

Nothingness, the Self, and the Meaning of Life

Nishida, Nishitani, and Japanese Psychotherapeutic Approaches to the Challenge of Nihilism

Lehel Balogh*

Abstract

In my paper I propose to explore how four influential 20th century philosophers and psychotherapists in Japan, Nishida Kitarō, Nishitani Keiji, Morita Masatake and Yoshimoto Ishin have given shape to their meditations on nothingness, emptiness and the self, and in what ways did their works point to similar directions when it comes to the question of fending off the dangers of nihilism and finding a new meaning in life. After introducing various concepts of nihilism and setting the historical and intellectual context of the era, I shall delve into the theoretical configurations of the self in relation to nothingness and emptiness in Nishida's, Morita's, Nishitani's and Yoshimoto's views. The paper will conclude with the delineation of some common features in the four thinkers' oeuvre that could assist the self in getting rid of the threat of nihilism by transforming itself into an emotionally and existentially more stable mode of being.

Keywords: *Nihilism, Nishida, Nishitani, Naikan therapy, Morita therapy.*

1. Introduction

Some ten years after listening to Heidegger's lectures at the University of Freiburg on Nietzsche and nihilism, Nishitani Keiji, one of modern Japan's most original and insightful philosophers, has decided to give a series of lectures in Kyoto which got published in 1949 under the title *Nihilism*.¹ The text warns against the imminent dangers of nihilism and explains its particular relevance to Japan. In his precautionary remarks and in-depth analysis Nishitani makes it clear that nihilism is not merely a European or western phenomenon: it has spread way beyond its point of historical emergence, and thus holds serious threats to the cultural lives and national identities of other countries, among them Japan, as well. Why is that so? How could European nihilism be a serious hazard to the Japanese culture? Nishitani explains that it is because Japan is *already* in a deep crisis. In

* JSPS International Research Fellow, Faculty of Humanities and Human Sciences, Kita 8, Nishi 5, Kita-ku, Hokkaido University, Sapporo, Hokkaido 0600808, Japan.
Email: lehel7[a]gmail.com

¹ Parkes (1990). p. xvi.

fact, Japan has been in crisis for some time, but the crisis had gone largely unnoticed. Consequently, Japan is unaware in terms of the extent of the spiritual malaise and the menacing ennui that has been swirling forebodingly under the surface of its manifest historical events.² The movement of nihilism conceals itself extraordinarily well, and therein lies the essence of its danger: that it can escalate in a barely noticeable yet fairly rapid manner. Nishitani expounds:

Up until the middle of the Meiji period a spiritual basis and highly developed tradition was alive in the hearts and minds of the people. Indeed, the reason Japan was able to take in western culture with such unprecedented alacrity was that people then were possessed of true ability born of spiritual substance. However, as Europeanization (and Americanization) proceeded, this spiritual core began to decay in subsequent generations, until it is now a vast, gaping void in our ground.

3

This “vast, gaping void” at the core of one’s existence is not a matter that could be labeled as unique to this historical period or could be simply understood as the consequence of a mere chronological chain of events that comes from the past and leads to the now. For Nishitani, as for his predecessors like Nietzsche and Heidegger, the nature of nihilism could be conceived in essentially twofold ways: one, it can be seen as universal and existential; two, as particular and historical. This duality is something that can and should be grasped in one single vision in order to understand how nihilism operates in actual reality; neither aspect of its movement ought to be downplayed. What is crucial here is that the problem should not be objectified and externalized as though it were just another problem among many others. The question of nihilism is the most urgent, the most personal and radical of all.⁴

“On the one hand, nihilism is a problem that transcends time and space and is rooted in the essence of human being, an existential problem in which the being of the self is revealed to the self itself as something groundless.”⁵ For Nishitani,

² Nishitani (1990), p. 177: “As noted above, our crisis is compounded by the fact that not only are we in it but we do not know that our situation is critical. Thus our first task is to realize that the crisis exists in us, that modern Japan is a living contradiction with a hollowness in its spiritual foundations.”

³ Op.cit., p. 175.

⁴ Op.cit., p. 2: “In short, nihilism refuses treatment as merely an external problem for one's self, or even contemplation as a problem internal to each individual self. This is the essence of nihilism. (...) Nihilism demands that each individual carry out an experiment within the self.”

⁵ Op.cit., p. 3.

the existential side is clearly very important and not something to be neglected. Nevertheless, the void is always there for the individual as the groundless ground of its personal existence. Although this fact is habitually covered up and made forgotten by the cultural structures of the civilization into which one is born, when these structures experience a deep and lasting inner crisis one cannot avoid to see the true groundless nature of one's existence. At times like this the uncomfortable truth comes to the fore, namely, that where one assumed to have fixed and reliable ontological foundations to be present there is nothing save for a formless void. Recognizing the presence of the abyss is agonizing, yet it is the only way that can revitalize the creative spiritual energies of both the individual and the civilization *in toto*.

The essential thing is to overcome our inner void, and here European nihilism is of critical relevance in that it can impart a radical twist to our present situation and thereby point a way toward overcoming the spiritual hollowness. This is the second significance that nihilism holds for us. The reason the void was generated in the spiritual foundation of the Japanese in the first place was that we rushed earnestly into westernization and in the process forgot ourselves.⁶

Nishitani's thoroughgoing analysis, no matter how convincing and alarming it may sound, has been formulated in a cultural milieu and historical era that is obviously not identical to the one we live in at the current moment, some seventy or eighty years after his thoughts were put down on paper. But is this era so entirely different than the one in which Nishitani lived? Has the danger of nihilism, in its second, historical sense, been successfully fended off and done away from among our primary cultural concerns? There may be some voices today again that would argue that historical nihilism is still lurking around, it still has not been overcome or replaced by anything more constructive and reassuring compared with the "gaping void".⁷ These voices might feel inclined to claim that a major shift has never taken place, but, instead, the long lasting decadent and self-destructive trends of the western world resulted in the evident multiplication and the deepening of the various crises that seem to produce new challenges by the

⁶ Op.cit., p. 178.

