

## On (the) nothing: Heidegger and Nishida

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**Abstract** Two major twentieth century philosophers, of East and West, for whom the nothing is a significant concept are Nishida Kitarō and Martin Heidegger. Nishida’s basic concept is the absolute nothing (*zettai mu*) upon which the being of all is predicated. Heidegger, on the other hand, thematizes the nothing (*Nichts*) as the ulterior aspect of being. Both are responding to Western metaphysics that tends to substantialize being and dichotomize the real. Ironically, however, while Nishida regarded Heidegger as still trapped within the confines of Western metaphysics with its tendency to objectify, Heidegger’s impression of Nishida was that he is too Western, that is, metaphysical. Yet neither was too familiar with the other’s philosophical work as a whole. I thus compare and assess Nishida’s and Heidegger’s discussions of the nothing in their attempts to undermine traditional metaphysics while examining lingering assumptions about the Nishida–Heidegger relationship. Neither Nishida nor Heidegger means by “nothing” a *literal* nothing, but rather that which permits beings in their relative determinacy to be what they are and wherein or whereby we find ourselves *always already* in our comportment to beings. Nishida characterizes this as a *place (basho)* that negates itself to give rise to, or make room for, beings. For Heidegger, being as an event (*Ereignis*) that clears room for beings, releasing each into its *own*, is *not a being*, hence *nothing*. We may also contrast them on the basis of the language they employ in discussing the nothing. Yet each seemed to have had an intuitive grasp of an un/ground, foundational to experience and being. And in fact their paths cross in their respective critiques of Western substantialism, where they offer as an alterantive to that substantialist ontology, in different ways, what I call *anontology*.

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Two major philosophers from the first half of the twentieth century, representing distinct cultural regions, are Nishida Kitarō (西田幾多郎) (1870–1945) of Japan and Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) of Germany.<sup>1</sup> Nishida’s basic concept is the “absolute nothing” (*zettai mu* 絶対無) upon which all being is predicated. He inquires into the place of the occurrence of beings that is a nothing vis-à-vis beings. Heidegger, on the other hand, known as the “thinker of being” par excellence, looks into the ground of beings as their being. Yet he thematizes the nothing (*das Nichts*) in different periods of his career as the ulterior aspect of being. Both turn to the nothing in response to the tradition of Western metaphysics that substantializes being and dichotomizes the world. The nothing, for both thinkers, is precisely what provides a challenge to the metaphysical substantialism and dualism of the philosophical tradition of the West. And yet ironically both appear to have regarded one another as being too “Western” due to metaphysical assumptions inherited from that Western tradition. Following Nishida’s reduction of West and East as cultures of form and formlessness, nothing and being, and his critique of Heidegger for the objectification or abstraction of facts, Nishida’s Kyoto School descendants have thus had an ambiguous relationship with Heidegger’s thought, mixing fascination for his ontology and dissatisfaction with his treatment of the nothing. In fact, it has become almost a cliché among scholars specializing in Kyoto School philosophy that Heidegger misunderstood “true” nothingness, even if the original classical Kyoto School critics of Heidegger themselves never engaged with his post-1930 works. My purpose here then is to compare and assess Nishida’s and Heidegger’s discussions of the nothing. But while doing so, I would like to address those lingering assumptions about the Nishida–Heidegger relationship by carefully examining their discussions of being and nothing throughout their oeuvre and with the help of recent scholarship. I will argue that in fact the paths of Nishida and Heidegger cross in their respective critiques of Western substantialism and at the point where each offers, as an alternative to that substantialist ontology, what I call *anontology*.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> References to primary works by Nishida and Heidegger will be given as parenthetical references in the text. Nishida’s works will be identified with *Z* standing for *Nishida Kitarō zenshū* (*Collected Works of Nishida*) followed by the volume number and pagination. The *zenshū* volumes are of the most recent edition that started publication in 2000 except for Z18 and Z19 which are both of the 1966 edition. Heidegger’s works will be identified either by *GA* standing for *Martin Heidegger Gesamtausgabe* (*Collected Works of Martin Heidegger*) followed by the volume number and pagination and/or initials of the work title. Often the reference to Heidegger’s GA volume will be accompanied by a reference to the English translation followed by a slash (/) mark. The initials are identified in the reference list. All other works will be referred to in footnotes. Japanese personal names will be given in this essay by following the traditional Japanese ordering of family name first followed by the given personal name. For example, in “Nishida Kitarō,” *Nishida* is the family name and *Kitarō* is his personal name. Exceptions will be made for Japanese authors whose English works are very well known in the West, such as D.T. Suzuki.

