

## **Nishitani's Buddhist Response to "Nihilism"**

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### *Introduction*

Keiji Nishitani presents a Buddhist philosophy that at once speaks from Buddhist religious experience and expresses a modern sensibility. It is his defense of the experience that above all qualifies his philosophy as Buddhist. Nishitani is a Buddhist thinker not so much in drawing on the rich history of classical Buddhist philosophy as in drawing on his sense of the value of Buddhist meditation ("*zazen*" in Japanese) and meditational experiences. The Buddhist works he cites are principally poems and various meditation manuals within the Japanese Zen tradition, not the analyses and speculations of classical Buddhist schools. Nishitani's philosophic education is much more Western than Buddhist, and his explicit intent is to defend the "Zen experience" not so much with terms and concepts that have been hammered out through centuries of Buddhist reflection as with those of Western traditions. The most important concepts in Nishitani's work remain those of Mahāyāna Buddhism, and the influence of Mahāyāna "scriptures" such as the *Prajñāpāramitāsūtra*-s—whether directly through Nishitani's own study or through their influence on Dōgen and some other Japanese Zen teachers who are his more immediate precursors—nevertheless must be counted as large.<sup>[1]</sup> But Nishitani presents his own "modern" interpretation replete with an arsenal of contemporary arguments. His defense of Zen mysticism is hardly a matter of scriptural exegesis.

Nishitani has been said to have assumed the mantle of Kitarō Nishida (1870-1945), the founder of the "Kyoto school," although there are several other notable figures in the movement, for example Shizuteru Ueda and Masao Abe. Centered in the State

University of Kyoto, this "school" is comprised of professors of philosophy and religion who, like Nishitani, follow Nishida in elucidating and defending a Buddhist outlook. Nishida, some of whose work has been translated into English and German, himself exhibits a mastery of Western philosophical traditions and is recognized as the first pioneer of the East-West fusion that is typical of the Kyoto school. He also is concerned above all with defending the value of the "Zen experience," and not directly with positions developed by classical Indian and Chinese thinkers. Nishitani, born in 1900, studied with Nishida in the twenties, and for a brief period just before World War II with Martin Heidegger in Germany. He had a distinguished career at Kyoto, as lecturer in ethics and German from 1928 to 1935, as professor of religion from 1935 to 1955, and as holder of the chair of modern philosophy from 1955 until his retirement in 1963. With the recent appearance of a translation of six of his major essays, *Religion and Nothingness* (1982a),<sup>[2]</sup> his ideas have become accessible to an English-reading audience. *Religion and Nothingness* is destined to be a classic of the struggle of Eastern world views to find reformulations in the light of Western and scientific conceptions—and this, I believe, despite the shortcomings that I identify below.

Repeating themes of both Heidegger and the earliest Buddhist teachings, Nishitani claims that the central failure of philosophy in our time is that it has not provided an adequate response to nihilism. With all life ending in death, with personal survival dubious, and with personalistic religions such as Christianity unable to explain the cruel objectivity of scientific law, nihilism appears to be, Nishitani argues, an unavoidable conclusion for the serious thinker. This "nihilism" is the view that there is no ultimate meaning to our activities and lives; they go on in a meaningless context. Upon reflection, the meaninglessness of life encompassed by insentience and death infects all particular goals, snuffing out any apparent value, like a poisonous gas. But although the nihilist view

appears warranted, it is not, he says, tenable "existentially." Nishitani cites the examples of Friedrich Nietzsche and Jean-Paul Sartre, who while proclaiming the absence of objective meaning and value urge the individual to make meaning for herself. Nishitani may be said to embrace this existentialist idea of "making meaning for oneself," but he also radically reinterprets it. He sees the task of making one's life meaningful as impossible without the deepening of subjectivity that is purported to come about through the practice of *zazen*. He believes that a nihilist attitude is, along with *zen* practice, a necessary step to the "standpoint" of *śūnyatā*, "emptiness." Here one ecstatically and spontaneously acts for the welfare of all, overcoming nihilism. My intention is to scrutinize both Nishitani's identification of a problem of "nihilism" and the Buddhist solution to it that he proposes.

*"Nihilism" and the rejection of Christian axiology*

The first essay of *Religion and Nothingness*, which is entitled "What is Religion,"<sup>[3]</sup> introduces an axiological theme that is developed in each of the six essays. Nishitani claims that when we worry about the objective value or meaning of our actions and lives, we enter the sphere of the religious. This we should do, he asserts. But he does not say why we should other than to suggest that it is a natural thing to do—maybe an "imperative" of our being—to question the significance of our own life, and of life as a whole.<sup>[4]</sup> For him the crucial *religious* response, with potentially overwhelming implications for one's life, is *despair*, a despair to which one is forced by the deanthropomorphized view of the world dictated by science and its preclusion of any traditional "teleological" or otherwise easy answer to the question of how a life can be objectively meaningful (45-48).<sup>[5]</sup> For Nishitani the question takes this form: in regard to what *beyond my individual life* are my actions meaningful and valuable? (3ff)<sup>[6]</sup> The despair that is yoked to a sense of

meaninglessness is termed "nihility," and is said to be dynamic, to launch a subjective process that leads to a transcendence of this attitude, in an eventual transpersonal ecstasy and realization of *śūnyatā*, "emptiness" (as well as to provoke in the interim a kind of deep "faith," he often intimates).<sup>[7]</sup>

The reality of *śūnyatā* is said to provide fundamentally—as the condition of the possibility—a way to transcend nihilism. More precisely, the reality of *śūnyatā* is said to allow one to pass through the horns of an "existential dilemma" whereof "nihility" represents only one of the possibilities of impairment for the religiously-minded. The other is reliance on traditional theistic theory of value. In other words, the reality of *śūnyatā* is said to allow one to avoid a false dilemma of "meaning," to avoid both the spiritually suicidal option (a) of abandoning all interest and hope for significance in the "objective" or "religious" sense, and the unthinking and demeaning option (b) of trying to find the significance in something "wholly other" to oneself—the great error, Nishitani asserts, of the Judeo-Christian tradition. The notion of *śūnyatā* is thus the most central one in the book, and Nishitani's project is to show why it is key to any right metaphysics. (Although "right view" is not the main point—that is instead, Nishitani says, the need for "existential appropriation" of *śūnyatā*—"right view" is thought to support a religious endeavor.) The chief argument is that only on the "field" of *śūnyatā* can we find, both existentially and theoretically, refuge from the horror of nihilism.

But although it is this Buddhist idea of *śūnyatā* that is clearly central in Nishitani's world view, one must understand—to appreciate the particular force of his writing—that he is a great sympathizer with "religion" whatever its particular forms, and especially Christianity. Nishitani often appears to be more concerned with Christian conceptions than with Buddhist. The rejection of option (b) above—and consonant criticism of some important strands of Christian thought—has, to be sure, a decisive role in his thought, but

this criticism occurs within a background of such a profusion of sympathy with Christianity that the whole discussion often seems an internecine dispute. Nishitani in this book not only gives several Christian theologians painstaking study in long passages of discussion, he finds many Christian ideas wholly acceptable. Further, he sometimes uses Christian conceptions to express his own most closely held views. For example, in the context of an onslaught on what he sees as Christian theology's typical overemphasis of God's transcendence and consequent reprehensible depreciation of God's immanence, he is able nevertheless to use Christian terms to talk about (Zen) "enlightenment":

. . . the *motif* of conversion for man implied in divine omnipresence confronts man with an urgency that presses him to a decision on the spot: either eternal life or eternal death. This is the meaning of what was said earlier about the love of Christ being at one and the same time a sword that kills man and a sword that gives man life. . . . He who dies and regains life by this sword of *agapē* can become God-breathed, an expiration of the Holy Spirit. (40)

This may be counted as one of the ways in which Nishitani characterizes the enlightenment that is supposed to be the real solution to nihility and the way out of the meaning dilemma. However, he does mount an onslaught on the theology of a transcendent God creating *ex nihilo*, and this is, let me repeat, a crucial phase of the general argumentation in support of "*śūnyatā*."

The option (b) above is no true option for Nishitani. His objection is two-fold. First, Christian theory with its posit of an ontological gulf between God and man and devaluation of the "nothingness" that is, along with God's omnipotent will, typically considered, he says, to be the source of our finite being provides inadequate conceptual support for the religious conversion and experience that he deems so all-important. (But he does see, on the other hand, some Christian mystics, most notably Meister Eckhart, as overcoming

the limitations of the received tradition.) Christian theology typically fails, he avers, to provide a "field" where the wills and perspectives of the individual and God can meet, because God's transcendence is absolutized. In this way, the theory arouses expectations—especially moral and soteriological ones—that are at the same time ruled out (37-38 and 41ff). For example, how can a thoroughly time-bound individual, aware that the future is infinite, find meaning for her life in an "eschaton" that is conceived as transtemporal, Nishitani asks. His second line of objection is more familiar. The traditional Christian notion of God as omnipotent and omnibenevolent proves, he argues parading the oft-rehearsed reasons, inadequate in the face of evil and the impersonality of nature (esp. 48). In long passages of cultural commentary, Nishitani concludes that from this two-fold failure many present social and individual ills have arisen, adding to the sting of "nihility." Christian axiology has been unable to meet the challenge of science, and a crisis of values has ensued. The crisis for the individual can be resolved, he goes on to urge, only by a conversion to the personal/impersonal "standpoint" of *śūnyatā*, and the conceptual support of this Buddhist idea. (Presumably, one can find an intellectual resolution before one's own final enlightenment and "existential appropriation.")