⁷ See for instance Diken (2009), pp. 1-7; Levin (1988), pp. 4-5; Possenti (2014), pp. 211-13; Severino (2014); Tartaglia (2016) pp. 21-25.

day.⁸

Among these voices James Tartaglia's is one of the most salient nowadays. He contends in his 2016 book *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life* that instead of rejecting nihilism or trying to fight it, one should rather embrace it, because human life *is* indeed meaningless. "There is no overall point to human life. We are each of us born into a certain specific situation, at a particular place, in a particular historical epoch, and with particular parents, and from this unchosen starting point we must continue to exist until our time runs out."⁹ Tartaglia goes on to argue that although human life does not have an unequivocal comprehensive meaning, this is no reason to despair after all. Nihilism has the power to reinvigorate not only philosophy but one's attitude towards life's goals as well. The philosophy of the meaning of life is inherently connected with the fact that we are living in a nihilistic age, but according to Tartaglia, this is not an issue that should be overcome. Nihilism is a fact of human life, and if one intends to improve the current situation, one ought to see nihilism in a positive light, in lieu of attempting to replace it with a purportedly more sensible approach to life: an approach that no one really knows what it consists in.

Some might even argue that non-western cultures, like Japan, which have been profoundly influenced by most aspects, both positive and negative, of western civilization, could not yet actually renew and regenerate themselves, but are still fundamentally at the same historical situation by and large where they had been sixty or eighty years ago. It may be plausibly posited that Japan is still searching for its own identity, and this long-going/ongoing search has not been without its difficulties and drawbacks. As professor Kazushige Shingu, renowned psychotherapist and psychiatrist from Nara University, has noted not long ago:

There is an increasing social demand for identity because in Japan we faced, initially, the collapse of the traditional construction of society based on Confucianism and Buddhism, later the opposition between East and West, between Communist and Liberal world. Now also this structure crashed and we are facing the overwhelming power of Neoliberalism. (...) We are living a deeply ambivalent and contradictory situation and it is true that, in this situation, we have

⁸ Possenti (2014), p. 211: "Having captured the spiritual sensibilities of an entire age, nihilism has now become the prevailing cultural climate in which we live. It is the air we breathe from birth, the irreplaceable lens through which we view every problem. Nihilism is thus the term that best sums up human civilization's march toward decadence; it is a negative nihilism that saps us of the will to live and work."

⁹ Tartaglia (2016), p. 21.

the tendency to close into ourselves, as if we were psychoanalyzing ourselves (...) I think this is a cause of suffering.¹⁰

Discovering – or creating anew – its own identity and an overall meaning of life while trying to find a way out of the distressing situation that causes widespread suffering and increased mental disturbances among the population is a cardinal goal for which Japan has been striving for a considerable time through various channels. If we follow them, some of these channels will lead us into the camps of Kyoto School philosophy, while others into the mental health care circles of Morita and Naikan therapies. In what follows we will investigate how Nishida Kitarō, along with Nishitani Keiji, worked on a potentially promising philosophical way out of nihilism, while Morita Masatake and Yoshimoto Ishin have developed two dissimilar, yet apparently converging therapeutic approaches that are embedded in the Buddhist tradition. All these scholarly and pragmatic endeavors have yielded a seemingly new, yet, at its core, a rather ancient foundation to a form of ethics which aims to cope with the challenges posed by nihilism. This ethics, as we will soon have an opportunity to observe, does not intend to cover up the existential void of nihilism but, instead, attempts to build a bridge over it while leaving the void in plain sight. Nevertheless, before turning our attention to the intellectual labor carried out by Nishida, Nishitani, Morita and Yoshimoto of bridging the void of nihilism, first we need to deepen our understanding regarding the true nature of the threat, in order to see how nihilism has come to be the notoriously dreaded cultural phenomenon of the modern period

2. The Advancement of the History of Nihilism

The modern epoch brought into being a world in which the effects of nihilism are spreading. Now, we can see, today, if we look with care and thought, that nihilism is a rage against Being: ‘nihilism’ means the destruction of Being: the Being of all beings, including that way of being which we call ‘human’ and consider to be our own.¹¹

If there is a single philosopher who is routinely associated with the notion of nihilism then that person is, without doubt, Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche’s musings on the emergence of nihilism from the cultural logic of Christianity is as

¹⁰ Bucci et al. (2014), p. 122.

¹¹ Levin (1988), p. 5.

well-known as his prophesied solution for the problem of nihilism which he declared to have found in the overcoming of man by the overman (*Übermensch*) and in creating new values instead of the hollowed-out old ones. Nietzsche was confessedly a nihilist himself in the sense of striving to actively assist the unavoidable progress of nihilism to come to its fruition with the explicit aim of propelling the development of European history to its subsequent, post-nihilistic stage. Nietzsche saw himself as much an outstanding herald of the times disseminating the news about the imminent advent of the mass decline of European civilization as the chosen thinker in whom the nihilistic tendencies of the west have culminated. Notwithstanding his apparent merits in laying bare the scarcely perceptible progression of the movement of nihilism, it would be a mistake to fall for Nietzsche's less than modest, somewhat self-aggrandizing presentation concerning the origins of nihilism. As Slocombe reminds us, "Nihilism did not originate with Nietzsche, however, and neither did it end with him. Before Nietzsche, philosophies of nihilism are evident from classical Greece to Enlightenment Europe; since Nietzsche, and especially since the Holocaust, nihilism is no longer a marginalized philosophy, but one that has become central to an understanding of the history of modernity and twentieth- and twenty-first-century culture."¹²