<sup>2</sup> Earlier and shorter versions of this paper were given as presentations at the 49th Annual Meeting of the Heidegger Circle held in Baltimore, MD; and at the 10th Annual Meeting of the Continental and Comparative Philosophy Circle held in Reykjavik, Iceland, both in May, 2015. And more recently a version was given as keynote address at the 1st International Conference of the International Association of Japanese Philosophy held in Fukuoka City, Japan in October, 2016. I would like to thank the conference organizers of those three events for allowing me to work out my ideas in these venues, and also the participants for providing me with questions and insight. I would also like to thank the blind reviewers of this journal for their helpful comments and suggestions.

Before examining their thoughts concerning the nothing, however, we need to, at least, acknowledge the context surrounding prevailing perceptions of the Eastern and Western traditions, and the assumptions both thinkers themselves held in regard to the Greco-European conceptions of being and of nothing as inherited by the Western tradition. Both Heidegger and Nishida take Greco-European metaphysics to be primarily substantialist. And this has certainly been a common perception recently in the last century or so. The Western metaphysical tradition after Plato has been under attack for its tendency to reify being as substance. In turn counter to the nineteenth century estimation of Buddhism by many Western scholars as pessimistic or negative for its sense of emptiness, many recently have argued instead that the Eastern traditions in general have shown a greater appreciation for an unreifiable non-substantiality or formlessness that in fact is a positive source of potentiality behind the emergence of beings. There is certainly a danger here of generalizing what the “East” entails, but one could argue this to be the case at least for the Daoist and Zen traditions that formed an important component of the intellectual mainstream in China and Japan, informing Nishida’s own thinking. Heidegger, on the other hand, emerges from within the Western tradition, as one of its harshest critics. Regardless of whether the Western tradition as a whole really is substantialist or not, what matters here is that it was for both Heidegger and Nishida. In each of their criticisms of Western metaphysics, they meet in their common fascination for the issue of the nothing.

If Western metaphysics since Plato has been oriented around the dichotomization between form and matter or thought and reality, one might say that much of the Japanese intellectual tradition has focused upon the relationship between nothingness (*mu* 無) understood as formlessness (*mukei* 無形) and the realm of beings (*yū* 有) understood as things with form (*keisō* 形相, *katachi* 形). On the basis of this assumption, Nishida contrasts in the preface to *Hatarakumono kara mirumono e* (『働くものから見る物へ』; *From the Working to the Seeing*, 1927), “the brilliant development of Western civilization that takes form as being...” and “the root of Eastern culture that harbors within itself that which sees the form of the formless and hears the sound of the soundless” (Z3 255). In both *Tetsugaku no konpon mondai* (『哲学の根本問題』; *Fundamental Problems of Philosophy*, 1933–34) and *Nihon bunka no mondai* (『日本文化の問題』; *The Problem of Japanese Culture*, 1940), Nishida repeats the contrast between the West that takes being as the ground of reality qua form and the East that takes the nothing as the ground of reality qua formlessness (Z6 335–335, 348; Z9 60). It is the case that the ancient Greeks, at least after Plato, premised on the notion that “something cannot come from nothing” (*ex nihilo nihil fit*), came to conceive of the source of all beings in terms of a constant and unchanging primordial being, the prime example here being the Platonic *ideas*. The concept of the *idea* (ἰδέα) etymologically means “form” (*eidos*, εἶδος) as well as the “look” of a thing, in other words, that which can be objectified in its visibility and, by extension, its intelligibility. Plato’s philosophy that shaped the mainstream of the Western tradition refused to take the unlimited or indeterminate as true reality. By contrast the Eastern tradition has taken nothingness in the sense of a certain formlessness or non-substantiality—as in the Mahāyāna sense of emptiness (*kū* 空) or the Daoist and Zen sense of the nothing or void