Nishitani does not pretend to be the first to have discovered inadequacies in traditional Christian conceptions. Indeed, he sees the criticisms of Christianity by Friedrich Nietzsche and Jean-Paul Sartre, along with these two thinkers' reflection on science and the meaning of life, to be especially important for the Western advent of the *śūnyatā* notion.<sup>[8]</sup> He endorses what he sees as Nietzsche's and Sartre's demonstrations of the inadequacy of Christian views about value and its ontological grounds (which lead them to reject the second option in the meaning dilemma). But he claims that while the two Westerners discern the real problems with traditional Christian axiology, neither provides a solution, neither arrives at a true alternative to "nihility."

As noted, the notion of nihilism is presumed to capture, or stem from, our sense of the impermanence of all things, including ourselves, and the hopeless fortuity of life's appearance in a fundamentally insentient universe—the universe is a "field of death." Apprised of the fact that life, our own life, ends in death, and that all things arise and pass away according to physical law—without any essential reason—also apprised of the fact of evil in general so that no trust reasonably could be placed in a personal God, apprised as well of the infinity of time so that one realizes that no transtemporal eschaton or transtemporal origin of history could be the ground of value and the meaning-conferrer, one enters, Nishitani says, into an awareness of "nihilism." There appears to be no possibility of meaning for our lives or for our endeavors, given our physical context of impermanence, death, and infinite time. All is presumed to be enveloped by nihilism and meaninglessness. And meaninglessness is hard to live with. Thus Nishitani commends the existentialists, and Nietzsche and Sartre in particular, for their courage in presenting it in all its apparent comprehensiveness, as well as for their rejection of Christianity and their efforts to find a true alternative to nihilism. But find it they do not, in his judgment.

#### *The critique of Sartre and Nietzsche*

Now Nishitani's criticism of Sartre is very different from his criticism of Nietzsche. In effect he says to Sartre that he is blind to a greater possibility of transcendence of nihilism than the assertion of individual will on the level of our ordinary apprehension of ourselves as subjects in the sense of the Cartesian "*cogito, sum.*" To my ear, this criticism sounds more like the testimony of a mystic than the argument of a philosopher, i.e. of a mystic claiming greater possibilities of self-experience. But Nishitani may be said to make here at least one more purely intellectual point. He indicts Sartre for finding false comfort in a chimera of making meaning for oneself. In Nishitani's sense of "meaning,"

one as one is now, namely a small ego, cannot make meaning for oneself, since this meaning has to be grounded in something that in key ways is larger than oneself, although, to be sure, he says that "*śūnyatā*" has to be "appropriated" or realized by oneself—with a tremendous change in oneself ensuing. He sees Sartre's contention that the individual's existence is a "project of continually going beyond the self and going outside the self, or as a mode of being continually overstepping itself" (33) as mere hand-waving, albeit waving that is in the right direction. He insists that the central question here is "What is my life *for*?" and that only a notion of some type of true transcendence of one's small egoistic perspective could be an adequate answer. Sartre's position is seen in the end as an unjustifiable rejection of the question, as not even a candidate for an answer (30-35).

Thus Nishitani may be said to have an intellectual objection to Sartre in that he urges that the logic of the concept of (religious) meaning—with its relational "my life *for* x"—precludes Sartre's narrowly "non-relational" view. The question is a religious question and must have a religious answer. Sartre's does not qualify because it does not give us any leverage against the radical contingency of our desires and the ultimate senselessness of our choices. But be this as it may, Nishitani's only real grounds for an objection to what he sees as the consequences of Sartre's position, to wit, "nihility" veritably with *no* escape—"no exit"—have to be mystical. If Nishitani were not hearkening to the testimony of mystics that there is a "standpoint" that passes through the horns of the meaning dilemma, namely the ecstatic and compassionate standpoint of *śūnyatā*, then he would have to admit that Sartre's position is reasonable. He in effect says as much:

Nothingness in Buddhism is "non-ego," while the nothingness in Sartre is immanent to the ego. Whatever transcendence this may allow for remains glued to the ego. Sartre considers his nothingness to be the ground of the subject, and yet he presents

it like a wall at the bottom of the ego or like a springboard underfoot of the ego. This turns his nothingness into a basic principle that shuts the ego up within itself. By virtue of this partition that nothingness sets up at the ground of the self, the ego becomes like a vast and desolate cave. . . . *In fact, this is what is usually meant by nihility.* (33)

(The emphasis is mine.) The contrast drawn here relies on mystic testimony, for why else should one believe the Buddhist state of "non-ego" to be possible?

But while the criticism of Sartre rests in the end on an appeal to mysticism—on Nishitani's sense that through "nihility" *and* Buddhist practice a "standpoint" "opens up" that avoids the horns of the meaning dilemma—the criticism of Nietzsche exhibits a different aspect of Nishitani's thought. This is his project of explaining our everyday awareness's relation to *śūnyatā*. Nishitani appears firmly convinced that his religious philosophy can be successful only if it upholds the value of certain dimensions of our everyday lives. There are apparently two motivating factors here, although Nishitani is not entirely explicit about these. First, he seems to believe that certain aspects of our everyday awareness are preserved when one breaks through to the "standpoint" of *śūnyatā*. Second, he seems to sense that to take seriously the concept of such a mystic "standpoint" one must ask questions about its relation to everyday human awareness. He asserts that the concept of *śūnyatā* not only allows one to answer such questions but to understand facts about ourselves that otherwise would be difficult, or impossible, to understand (e.g. 155-56). It is on this line of consideration of everyday awareness that battle is enjoined with Nietzsche.

In other words, Nishitani enjoins battle with Nietzsche principally on the metaphysical grounds of the power of a general theory of reality to explain psychological facts, not on grounds that are mystical. It is interesting that Nishitani views Nietzsche as himself

aware of an enlarged self-experience, unlike Sartre. He sees Nietzsche as following in his own way—through the force of his "religious" despair and doubt and clear-eyed perception of the nihilism entailed by science—a Zen path of enlargement of ordinary self-understanding to something beneath it that would encompass it and give it rise: the Dionysian Will to Power (65-66). Nishitani's all-out assault on the notion of an impersonal Will to Power stems from his sense that it does not do justice to key elements in our present experience.

Knowing Nishitani's background to be Buddhist, we could expect him not to like the smell of a substance-concept in the notion of a Will to Power. (Throughout the history of Eastern philosophy, the Buddhists have been notorious for their eschewal of all concepts of substance.) But I believe that the critique of Nietzsche is original and has something to it beyond mere axe-grinding. It is part of a larger "transcendental" pattern of argument that, once seen, appears to dominate the book, overshadowing all the individual attacks and long passages of cultural analysis. The reasoning is "transcendental" because it purports to show the condition of the possibility of some actual *x*. Again, the argument in the context of the attack on Nietzsche is restricted to the customary; let us call it also "commonplace" reasoning. He urges that not Nietzsche's idea but only the concept of *śūnyatā*—the Buddhist notion that he sees in competition with that of a Will to Power—can explain the facts (1) of the actuality of the present moment of awareness and (2) time's two-directional infinity (212-17). Thus Nishitani finds inadequacies in Nietzsche's notion of Will to Power, and in its correlate "Eternal Recurrence," not so much from reflecting on the possibility of a mystical awareness resulting from an appropriation of nihilism, as from reflecting on certain dimensions of everyday experience.

The claim is that while Nietzsche personally appears to have progressed spiritually—precisely through his appreciation of nihilism<sup>[9]</sup>—such that ultimately he

senses a great affirmation at one with nihility, his conceptualization of this "affirmation-sive-negation" is inadequate. (It may be also that Nietzsche's spiritual progress did not go far enough; he does not sufficiently appreciate the fundamental "affirmative," perhaps.) Nishitani claims that in conceptualizing this enlarged self—which grounds the reality and the value of life as a whole as well as the reality of nihility—Nietzsche fails to deliver either the actuality of the present moment of awareness or the infinity of time. These phenomena presumably remain after the existential conversion to "joy" through nihility, or are such essential features of any human awareness that no theory of self—no matter how "enlarged" the entity is conceived to be—can ignore them and be adequate. Now, I admit, some of this dispute may lie on the level of a mystic phenomenology, or of incommensurable mystic phenomenologies. Nevertheless, it does appear, as Nishitani argues, that the theory of a Will to Power exulting in each act reverberating meaninglessly in a cycle of eternal return would mean on the one hand a loss of our immediate sense of self and on the other entail too severe a boundedness in our future opportunities to be a metaphysics that recommends itself *to us*. Nishitani's position is that the theory of *śūnyatā* has an advantage in preserving the sense of self on, as he says, the "absolutely near side" (70ff, 99, etc.). Whether in fact it has such a merit remains to be seen. My intention right now is to show the nature of Nishitani's argumentation, and thus to determine the proper focus for our scrutiny. Perhaps the conversion that Nishitani advocates is simply less radical than that which Nietzsche envisages, and that Nishitani is not aware of the true character of the disagreement. Surely the most critical question is whether either conversion is a real possibility, and we shall discuss Nishitani on this score in the last two sections below. Again, my present point is simply that Nishitani tries to show that it is only through the idea of *śūnyatā* and not through that of any Will to Power (and Eternal Recurrence) that both the actuality of the present to any "self" and the inexhausti-

ble possibilities of the future can be properly understood—after "nihility" has forced us to abandon all notions that an ontologically "other" realm founds the things and events of this world. In this way, *śūnyatā* is to be the condition of the possibility of true self-understanding as well as of our sense of real and irrecoverable history—and, as we shall see, of other dimensions of our everyday experience. One must acknowledge this transcendental and "commonplace" approach to give Nishitani his due.<sup>[10]</sup> He is by no means only a mystic.