The first usage of the term "nihilism" in its philosophical sense can be traced back to a letter, dated 21st of March 1799, written by Jacobi and addressed to Fichte. In this letter Jacobi criticized Fichte for the kind of transcendental idealism, initiated by Kant and sustained by Fichte himself, which seeks to address all philosophical questions without involving anything external (i.e. God) to the self. This kind of transcendental idealism becomes, according to Jacobi, a form of 'nihilism' (*Nihilismus*). For if God is removed from philosophy, philosophy becomes sheer egoism or solipsism, and there remains *nothing* upon which the inquiring self could stand on. Consequently the self, without God, turns into an "empty self", and, *vice versa*, God, without its absolute validity, changes into nothingness.¹³ Following this famous letter, nihilism as a "term was generally connected with atheism and with a rejection of all existing sources of authority by critics such as Jacobi and Jean Paul, and later by Turgenev, and Dostoevsky. They were all convinced that if the I was posited as absolute, God was nothing, and that without God all authority could have no other basis than shifting human will and

¹² Slocombe (2005), p. 1.

¹³ Weller (2008), pp. 1-2.

opinion.”¹⁴ The connection of nihilism with atheism and the refusal of authority then grew even more pronounced when Russian radicals who came to be known as “Nihilists” started a political movement in the 1860s which was boldly propagating anarchistic ideals while rejecting all forms of authority from the Tsar to the Russian Orthodox Church to the aristocracy.¹⁵

Nietzsche referred to nihilism as the “uncanniest of all guests”. If nihilism is a guest, then it is certainly not the kind of the guest that would feel embarrassed about entering our home: it has come without invitation and will proceed without hesitation.¹⁶ Being uncanny, it will exude an eerie atmosphere; one does not know what to expect from it, but it is evident that its presence is palpably unsettling and is felt by everyone. Generally speaking, the notion of nihilism, even though its meaning is not unequivocally clear – in fact, it can denote several things at the same time – conveys an overwhelmingly *negative* sense: one expects something dreadful, sinister, destructive. As Weller observes, “Since its introduction into the discourse on modernity at the time of the French Revolution, targets for the charge of nihilism have included atheism, Christianity, Judaism, rationality, metaphysics, ontology, transcendental idealism, logocentrism, deconstruction, technology, democracy, Nazism, fascism, socialism, bolshevism, humanism, and anti-humanism.”¹⁷ Indeed, nihilism has been tied to almost any movement or *-ism* that appeared to be undesirable or hostile to its adversaries.¹⁸ Nevertheless, nihilism has not exclusively been characterized as negative or destructive. Marmysz comments that nihilism can – and has been – viewed as something positive or productive as well: a field or a ground that allows for previously unknown creative forces to appear.

The problem of nihilism (...) is nothing new. It is, in fact, a perennial

¹⁴ Gillespie (2015), p. 80.

¹⁵ Crosby (1988), p.4.

¹⁶ Metzger (2009a), p.1: “The figure of the guest, ‘standing at the door,’ suggests that he is foreign, an outsider or alien from whom one can safely dissociate or differentiate oneself. The fact that nihilism is the ‘uncanniest of all guests,’ however, suggests that he makes our home itself foreign and alien; his chill figure is not simply unwelcome, it renders us homeless (*heimatlos*).”

¹⁷ Weller (2011), pp. 9-10.

¹⁸ In the case of Leo Strauss, Nazism was the infamous manifestation and embodiment of German nihilism. See: Strauss (1999), pp. 357-358: “The fact of the matter is that German nihilism is not absolute nihilism, desire for the destruction of everything including oneself, but a desire for the destruction of something specific: of modern civilisation. That, if I may say so, limited nihilism becomes an almost absolute nihilism only for this reason: because the negation of modern civilisation, the No, is not guided, or accompanied, by any clear positive conception. German nihilism desires the destruction of modern civilisation as far as modern civilisation has a moral meaning.”

concern and a source of anxiety that has had an influence upon human life and thought throughout history. A phenomenon that has affected both individuals and whole cultures, nihilism has been likened to a “malaise,” a “cancer,” and a “sickness,” while also having been called a “divine way of thinking,” and an inspiration to artists and scholars. Nihilism has been deemed both a “disease” and a “cure”; something to be feared as well as welcomed. In short, it is a phenomenon that has been considered both an evil and a good.¹⁹

What positive features could nihilism possibly hold? For one thing, if one is to begin anything from scratch, nihilism is *the* sweeping power that has the potential to erase *anything* that would otherwise stand in the way and hinder the creation of revolutionary novelties. In order to give life to something new, naturally, something old needs to give way to it. As things stand, the old typically does not want to give up its place voluntarily to the new. The movement of nihilism can provide the necessary thrust that sets the emerging innovative forces free. That is why Nietzsche believed that a new beginning – which was symbolized in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* by the carefree and obviously inventive play of the child – necessitates the prior destruction of the aged “tables of value”. Accordingly, Baker adds, “Nietzsche believed that the outcome of nihilism – the death of God – is itself the opportunity for what he terms ‘the great liberation’. Not the inexistence of God but his death”²⁰

The “death of God” stands for the lack of values, the pervading meaninglessness and the perceived futility of human life. Since the belief in the metaphysical truths and the entire Christian mega-narrative has crumbled, man has nowhere to turn but towards his innermost self. The triumph of subjectivity, whose gradual expansion began with the renaissance and Descartes, has come to its completion in the nihilistic individualisms of Stirner and Nietzsche. However, this supposed triumph is, in fact, also a staggering defeat, for the subject of epistemology, the *ego cogito* that has objectified the entire world, could not avoid the undesired outcome of objectifying itself as well in the end. Man has become just another field of inquiry for science, therefore the distance between himself and his knowledge of himself grew steadily until it came to be no longer bridgeable. Hence the self has lost touch with its authentic selfhood which points

¹⁹ Marmysz (2003), p.1.