(*mu* 無)—to be the source of all. One point to remember here as we juxtapose Nishida with Heidegger is that for Nishida, being (*yū*) always means that which is determined, or has determinate form, while the nothing is the formless. That is, Nishida reduces being to the objectifiable or what in Heideggerian terms would be the ontic. Nishida's stance is not without significance as a response to the substantialism and dualism he noticed in the mainstream current of Western philosophy that we can trace to Plato and Aristotle. Counter-examples from the West to Nishida's own East–West dichotomy would presumably fall outside of that mainstream. Heidegger would be a prime counter-example.

How then did Nishida himself react to Heidegger's philosophy? Nishida in an essay from 1931 and included in *Mu no jikakuteki gentei* (『無の自覚的限定』; *Self-aware Determination of the Nothing*, 1932) condemns Heidegger's standpoint by saying that Heidegger's "being" (*Sein*) (*sonzai* 存在) is not "factual" (*jijitsu* 事実) and that his notion of the understanding (*Verstehen*) of being retains a remnant of subjectivist consciousness and thus fails to get to the point of "seeing oneself by becoming nothing." Instead of being presented as bare fact, fact in Heidegger becomes objectified vis-à-vis the understanding. Heidegger's approach accordingly remains abstract and does not get at the concrete (Z5 129, 132ff). Nishida's critique appears to be based on his reading of *Sein und Zeit* (*Being and Time*), one of the three works of Heidegger found in Nishida's personal library.<sup>3</sup> One might question whether he understood what he read.<sup>4</sup> Heidegger for his part, when questioned what he thought of Nishida's philosophy, responded that "Nishida is Western,"<sup>5</sup> presumably meaning that his thinking falls under the domain of Western

<sup>3</sup> The other works were Heidegger's 1915 habilitation dissertation on Duns Scotus, *Die Kategorien- und Bedeutungslehre des Duns Scotus* (*Duns Scotus' Doctrine of Categories and Meaning*) and the first edition of *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik* (*Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*) of 1929. See *Nishida Kitarō zenzōsho mokuroku* (Catalogue of Nishida Kitarō's entire library), edited and compiled by Yamashita Masao (Kyoto: Kyōto Daigaku Jinbunkeigaku kenkyūjo, 1983) referenced in Ōhashi 1994: 263.n.2. Nishida received the copy of *Sein und Zeit* from his student Mutai Risaku in 1927, the same year as its publication in Germany (see Z18 327; also Z19 600).

<sup>4</sup> Nishida also expressed his negative assessment of Heidegger in 1933 to two younger Japanese philosophers. He told Takizawa Katsumi (滝沢克己) that "Heidegger is not worth your time [*tsumaranu*; worthless, uninteresting]" and discouraged him from studying with Heidegger (Takizawa 1975: 521; also see 1972: 441; and Sakaguchi 1989: 164). And he also told Miyake Gōichi (三宅剛一) that Heidegger's work "...cannot answer the deep issues of substance and life" (Z18 489). But based on what Nishida writes of Heidegger, one wonders how much of Heidegger he really understood. According to Takizawa (in the above passages), who was also a Christian theologian, Nishida in addition stated that Heidegger "...does not recognize what is indispensable and decisive, namely, God." On this see Rigsby 2010: 512 and n.1, 526 and nn.69–71, 546 and n.168. Nishida was certainly not aware of Heidegger's complex relationship to religion, including the notion of "God", not only in his earlier phenomenological period but also later in his post-1930 years which is much more nuanced than Rigsby suggests. We also need to keep in mind how Nishida's own conception of "God" takes as its premise the absolute nothing and in this we might find unacknowledged resonances with Heidegger. On this see, for example, Krummel 2010.

