind (“Pure Mind”), which is named by Nishitani as “Subjectivity of Nothingness.”<sup>9</sup> The notion of subjectivity is so much stressed because it refers to the transcendental ground by which the praxis of religious and sociopolitical transformation can be metaphysically explicated. In other words, metaphysics in this context is employed to germinate the power for religious and sociopolitical action. It is not merely theoretical speculation only. Moreover, the transcendental subjectivity is not conceived in terms of a self-same substance. On the contrary, it is empty of substance and

<sup>9</sup> *The Awakening of Faith*: “There are two gates [of world] on the ground of One Mind. Which two gates? The first is the gate of the Mind-in-Suchness. The second is the gate of the Mind-in-Arising-and-Cessation. What is meant by this statement? It means that the two gates are not separated” (Hakeda 1967: 31).

characterized by suchness (*tathatā*) qua dependent arising only. However, the notions of “Pure Mind,” “True Mind,” and “No-mind” in Nishitani’s early discourse seem to be oversaturated with German Idealist flavor, for history is seen as the field that needs to be purified, transformed, and *dialectically* elevated to the level of religion. It is also from this Idealist viewpoint that the notion of world history is adopted to suggest the final triumph of the subjectivity of nothingness. In this respect, Nishitani seems to take a Hegelian stance when he claimed that the principle of nothingness will be finally actualized in the process of world history.

### 3 Emptiness and Historicity in Nishitani’s *Religion and Nothingness*

In *Religion and Nothingness*, Nishitani’s approach to the problem of history was clearly shifted from Hegelian dialectics to Heideggerian existential phenomenology. Inspired by Heidegger’s interpretation of Nietzsche in the 1930s, Nishitani squarely confronted the problem of history that appeared as an “historical, existential event” at the advent of nihilism (Nishitani 1982: 168, 171). As Nishitani pointed out, both Nietzsche and Heidegger dealt with the problem of nihilism as the problem of “*history of being*” (Heidegger 1982: part 2). The problem of history is viewed as the problem of being. To deal with the problem of history one should therefore start from the analysis of the problem of being that, as already elaborated by Heidegger in *Being and Time*, proceeds with the ontological analysis of Da-sein (Heidegger 1982: 36–40). We will come back to Heidegger’s analysis of temporality and historicity later. For the time being we simply need to see how Nishitani brings in the problem of historicity when analyzing the meaning of Da-sein as “life-and-death” in the Buddhist sense.

Nishitani firstly defines human existence as “life-and-death” that is further characterized as “infinite finitude.” To characterize human existence as “finite” is not owing to the fact that, as believed in Christianity, human beings are created by God, but rather because, in Buddhist words, human beings exist along with the “six destinies” of existence. This “total horizon that embraces the other forms of existence and types of species within the world,” as Nishitani writes, constitutes ontologically the spatiality of human existence as “finitude.” On the other hand, the temporality of human existence is also revealed in the unending evolution of existence, or in what Buddhists speak of as “wandering in the cycle of life and death,” which is also characterized in Buddhism as existence in suffering (Nishitani 1982: 172–173). When employing Buddhist mythical imageries, such as “life-and-death” and “six destinies” to interpret the meaning of Da-sein, Nishitani is quite aware of the difficulty in his hermeneutical task. In this regard, Nishitani appeals to Rudolf Bultmann’s existential demythologization to restore the existential meaning of mythical imageries.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> After exploring the efforts of scientific and philosophical *demythification*, Nishitani turns to Bultmann’s existential demythologization: “But neither the negation of myth by scientific intellect nor its transmutation into *logos* by philosophical intellect can exhaust the essence within myth. The mythical has to be restored to the existential whence it originates in an elemental sense and within which the core of the content of its meaning can be accorded a new existential interpretation on the dimension of Existenz. The positive significance in myth will truly be revealed only through what Bultmann speaks of as *existentielle Entmythologisierung*” (Nishitani 1982: 173–174). Also see Nishitani 1991: 1–27.

From the beginning, Nishitani draws a methodological distinction between existential-phenomenological thinking and conceptual-representational thinking. While refuting the latter as an inauthentic mode of thinking, Nishitani takes the former as his own hermeneutical standpoint. Although Heidegger is mentioned in the explanation of “existential phenomenology,” Nishitani elaborates his own hermeneutical method explicitly in Buddhist tone. In analyzing Da-sein as “infinite finitude,” Nishitani explains his existential phenomenological method as that which “consists in man’s grasp of his own finitude on a dimension of transcendence—of “transcendence,” so to speak—that breaks through the standpoint of discursive understanding and speculative reason to the depth of his own existence” (Nishitani 1982: 171). Hence only if one is on such a field of transcendence can the finitude of Da-sein be made manifest.