²⁰ Baker (2018), p.1.

outside of its individual self and which could provide meaning and values.

The triumph of subjectivity is self-destructive, because it has inflated the human ego without developing self-respect, the true basis of agency, and the social character of human vision. Moreover, the triumph of ‘Man’ necessitated the death of God. But, since God had been the sole source of our values and the origin of all meaningfulness, the death of God only accelerated the spread of a latent culture of nihilism, cancer of the spirit, contagion of despair.²¹

As we have seen in the Introduction, Nishitani attended Heidegger’s lectures on Nietzsche’s Nihilism and has followed Heidegger’s philosophical etiology as to the causes of the spiritual pathology of western civilization. Heidegger famously claimed that the process of nihilism is an inevitable one, since it is practically coded into the advancing self-oblivion of western metaphysics. In other words, it could not have happened in any other way; it was the “destiny” of European intellectual history to have nihilism emerge from its underbelly at a certain point and allow it to blossom.²² In Heidegger’s view, even though Nietzsche maintained that western metaphysics had ended and a new epoch had begun with him, Nietzsche was, indeed, still operating from within the same tradition that held him captive.²³ Heidegger, in a strikingly similar way as Nietzsche before him, asserted that *he* was the first one in the history of philosophy who had succeeded in overcoming the failings of the self-destructive western metaphysics and had instigated a new way of philosophizing; to be precise, a new way of *thinking* (*Denken*).

How did Heidegger see mankind’s responsibility in bringing about the advent of nihilism?

For Heidegger, modern man is ‘empty’ and estranged from the world, incapable of valuing, moved only by the restlessness of his ‘will to will’, by his sense of some endless possibility to enhance his subjectivity. Perhaps it would seem logical to conclude that, for Heidegger, modern

²¹ Levin (1988), p. 4.

²² Although not everyone agrees with Heidegger on this particular point. Rosen for instance states – Rosen (1969), p. xiv. – that, although the danger of nihilism is a permanent human possibility, the actual pervasive presence of nihilism today is due to a series of specific philosophical decisions in the past.”

²³ Mortensen (1994), pp.138-139.

man embodies the *nihil*, that modern man is the ‘nothing’ – yet, at precisely this point we would be wrong. (...) Aims are not lacking; they are, for modern man, everywhere and always bound up with the most important being – the self, *my* self, this one and no other, *me*. But is it not in this that, for Heidegger, a historically intensified forgetfulness of Being might lie? In other words, is modern man not the historical embodiment of near-absolute forgetfulness in which what Heidegger calls ‘everydayness’ becomes the only horizon of self- and world-understanding? And, in this sense, is modern man not *the* central character of destructive nihilism?²⁴

It is ambiguous, to say the least, as to whether Heidegger holds “modern man” morally accountable for unleashing – and, on occasion, actively implementing – the destructive powers of nihilism. His account of the History of Being seems to imply that the processes of history are destined to happen the way they do and the way they will do. On the other hand, it would be difficult to ignore the morally highly saturated rhetoric Heidegger tends to use whenever he analyzes and, in effect, criticizes modern science and particularly modern technology for enabling the spread of nihilism and the spiritual impoverishment of human existence. Yet, it is also Heidegger who pays heed to the developments of other intellectual and spiritual traditions, namely, Chinese and Japanese thought, and sometimes incorporates them – usually without giving them much credit – into his later philosophy. The fact that – and the manner in which – he keeps open the possibility of a renewal of western thinking, a “second beginning” by which nihilism would be surpassed is clearly significant. Furthermore, the key to the overcoming of nihilism in Heidegger might already be there in the movement of nihilism itself. As Cunningham perceptively observed, nihilism in its true sense cannot be such a one-sided negative phenomenon as it is regularly portrayed in a rather overly simplified fashion.

This conundrum merely points to the obvious fact that nihilism may lack God, but it also lacks this lack of God. Accompanying any radical absence is an absence of absence, and so to attribute a negativity to nihilism is one-sided. This type of accusation articulates its protestation

²⁴ Costea and Amiridis (2011), pp. 21-22.

only 'within the sides' of a metaphysical imputation, since it must presume the absence of nihilism so as to be able to accuse it. Such accusation takes the form of deeming nihilism nihilistic, and this, it is argued, need not be the case (...) If we are to speak seriously of nihilism we must, it seems, understand nihilism precisely to be an absence of nihilism: nihilism is not nihilistic. (...) Nihilism will provide values, gods, and most of all, it seems, intelligibility. Indeed, as we shall see, nihilism generates an excessive intelligibility.²⁵

3. Nothingness, Emptiness and the Self in Japanese Philosophy and Psychotherapy

If one accepts the above claim that nihilism is *not nihilistic* after all, that is to say, beyond its naturally destructive characteristics it has a positive aspect as well which permits new values and new meanings to emerge, one still wonders where these new values and meanings may rise from? If nothing exists any longer, if all that has been, is irretrievably lost, and the beings as we used to know them are no more, then the only fountainhead from which the new values could possibly spring forth is, indeed, *nothingness* itself. But what *is* nothingness? Is it a thing among others? If it is, how does it differ from any other being? Or is it perhaps a radically different reality which cannot be characterized by the traditional apparatus of ontology?