<sup>5</sup> D. T. Suzuki, "Erinnerung an einen Besuch bei Martin Heidegger" in Buchner 1989: 169–172, 170. This was Heidegger's response to Suzuki Daisetsu (鈴木大拙) (D.T. Suzuki) in a conversation they had in 1953 when Suzuki asked him what he thought of Nishida's philosophy. It is doubtful that Heidegger was too familiar with Nishida's philosophy and this judgment was probably based on what he heard about Nishida from his Japanese visitors. On this also see Parkes 1992: 405.n.55.

metaphysics.<sup>6</sup> Neither seemed to have good knowledge of the other's philosophy. On the other hand there could be some truth in what each had to say of the other.<sup>7</sup> Yet at the same time both may have had an intuitive grasp of something foundational to human experience and being, which they tried to express in terms of the nothing.

Several important Kyoto School philosophers, including those who had studied with Heidegger like Tanabe Hajime (田辺元) and Nishitani Keiji (西谷啓治), following Nishida, have criticized Heidegger for an inadequate understanding of the nothing. A common charge was that Heidegger was stuck in the Western metaphysical standpoint of *being* and reifies the nothing into its mere opposite or negation as *non-being*.<sup>8</sup> Heidegger for his part, felt that his discussion of the nothing

<sup>6</sup> It seems unwarranted to read this statement as the “highest possible compliment he [Heidegger] could have paid to Nishida” as a result of Heidegger's supposed “privileging of the Graeco-German primal language” (Rigsby 2010: 540 and n.137). It is more likely that Heidegger—during a period when he was looking to poetry and “thinking” (*Denken*) as opposed to “philosophy”—was tacitly expressing a negative assessment of Nishida as too caught up in Western metaphysics. Two decades prior to Suzuki's question, during the 1930s Heidegger was presented with a summary outline of Nishida's *Ippansha no jikakuteki taikai* (『一般者の自覚的体系』; *The Self-aware System of Universals*) published in 1930 by Miyake Gōichi and Yuasa Seinosuke (湯浅誠之助), who were both in Germany studying with Heidegger during that time. According to Miyake, Heidegger gave a brusque reply that “it looks like Hegel, does it not?” On this see Shimomura 1971: 123 cited in Mine 2014: 71.

<sup>7</sup> That is, if we regard the “metaphysics” or at least the metaphysical tendencies in both thinkers—in Heidegger's pre-1929 discussions of being and nothing, which he himself later acknowledges in his self-critique; and in the language, replete with Western, especially German, philosophical terminology and locution, Nishida himself uses. We will discuss this in the last section of this paper.

<sup>8</sup> Tanabe was a younger colleague and Nishitani was a student of Nishida. Miki Kiyoshi (三木清) and Kuki Shūzō (九鬼周造) are two more notable Japanese philosophers associated with the Kyoto School and who spent time with Heidegger and were influenced by him. Kuki was a colleague of Nishida at Kyoto University and Miki was Nishida's student.

Tanabe, for example, wrote in his marginal notes to his copy of Heidegger's *Was ist Metaphysik?* (“What is Metaphysics?”) that Heidegger's conception of the nothing is a mere negation of being and thus a “nihilistic nothing” (*nihilistisches Nichts*). On this see Rigsby 2010: 544. And Nishitani suggests Heidegger dichotomizes being and nothing and hence reifies the latter when he states that the being of the self (*Dasein*) is suspended over the abyss of nothing, thus representing it as a “thing” (*mono もの*) that is *not*, separate from (or external to) being as a distinct “thing” that is. See Nishitani 2001: 108–109, 1982: 96. Nishitani's point is that Heidegger is taking the nothing as a negative concept vis-à-vis being, yet this is precisely the standpoint Heidegger is at pains to deny is his own. And the standpoint of emptiness Nishitani himself advances in its stead in *Shūkyō to wa nanika* (*What is Religion?*), realized as at one with being, often sounds much like Heidegger's words concerning the nothing in the 1930s and beyond such as in the 1936–38 *Beiträge zur Philosophie* (*Contributions to Philosophy*). If anything his critique applies to Heidegger before the 1930s as the later Heidegger himself critiques his pre-1930 discussions of the nothing as still “metaphysical”. Nishitani, no doubt, was influenced by Heidegger when he studied with him in Freiburg from 1937 to 1939. Yet his discussion of Heidegger seems to be based on Heidegger's earlier works (pre-1930). What is ironic is that analogously to how the first generation of European Buddhologists and nineteenth century European thinkers evaluated Buddhism with its notion of emptiness as pessimistic and negative, it has become the common motif among some Kyoto School thinkers and their descendants that Heidegger had failed to overcome the negative image of nothingness. But if the early Western assessment of Buddhism was based on a misunderstanding, the recent Kyoto School assessment of Heidegger likewise may be a kind of misunderstanding or at least an assessment that ignores Heidegger's post-1930 works.