*"Emptiness" as ground of both self and world*

The transcendental reasoning about everyday realities is complex, and comprehends much more than the basis of a criticism of Nietzsche. Through it, and not only by an appeal to mysticism, is the concept of *śūnyatā* to be established, as we have noted. Now "emptiness" itself, which in this manner of argument is both *explanans* and *probandum*, is a concept with a long pedigree, and is difficult to explain briefly.<sup>[11]</sup> My hope is that once we see what this difficult idea is supposed to accomplish transcendently with regard to our everyday selves and world, we shall better be able to understand what it amounts to in itself. But two features of *śūnyatā* need to be mentioned now because of their explanatory role. (1) Emptiness is a unitary "world-ground," a "field" that is a "force" sustaining all finite forms.<sup>[12]</sup> (2) At the same time, it is an absolutely immanent "self-positing" (156-57), the ground that is "no-ground" of each self (because it is, or can be, entirely and existentially "transparent" to a person, in the enlargement of self conceived as enlightenment). I shall begin to portray these two features' function in the metaphysical theory, as I identify Nishitani's explanations of commonplaces. In the following two sections, the logic of the concept of *śūnyatā* and the adequacy of Nishitani's "cosmology" of Emptiness are taken up. In the final section, we shall turn to the mystic

appeal and assess Nishitani's theory as a whole.

I find six clusters of argument of this transcendental type. First, only through the concept of *śūnyatā* are we able to understand how things can have both an "outside" and an "inside"; thus the mind-body problem would be resolved.<sup>[13]</sup> "Emptiness" is a "field" of unity of the subjective and objective, Nishitani avers, and he thinks that its "self-like" impersonality is the condition of the possibility of a finite self that is immediately known to itself but is known as an "other" to others (esp. 155-56).<sup>[14]</sup> Let me say straightaway that Nishitani is hardly pellucid with details about how this possibility is provided. But before throwing up our hands, let us look at all the argumentative strands.

Note that here, as with each move of this transcendental type, Nishitani often says "only through the concept of *śūnyatā* can we understand x." However we may interpret the claim as less exclusivistic without much depreciating its force: any resolution of the mind-body problem would be good, and it would be a merit of the concept of *śūnyatā* if indeed through it we could understand x, i.e. in this first case how persons can have both an outside and an inside, one of the most intractable of philosophic problems.

Second, (only) through the concept of *śūnyatā* can we understand the possibility of one world of many inextricably interconnected things.<sup>[15]</sup> Emptiness as itself a unity founds the interconnectedness of things and makes a "world" possible. Nishitani often claims that without the unity that *śūnyatā* contributes as the "home-ground" of each and every thing there would be anarchy and chaos (e.g. 147 and 159). (Here we have a Buddhist "teleological argument.") Nishitani flies the flag of "world-interdependence," a thesis viewed as having biological, economic, and political as well as physical scope. And surely, one has to admit that the idea is an important one for many areas of thought.<sup>[16]</sup> But the question is, "Is the unity contributed by *śūnyatā* as a common ground the only type of unity that we need conceive in these spheres, or at all plausibly even one

of the best explanations for what are after all diverse phenomena of interdependence (physical, economic, etc.)?"

An important sub-theme to "world-interdependence grounded in *śūnyatā*" is that of the "master/slave" phenomenon. Nishitani understands a "self" as intrinsically capable of being a master, and a slave, in relation to others. He holds that to stand in the relation of master towards another entails the possibility that one also be a slave (149). This follows from the unity of *śūnyatā* and world-interdependence, Nishitani suggests. The sub-theme also relates to a third strand of transcendental reasoning, which we need to put on the table.

(Only) through the concept of *śūnyatā* can we understand the freedom of a self—to include a self's ability to renounce its individual freedom in the service of others.<sup>[17]</sup> Nishitani emphasizes each person's potentiality of self-determination and control of events. He appears to believe that we have an almost absolute freedom in potentiality. We can make anything our servant. We can regard anything as an "it." The unity at the ground of each self insures that the relation is reciprocal, however, as we noted. We can find our will opposed. Anything can oppose it, and we may find ourselves as a servant of another. Thus the idea of freedom is circumscribed by the principle of world-interdependence. But Nishitani does not think that the unity of *śūnyatā* precludes the possibility of a world-tyrant or that we all perish in a nuclear holocaust. Emptiness is intrinsically a freedom of self-expression, and this manifests as our own near absolute power to determine over time both ourselves as persons and our environment. Emptiness itself appears neutral about how we shape our lives—although there are putative pragmatic consequences of an "appropriation" of *śūnyatā*, consequences that are thought to be beneficial for all.

In other words, there appears to be a higher level to the idea of a master/slave relation

where *śūnyatā* does set a life-standard. (Here we go beyond mere "commonplace" reasoning.) A pre-condition for the existential "appropriation" or "realization" of Emptiness (i.e. the state of enlightenment conceived traditionally as Bodhisattvahood) is, according to Nishitani, that we become the "slave" of all. This is, he avers, how we should understand the divinity of, for example, Jesus (59). It is because of Jesus's *ekkenōsis*, the "emptying" of all his self-regarding egoism, that the Son is properly thought of as one with the Father (59 and nt. 4, 288). Emptiness, furthermore, "gives" itself to us, but we can possess our own ground and true self only by refusing to exercise the offer of individual freedom and by participating in this fundamental and cosmic act of "giving"—emptying ourselves of self-regard and thus becoming Christ-like. The "no freedom" of Jesus and the Bodhisattva is the reflection of a "giving" that makes our freedom so extreme.<sup>[18]</sup> In theistic terms, God totally surrenders God's omnipotence, according to Nishitani. The only goal and interest clearly attributed to Emptiness itself is the maintenance of a world of a multiplicity of selves and finite forms. In sum, *śūnyatā* existentially appropriated as an "emptiness" of self-regard founds self-regard and egoistic power in a sacrifice that is the opposite of these. Nishitani claims that only something that is both like a self, "on the absolutely near side of the self," and absolutely magnanimous and impersonal makes such regard and power possible.

Fourth, the concept of *śūnyatā* allows us to understand the unique individuality of a multiplicity of things.<sup>[19]</sup> Again, the principle of world-interdependence forms a crucial parameter for the argument:

In short, it is only on a field where the being of all things is a being at one with emptiness that it is possible for all things to gather into one, even while each retains its reality as an absolutely unique being. . . . The field of *śūnyatā* is a *field of force*. The force of the world makes itself manifest in the force of each and every thing in

the world. . . . Even the very tiniest thing, to the extent that it "is," displays in its act of being the whole web of circuminsessional interpenetration that links all things together. (148 and 150)

I find not a single word in *Religion and Nothingness* about why anything in the world—other than ourselves—has the precise character that it has. There is a serious lacuna here, the full implications of which will be shown below. Nishitani does wax eloquent about "absolutely unique individuality" (e.g. 164ff and 191-93). But he discusses only the general phenomenon of "unique particularity," not the particular natures of physical things. His argument is that only *śūnyatā* can explain the possibility of "thisness" and the interrelatedness of one world. The two together—particularity and interrelatedness—he terms "the system of circuminsessional being." He claims that this system is possible only on the "field" of *śūnyatā*.

Fifth, the concept of *śūnyatā* allows us to understand the two-directional infinity of time and the openness of the future. Here another sense of the original Sanskrit term is brought to the foreground: '*śūnya*' means "nothing" or "zero." The Zero is conceived as a boundless Infinite, a zero of all finite determinations. This is thought to make possible the two-directional infinity of time, a reality that it is impossible to understand, we have seen, through Nietzsche's notion of Eternal Recurrence. This idea is also crucial in particular to the fourth of the "transcendental strands" delineated just above: only an Infinite could be the "home-ground" of each of a great diversity of things—things that are absolutely unique—because anything else would stand opposed to one or the other's particular nature. (Some things in the world stand in such stark opposition, the one to the other, that only an Infinite could be their common "home-ground.")<sup>[20]</sup> Here we have struck gold, I believe, and uncovered the essence of the *śūnyatā* notion. The next section is devoted to the thesis that "*śūnyatā*" has the logic of an infinite.