The advancement of nihilism has been whirling onward ruinously until it has reached its most radical conclusion, which is this: it can no longer destruct without having to build and create something new. The way beyond nihilism leads through it, as both Nietzsche and Nishitani agreed, so one cannot simply shy away or shun the consequences of its relentless advancement. The most immediate consequence of this progress is that it is impossible to turn back to the same values and the same narratives which were still valid before nihilism commenced its vicious ride. However, it is still possible to grab hold of that which is alive and life-giving in the old and make use of it for the new to come. As Nishitani argues:

Both Dostoevsky and Nietzsche anticipated the nihilism that was to come, and dared to descend to the depths of history and humanity to struggle

²⁵ Cunningham (2002), p. 170.

desperately against it. They can even lead us Japanese to the nihilism lurking in the ground of our historical actuality. But in order for us to take up the struggle, we need our own means. The way to overcome it must be of our own creation. Only then will the spiritual culture of the Orient which has been handed down through the ages be revitalized in a new transformation.²⁶

Nishitani was convinced that the way out of nihilism could only be reached by dipping into its heart and coming face to face with nothingness itself. One is instinctively reluctant to turn away from being and to bend instead towards nothingness, for nonbeing and nothingness are generally considered to be analogous with death and extinction which every healthy living instinct wants to avoid. Nevertheless, as Heidegger emphatically referred to nothingness as something that can be experienced in the existential mode of anxiety (*Angst*) which brings one's most authentic possibility for being to one's awareness, the encounter of nothingness is not only inevitable but it is also desirable; desirable in the sense that it facilitates the displacement of something worse, i.e. the all too powerful self-destructive strand of nihilism. The direct experience of existential anxiety, along with Dasein's running-forward-to-death and the chilling encounter of nothingness amidst the moment of *Angst* are justifiably dreaded scenarios that one would *never* look forward to. Yet, precisely this experience is that exceptional one which, by displaying the groundlessness of one's existence prepares one for the acceptance of a vision that demands no grounds for humans to be able to exist and even to thrive and flourish happily in life.

Despite the fact that Buddhism has been frequently accused, even by Nietzsche himself, of being through and through nihilistic and life-denying, Nishitani insists that "there is in Mahayana a standpoint that cannot be reached even by nihilism". He quickly adds though that, "For the present this standpoint remains buried in the tradition of the past, far from historical actuality."²⁷ Yet, this standpoint, which is the *standpoint of nothingness or emptiness*, is still potentially accessible for the seeking mind: one only needs to unearth the origins of the concepts of nothingness and emptiness and then witness how they endow with new values and meanings the moribund words and notions of our language and our narratives that had been long besieged by the negative forces of nihilism.

²⁶ Nishitani (1990), p. 181.

²⁷ Op. cit., p. 180-181.

During the time when Nishitani's predecessor, the originator of the Kyoto School, Nishida Kitarō was a young intellectual seeking out a way to wed the ancient insights of Zen Buddhism²⁸ with the nomenclatures of modern western-style philosophy, taking good use of the antique texts of Buddhism was not an approach that was in the vogue in Japan. As the government dispatched many of its brightest young students and professionals to Europe and the United States in order "to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills for modernization", the prior body of knowledge that was founded on Indian, Chinese and ancient Japanese religious texts and on dated scholarly discussions came to be heavily criticized and eventually abandoned by the most.²⁹ While the Japanese were looking for their identity, the religious past and the modernizing scientific present, especially in medical and religious circles, competed and clashed with each other.³⁰

At the outset, the explicitly expressed guiding principle of modernization in Japan was to borrow western technology and science but maintain Asian values. As the process unfolded, however, it became clear to many leading Japanese intellectuals that modernization brought with it ideas of self, society, knowledge, education, and ethics that ran counter to many traditional Buddhist, Confucian, and Shinto values. (...) In response to the new ideas from the West, a great many philosophers in the Japanese academy simply abandoned the premodern traditions as sources for their work, devoting themselves entirely to expositions and critiques of major western figures.³¹

Sensing the damaging effects of this clash between the old and the new yet deliberately refusing to take sides, Nishida, and, about the same time, Morita Masatake, a famed psychiatrist at the prestigious Jikei University opted for elevating Buddhism back into the mainstream of philosophical and scientific discourses. In order to do this, they took advantage of the rich cultural heritage of

²⁸ On Nishida's Zen Buddhist practice of *zazen* in search of enlightenment see for example Uehara (2019), p. 578.

²⁹ Heisig et. al. (2011a), p.15: "Along with medicine, engineering, agriculture, postal systems, and education, knowledge of western thought was prized as a means to understand the foundations of modern society and the ideas behind western science and technology. Naturally, this would involve intimate familiarity with western philosophy. After a brief period of interest in British utilitarianism and American pragmatism, Japanese philosophers began to look to Germany for guidance."

³⁰ Harding (2015), pp. 4-12.

³¹ Heisig et. al. (2011a), p.15-16.

two well-respected archaic East Asian philosophical concepts: *nothingness* and *emptiness*. Nishida by planting the notion of *absolute nothingness* into the center of his conceptual framework and elaborating its crucial significance with regard to epistemology and ethics, whereas Morita by creating a unique form of psychotherapeutic practice which he based on the *emptying* of the self and on accepting reality as it is, the pragmatic reappropriation of these two concepts for modern Japan had began to take shape.