On the other hand, however, we should mention the possibility here that Heidegger in turn may have been influenced by Zen conceptions of the nothing through his conversations with Nishitani. Nishitani has recounted how when he was studying in Freiburg, after presenting Heidegger with a copy of D.T.

in *Was ist Metaphysik?* (“What is Metaphysics?”) was understood in the Far East after its Japanese translation in 1930 in contrast to the common charge of nihilism made in Europe at the time (see GA15 414/FS 88).<sup>9</sup> Intrigued and fascinated with Heidegger’s thought, many of these Kyoto School thinkers were not satisfied with Heidegger’s treatment of the nothing. Yet none of them, to my knowledge, refer to Heidegger’s works beyond 1930, with the exception of the more recent representatives of the Kyoto School, such as Ueda Shizuteru (上田閑照) and Tsujimura Kōichi (辻村公一), both of whom however also happen to be the most sympathetic to Heidegger despite their critique. To give a fair assessment of Heidegger’s thought on the nothing vis-à-vis Nishida’s, we need to examine both of their oeuvres. To simply presuppose Nishida’s charge and say that Nishida’s concept of the nothing is more radical than Heidegger’s concept of being and suggest that Heidegger’s thought still assumes the subject-object dichotomy that gets collapsed in Nishida’s thinking of the nothing<sup>10</sup> does not resolve or explain anything and remains blind to Heidegger’s on-going refinements of his thought post-1930. Let us then examine each of their thoughts on the nothing and see how they stand in relation to each other.

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Footnote 8 continued

Suzuki’s *Essays on Zen Buddhism*, he was repeatedly invited to come to Heidegger’s house to discuss Zen. He recounts how they had many conversations about Zen at Heidegger’s home, during which Heidegger would ask many questions about Zen and would note down what Nishitani had said only to “repeat these ideas in his own lectures but without mentioning Zen” (Ban 1998: 186–90, 200–201; See also Parkes 1992: 394–395, 1996: 100; Davis 2013a: 460, b: 161.n.39). If so, Heidegger’s own retrospective 1943 self-critique of his earlier treatment of being and nothing as still “metaphysical” and as made in terms of beings (GA9 306 and n.a/PM 233 and n.1) along with the above-mentioned similarity of Nishitani’s discussions of emptiness with Heidegger’s post-1930 discussions of the nothing may in fact be due to Nishitani’s influence.

<sup>9</sup> See also Heidegger’s 1963 letter to Kojima Takehiko (Buchner 1989) and Heidegger’s reply to Tsujimura Kōichi’s address (for Heidegger’s birthday) in 1969 in Tsujimura, “Martin Heideggers Denken und die japanische Philosophie” (Buchner 1989: 159–166, 166). In the letter to Kojima he emphasizes that “The nothing [*das Nichts*] talked about there means that which in relation to beings [*das Seiende*; rendering the singular as plural here] is never any kind of being, and ‘is’ thus nothing, but which nevertheless determines beings as such and is therefore called being [*das Sein*]” and states that this was understood immediately in Japan when it was published (Buchner 1989: 225). And in his *Aus einem Gespräch von der Sprache* (“Dialogue on Language”) of 1959 appearing in *Unterwegs zur Sprache* (*On the Way to Language*), Heidegger has the Japanese character remark that “...we in Japan immediately understood the lecture ‘What is Metaphysics?’ when it reached us in translation in 1930... For us emptiness is the highest name for that which you would like to speak of with the word ‘being’...” The suggestion is that this was because of the Japanese sensitivity to East Asian emptiness (US 108–109/OWL 19). He also makes a similar remark in another letter around 1969 (GA15 414/FS 88). This translation of *Was ist Metaphysik?* by Yuasa Seinoshuke, in fact published in 1931 one year after its appearance in Germany in 1930, was the first published translation of any work by Heidegger in Japanese (see Parkes 1992: 388).