Nishitani's principal point about *śūnyatā* and time is that the infinite "openness" of Emptiness permits truly new things to emerge (esp. 201 and 206). Emptiness imposes no restrictions on future determinations. Other spiritual monisms, which are "philosophies of being," would preclude anything truly new. All would be part of an eternal hierarchy. Obviously, this theme connects with that of a person's freedom, which we discussed above, as well as with the criticism of Nietzsche. Emptiness provides no *telos*; and it is in virtue of the lack of an implied teleology that the Buddhist theory, Nishitani claims, best captures our sense of the temporal and the "openness" of history.

Finally, only through the concept of *śūnyatā* can we understand the human reality of "nihility" (98). No "philosophy of being" is able to do this, because it invariably misses the transcendence that is reflected by nihility. Nishitani sees the old spiritual monisms, both Western and Eastern, as "rational reductions" unable to present divine transcendence as a "negation" that is everywhere present. The "One" is mere "non-differentiation" (144). "Emptiness" has an element of essential negativity; that is, its transcendence guarantees that our authentic being as egos full of self-regard involve an "appropriation of nihility." The small personal ego does not survive death, Nishitani avers; thus our small goals must be enveloped in nihility. The power of the concept of *śūnyatā* to explain in this way the reality of nihility is, in sum, a principal advantage of the Buddhist outlook. "Nihility," as was brought out at the beginning of the paper, constitutes Nishitani's predominant theme, and we shall return to the axiological claims two sections below. The present point is that "nihility" is presumed a fact, and that only *śūnyatā* can explain it.

#### *The logic of "śūnyatā"*

We noted that *śūnyatā* is according to Nishitani (1) a unitary world-ground, a "force"

"rushing into" finite forms and sustaining them, and (2) an absolutely immanent ground (or "no-ground") of each self. These are cosmological attributes, relating *śūnyatā* to worldly things. We have now seen that the reality of *śūnyatā* is thought to have quite a bit of cosmological punch. It is supposed to explain: (a) how persons can have both an "outside" and an "inside," (b) how there can be one world of many interconnected and interdependent things, (c) the freedom of a self and the possibility of an ultimate "service" in the manner of Jesus or a Bodhisattva, (d) a thing's unique individuality, (e) the two-directional infinity of time, and (f) "nihility." What then is it about *śūnyatā* that allows us to understand all these difficult matters? How is it that the concept accomplishes all these marvelous feats? Whence does it derive its cosmological leverage, so to say? The answer has to do both with *śūnyatā*'s transcendence and its positive "divine" features.

Nishitani asserts that it is the transcendence of *śūnyatā* that permits its immanence in all things, and that guarantees that they are all unique in a "circuminsessional" web of being (148-50).<sup>[21]</sup> He reasons that it is because of the transcendence of *śūnyatā*—its *not* being any particular thing—that things can be uniquely particular, as has already been mentioned. Thus he hardly disavows a divine transcendence altogether (see esp. 90, 91, and 97), despite his onslaught on the notion of a transcendent God creating *ex nihilo*. How then is it that *śūnyatā* can be both immanent and transcendent?

Here some further Western comparisons may help. G. W. F. Hegel's concept of a "genuine Infinite" that has a "logic" permitting at once the relations of transcendence and immanence, unity comprising multiplicity, and infinity founding the finite appears to be something like the idea that Nishitani is trying to convey.<sup>[22]</sup> Hegel's "genuine Infinite" includes and underlies all finites, both subjects and objects; it is also a Unity "unbounded" in the sense that there is nothing outside it though it is self-related to a mul-

tiplicity within it.<sup>[23]</sup> Robert Nozick, in grappling with what appears to be the same or at least a similar idea, turns to mathematics for an analogy: "Only an infinite set can be mapped onto a proper subset of itself, and only an unlimited being can include itself as a part, only an infinite being can embed itself" (1981:603). Nishitani says outright that *śūnyatā* is a "true infinity" (170 and 177).<sup>[24]</sup>

Interpreting then Nishitani's "*śūnyatā*" as a concept of a divine Infinite, we can see why he so often resorts to apparent paradox in discoursing on *śūnyatā*'s transcendence. The best explanation of this frequent use of paradoxical language is, I believe, that he senses—though he never makes the point explicitly (see again notes 10 and 20 above for an analysis of Nishitani's anti-intellectualism)—that predicates that would be contradictory in application to finite things are not contradictory in application to *śūnyatā*, which has a similar "logic" to that of an infinite set. We are accustomed to think of attributes and relations on the model of a sensible and finite physical object. The logic of such an object would not be applicable to *śūnyatā*. Thus this "Zero" would suggest a flouting of the everyday and common supposition that terms refer to finite things.

To explain my interpretation here, let me say a few words about metaphor and trope in general. Use of "apparent paradox"—which is a particular kind of metaphor—whether by mystics or by you and me, need not be understood as true paradox or nonsense and contradiction. For example, a principal of an "excluded middle" is commonly presupposed in conversation; we normally think that something x has to be either F or not-F.<sup>[25]</sup> By flouting this rule, one can introduce a trope.<sup>[26]</sup> Imagine two baseball fans, J and K, who are both supporters of a team that is tied for first place near the end of a season. J reports to K, who is ignorant of the prior day's scores, "Last night's games? Not a celebration, and not not one either." K can be imagined to take this to mean that their team lost and that the other first-place team did, too. (If J had said, "Last night's games were

both a celebration and a postponement," K would more likely take him to mean that both teams had won.) Taking mystical and religious claims seriously often requires that one look beyond certain conversational presuppositions.<sup>[27]</sup> "Apparent paradox," like all metaphors, signals that one is supposed to.

Mystical, or religious, floutings of conversational maxims and common presuppositions would often convey information about something "divine" and "infinite," in virtue of the severity of the flouting, since (1) we cannot make sense of a literal and formal contradiction and (2) we naturally try to understand a statement asserted (and we assume that the speaker is trying to communicate). In other words, we tend to rule out the alternative that such usage simply does not make sense by an overriding supposition that the user is attempting to say something; we try to give the mystic, or whomever, at least this much credit—though the severity of the flouting forces us to think of a "divine infinite."<sup>[28]</sup> Tillich and others have made it almost a truism of current philosophic theology that God must be spoken of metaphorically, since no terms in their everyday usage would appear to be applicable to so grand an "object." (This is the correct insight behind the confusions of negative theology.) Emptiness appears to be conceived negatively and paradoxically—not only by Nishitani but throughout Buddhist thought from the Pali Canon on—to suspend a presupposition. And the presupposition that is usually suspended is, in my view, that it is any particular finite thing, or class of things, that is being discussed (esp. 97, 118, and 126). "Emptiness" is a "true infinity," Nishitani says, and here he apparently intends to make a quite literal claim.

But how is it that this "true infinity" has the explanatory power alleged? If this "logic" is all there is to the *śūnyatā*-concept, it would seem to be the emptiest of ideas. No, Nishitani does not believe that the concept is empty in that sense, that it has no instantiation. This is evident in his conception of Emptiness as having certain determinate

features (features that do not, however, stand opposed to individual things but on the contrary make them possible). The Infinite is said to have a character, as we have seen: its principal positive features are that it is a unitary "field," and a "force" that both posits itself as our and all subjectivity and holds finite forms in existence. Nishitani uses the attributions "force," etc. metaphorically, but they nevertheless have a positive explanatory role. The logic of *śūnyatā* as an infinite permits the transcendence of finite form, as is putatively "realized" in the unitive and compassionate "standpoint" of a Bodhisattva and "King Samādhi," and permits as well its immanence in each finite thing. In sum, this logic guarantees unity and interdependence, as well as the "bottomlessness" of a self. It also is crucial for understanding the two-directional infinity of time, as we have noted. But some of the *explananda*, (a) - (f) above, depend not on this "logic" but on *śūnyatā*'s being (metaphorically) a "force," "*dhāraṇī*." These are, namely, (a) the mind-body duality, (c) the freedom and power of a self, and (d) the individuality of things.

*The cosmology of "avidyā" and of enlightened "play" and "samādhi"*

Our question is the relation of *śūnyatā* to the world. Viewed as related to the world, *śūnyatā* is a force, Nishitani says. It is a force moving from a formless center to the circumference of all forms.<sup>[29]</sup> He uses the Sanskrit term '*dhāraṇī*,' "the sustaining" (or "sustainer"), to capture this aspect.<sup>[30]</sup> The force from the formless center (which as transcendent can be everywhere at once) holds things in being.

The question is then the nature of this force. What is its relation to matter, to life? "Emptiness" is said to be not only a transcendence of small personal goals but also a grand "life-affirmation." In what ways does it affirm, and precisely what is it that is affirmed? Just how does this theory avoid the horns of the meaning dilemma? How exactly does *śūnyatā* confer value to life? My judgment is that Nishitani has far too little

to say on these and other central questions. His world view is thus at best not fully worked out. He does not pay his promissory notes, (a), (c), and (d) above. Further, no story is told about matter or biological phenomena. And even on the axiological issues that Nishitani claims present a crisis for philosophy in our time, we hear little more than that *śūnyatā* is a world-affirmative force. He insists that *śūnyatā* is a grand "life-affirmation" (124, 131, 138, 191-93, etc.), but he does not explain at all very well how it is life-affirmative nor make the claim precise. Does *śūnyatā* affirm all desires and goals equally, the murderer's and extortioner's as well as the Zen seeker's? And is this life-affirmation compatible with "nihility"? Emptiness is cosmologically a "force," sustaining finite forms. Can it hold beings in existence beyond the normal span of life? Are there limits to *śūnyatā*'s power? We have only a few clues on all this from Nishitani.