Nishitani’s above remark needs to be further explained. First, his method of “transcendence” (*chōetsu* 超越) is characterized as breaking through the standpoint of Kantian understanding and reason. Second, it is characterized as “ecstatic awareness” (*datsujiteki jikaku* 脱自的自覺), namely the awareness of no-self that is obtained through the meditative praxis. If one experiences the world via understanding and reason, one’s knowledge will be confined to that of appearance only. On the contrary, if one is able to “transcend” or “to break through” the standpoint of individual understanding and reason, one will be capable of having “intuition of essence” in the Husserlian sense. The concept of “transcendence” in this context is further explained in terms of “ecstatic awareness.” In Japanese, “ecstasy” (*datsuji* 脱自) literally means “casting off oneself or selfness,” a usage that will be more intelligible by referring to Dōgen’s Zen practice of “casting off body and mind.” In other words, Nishitani’s existential phenomenology should be understood in the context of Buddhist meditative praxis. As soon as one has cast off the dualistic frame of subject and object, mind and body, one is able to see things as they are. On the contrary, reason enables one to see things as representations only.

The question about history raised by phenomenologists, as David Carr once pointed out, is not “What *is* history? or How do we *know* history? but rather What is it to be historical? What is it like to exist historically?” (Carr 2005).<sup>11</sup> Differing from metaphysical and epistemological approaches, phenomenology assumes that before we have any knowledge of history, we must first *be* historical beings. We exist historically before we raise any questions about history. To describe our *experience* of history is therefore methodologically prior to analyzing our *knowledge* of history. As for Nishitani, he is not concerned with the knowledge of history that is constituted by conceptual-representational thinking, because in that case history in historiography is represented as objective knowledge only, but not as historical experience itself. In the contrary, historical experience must be accessible only in the existential mode of first person or Da-sein. Heidegger called this mode of historical existence “historicity” (*Geschichtlichkeit*):

The Being of Da-sein finds its meaning in temporality. But temporality is at the same time the condition of the possibility of historicity as a temporal mode of

<sup>11</sup> I am grateful that my visit to The Chinese University of Hong Kong in 2005 overlapped David Carr’s visit, which allowed me to learn from his lectures on phenomenology and history.

being of Da-sein itself, regardless of whether and how it is a being “in time.” *As a determination historicity is prior to what is called history (world-historical occurrences). Historicity means the constitution of Being of the “occurrence” of Da-sein as such; it is the ground for the fact that something like the discipline of “world history” is at all possible and historically belongs to world history ... Da-sein “is” its past in the manner of its Being which, roughly expressed, on each occasion “occurs” out of its future.* (Heidegger 1996: 17; italics mine)

In his analysis of temporality, historicity, and emptiness, Nishitani follows Heidegger in beginning with an analysis of existence in life-and-death as Da-sein, that is, as being-in-the-world.

In his Heideggerian analysis of Da-sein, Nishitani also describes human existence as a “being-at-doing” (Ch: *youwei* 有為; Skt: *saṃskṛta*), that is “entangled in the net of casual conditions” (Nishitani 1982: 220). It is worthy of note that Jan van Bragt’s English translation of *youwei* into “being-at-doing” beautifully catches the ontological meaning of Da-sein in connecting the Buddhist notion of being (*you* 有) with the notion of doing (*wei* 為). His creative translation is philosophically, though not philologically, faithful when we continue to read the following lines: “[W]e are in time means that we are condemned to be *doing* something incessantly, and in that constant doing our being constantly comes about as a *becoming*. That is, existence in time occurs as a constant ‘incessant becoming’” (Nishitani 1982: 221). Being in time is therefore nothing but being in doing. Time is neither viewed as an objective entity, nor as an *a priori* form of perception. It can be understood only in the existential situation where one is always unable to stop doing something. Doing one thing must eventually result in an obligation to do something else. Hence, according to Nishitani, we come to realize Da-sein as “being in time,” as an “infinite, restless, forward drive within,” as an “infinite finitude,” or as *saṃsāra* (life-and-death).<sup>12</sup>