As Deguchi explains, nothingness and emptiness are “among the most important philosophical terms in East Asian thoughts. Emptiness, as a philosophical term, has an Indian origin; it is *śūnyatā* in Sanskrit, and was formulated in Mahāyāna Buddhism, particularly in the *Paramīta sūtras* and the Mādhyamaka school. On the other hand, nothingness came from Chinese Daoism, especially the doctrine of reverence for nothingness”³² Nishida differentiates between relative and absolute nothingness. Whereas relative nothingness is relative to being, in other words, it is the denial and negation of a particular form of being, absolute nothingness is not relative to anything (thus it is absolute). To put it differently, absolute nothingness (*zettai mu*) is not determined or delineated by anything else. It is a place (*basho*) which encompasses anything else and from which particular beings form and emerge. As Krummel elucidates, it is the “horizonless horizon that contextualizes and makes possible every determination of being as well as their negation”.³³ Nishida’s position is akin to the Mahāyāna notion of the middle path or the emptiness of emptiness which stands between the negative (and relative) nothingness of nihilism and a substantialized version of nothingness which is liable to turn nothingness into yet another form of supreme being (similar to God or Being).³⁴

As Heisig observes, “One of the core ideas associated with the Kyoto School philosophers is that of a *self-awareness in which the self awakens to its true nature as no-self*.”³⁵ Regarding Nishida, the negation of the self and the goal of becoming the thing itself is a crucial part of his philosophical program from the outset. Becoming one with reality in a primordial, non-dual awareness is one of the principal goals of Nishida already in *Inquiry into the Good*, his first major

³² Deguchi (2014), p. 300: “When the Mahāyāna idea of emptiness was introduced into China, it was sometimes translated and explained as nothingness. Since then, these terms have been largely taken as synonyms in Buddhist philosophical discourse.”

³³ Krummel (2014), p. 272.

³⁴ Krummel (2014), p. 281.

³⁵ Heisig (2016), p. 187.

philosophical work. In order to this, in order to become united with reality in a non-dual awareness it is necessary to learn to empty the self and see things as they truly are without our subjective distortions and our reflexive interpretations.³⁶ When the subject and the object are completely joined in a single awareness, that is when the ego-self gets forgotten, and the totality of the experience may come to the fore. For the early Nishida the concept of “pure experience” was the starting point that was supposed to enable the self to rise above the subject-object division. Knowing things as they are is the goal of both philosophy and life in general, yet this kind of knowledge can only be acquired intuitively, according to Nishida. Pure experience is supposed to break through the ego-centered view of the self and reveal reality in an ordinary way. According to this view, the true or authentic self can only be encountered in pure experience when the self is lost in some kind of activity. At that moment the self loses its sense of itself and becomes completely “sincere”. This kind of sincerity appears spontaneously as soon as the awareness of the ego-self disappears.

Losing the self in a non-reflexive activity serves as the key to understanding Morita Masatake’s approach to psychotherapy as well. As a psychiatrist his chief aim was to find a method which would successfully treat neurotic patients suffering from anxiety-related diseases and depression. Similarly to Nishida, Morita was also not propagating Buddhism out in the open but decided rather to let his theory (and practice) be influenced by Zen Buddhist tenets and values in a more subtle manner. The tacit application of the *arugamama* principle which entails accepting reality *as it is*, without illusions and without self-deception, coupled with the self-emptying process that occurs while the patient is lead to directly face his or her problems and thus to build up a novel relation to the world from the ground up are essential features of Morita therapy.³⁷ According to this approach, reality can be experienced in a fundamentally different way than what we are used to in our everyday involvement with things and with other people. When one candidly and directly engages with the ever-changing stream of existence, a much deeper sort of involvement with reality can result whereby one comes to encounter the fine and delicately tangible events in the natural order of things. This experience is tantamount to losing one’s egoistic self and waking up to a new self that is safely grounded in the natural environment and is naturally selfless and compassionate. This new selfless self, by negating itself and through

³⁶ Carter (2013), p. 31.

³⁷ Morita, Shōma (1998), pp. 3-34.

disentangling itself from its own neurotic preoccupation with itself does not fall prey to the self-destructive tendencies of nihilism, albeit it does not cease to acknowledge the emptiness of its existence either.³⁸ Being completely immersed in the flux of reality the awareness of the subject merges into the tranquil and engaged observation of what appears in the field of consciousness. This might remind us of Nishida's notion of "sincerity" and the disappearance of the self amidst the pure experience of reality.

Turning back once again to Nishitani, one can readily observe how his analysis had been influenced by Nishida, and at the same, how he diverged from his predecessor in significant ways. Krummel points out that "Nishitani, borrowing the schema of Nishida, distinguishes emptiness as absolute nothingness (J. *zettai mu*) from nihility as relative nothingness (J. *sōtai mu*)."³⁹ However, in Nishitani's explanation "absolute negation" (*zettai hitei*) as the negation of negation becomes the "great affirmation" (*ōkina kōtei*), and it is on the Buddhist standpoint of emptiness as absolute "nothingness" that nihilism can be penetrated and thus overcome. In *Religion and Nothingness*, Nishitani distinguishes three different standpoints or modes of existence which correspond to the three fields of consciousness, nihility, and emptiness. Davis sums it up the following way:

On the field of consciousness (by which he means subjective, dualistic consciousness), we purport to know other persons and things; but in fact what we know are merely our own subjective representations of them. On the field of nihility (...) one realizes that there is an "absolute breach" between one's subjective consciousness and the things or persons it purports to represent. However, on the field of emptiness, one realizes that this "absolute breach" that distances one person or thing from another at the same time "points directly to a most intimate encounter with everything that exists." This "intimate encounter" is possible because underneath the abyss of nihility that separates subjective consciousness from everything else lies the field of emptiness that unites things in their differences.⁴⁰

³⁸ Chervenkova, Velizara (2017), pp. 45-60.

³⁹ Krummel (2019). p. 660.

⁴⁰ Davis (2017), p. 243.