The little that he does say by way of elaborating the idea that *śūnyatā* is a "life-affirmation" (and refuge from nihility) is restricted to what he describes as the attitudes and actions of an enlightened Zen master. Here the key notions are "play" and "*samādhi*" ("just sitting"), as well as the absence of self-regard that we have already discussed. Despite the transcendental projects that I have identified, Nishitani must be said to be an irresolute and unconscientious metaphysician; his anti-intellectualism apparently prevents him from fully developing his views. He vacillates between positive theory-building and the view that an existential appropriation of *śūnyatā* precludes an intellectual understanding of it. The latter is an unfortunate prejudice, for we encounter in him both a great Eastern religious figure and a philosophically astute as well as original mentality. One could expect more. But in addition to the "commonplace" projects already reviewed (some of which, we should again note, do not remain only promissory notes), we are presented a definite "existentialist" (and mystical) "solution" to nihility, and a somewhat fuller outline of a cosmology is indeed present therein. We are told that one

who has existentially appropriated *śūnyatā* no longer faces the crisis of "nihility," and has an unshakable attitude of profound "play" and of "just sitting" (*samādhi*) in all that he says and does. Implicitly, Nishitani "cosmologizes" his idea of the enlightened state in that he recommends, nay urges, us all to seek it as the only refuge from nihility.<sup>[31]</sup> He sees the reality of *śūnyatā* as underpinning *universally* both the problem of nihility and its solution in enlightenment. Let us return then to the argument that centers on nihility.

We confront an existential problem in cosmic meaninglessness, and are faced with despair when we ask, "What is my life *for*?" The solution, we are told, is a living "appropriation" of *śūnyatā*. What would this mean in terms of personal action? It would mean that one would be naturally no longer self-centered, that one would live for others in a spirit of *agapē* and *karuṇā*, "compassion." What would one do for others? Apparently, the "enlightened" (a) help others achieve enlightenment and (b) play "in earnest," having become like a child (139 and 252ff), as well as "just sit," in that there is nothing personal to gain or protect. Thus *śūnyatā* would uphold "play" and "just sitting" in a way distinct from its upholding of ourselves as we are now, with our petty desires and aims. The "life-affirmation" of *śūnyatā* and its value-conferral are tied to the attitudes of "play" and "just sitting." What then should we think of the view that attitudes of "play" and of "just sitting" are in some preferred way underpinned by the reality of *śūnyatā*? Does Nishitani in this way provide a solution to the tension between religious faith and evil, or is this mere sleight of hand?

An easy rebuttal appears available in an appeal to social conscience—despite the talk of transcendence of self-regard—since "play" and "just sitting" are what the transformation is to amount to in a positive way. Are we to play and just sit while people are oppressed and nations with unenlightened leaders move closer to nuclear war? Are we to "just sit" while people in Africa, or anywhere, starve?<sup>[32]</sup> Clearly, play and just sitting do

not seem to be crucial to survival in our day and age, and not only societally but also from the individual's perspective. Most of us enjoy playing. And "just sitting" might be luxurious. But there is rent to be paid. Yet these lines of objection may be superficial because they do not take into account "nihility."

One must appreciate how radical is Nishitani's condemnation of our everyday concerns, despite the talk of "life-affirmation." In our present state we are totally "corrupt." All our desires and goals are enveloped by nihility, the meaninglessness of self-regarding aims in the context of death and radical physical contingency. There is only one qualification. Nishitani says:

Yet were complete corruption the last word on the actual condition of the *imago Dei* in man, we should still be left with some unanswered questions: How can man look for God, and how can he recognize when he has found him? How can man become conscious of sin? How can man hear when God calls out to him? It is not without reason, therefore, that [Emil] Brunner attempts to come up with some "point of contact." On the other hand, though, if we set any limit at all to the completeness of the corruption within man, we risk falling short of the full truth of human sinfulness. Therefore, the place of "contact" must be present, in some sense, *within* that complete corruption itself. It may be found, I think, in the very awareness of the fact of complete corruption itself. (25)

Recall that to appreciate nihility is to be "authentic." Nihility is *the* religious attitude, Nishitani says. And this attitude has a special confirmational role in the Buddhist theory. It reflects the transcendence of *śūnyatā* in the sphere of values. Nishitani makes perhaps his most important contribution to Buddhist philosophy in the way in which he ties the transcendence of *śūnyatā* to "nihility." Nihility is something that we should expect, given the reality of *śūnyatā*. He suggests that nihility as a natural expression of the transcen-

dence of *śūnyatā* protects that transcendence, as it were. The only way existentially to *śūnyatā* is through "nihility," as though this state of despair were some purifying spiritual fire burning away all self-regard.

There is thus a pronounced value-opposition between "nihility" and the transcendence of *śūnyatā* on the one hand and its "life-affirmation" on the other. Nihility is so radical that it is hard to make sense of the claim that Emptiness is life-affirmative. Moreover, the value-opposition is shuffled off, cosmologically, in a theory of *avidyā*, an "original" and beginningless "ignorance."

According to Nishitani, when we participate in the larger awareness of *śūnyatā*, personal action ceases to be a "task"; we are no longer laden with a sense of a debt to be repaid through work (this is called "*karma*" [237ff]). We have no sense of meaninglessness. There are no problems of choice. In fact, action happens spontaneously. We are rushed forward into the world by the dynamic nature of *śūnyatā*, yet with compassion as well as the attitudes of "play" and "just sitting." But isn't something similar supposed to be what is already happening in reality? Nishitani's fundamental assumption is that *śūnyatā* is surpassingly real. "Emptiness" has been said to be omnipresent, *to sustain all forms right now*, whether or not we are aware of this. Why then are we not aware of this now? To this problem the theory of *avidyā* is put forth.

Nishitani appears to some extent to recognize the problem, but his "solution" moves very fast:

As rational or personal beings, we grasp ourselves and thereby get caught by our reason or personality. While this is our own act, it is not something we are free to do as we please. The force of destiny is at work here, impelling us to be and to act in this manner. (103)

What is this "destiny"? We are not told. Then again near the end of the book:

At the home-ground of Dasein [Nishitani's shorthand for the intrinsic "presence" guaranteed by *śūnyatā*, the cosmic but unconfined "here and now"], where we find the wellspring of that infinite drive [to finite forms, acts, and personality], we become aware of an infinite self-enclosure, or what [Arnold] Toynbee calls "self-centeredness." The ancients took this elemental self-enclosure, this self-enclosure that is the wellspring of endless karmic activity, as the darkness of ignorance (*avidyā*) or "fundamental darkness." (242)

This is the Eastern "non-solution" *par excellence*.<sup>[33]</sup> No explanation of the "infinite self-enclosure" or of *śūnyatā*'s "drive" away from itself into "ignorance" is given. These are thought to be, I suppose, just brute facts. Cosmic "ignorance" (*avidyā*) is said to be primal and "beginningless" (*anādi*) (223 and 236);<sup>[34]</sup> but we are left in the dark about why things should be this way—a theoretical failure that is all the more grievous in the light of the possibility of *satori* (and the life-affirmation) putatively provided by *śūnyatā*. Here lies perhaps the chief inadequacy of the theory of *śūnyatā*: *avidyā* is very mysterious in Nishitani's view. And since it is so mysterious, he does not resolve the tension between religious faith and evil, that is to say, he fails—to use his own terms—to find an alternative to nihilism. He is not convincing that *śūnyatā* is a grand life-affirmation. Either it affirms too little, only "play" and "just sitting," or too much, all the evils of existence.<sup>[35]</sup>

We have seen that the theory of *śūnyatā* is defended by best-explanationist arguments, strands of "transcendental reasoning." But what is really explained, given the final resort to the "beginninglessness" of (*karma* and) *avidyā*? If these remain mysterious, is there any advantage to the view? In sum, with the idea of *avidyā* the theory comes apart. Nishitani does not resolve the tension between (1) the idea that the reality of *śūnyatā* makes enlightenment possible, which is said to be in turn a great "life-affirmation," and (2) the reality of *avidyā*, which is responsible for all our "suffering"

(recall the First Noble Truth). Given the glorious splendor of *śūnyatā*, why do *avidyā* and suffering arise?<sup>[36]</sup>

Nishitani may be understood to attempt to alleviate the tension through depicting the enlightened state—and by appealing to our sense of the "deep" value in "play" and "just sitting." Admittedly, these are concepts that could ground many aesthetic values at least. D. T. Suzuki in the classic *Zen and Japanese Culture* (1970) has shown the enormous influence of these and other Zen ideas on Japanese art and even daily conduct. One senses an enormous refinement in all this. Who could deny the fecundity of Zen for a high aesthesis and the production of great works of art? (But does Michelangelo have to be viewed as unknowingly a practitioner of *zazen*? The wellsprings of artistic endeavor seem extremely diverse.) Further, what Nishitani means by "just sitting" (*samādhi*), as well as by the "earnest" in the talk of "earnest play" (better captured, I believe, by the ancient Indian yogic notion of *ekāgratā*, "one-pointedness of mind" or "exclusive concentration"—a term closely related historically to '*samādhi*'<sup>[37]</sup>), is surely efficacious in life. The mental attitudes developed through *zazen*, and the ability to hold one's attention on a single point, have obvious practical value—whatever be the truth of the claims that fantastic powers belong to those who have mastered *zazen*. But again there is a problem. Should not these attitudes be at least partially good before enlightenment? If not, why should they be so valuable afterwards? Nishitani does not seem to have struck the right balance—within the terms of his religious commitment.