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Tani 1998: 251.



## 1 Nishida

We begin with Nishida's discussion of the nothing, which is much more conspicuous than Heidegger's as he made it his key concept throughout most of his oeuvre. As we stated above, for Nishida beings all have form. The term "nothing" (*mu*) thus signifies for Nishida their non-objectifiable and non-substantial *formless* ground, an un/ground for the establishment of all things and their opposites in mutual differentiation. It is the most concrete reality, which we "forget" through our constant objectifications and abstractions.

To understand what Nishida means by the *nothing* (*mu*), we need to keep in mind what he means by *being* (*yū*). The *nothing* for Nishida does not mean utter nothingness or that there is nothing existing. It entails a dynamism that perpetually forms itself while remaining essentially formless and which every being qua formed must presuppose. In his 1926 essay, *Basho* (「場所」; "Place"), Nishida states that "to be" is "to be implaced" (Z3 415). Inheriting traditional Eastern conceptions of being traceable to the Daoist classics, Nishida understands by *being* (*yū*), that which is determined and differentiated from others, a *thing* with properties, having form. But this in turn presupposes a place *wherein* they can be differentiated and related. And the place that implaces all places and all beings in their differentiation and constitution, itself can have no place and is hence not determinable. This leads him to his notion of the nothing as enveloping and making room for the determinate and mutually distinct or differentiated beings. The ground of beings then is an ungrounded place, an open abyss or abyssal open. It is a formless no-thing, providing space for the causal interactions between things with form. Rather than searching for an "absolute being" that would ground all beings and secure their rationale if it were not for the infinite regress the search inevitably occasions,<sup>11</sup> Nishida chooses to plumb the depths beneath being to face that abyss, un/ground, which he designates "absolute nothing" (*zettai mu* 絶対無).

One of Nishida's primary concerns that led him to the nothing was the question: How does the knowing subject cross the gap of otherness in order to know the object? The solution for Nishida lay in their pre-cognitive primal non-distinction. In his maiden work of 1911, *Zen no kenkyū* (『善の研究』; *Inquiry into the Good*), Nishida expresses that sense of an originary non-distinction in terms of pure experience (*junsui keiken* 純粹経験). By this he meant one's most immediate experience before the advent of reflection that would dichotomize an event in terms of subject ("I") and object ("it"). Yet the significance of pure experience for Nishida was neither merely epistemological nor subjective but ontological as well. That is, he took it to be the infinite and unifying force of cosmic reality itself, which he called "God" (*kami* 神). But he also characterized it as "the nothing" (*mu* 無) in its non-differentiation, whereby, "God is completely nothing" (*mattaku mu* 全く無) (Z1 81). Nishida will return to this equation of God and the nothing in his final essay of 1945.

In the series of works following *Zen no kenkyū*, from *Jikaku ni okeru chokkan to hansei* (『自覚に於ける直観と反省』; *Intuition and Reflection in Self-Awareness*)

<sup>11</sup> For the cause as a determinate being with form forces us to inquire after *its* cause and so on *ad infinitum*. On this see Kosaka 2002: 60–61.

of 1917 to *Ishiki no mondai* (『意識の問題』; *The Issue of Consciousness*) of 1920, Nishida inquires after that fundamental reality by plumbing through the interior depths of the self. In the 1917 work he takes what he calls the “absolute free will” (*zettai jiyū ishi* 絶対自由意志) to be at the same time the root of our self-awareness or self-realization (*jikaku* 自覚) but also the creative act of the cosmos (*uchū no sōzō sayō* 宇宙の創造作用), transcending the individual’s will (Z2 45–47, 204). And he tells us that the will as such is the creative source of being precisely at the point where “being is born out of nothing” and where “...the will comes from, and returns to, the creative nothing [*sōzōteki mu* 創造的無]” (Z2 217, 264).