The field of emptiness in Nishitani's analysis has a unifying power that breaks down the individual differences of the subjects and provides a groundless ground upon which the experience of values and meanings is possible yet again. As we may remember, nihilism has announced its arrival by bringing into awareness the meaninglessness of life and the valuelessness of all values. At a later point, however, nihilism came to its most radical when the emergence of new values and new meanings was bound to happen once again, owing to the activation of the positive forces that lie beneath the negative veneer of the movement of nihilism. "When things appear to be ultimately meaningless, without substance, we are forced by the negation of what we had taken for granted to take a step back to see the reality of our existence under a new light. This marks a fundamental conversion of life that comes to question our ego-centric and anthropo-centric assumptions".⁴¹

A conversion of an earlier self-centered vantage point to a selfless and altruistic one is also a hallmark feature of Naikan therapy which is another Japanese psychotherapeutic approach founded upon a venerable Buddhist tradition. The founder of Naikan therapy, Yoshimoto Ishin was a Shin Buddhist priest who created Naikan ("introspection") therapy out of the ancient ascetic practice of *mishirabe* the aim of which was the attainment of enlightenment (*satori*). Naikan theory emphasizes the interconnectedness of beings, and, in particular, the individual's sinful forgetfulness of his or her indebtedness to others. During the course of the highly structured procedure of the therapy the clients are to meditate on and come to terms with their self-serving narratives of the past, while realizing how biased their preferred ways of remembrances vis-à-vis their roles in past events have been. As soon as one learns to see one's life and the significance of other people's assistance in one's life in a less self-absorbed and self-protective manner, one will become more compassionate and feel reconnected to society and nature as a whole.⁴² Emptying the self, realizing an objective view of reality, and finding meaning in the appreciation of and gratefulness for one's immediate environment (family, friends, the Nature) are the ultimate goals of Naikan therapy.

Letting go is the key to Naikan therapy. One lets go of one's old, false image of the self and of the world. However, instead of being reborn or transformed into

⁴¹ Krummel (2019). p. 657.

⁴² Chervenkova (2017), pp. 81-128.

a new self, it is not the self but rather the *world* that changes form. It simply occurs as a result of the self's realization concerning its deep interconnectedness with the world: the self stops seeing the world as something external to itself. The transformed self is transformed because it does not prioritize itself over other selves any longer. One learns in Naikan that the world has blurry boundaries, and by caring for the world the self sustains itself just as much as the world sustains itself by caring for the self. *If I cause you pain the pain I cause you causes me pain, too*; for although you are not me and I am not you, you and I are not entirely separate, either. The sincere and profound gratitude one feels during and after Naikan for one's family and friends and for one's life in general brings one to the understanding as to our essential belonging with one another, with our ever changing, multiple selves, and with Nature or the Universe.⁴³

4. Conclusion

Having compared in a concise manner how Nishida, Morita, Nishitani and Yoshimoto have addressed the problems of meaninglessness, valuelessness and egocentrism that are all recognized to be the results of a pervasive nihilism that is present in our contemporary culture we came to the position where it will be possible to draw on the commonalities in their respective views. First of all, all four of these thinkers seem to agree that the only approach which is capable of transcending nihilism leads through the realization of the emptiness of the self. This view, in turn, demands to see reality as it is, beyond the false subject-object dichotomy. As Nishitani would stress, only by going through nihilism can one overcome it. Nishida and Nishitani both suggested a criterion with reference to attaining the objective of transcending the self-defeating self-centered vision of modernity that is virtually the same criterion that the aforementioned Japanese psychotherapists set as a goal. This criterion consists in allowing the self and other beings, via a transformative personal conversion, to become manifest in their "suchness" (*shinnyo*) so that the self could achieve an egoless tranquility from which it would become able to see its original connectedness to other beings. The ideal of the enlightened or selfless self looking at it from this revitalized Buddhist perspective is a self which is infinitely more embedded in the world than was ever before. The *arugamama* principle which demands the acceptance of things as they

⁴³ Ozawa de-Silva (2006).

are instead of fleeing into imaginary scenarios or focusing monomaniacally on the ego's petty concerns, is believed to be crucial for the individual's well-being (and also for the healthy functioning of society as a whole).

Standing on this rejuvenated standpoint of emptiness *qua* nothingness one does not purport to have buried once and for all the problem of nihilism or the quandary of the groundlessness that opens up underfoot whenever one sincerely examines one's rapidly dissolving existential bases. Perhaps the self-destructive and self-reorganizing traits of nihilism are vital components to its movement that is eternally vying with(in) itself. The human self that both causes the suffering and is subject to the suffering it causes may be better off if it were conceived as an entity that lacks a substantial core, devoid of an unchanging and indestructible center. Perhaps the self could be posited instead as a locus of emptiness wherein new values and new meanings are created spontaneously and automatically as soon as the self stops concentrating on itself and, as a prudent alternative, opens its eyes onto the vast universe that is always right there in front of its inquisitive nose.⁴⁴

References

- Baker, Gideon (2018). *Nihilism and Philosophy: Nothingness, Truth, and World*. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Bucci, Fiorella and Campagnola, Francesco and Taguchi, Kaori (2014). "The Shifting Place of Madness in Modernizing Japan: Interview with Kazushige Shingu." *Rivista Di Psicologia Clinica* 1: 109–139.
- Carter, Robert E. (2013). *The Kyoto School: An Introduction*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Chervenkova, Velizara (2017). *Japanese Psychotherapies: Silence and Body-*

⁴⁴ Mellamphy (2011), pp. 114-115: "The question of 'subject-unity' must become the question of a sovereignty in which the 'head' is placed and displaced over and over again. The 'unity' of the subject is one in which the principle of sovereignty is equated with the capacity for ongoing spontaneous self-destruction qua self-organization (...) So while sovereignty itself is inviolable, it is so only because it is a multiplicity that reconfigures itself. As Nietzsche might say, it is nothing other than its activity of overcoming. Sovereignty is thus constituted as the ongoing capacity for individuation, rather than as the substance that makes up the constituted individual. The 'self' in other words is not individual, properly speaking, but radically over-individual. And within the context of the pathological condition of nihilism, the 'individuality' of the 'individual' cannot be given ontological priority over its characterization as 'over-individual'."