Let me expand upon this set of problems before drawing together and summarizing in the next section what I see as the major strengths and weaknesses of his view. Nishitani too facilely assumes that a person making "petty" choices and living out her desires is encompassed by "nihility" whether she be conscious or unconscious of the situation. Nishitani owes us a story about choice and desire, a story for which rich resources lie,

one may presume, in his Buddhist tradition, but one which in this book is not told. (It is noteworthy that he fails to mention Freud.) How are desires related to the "force" of *śūnyatā*? Nishitani's asceticism does not mesh well with the putatively life-affirmative nature of "Emptiness." Is it clear—within his own terms—that a desire for enlightenment would be the only desire that is not "corrupt"? Conversely, would it be plausible that there be no egoism and self-regard in a desire for an "existential appropriation" of *śūnyatā*? In some cases, it would hardly seem an act of compassion for a person to abandon all responsibilities in such a pursuit. In sum, if Nishitani had more of an account why *śūnyatā* rushes into form, maybe he would be able to pay up his chief outstanding debt, his promise to illumine the meaning of life and the value of personal action. As his view stands, he is not.<sup>[38]</sup>

*Mysticism and the resilience of Buddhist philosophy*

It is possible now for us to take an overview of Nishitani's philosophy. We have uncovered two central inadequacies. First, the explanatory project is aborted; the task of explaining why the world is the way it is at best only half-done. Given this incompleteness and the unpaid promissory notes, it is unclear what explanatory advantage there is to the *śūnyatā* theory. Nishitani makes capital with his demonstrations of the shortcomings of the Judeo-Christian notion of a transcendent God creating *ex nihilo*, and his reasoning in support of God's immanence and omnipresence should be, I feel, considered seriously by theologians and religious philosophers. But he does not complete an alternative theory, and the idea that "Emptiness" is a force (*dhāraṇī*) supporting all things is sketchy. Now most, if not all, grand metaphysical systems suffer spots of explanatory weakness. This observation shows that the incompleteness does not just in itself knock Nishitani's view out of the ring of metaphysical contenders. Further, Nishitani comes

close to making his "spiritualist" view work at times—when for example he tries to illumine the interdependence of things, also a person's freedom, through the idea of *śūnyatā* as a common, though infinite, "home-ground." There are other obscure phenomena that he handles rather well, such as the "openness" of the future and the infinity of time, which look much more like natural expressions of *śūnyatā* than expressions, or consequences, of some of the other "fundamental realities" that have been proposed by metaphysicians. But Nishitani has little to say about why life or material forms have just the characteristics they possess, and his claim that *śūnyatā* is a "force" is, I must conclude, not at all well thought-out—even by charitable standards applied out of a sense of the difficulty of a metaphysical endeavor.

A second central inadequacy is that there is a tension between the claim that *śūnyatā* is a grand "life-affirmation" and the "authenticity" of nihility for those of us who are not Zen masters. While Nishitani shows some brilliance in the way in which he connects "nihility" with *śūnyatā*'s transcendence, his "world-negational" theme does not jibe with the claim that *śūnyatā* is life-affirmative. Nor is Nishitani's solution to nihility and way out of the meaning dilemma in enlightenment, i.e. the "existential appropriation" of *śūnyatā*, satisfactory, as we have seen.

These two inadequacies dovetail in the theory of *avidyā*. Nishitani shuffles off the value-tension to a primeval "ignorance" and does not illumine why, given the reality of *śūnyatā*, this "*avidyā*" has to be. (Indeed, given the resplendent reality of *śūnyatā*, shouldn't we all have been born Zen masters?)

In closing, I wish to make a few remarks about the "Zen experience" that appears fundamentally to motivate Nishitani's speculations. I feel that the real strength of his view lies in this mystical motivation, and that Nishitani has tapped a source that guarantees the "resilience" of the general view, despite his particular failings. Recently, I com-

pleted a study of the modern Indian mystic, Aurobindo (1986). What strikes me even now as most significant about his (sometimes extremely bold) speculations is the conviction that Aurobindo expresses that his special experiences reveal realities in much the same way that sense experiences do for us all. Aurobindo tells us he is compelled to take his extraordinary experiences as veridical of matters that are extremely important, however difficult their interpretation may be. (As the history of science shows, it is not always easy to interpret and theorize from sense experiences, too.) Although there are large differences in the philosophies propounded, Nishitani is significantly like Aurobindo in finding important consequences for philosophy in the occurrence of mystical experiences. The fervor with which these modern, highly reflective and articulate men speak of the mystical suggests—along with the fact that sense experience does count for so much in what we believe about things—that philosophers and scientists scoffing at this topic risk a new obscurantism.

Let me shore up my sense that the mystical has crucial importance in Nishitani's thought. My chief contention is that the "Zen experience" guarantees the resilience of Nishitani's world view, or, more generally, that an "argument from mystical experience" is centrally what "spiritualist" views such as Nishitani's have in their favor. But I must refer to my work on Aurobindo for most of the details of my thought on this score, since the topic is complex and cannot be treated in a few pages. Let me close then with remarks about Nishitani's mysticism.

Earlier, we noted that Nishitani's response to Sartre relies on an appeal to the authority of a mystical state. I wish now to expand the remark and point out that the mystical appeal is crucial to several phases of Nishitani's argumentation. Nishitani does not rely only on the authority of those (himself included?) who claim to live "on the field of *śūnyatā*"; some of the strands of transcendental reasoning, and the attack on Nietzsche,

are not mystically motivated. But such an appeal is a very large part of what is going on in *Religion and Nothingness*.<sup>[39]</sup> Although the appeal takes many forms, at its heart is the argument: only *śūnyatā* can explain enlightenment experiences (and these have occurred)—alternatively, the enlightenment experiences reveal *śūnyatā* in the way that sense experience reveals everyday physical things. This argument does not detract from the other strands of best-explanationist reasoning. Convergent arguments are what one would want. I think that for Nishitani himself this mystical argument (only *śūnyatā* can explain the *satori* experience) is fundamental—although it may well not be the most important one for us. Indeed, could anyone without a strong sense of what "enlightenment" is like experientially, "from the inside," have written this work?<sup>[40]</sup>

Perhaps then the value-tension we have uncovered is due to some extent to Nishitani's sense of the overwhelming worth of this mystical experience. It is possible to read Nishitani not as a struggling cosmologist and metaphysician but as a saint or a prophet, calling us to give up what is of little worth and to seek instead that which is of surpassing value. He insists again and again that the "appropriation" of *śūnyatā* must be "existential," and that only this, and no "rational prehension," is the solution to the problem of meaning and the bearer of real value. I have pointed out that he does not appear to have achieved the right balance between the negativism of "nihility" and the "life-affirmation" of *śūnyatā* to which he is committed. While this is philosophically a fault, it reveals valuations that are all the more noteworthy because they are exaggerated—given that we have in Nishitani no unthinking fanatic. (Doesn't such contrast and exaltation of a mystical outlook make you wish that you could have a taste at least?)

But metaphysical and cosmological he is, too, I wish to stress. This is, after all, to his great credit, although, as has been shown, he does not overcome an "anti-intellectualist" prejudice. Briefly, the intellectual speculation is to his credit because the claim that there

is a mystical experience that is both surpassingly valuable and revelatory of a "deeper" reality raises questions about its relation to our ordinary experience and the physical things that we daily encounter. As the Buddha himself apparently saw in proclaiming the Eightfold Noble Path, "right view" must be an important part of a mystical endeavor just because mystic claims raise these questions.<sup>[41]</sup> Nishitani makes a notable attempt at answering them, although it is on the whole unsuccessful. Wouldn't we feel more compelled to explore Zen, as Nishitani apparently would like us to do, if he had given us a pellucid account of *śūnyatā* as the ground of ourselves and all phenomena? Surely, Zen novitiates place confidence in the Buddhist ideas that Nishitani tries to explain.

The grave shortcomings of Nishitani's theoretic effort do not prove Zen philosophy bankrupt. So long as there are those who practice *zazen* and achieve the *satori* experience that Nishitani so highly values, his philosophy doubtless will prove "resilient." The powerful motivation provided for his thought by (his sense of the value of) the enlightenment experience makes it most probable that he or others will improve on this effort. Why shouldn't such experience have the importance claimed? May non-mystics presume *a priori* and before all serious investigation that it does not?