In Buddhist terminology, this infinite drive from within is called “craving” or “desire.” According to the Buddhist formula of “the twelve links of causality,” human existence as becoming (*bhava*) is mainly constituted in the chains of grasping (*upādāna*), craving (*trṣṇā*), and ignorance (*avidyā*). Put in other words, Da-sein as being-in-the-world is ontologically constituted in karma (doing), while the essence of karma is precisely determined in grasping, craving and ignorance. *It is in the evolving cycle of karma that both being and time are ontologically constituted.*<sup>13</sup>

There are several implications in Nishitani’s statements. First, as the ontological condition of conventional time and history, temporality and historicity can be disclosed only in our ready-to-hand experience of life-world constituted in incessant drive and desire. They are concealed in our scientific understanding of time and history while the latter are often taken as the objects of knowledge. Only when our natural attitude

<sup>12</sup> Nishitani’s existential exegesis of “being-in-doing” (*ui* 有) reminds us of Dōgen’s creative interpretation of being-time (*uji* 有時).

<sup>13</sup> It is better to cite the complete passage in Nishitani’s own words: “This infinite drive has since ancient times been taken as ‘greed’ or ‘lust’ (*cupuditas* and *concupiscentia* being the Western equivalents). Being so driven by an infinite drive and unable to refrain from constantly doing something new—the mode of being that constitutes the essence of our life or being-in-the-world, together with the causal nexus it implies—led to the idea of karma. The term ‘karma’ expresses an awareness of existence that sees being and time as infinite burdens for us and, at the same time, an awareness of the essence of time itself” (Nishitani 1982: 221).



toward time and history has been methodically bracketed, the fundamental meaning of temporality and historicity can be disclosed in the primordial existence described by Heidegger as “being-in-the-world” or by Buddhists as “that which arises dependently.” Methodologically speaking, the ontological structure of being-in-the-world or “dependent origination” needs to be disclosed before we raise questions such as “What is time?” or “What is history?” This is the reason why Nishitani was at such pains to unpack the complex meaning of existence as being-time.

Second, in Nishitani’s analysis, the meaning of time in its primordial sense is twofold: newness and impermanence (Nishitani 1982: 219–220). Time in the sense of newness is possible because all beings as “new things” are constantly arising in dependence upon other cause and conditions. This sense of newness is to be viewed either as creative possibility or as infinite burden. Although Nishitani places much emphasis on time as burden, I rather tend to think that the true point lies right at the possibility of conversion from the burdensome state to the creative state through spiritual praxis. At this jointure, the question arises: how is existential conversion possible? In the reply Nishitani mentions two explanations. The first explanation is that the infinite drive is always already at work. The second is that time “contains at its ground the presence of infinite openness” (Nishitani 1982: 237). Obviously Nishitani has Heidegger’s notion of “project” (*entwerfen*) in mind when he proposes these explanations. However, the possibility of existential conversion is still not fully clear. If we turn to Buddhist thinking, Mādhyamika in particular, we find the answer right in the doctrine of “dependent origination.” That is, since all beings are originated in dependence upon other causes and conditions, they are empty of intrinsic nature (essence) in themselves; and since there is no permanent and changeless intrinsic nature at all, change is possible in directions of either becoming burdensome or free. It is in this sense that we come to understand that *the fundamental meaning of time is grounded in the temporality of “dependent origination.”* At this point, Nishitani’s concluding remark becomes worthy of notice: “The essential ambiguity in the meaning of time means that time is essentially the field of fundamental conversion, the field of a ‘change of heart’ or *metanoia*” (Nishitani 1982: 222).<sup>14</sup> In this statement, rather than alluding to Mādhyamika philosophy, Nishitani instead appeals to Yogācāra Consciousness-Only philosophy, or even to Pure Land thought, for explaining how religious time-consciousness occurs and changes. According to the latter, the meaning of time is convertible simply because consciousness is convertible in dependent origination. Time is not separable from consciousness.