- Mind Interconnectedness in Morita, Naikan and Dohsa-Hou*. Singapore: Springer.
- Costea, Bogdan and Amiridis, Kostas (2011). "The Movement of Nihilism as Self-Assertion." In Hemming, Laurence Paul and Costea, Bogdan and Amiridis, Kostas, eds. *The Movement of Nihilism: Heidegger's Thinking After Nietzsche*. London and New York: Continuum, pp. 8-24.
- Crosby, Donald A. (1988). *The Specter of the Absurd: Sources and Criticisms of Modern Nihilism*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Cunningham, Conor (2002). *Genealogy of Nihilism: Philosophies of Nothing and the Difference of Theology*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Davis, Bret W. (2017). "Encounter in Emptiness: The I-Thou Relation in Nishitani Keiji's Philosophy of Zen." In Yusa, Michiko, ed. *The Bloomsbury Research Handbook of Contemporary Japanese Philosophy*. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, pp. 231-254.
- Deguchi, Yasuo (2014). "Nishitani on Emptiness and Nothingness." In Liu, JeeLoo and Berger, Douglas L. eds. *Nothingness in Asian Philosophy*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 300-325.
- Diken, Bülent (2009). *Nihilism*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Gillespie, Michael A. (2015). "Nihilism After Nietzsche." *Bollettino Filosofico* 30 (2015): 80-100.
- Harding, Christopher and Iwata, Fumiaki and Yoshinaga, Shin'ichi, eds. (2015). *Religion and Psychotherapy in Modern Japan*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Harding, Christopher (2015). "Introduction." In Harding, Christopher and Iwata, Fumiaki and Yoshinaga, Shin'ichi, eds. *Religion and Psychotherapy in Modern Japan*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 1-24.
- Heisig, James W. and Kasulis, Thomas P. and Maraldo, John C., eds. (2011). *Japanese Philosophy: A Sourcebook*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- (2011a). "Framework." In Heisig, James W. and Kasulis, Thomas P. and Maraldo, John C., eds. *Japanese Philosophy: A Sourcebook*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, pp. 1-31.
- (2016). *Much Ado About Nothingness: Essays on Nishida and Tanabe*. Nagoya: Chisokudo Publications.
- Hemming, Laurence Paul and Costea, Bogdan and Amiridis, Kostas, eds. (2011). *The Movement of Nihilism: Heidegger's Thinking After Nietzsche*. London and New York: Continuum.

- Kopf, Gereon, ed. (2019). *The Dao Companion to Japanese Buddhist Philosophy*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Krummel, John W. M. (2014). "Anontology and the Issue of Being and Nothing in Kitarō Nishida." In Liu, Jee Loo and Berger, Douglas L. eds. *Nothingness in Asian Philosophy*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 263-283.
- (2019). "Nishitani Keiji: Nihilism, Buddhism, Anontology." In Kopf, Gereon, ed. *The Dao Companion to Japanese Buddhist Philosophy*. Dordrecht: Springer, pp. 649-679.
- Levin, David Michael (1988). *The Opening of Vision: Nihilism and the Postmodern Situation*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Liu, JeeLoo and Berger, Douglas L. eds. (2014). *Nothingness in Asian Philosophy*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Marmysz, John (2003). *Laughing at Nothing: Humor as a Response to Nihilism*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Mellamphy, Nandita Biswas (2011). *The Three Stigmata of Friedrich Nietzsche: Political Physiology in the Age of Nihilism*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Metzger, Jeffrey, ed. (2009). *Nietzsche, Nihilism, and the Philosophy of the Future*. London and New York: Continuum.
- (2009a). "Introduction." In Metzger, Jeffrey, ed. *Nietzsche, Nihilism, and the Philosophy of the Future*. London and New York: Continuum, pp. 1-8.
- Morita, Shōma (1998). *Morita Therapy and the True Nature of Anxiety-based Disorders (Shinkeishitsu)*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Mortensen, Ellen (1994). *The Feminine and Nihilism: Luce Irigaray with Nietzsche and Heidegger*. Oslo: Scandinavian University Press.
- Nishitani, Keiji (1990). *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Ozawa de-Silva, Chikako (2006). *Psychotherapy and Religion in Japan: The Japanese Introspection Practice of Naikan*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Parkes, Graham (1990). "Introduction." In Nishitani, Keiji. *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*. Albany: State University of New York Press, pp. xv-xxviii.
- Possenti, Vittorio (2014). *Nihilism and Metaphysics: The Third Voyage*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Rosen, Stanley (1969). *Nihilism: A Philosophical Essay*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Severino, Emanuele (2016). *The Essence of Nihilism*. London and New York: Verso.

- Slocombe, Will (2005). *Nihilism and the Sublime Postmodern: The (Hi)Story of a Difficult Relationship from Romanticism to Postmodernism*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Strauss, Leo (1999). "German Nihilism." *Interpretation*, vol. 26 no. 3 (Spring 1999): 353-78.
- Tartaglia, James (2016). *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life: A System of Nihilism, Consciousness and Reality*. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Uehara, Mayuko (2019). "Nishida Kitarō as Buddhist Philosopher: Self-Cultivation, a Theory of the Body, and the Religious Worldview." In Kopf, Gereon, ed. *The Dao Companion to Japanese Buddhist Philosophy*. Dordrecht: Springer, pp. 575-588.
- Yusa, Michiko, ed. (2017). *The Bloomsbury Research Handbook of Contemporary Japanese Philosophy*. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Weller, Shane (2008). *Literature, Philosophy, Nihilism: The Uncanniest of Guests*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- (2011). *Modernism and Nihilism*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.