One final comment. The inadequacies in Nishitani's view that have been brought out here emerge from an "internalist" reading. The problems identified arise just when one tries to understand his thought. But Nishitani in putting forth a religious philosophy also faces "externalist" opposition. To my mind, the most significant worry there is historicist in nature. Nishitani's philosophy repeats central Buddhist precepts. How far then is it subject to a historicism that would debunk its claims as the (uncritical) inheritance of the past? I read Nishitani as proposing a decidedly Buddhist response to "nihilism," and as even formulating the problem in conformity with the "Four Noble Truths."<sup>[42]</sup> Has he been sufficiently critical of his religious inheritance, his mastery of Western thought not-

withstanding?

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## NOTES

1. A good introduction to the complex history of Zen Buddhism, including the history of its doctrines, is Heinrich Dumoulin's *A History of Zen Buddhism* (1963).
2. References to this book are given by page number only.
3. The title of the essay is the title of the book in Japanese. Nishitani was convinced by the translator and publisher to change it.
4. Echoing Heidegger, he appears to believe that the "ontological question" of the meaning of our existence is central if not to philosophy to "authentic" seeking. See for example: 17-18.
5. Cf. Heidegger's discussion of "fear" and "dread" in *Being and Time* (1962:179-82).
6. Cf. Robert Nozick's analysis of this kind of "meaning" (1981: 574-79 and 594-600). Nozick argues that this meaning invariably involves a person's "transcending limits" and "hooking up" with something larger, and more valuable, than himself. (The problem he identifies is that unless that which purportedly gives meaning to an individual's life has itself meaning and value in relation to something still larger, then its meaning-conferral is sham.) Nishitani appears to believe that the concept of religious "meaning" has almost precisely the logic that Nozick elaborates.
7. If there are any doctrines central to all Buddhism, they are the "Four Noble Truths": (1) All is suffering (and transitory); (2) the suffering has a cause, namely, desire (or egoism); (3) there is the possibility of removing the cause and ending suffering through the experience of Nirvāṇa (or of *śūnyatā*); and (4) the Eightfold Noble Path leads to this end. Nishitani's talk of "nihility" can be seen as a reformulation of the

First Noble Truth, although Nishitani does not himself refer to these doctrines in *Religion and Nothingness*.

8. Apparently, he believes that these two existentialists represent the nusus of Western thought on the meaning question. But it is curious that he fails to discuss Heidegger. Hans Waldenfels, who has contributed an important study of Nishitani from the perspective of a committed Christian theologian, viz. *Absolute Nothingness: Foundations for a Buddhist-Christian Dialogue* (1980), speculates concerning the Heidegger lacuna:

While Nishitani agrees with Heidegger's approach [to "nothingness"] as far as it goes, he cannot hide the fact that for him it does not go far enough. And this leads him to the following difficulty: on the one hand, the personal relationship that Nishitani had with Heidegger apparently forbids him an open critique. Accordingly, Heidegger is only mentioned occasionally, here and there. On the other hand, . . . as a whole [Nishitani's work] represents nonetheless a fundamental confrontation with Heidegger in that Nishitani has in mind to take a great stride beyond him. (1980:69-70)

9. In "Science and Zen," an essay published in an English anthology of writings of the Kyoto school (1982), Nishitani again commends Nietzsche for his courage of despair and honest assessment of the implications of science for the human outlook. He quotes the following passage from the *Genealogy of Morals* and endorses Nietzsche's indictment of those who see in science a philosophy of human progress:

These trumpeters of reality are bad musicians, their voices obviously do *not* come from the depths, the abyss of the scientific does *not* speak through them—for today the scientific conscience is an abyss—the word *science* in the

mouths of such trumpeters is simply an indecency, an abuse, and a piece of impudence. (1982b:119)

10. Here I must say a word about Nishitani's "anti-intellectualism." This strand in his thought stands in conflict with his positive portrayal of "*śūnyatā*'s" explanatory power. But like negative theologians in the West—along with their *confrères* in Vedānta and classical anti-intellectualist Buddhist schools (principally the Mādhyamika)—who typically cheat, smuggling in positive content for the notion of God, Nishitani has some positive ideas about *śūnyatā*. Indeed, Nishitani is no mere smuggler; he is a large-scale exporter. Thus I tend to discount the anti-intellectualist strand, strictly interpreted. However, there are two ways in which the anti-intellectualism, or "negative theology," need not be construed as inconsistent with the broad explanatory project. First, Nishitani often insists that "appropriation" of *śūnyatā* has to be "existential," and no mere right intellectual view. And his implicit use here of a distinction between "knowledge by acquaintance" and "knowledge by description" does not entail that the latter is impossible, although (self-defeatingly) he often indicates that he thinks it does. Second, Nishitani claims that *śūnyatā* has to be conceived "negatively" to do justice to its transcendence of our ordinary ego-bound perspectives. "Negatively" does not entail "contradictorily," as we shall see below in scrutinizing the proposed relation of *śūnyatā* to self and world. But when he appears to say that we cannot understand *śūnyatā* at all intellectually (e.g. 124-25), or that the "understanding" depends upon contradictory attributions, I wonder why he is writing. Despite his considerable contribution to a Buddhist metaphysics, he seems to share the confusion of many "spiritual philosophers"—both Eastern and Western—about the merit of comprehensibility. I expand this point in each of the last three of the following four sections.

11. The intellectual history of the concept could be written in no less than a large tome.

It has origins in the earliest Indian Buddhism, and is developed in the classical Indian Mahāyāna schools as well as in the "Wisdom" (*prajñā*) literature. The Japanese inherit the idea after a long period of Chinese gestation, where it takes on some of the color of Lao-Tsu's "Tao." Note that a term used by Mahāyānins in general as an equivalent of 'śūnyatā' is 'tathātā,' "Suchness." This implies that "Emptiness" is considered no absolute void. See e.g. Nishitani's usage: 21.

12. Apparently, Nishitani takes over the "field" concept of Nishida. Concerning Nishida's sources, let me quote Gino K. Piovesana.

Nishida himself explains to us how he came to the formulation of the concept of "place." After having tried, with the help of Fichte's *Tathandlung*, to overcome Rickert, and the neo-Kantian position in general, he had tentatively concluded that the ground or basis of the will was to be found in a kind of Plotinian intuition. Not satisfied with this conclusion, however, he began again to look for the ultimate basis of the absolute will, considering next A. Meinong's ideas on the foundations of knowledge. Another spur to his thinking was his realization that Aristotle's stress on the importance of the individual substance must be taken account of. Like Aristotle's *hypokeimenon*, the final subject of predication and the starting point of the syllogism, Nishida's "place" has both logical and ontological significance. Aristotle's "substance" and Lask's *Feldtheorie* (field theory), not to mention Plato's "topos" and world of ideas, are the immediate inspiration of Nishida's idea of "place." (1968:103)

See also Jan Van Bragt's discussion, "Translator's Introduction," Nishitani's *Religion and Nothingness*: xxx-xxxii. To my mind, key here is the neutrality of the "field" or

"place" concept: it presupposes neither objectivity nor subjectivity, and thus can comprise both. For Nishitani's expression of the idea, see especially: 25 and (the critique of Aristotelian ontology) 114-18 and 282-85.

13. I confess that it is difficult to individuate distinct strands of argument. For example, Nishitani says that only through the concept of *śūnyatā* can we understand the immediacy of our own individual awareness, a phenomenon closely related to an "inside/outside" problem that the theory of *śūnyatā* is purported also to resolve. And many of his attacks on competing notions, e.g. on Nietzsche's, rest, as we have seen, on the superiority of the concept of *śūnyatā* for conceiving the self, along several dimensions.
14. The "Absolute" is none other than the ground of our own subjectivity, as well as the "locus" and "support" (*adhiṣṭhāna* and *āśraya*) of all things. This position, central to Indian Vedānta, and as early as the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (c. 800 B.C.), was reworked in Buddhism in peculiarly Buddhist fashions. Note that Western idealism is here for Nishitani, as it was for Nishida his teacher, also a source.
15. In much Mahāyāna, this is a venerable doctrine known as "*pratītyasamutpāda*," "interdependent origination." It forms a mainstay in classical Buddhist systems that are on many other issues opposed. For example, the great Buddhist Logician Dharmakīrti elaborates the idea at length, as does the Mādhyamika Candrakīrti.
16. There appeared recently a news-item that an ostrich-feather in a favorite hat of Princess Diana's had caused ostrich-farmers in Kenya to experience a period of prosperity.
17. Here he distinctly echoes Nishida, who, in turn, cites Martin Luther: "Luther speaks of 'A Christian's Freedom,' and says that the Christian is no one's servant, and

- everyone's servant" (1973:235). Nishitani also cites Luther (275).
18. "What is *ekkenōsis* for the Son is *kenōsis* for the Father" (59). Here (58-59) Nishitani claims to embrace the Christian notion of *agapē*, a "non-differentiating love" that he sees exemplified both in Jesus's self-sacrifice and in the Bodhisattva's vow (not to pass into *nirvāṇa* until all sentient beings have been delivered from suffering).
19. Nishitani appears to draw here on classical Buddhist reflection about a thing's "*svalakṣaṇatva*," "the having of a characteristic or individuating mark," as well as Western reflection on "*haecceitas*," "thisness." Waldenfels (1980) shows Nishitani's affinity to the great Indian Mādhyamika, Nāgārjuna. But it is the Buddhist Logicians, Dignāga, Dharmakīrti, and their followers, who elaborate the *svalakṣaṇa* concept.
20. Note 8 in Chapter 2 (289) is very important. There Nishitani says, "Life and death are, by nature, contradictory opposites." Part of his (misguided) anti-intellectualism appears to stem from a confusion, evident in this passage, about "contradiction." Only statements can be contradictory, not phenomena. Much of his anti-intellectualism dissolves, I show in the next section, when one interprets his "paradoxes" as referring to an divine Infinite. In this note he goes on to say, "The self-identity of this unity [i.e. *śūnyatā*] cannot be a self-identity in the objective sense, since nothing objective can be constituted out of contradictory elements." (He should say "opposed elements.")
21. I use the term 'transcendence' as a short-hand for all Nishitani's talk of a "home-ground," where "a thing is *not* itself," where "fire is *not* fire," etc. (emphasis mine). Nishitani is careful not to suggest that this transcendence is like that of God in the traditional Christian conception; thus he sometimes seems loathe to use the term 'transcendence.' But he does do so, usually hastening to add that *śūnyatā* is also—

and just in virtue of the transcendence—an absolute immanence; see for example: 265-66.

