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Review of *Philosophers of Nothingness:  
An Essay on the Kyoto School*

*Philosophers of Nothingness: an Essay on the Kyoto School*. James  
W. Heisig. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001. Pp. xi + 380.  
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James W. Heisig's latest book, *Philosophers of Nothingness*, is the first comprehensive work addressing the philosophy of the scholars who constitute what has come to be known as the Kyoto School in Japan. This movement spanned the time period of the early 1900s until the end of WWII. Comprised of Nishida Kitaro, Tanabe Hajime, and Nishitani Keiji, who succeeded each other in the same chair, the Kyoto School was a movement whose influence has recently been the subject of much debate and scrutiny.<sup>1</sup> Heisig's book documents the school's major scholarly contributions as well as explicating the complicated interface between European continental philosophy and works of these philosophers. This book will be of interest to anyone involved in the study of continental philosophy, particularly phenomenology, as well as those interested in Zen and Pure Land Buddhism. In addition, the book is an interesting historical chronicle in that it documents the opening of Japan's borders to the West and the subsequent Japanese academic response to Western ideas.

The organization of Heisig's book is easy to follow. The bulk of the book consists of an in-depth examination of each of the major works of each philosopher. Framing this is an orientation and conclusion. The orientation provides important contextual material necessary for a proper understanding of Kyoto School philosophy. For example, Heisig provides a brief explanation of how Japanese philosophy differs from the philosophy of the West. In addition, the conclusion notes the specific contributions the Kyoto philosophers have made to Western philosophy. He suggests that Martin Heidegger's encounters with Tanabe Hajime changed both philosophers fundamentally. Heidegger's late philosophy reflects a greater appreciation for the primacy of experience over abstraction, and Tanabe focuses on the Heideggerian theme of death. Heisig's conclusion is also a prospectus in that he suggests that Kyoto School philosophy constitutes a chapter in the history of Western philosophy. In this respect he states that the Kyoto School is as influential as that of the neo-Kantians, who are credited with breaking with German Idealism and emphasizing the importance of empirical rather than a priori knowledge.

The heart of Kyoto school philosophy, and the one element unifying the three philosophers' works, is Buddhism. Heisig is careful to point out that the school's interpretations of Zen and Pure Land Buddhism are unique and not representative of Mahayana Buddhism in general. However, their application of Buddhist experience to philosophy is the distinguishing feature of the Kyoto school of thought. It is a philosophy that transcends metaphysics. Heisig frames this aspect of Kyoto School philosophy in terms of the critique of the transcendental subject occurring at the time among European philosophers, perhaps to shed light on the truly groundbreaking elements of Kyoto School philosophy. While Heidegger was attempting to overturn traditional metaphysics and Cartesian subjectivity, Kyoto School philosophers were mining Buddhist texts to substantiate a philosophy of subjectivity as sophisticated as any posited by Western philosophy thus far.

This point is made obvious by Nishida Kitaro's recognition that Buddhist practice provides a unique understanding seemingly lacking in most Western philosophy. Instead of referring to his work as theory, he preferred the term standpoint. From Nishida's perspective, the only way to confirm a philosophical intuition was to achieve it. Thus, philosophy must include an experiential, as well as conceptual, component. According to Heisig, Nishida's work is an attempt to introduce the language of Zen into the closed world of philosophy. And, conversely, he sought "to use philosophy to find a language to talk about

those things that Zen had always insisted were not susceptible to rationalization” (38). Thus the stage was set for a cross cultural dialogue, mutually informing European as well as Japanese philosophers.

Tanabe Hajime, Nishida’s junior and consequent heir to the chair of philosophy at Kyoto University, was much more active in European intellectual circles than his predecessor. He met and corresponded with Edmund Husserl, as well as befriending Martin Heidegger. Heidegger recommended him for an honorary doctorate at the University of Freiburg. In the chapter focusing on Tanabe’s major work, Heisig details the possible impact of the Japanese political climate on Tanabe’s work. Specifically, Heisig notes that in the *Philosophy of Metanoetics*, published in 1946, a year after Japan’s defeat in WWII, Tanabe calls for an urgent reform of the practice of philosophy from an apolitical academic endeavor to an active moral engagement with prevailing historical conditions. Profoundly disturbed by the consequences of the war, his late work emphasized the religious self-awareness, which he described as “nothingness-in-love that mediates our existence as relative beings” (175). Although retaining the theme of the connection between theory and praxis characteristic of Nishida, Heisig shows how Tanabe’s philosophy differs markedly from his predecessor in its emphasis on the moral responsibility of the philosopher.

Perhaps the most interesting chapters of Heisig’s book are those dedicated to the works of Nishitani Keiji. Nishitani is the third major philosopher comprising the Kyoto School movement. His work *Religion and Nothingness* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982),<sup>2</sup> an explication of the concept *sunyata* or emptiness, is a bold critique of traditional religion, both Eastern and Western, as well as philosophy. Although Nishitani considered himself a Buddhist, he stopped short of identifying himself as belonging to a particular Buddhist tradition. A practitioner of Rinzai Zen Buddhism, he stated that he was a “wandering Buddhist,” (255), unable to affiliate with any of the Buddhist traditions as they could not provide a comprehensive ethic which was able to respond to historical conditions. Nishitani was equally at ease commenting on Dogen’s *Shobogenzo* as Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. Each, according to Nishitani, recognized that beyond the opposition of God and nothingness was something more fundamental, which he identifies as emptiness. It was Nishitani’s work, traversing both ancient and contemporary Eastern and Western traditions, comprehensive as well as accessible, that brought attention to the works of the Kyoto School philosophers.

Heisig is careful to state that his use of the term “Kyoto School” in reference to these three philosophers, and the subsequent philosophical movement associated with them, does not imply a univocal set of philosophical tenets. Each of the philosopher’s work is unique. However, this does not prevent Heisig from identifying the common theme of their work, which he also states is their significant contribution to world philosophy--the distinctly Zen Buddhist emphasis on the experiential components of philosophical practice, and its subsequent moral consequences. *Philosophers of Nothingness* is an important contribution to the understanding of philosophy in the twentieth century, as well as a recognition of the important contributions of a group of philosophers whose achievements are far reaching.

## Notes

- 1 The possible links between nationalism and Zen Buddhism are covered in the volume *Rude Awakenings: Zen, the Kyoto School, and the Question of Nationalism*. (James Heisig and John Maraldo, eds. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1995).
- 2 Originally published as *Shukyo to wa nani ka* (What is Religion?) (Tokyo: Sobunsha, 1961).