Third, since time is *grounded* in the *groundless* “dependent origination,” the essence of time is characterized by emptiness and impermanence due to its lack of intrinsic nature. Nishitani named the groundlessness of time “nihility” in the Nietzschean sense. In light of “nihility” or “emptiness,” time is no more conceivable in the linear sequence of the past, the present, and the future, because there is no “unit” of time at all. All that is certain about “time” is the experience of temporality at the moment of the present only. Right at the home-ground of the present, Nishitani continues to say, “nihility opens up as the field of the ecstatic transcendence of world and time” (Nishitani 1982: 229). That means only when one fully reaches the abyss of nihility, can the transformation from negative nihilism to positive nihilism take place. To cite Nietzsche’s words

<sup>14</sup> In many places in this book we see Nishitani’s discussion on Yogācāra philosophy (e.g., Nishitani 1982: 240).

in the *Twilight of the Idols*, “there is nothing outside of the whole” (*es gibt Nichts ausser dem Ganzen*), Nishitani interprets “nothing” (*Nichts*) as the field of nihility on which Great Liberation becomes possible. If Nishitani’s interpretation appears not completely transparent, recasting it in Buddhist idiom might make it more understandable. That is, when one comes to realize that “all is empty,” including time and history, one is right on the track to liberation from the bondage. Hence “nihility” is not a nihilistic concept. As Nāgārjuna argued, emptiness is the groundless ground of being. “Everything is established by virtue of emptiness. If there were no emptiness, nothing would be established.”<sup>15</sup> Only within the Buddhist philosophical background are we able to understand that in the final stage, in Nishitani’s words, “nihility comes to participate in time, as a participation occurring at all times on the home-ground of the present” (Nishitani 1982: 229). Authentic temporality is fully realized only at the moment when one has been enlightened in emptiness (absolute nihility).

As a Zen practitioner, Nishitani often finds in Zen literature the best testimony for the enlightened experience of time, which is hardly reached in the representational thinking. Citing again Dōgen’s famous experience of “dropping off body and mind,” Nishitani concludes that the Existenz as samādhi-being is true time, or “Existenz as true time comes to the fullness of time” (Nishitani 1982: 190). That is, authentic time is only realized in authentic existence. This authentic being-time is best described in a cited Dōgen’s poem: “A leap year is met one in four / Cocks crow at five in the morning” (Nishitani 1982: 191).<sup>16</sup>

#### 4 Critique of Modern Historical Consciousness

In his magnum opus, *Religion and Nothingness*, Nishitani places his true philosophical concern in the last two chapters, namely, “Emptiness and Time” and “Emptiness and History.” Quite obviously, his intention is to confront the crisis of modernity from the Buddhist standpoint of nothingness. The task of “overcoming modernity” is not a new one. It has been carried over from wartime to the postwar period. If there is any reason for the Buddhist tradition to continue as an alternative to modernity, as Nishitani believes, thinking on time and history needs to be pressed harder and deeper.

However, what is Buddhist historical consciousness? Or, what is the Buddhist conception of historicity? Nishitani contextualizes these questions within history because the questions themselves are embedded in their own historicity. Strategically speaking, the answer to the above questions will be unfolded within the analysis of the development of historical consciousness. In the following sections, I will keep in close step with Nishitani’s account of the development of historical consciousness in Christianity, the Age of Enlightenment, Nietzsche, and finally in Buddhism. I should also point out that Nishitani’s historical reading is intended to dialectically arrive at the summit of a system. This kind of reading, often found in the Buddhist hermeneutics, is

<sup>15</sup> *Mūlamadhyamakārikā* XXIV.14: *sarvaṃ ca yujyate tasya śūnyatā yasya yujyate*. Here I adopt Kumārajīva’s Chinese translation, 以有空義故 / 一切法得成, which is slightly different from what is meant in the Sanskrit text, “All is possible when emptiness is possible.” Cf., Siderits and Katsura 2013: 275–276.

<sup>16</sup> 三年逢一閏 / 雞向五更啼. The translation is slightly modified. Nishitani also interprets the Zen enlightened experience depicted in Dōgen’s poem as close to what Nietzsche said about “play” in the “innocence of becoming” (*Unschuld des Werdens*) (Nishitani 1982: 215).

known as the “classification of teachings” (*kyōhan* 教判). Nishitani seems to be no exception.

#### 4.1 Historical Consciousness in Christianity

In Christianity, history is unfolded in the once-and-for-all process of creation, man’s rebellion against God, the coming of Jesus Christ the Savior, and the final Judgment and reconciliation with God. As Nishitani observes, individual consciousness has been taking shape since the time man first rebelled against God’s Will. From the beginning human self-consciousness, which is revealed as the consciousness of freedom, has never been separable from the consciousness of sin. Human self-consciousness is constituted in the consciousness of sin, the consciousness of freedom, and the consciousness of once-and-for-all nature of time.<sup>17</sup> Nishitani goes further to claim that this form of historical consciousness in Christianity has been rooted in the character of self-centeredness. As a result, the effort to eliminate self-centeredness (self-centeredness being identified with sin) becomes an everlasting theme in history, which is thus regarded as a history of repentance and salvation.