22. R. Schinzinger, the translator of Nishida's *Intelligibility and the Philosophy of Nothingness*, also points out this similarity (1973: 36 and 63-64), or, I should say, he compares Nishida's notion of "nothingness" to Hegel's "Infinite." Note that Nishida himself talks about the ultimate ground of self and world more as "God" than as "Emptiness." But in effect these are for him equivalent concepts:

In what form does God exist? Seen from one viewpoint, God, as such men as Nicholas of Cusa have said, is all negation, for that which one specifies or must affirm, i.e., that which must be seized, is not God, for if He is that which is specific and must be seized, He is already finite, and is unable to perform the infinite function of unifying the universe. (*De docta ignorantia*, Ca24.) Seen from this point, God is absolute nothingness. However, if one says that God is merely nothingness, this is certainly not so. At the base of the establishment of reality there is a unifying function which clearly cannot be moved. Reality is truly established according to this. . . . God is the unifier of the universe . . . , He is the basis of reality, and only because he is able to be nothingness, is there no place whatsoever where He does not operate.

From the chapter, "God as Reality," in his *A Study of Good* (1960:88-89).

23. See especially Hegel's *Logic* (1975: para. 95). Note that apparently it is the Indian Upanishads where such a conception is first elaborated. See for example *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 5.1: "This is the complete and that is the complete; . . . subtract the complete from the complete and the complete is the remainder." (A similar verse appears in the *Atharva Veda*: 10.8.29.) Compare the twentieth-century Indian philosopher Aurobindo's discussion of the "logic of the Infinite" (1973:329-64). See

also my book on Aurobindo (1986: 109 and 115). Let me repeat that Buddhism from its inception has shared many ideas with Vedānta.

24. See also in particular: 106 and 224.

25. Buddhists have been prone to flout the so-called principle of the excluded middle from very early times. The famed *catuṣkoṭi*, "four-cornered negation," is apparently used to show the inapplicability of certain ordinary concepts to *nirvāṇa*. Cf. Frits Staal (1975:40-54) (Staal rightly sees an attribution of "irrationalism" to the Buddhists as misguided); and Nozick (1981:150ff).

26. It is my view that mystics typically flout certain conversational maxims, or expectations, to convey their experiences and what they take them to indicate. My understanding of tropes in general as floutings of conversational, to include even "logical," maxims depends on the work of H. P. Grice and A. P. Martinich. See in particular Martinich's "A Theory for Metaphor" (1984).

28. Some philosophers have not given the mystics this much credit, falling into a trap of too easy a rebuttal, e.g. W. E. Kennick. Kennick (1962:387-90) takes the mystical utterances, which he sees as *characterized* by contradiction, to be non-descriptive, but also to indicate—in their strict contradictoriness—a mental state that he likens to psychosis. "We do not believe what the depressive psychotic says, nor do we disbelieve it; . . . we recognize [it] for what it is, an expression of depression" (390). Note that some mystic users of apparent paradox—and these are not restricted to Buddhist traditions—are highly articulate, having contributed some of the world's greatest literature, e.g. the Sufi Al-Ghazzālī.

29. See the illustration: 141.

30. Is it an advantage of an ancient Sanskrit term that it is not likely to be taken in a customary way; does the very use of a Sanskrit term flout a conversational maxim and thus set up a metaphoric meaning?
31. Also, he himself says, "Samādhi is not simply a psychological concept but an *ontological* one" (165).
32. Buddhism has long had to live with an ethical tension between the ideals of compassion and *samādhi* ("just sitting"). Nishitani believes that the tension is resolved in the emergence of Mahāyāna and its ideal of the Bodhisattva, an ideal opposed to the earlier (and Theravāda) ideal of the Arhat (see for example: 282). But *how* does the Bodhisattva help others? He helps them win *nirvāṇa* for themselves; then he himself passes into the ultimate extinction of form and personality, and transcendent "bliss." The ideal thus remains "world-negational," although it is not, to be sure, *as* world-negational as the ideal of the Arhat who seeks above all his own salvation, for in Mahāyāna there is at least more of an acknowledgment of the importance of others.
33. The theory of *avidyā* stands out in Vedānta, and does so more—in the Indian context—than in Buddhism.
34. Compare the statement of Śaṅkara, the great Advaita Vedāntin, on *avidyā* (i.e. "non-awareness of the Absolute"): "[it is] a beginningless and endless, primal illusion . . ." *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* 1.1.1: *anādir ananto naisargiko 'dhyāso . . . [avidyā]*.
35. What horrible "play" is sustained by *śūnyatā*, war and all moral evils as well as all the natural evils of disease, pain, and death! "By means of its own dharma, this Existenz maintains dhāranī [sic] over all phenomena in their dharma-like nature, or suchness, within this world of transitoriness and uses them for its own enjoyment" (200). If "Emptiness" may be conceived, with qualifications, as "God," as Nishitani

often suggests, then God would hardly appear to be worthy of worship, "enjoying," as Nishitani here implies, even the phenomena of pain and suffering.

36. Let us assume for a moment that we are told how one can avoid the dilemma of meaning, namely, by living on the "home-ground" of ourselves and of all things, living thus "cosmically" and "transcendently." What one's life would be *for* would not be something "wholly other" to oneself, nor would one be confined to a perspective cut off from and opposed to others (the situation prompting the meaning question in the first place). The meaning question would be blocked; there would be nothing outside and larger than oneself that could confer meaning. The question would lose its sting. But wouldn't there nevertheless be a puzzle? Couldn't we still worry about the meaning of the whole (i.e. "Emptiness" *and* its rushing into form)? Nishitani not only needs to explain the origin of *avidyā* and suffering on the "field" of *śūnyatā*, he needs to answer this question: How is *śūnyatā* to be the source of its own meaning (since there is nothing else that could give it meaning)? or (what amounts to the same thing) Why is it supremely and intrinsically valuable?

Robert Nozick speculates (1981: 608 in particular) that it is the process of history and the "Unlimited's" becoming finite that confers it itself meaning, a conferral that is part of its "dynamic" perfection ("perfection need not be boring" [607]). And Nishitani makes a similar suggestion, though not with so clear a formulation; see especially: 265. But even if such speculation is on the right track for resolving the puzzle how *śūnyatā* could itself have meaning, the problem of *avidyā* and suffering would not disappear. Why does *śūnyatā* have to give itself meaning in just the way that (Nishitani would want to hold) it does, including all the pain and misery experienced throughout history?

37. Both are elaborated in the *Yogasūtra* and (according to Mircea Eliade) in the Theravādin Buddhaghosa's *Aṭṭhasālīnī*, verse 118 ("*samādhi* is identical with *citta*'s *ekaggatā*" [Eliade:396]).
38. Here the West has rich traditions of religious speculation that Nishitani ignores: especially noteworthy is the conception of desire as divine will, found in some Romantics, e.g. William Blake. Also interesting in this context is Plato's *Symposium* and the view of *eros* there expressed. Several contemporary Christian theologians appear to be trying to develop and refine the Romantic outlook: see in particular John Hick (1966), Paul Ricoeur (1970), and George Rupp (1975).
39. This point could be substantiated with many references. See for example: 13, 62-4, 70-1, 98, 137ff, 142, 189ff, and 250ff.
40. It seems to me that the theory of *sūnyatā* is comprehensible by those who like myself have not had the experience. But is not our understanding of at least "enlightenment" dependent on the testimony of those who have? (It is conceivable that Nishitani's own understanding of enlightenment depends chiefly on the writings of Dōgen and other masters of Zen. I do not know whether he claims to have had himself a *satori* experience; I suspect that he would say he has.)
41. For my fuller thoughts on the general project of offering mystical defenses of "religious" claims, and an identification of the key issues for assessing any mystic world view, I must again refer to my book, in particular the chapter on the "epistemology of mysticism" (1986:5-53). There issues of "foundationalism" and "pragmatism," of intersubjectivity and conflicting mystic claims, religious predispositions and "theory-laden" reportage, of the language of mysticism, of coherence, parsimony and the unity of science, as well as the justificational importance of a first-/third-person dis-

inction are there in detail discussed.

42. See again note 7 above.