Nishida’s understanding of the nothing that is somehow at the root of self-awareness as well as of beings in general begins to mature with the formulation of his philosophy of place (*basho* 場所) in his *Basho* essay of 1926. His attempt to avoid the psychologistic tendencies of his earlier formulations led him to the notion of *place* in the sense of an ultimate context that embraces and envelops knower and known, preceding their differentiation. Because this ultimate place in its non-distinction is unobjectifiable, escaping thematization, Nishida characterizes it as the transcendental predicate plane (*chōetsuteki jutsugomen* 超越的述語面), “the predicate that cannot be made into a grammatical subject.” His intent was to contrast his own stance to Aristotle’s metaphysics founded upon the notion of substance (*ousia*) or substratum (*hypokeimenon*) that “becomes the grammatical subject but never a predicate.” He also sought to overcome modern epistemology that begins with the assumption of the opposition between knower and known (Z7 216–17), a dualism that reached its apex in Neo-Kantianism. Broadening its sense beyond its grammatical significance, Nishida uses the notion of predicate (*jutsugo* 述語) here as an heuristic device to defocus our attention *away* from being qua object—the grammatical subject—that normally lies on the foreground of our attention. The point is to turn us towards its set of constitutive conditions and ultimately to its ever-implicit horizontal or contextual *background* that environs what becomes the grammatical subject. The ultimate context of contexts however, as a predicate not subsumed under further predicates and transcending all possible grammatical subjects, thus permitting no objectification of itself, would have to be a *nothing* enveloping all things objectifiable, all possible subjects of assertion. The nothing in that absolute sense—absolute nothing (*zettai mu*)—thus is that ultimate contextual place assumed by any predicative determination or ontological differentiation.

The movement away from the object and towards that ultimate contextual place proceeds through a series of implacements with each determining place determined by a broader one (see Z3 347–48, 391, 400, 402–03, 431, 465, 517). Physical things belong to the force field as their place of being (*yū no basho* 有の場所) but become objectified as objects of consciousness in the field of consciousness (*ishiki no ba* 意識の場). That field is relatively nothing (*sōtai mu* 相對無), or an oppositional nothing (*tairitsuteki mu* 對立的無), in relation to those objectified beings it determines.<sup>12</sup> Yet when our focus of attention shifts from the object of consciousness to its (epistemological) subject, consciousness itself becomes

<sup>12</sup> Perhaps akin to how Jean-Paul Sartre conceived consciousness as a nothing in relation to its objects.



objectified to be determined as a grammatical subject of the statement, “I think X.” Hence it is not yet the absolute nothing. In its relation to objects, consciousness itself is determined and contextualized upon a *further* receding background, the concreteness of which is no longer objectifiable. That unobjectifiable and unsayable horizon encompassing the transcendent object *always already* and preceding the subject-object dichotomy is the most concrete reality, from which objects are abstracted out. As an unreifiable holistic situation, presupposed by every utterance, it is the place of absolute nothing or true nothing (*shin no mu* 真の無) (Z3 424, 432, 482).

Nishida qualifies the term “nothing” here with “absolute” (*zettai* 絶対) to convey the sense that it is free of—in the sense of being cut-off from—(*zetsu-* 絶) opposition (*-tai* 対). The point is that there is no longer anything beyond to delimit it, oppose it, determine it, from the outside. It is undelimited, undetermined, and in that sense *no-thing*. It cannot be made into a subject of judgment to state *what* it is or not, or even *that it is* or *is not*; it cannot be predicated as *being* or *not being* (Z3 424, 503). Beings are rather *within* its embracing context. Being has a place in which it is and non-being has a place in which it is not. The ultimate place enveloping them, however, is neither being nor non-being. What Nishida calls “the place of absolute nothing” (*zettai mu no bahso*) or “the place of true nothing” (*shin no mu no basho*) is this ever-implicit horizonless horizon that contextualizes and makes possible every determination of being as well as its negation (see Z3 467, 482). But the series of implacements culminating in this place, in the reverse direction, involves individuation through self-differentiation (see Z3 347–48, 391, 400, 402–03, 431, 465, 517). Its negativity is simultaneously the positivity of its self-determination that inverts its nothingness into being. As a living creativity, it is *self-forming*. It forms itself into those beings it environs. Nishida also characterizes it during this period as the place wherein life meets death, “the place of generation-and-extinction” (*shōmetsu no basho* 生滅の場所) (Z3 423), from out of which one’s self is constituted in self-differentiation. Therein one intuits one’s non-substantiality in the abyss preceding the bifurcation of ideal and real, self and world, out of which one’s self arises to face the world.