The second feature of Christian historical consciousness is seen in its eschatology *within* history. History as the once-for-all process will eventually come to an end (*eschaton*) under the Divine plan. Although the idea of eschatology has never been taken literally in the modern age, it appears in the form of teleology that assumes an aim in history to make progress possible. In this respect Nishitani sees the continuity between Christianity and modern secularism in terms of eschatology and the ideology of progress (Nishitani 1982: 209–210).

#### 4.2 Historical Consciousness in the Age of Enlightenment

In the age of Enlightenment, as mentioned above, the idea of the end of history, which had been dominant in the Christian era, was replaced by the idea of progress, which is in turn based on faith in human reason. Furthermore, trust in human reason can be traced back to man’s rebellion against God’s Will. Although the historical consciousnesses of modern secularism and Christianity seem to oppose each other, according to Nishitani, they share the same structure of thinking. On the one hand, Christianity is characterized by eschatology and theocentrism. On the other hand, modern secularism is characterized by the idea of progress and anthropocentrism. Both sides seem to be in direct conflict with one another. Ironically, both of them sustain each other through the diametrical opposition within the same structure, because both regard history as that which is *meaningful*. For Christianity, the meaning of history comes from God’s Will. For modern man, the meaning of history comes from human reason and progress. Such belief in the meaningfulness of history had been considered the core of modern Western culture until “God is dead” was declared by Nietzsche as the sign of nihilism.

<sup>17</sup> The notion of “once for all” has been mentioned in Heidegger’s *Being and Time*: “The theme of historiography is neither that which has happened just once for all nor something universal that floats above it, but the *possibility* which has been factually existent” (Heidegger 1962: 447; italics mine). Here the possibility comes from “anticipatory resoluteness” that has been emphasized by Heidegger as the determination of authentic historicity of Da-sein. Also see Heidegger 1962: 433–439.

According to Nishitani, the modern conception of time as stretching forward or backward endlessly will inevitably fall into “optical illusion.” The typical examples are Christian eschatology and Platonism, in which the origin or essence of time and history are either placed in the *eschaton* or in the Idea. Both completely overlooked the fundamental experience of the present in which the authentic temporality of time is found as “infinite openness” or “absolute nothingness.” In this regard, the modern science of history that searches for “causes” in the “past” also falls in the same optical illusion. More significantly, Nishitani digs deeply into the ground of modern science in human reason which, as both Nietzsche and Buddhism point out, embodies “the drive of existence to achieve autonomy.” The illusion of modern historical consciousness is mainly rooted in human reason as “self-will” or “will to will” or “self-attachment” in the Buddhist sense (Nishitani 1982: 224–227). To put it more plainly, the science of history as a branch of “human sciences” is still unable to break the confinement of anthropocentrism or subjectism as illustrated by Heidegger.<sup>18</sup>

Nishitani’s critique of modernity is even clearer in his criticism of Kant’s conception of human subject confined within itself as autonomy and self-as-an-end-in-itself. The question thus raised by Nishitani is: “While autonomy is beyond doubt the essence of the subject, does this essence really belong only to the standpoint of the subject? Is it immanent to the subject?” (Nishitani 1982: 273) This question leads Nishitani to search for the more fundamental ground of existence where all beings are co-relative to and co-depend on others reciprocally, “for only through opening up within the self a field where others are acknowledged as persons can the self also exist as a person on that same field” (Nishitani 1982: 274). This fundamental field is the field of emptiness, which is depicted by Nishitani as “not that the self is empty, but that emptiness is self; not that things are empty, but that emptiness is things” (Nishitani 1982: 138). For Nishitani, only in the field of emptiness can the solipsism of Kantian subject be broken and the “Other” be recognized as being-with in the ontological and religious sense.

However, Nishitani pushes this line of thinking to the extreme, asking for a “complete conversion from the standpoint where the self is an autotelic person to the standpoint where *the self is a means for all other things*” (Nishitani 1982: 275; italics mine). Nishitani repeatedly emphasizes radical self-negation, even to the extent that “the self as person, including even its reason and will, the self such as it is in its totality, has to become a *thing* to all other beings” (Nishitani 1982: 275). To take self as a means, but not as an end, is the complete realization of religious Love (*agape*) or Compassion (*karuna*) in this world. It is precisely at this point we see the hidden danger in Nishitani’s critique of modernity. If a person *chooses* to sacrifice himself as a means or a thing for others, the value based on such a choice still belongs to the subject as an autonomous being who is able to judge and make decision. *What if conversely he chooses to sacrifice other selves as a means or a thing, when a self is no more viewed as an end in itself?* The dangerous consequence of Nishitani’s critique of Kantian ethics should not be taken lightly. Obviously this idea might be somehow related to his wartime political involvement.

<sup>18</sup> In critique of modern secularism, Nishitani penetrates insightfully into the core of delusion of human autonomous reason: “[A]t the ground of the independence effected in human reason lies what could be called the drive of existence itself to become autonomous, and, moreover, that in the deepest ground of that drive, self-will—what Heidegger called the ‘will to will’—is at work” (Nishitani 1982: 235).

### 4.3 Historical Consciousness in Nietzsche's Nihilism

The most impressive contribution in Nishitani's life-long philosophical journey is seen in his brilliant appropriation of Nietzsche's radical nihilism as a bridge for utilizing the Buddhist philosophy of emptiness to meet the crisis of modernity. For Nishitani, the best way of understanding both the Buddhist philosophy of emptiness and Nietzsche's nihilism is allowing them to illuminate each other. It might be legitimate at this point to say that Nishitani's philosophy would not strike us so profoundly if it had not been mediated through his reading of Nietzsche.

Nietzsche's nihilism was briefly defined by Nishitani as follows: "There is no home-ground at all to be sought in the world of that pure becoming, that circular world-time turning eternally within itself. And where all things are to be repeated endlessly in exactly the same fashion, where everything is nullified and rendered meaningless, any search at all for the elemental loses its significance" (Nishitani 1982: 226). In view of nihilism, history loses the meaning that its origin is either ascribed to God in the Christian era or to human subjects in modern times. In other words, Nietzsche deconstructs all forms of metaphysics that are taken as the ground of the meaning of all beings, including history. History becomes meaningless because the truth of metaphysics is now claimed to be nothing but "a mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms" (Nietzsche 1976: 46). Instead of being disclosed as the manifestation of eschatology or the field of progress, history is now disclosed as Eternal Recurrence of the Same by the Will to Power. Eternal Recurrence appears here as an "utterly pure and transparent becoming" which is envisioned only by the Will to Power at the moment of the present. It is at the ground of the present that one comes to experience the Eternal Recurrence as nihility and pure becoming. It is also at the ground of the present that the fundamental conversion from the Great Death to the Great Life is possible under the sway of the Will to Power. It is the Will that reveals the Eternal Recurrence as pure and innocent play. If there is history, it should be viewed in such a way.<sup>19</sup>

### 4.4 Historical Consciousness in the Buddhist Standpoint of Emptiness

Although the thought of Nietzsche seems to come pretty close to Zen Buddhism, Nishitani still follows Heidegger's interpretation to consider Nietzsche as the "last metaphysician" who constructs a system of metaphysics in terms of "Will to Power" as "essence" and "Eternal Recurrence" as "existence." Hence, according to Nishitani's *kyōhan* (classification of teachings), Nietzsche's position on nihilism is not radical enough for deconstruction of metaphysics, for "Will" is still conceived as the essence of being.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, unlike the Buddhist standpoint of emptiness, Nietzsche's

<sup>19</sup> Heidegger insightfully points out Nietzsche's conception of nihilism as history: "Nihilism *is* history. In Nietzsche's sense it constitutes the essence of Western history because it co-determinates the lawfulness of the metaphysical positions and their relationships. But the fundamental metaphysical positions are the ground and realm of what we know as world history, and especially as Western history. Nihilism determines the historicity of history." (Heidegger 1982: 53)

<sup>20</sup> "[S]ome sort of 'being' such as the Will to Power is being conceived of on the transhistorical plane.... And yet insofar as what is here at issue is a 'will,' that is, something conceived of in the third person as an 'it,' it has yet to rid itself of the character of a 'being'" (Nishitani 1982: 216).

standpoint of “Will” is still somehow characterized by self-centeredness that lacks the other-oriented compassion. According to Nishitani, Nietzsche’s “Will to Power” needs to be supplemented by Bodhisattva compassion and superseded by the standpoint of emptiness (Nishitani 1982:265).

“The standpoint of emptiness is the radical deliverance from the self-centeredness” (Nishitani 1982: 250). According to Nishitani’s interpretation, Western conceptions of time and history are rooted in the metaphysical notion of a self-centered will that is especially manifested in human reason in modern secularism, the Will of God in Christianity and the Will to Power in Nietzsche’s atheism. In order to discharge the authentic temporality of time and the authentic historicity of history, Nishitani argues, the self-centeredness of will needs to be completely negated and transformed into the standpoint of emptiness. Only with such conversion of standpoint can past karma accumulated by acts of the will be wiped away.

Now I would like to offer some reflections on another statement of Nishitani’s: “It is on the standpoint of emptiness that historicity is able to realize itself radically” (Nishitani 1982: 217). According to Nishitani, the standpoint of emptiness can be fully realized only in the ordinary experience of life-world. Such a kind of enlightened experience of life-world is often depicted in Zen poems cited by Dōgen:

Every morning the sun ascends in the east,  
 Every night the moon descends in the west.  
 Clouds retreat, the mountain bones are bared,  
 Rain passes, the surrounding hills are low.<sup>21</sup>

The Zen poem cited here illustrates the authentic historicity of history that is found in our fundamental experience of daily life without any concealment of discursive and representational thinking.

Nishitani goes further to elaborate the paradoxical relationship between history and emptiness in terms of mutual penetration. The *historical* time of Da-sein as “being-at-doing” is firmly rooted in the *transhistorical* emptiness as “non-doing or unconditionedness.” Conversely, the *transhistorical* emptiness needs to be realized in the *historical* time. This is the fundamental spirit of the Bodhisattva Path, “where each point of historical time pierces through the field of emptiness, each time must be a time of infinite solemnity” (Nishitani 1982: 271). This is the final conclusion reached by Nishitani.

## 5 Concluding Remarks

As Nishitani reached this conclusion a decade after the War, it might not be too sensitive to re-examine the philosophical rationale for his *historical* standpoint during wartime. The question is raised as such: is it possible to justify Nishitani’s *historical* “being-at-doing,” which is supposed to be rooted in the *transhistorical* standpoint of emptiness as “non-doing”? This is an ethical question. More precisely, this is a question

<sup>21</sup> 朝朝日東出 / 夜夜月沈西 / 雲收山谷露 / 雨過四山低。This poem is cited in Dōgen’s *Eihei kōroku* 永平廣錄 (*Dōgen’s Extensive Record*) (see Nishitani 1982: 188).

about the relationship between ethics and metaphysics. For those who take the trans-historical standpoint of emptiness, there is no distinction of good and evil, ought and is. The “ought” is nothing but the other-directedness of the “is” (Nishitani 1982: 260). This observation is absolutely correct at the level of emptiness. However, if one applies this transmundane wisdom of emptiness, namely, nondiscrimination of ought and is, to the historical domain of life-and-death, which is supposed to have been concealed by ignorance and desire, he or she will inevitably commit a categorical mistake of place. That is, if there is any ethics in the transhistorical world, it must be different from that in the historical world. In other words, categorical mistakes will occur when transhistorical ethics is applied to the historical world. On the contrary, a clear and uncompromising distinction between the “historical” and “transhistorical,” or *samvṛti* and *paramārtha*, needs to be upheld fast for common people, namely, those who have not been enlightened. For common people in the *historical* world, mundane ethics is absolutely indispensable for any right action. However, if Nishitani appeals to the dialectical interpenetration between “historical” and “transhistorical” which is governed by the logic of *soku*, we should be cautious that the logic of *soku* makes sense only for those who are enlightened, but not for those who are ordinary and unenlightened. Unless all human beings have been enlightened, mundane ethics still needs to be addressed in the historical world.

Regardless of the above caution, Nishitani’s interpretation of the historical consciousness as grounded in the emptiness of dependent origination is highly insightful. With this insight, the illusion of self-centered subjectivism embedded in the modern historical consciousness can be discerned and then transformed. For Nishitani, historical existence should be led back to the everyday life-world in which “flowers cover the mountainsides like brocade, the valley stream deepens into an indigo-like pool” (Nishitani 1982: 190).<sup>22</sup>

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