In response to Neo-Kantian epistemology and its theory of judgment, Nishida takes judgments to be articulations or amplifications, even abstractions, of a fundamental (self-)intuition (*chokkan* 直観) of that place of absolute nothing, in its self-differentiating self-realization. He characterizes that intuition in terms of the self-seeing of the absolute nothing, explaining its self-formation as a self-mirroring that occurs within the abyssal depths of the individual self. But since what lies there is unobjectifiable, its seeing is a “seeing without seer” (*mirumono nakushite miru* 見るもの無くしてみる) (Z3 255). Nishida explains that “to see the self itself... [means] to see that the self seen disappears, that the self becomes absolutely nothing. Hence we conceive of the true self to be where we have truly forgotten the self itself”<sup>13</sup> (Z4 297). True self-awareness then means simultaneously the self-

<sup>13</sup> This passage reminds one of the 13th century Japanese Sōtō Zen master Dōgen’s (道元) statement from his *Genjōkōan* (「現成公案」) in the *Shōbōgenzō* (『正法眼藏』) that “to study the Buddha-way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self...” And indeed Nishida often quotes that passage from Dōgen.

awareness of the place of absolute nothing *and* our own self-awareness of the nothingness of our selves.<sup>14</sup> In the 1930s, after developing this idea of self-seeing in terms of “the self-aware determination of the nothing” or “determination of the nothing in self-awareness” (*mu no jikakuteki gentei* 無の自覚的限定), Nishida moves to further develop the idea in terms of the self-determination of the world (*sekai no jikogentei* 世界の自己限定). And by the 1940s he will return full circle to the individual self but with the sense of the world’s self-mirroring in each individual as its microcosmic mirror. But the concept of the nothing remains.

In the 1930s, in response to charges of absolute idealism or subjectivism, Nishida develops his concept of place by turning his attention 180 degrees from the standpoint of consciousness that looks within to the standpoint of the world, looking outward. And he unfolds the significance of the nothing beyond the epistemological or judicative framework to conceive it in terms of the contextual whole of a dialectical world (*benshōhōteki sekai* 弁証法的世界), wherein individual persons inter-act with other persons and with the environment. He initiates this move in his 1932 *Mu no jikakuteki gentei* (『無の自覚的限定』; *The Self-Aware Determination of the Nothing* or *The Determination of the Nothing in Self-Awareness*), wherein the absolute nothing enveloping “I and thou” is also the “absolute other” (*zettai ta* 絶対他), negating each of their individuality qua substance. Alterity here is precisely what *permits* their relationships through that negation. The nothing uncovered within the interiority of the self—as *other* to one’s egoity—is nondual with the world’s own abyssal ground embracing “I and thou.” This enables Nishida to follow its unfolding from the side of the socio-historical world (*shakaiteki rekishiteki sekai* 社会的歴史的世界). With this shift in angle, the self-formation of the formless described earlier in terms of self-seeing takes on a conspicuously dialectical and world-historical significance as the world’s self-determining. And since that world of determinations is ultimately founded upon the nothing, “seeing without a seer” now becomes “determination without a determiner” (*genteisurumono naki gentei* 限定するものなき限定) (Z7 8, Z8 9), another way of rendering the “forming of the formless.” The nothing as such is the world’s ultimate context. And the place of absolute nothing in his 1933–34 *Tetsugaku no konpon mondai* (『哲学の根本問題』; *Fundamental Problems of Philosophy*) now opens up as the place of mediation (*baikaiteki basho* 媒介的場所), relating man and world.<sup>15</sup>

As Nishida unfolds the dialectic of the world during this period, one of its important features is the pervasive function of mutual self-negation (*jiko hitei* 自己否定) that permits relationships and interdeterminations in general. In the dialectic between organism (or life: *seimei* 生命) and environment (*kankyō* 環境) in his *Ronri to seimei* (『論理と生命』; “Logic and Life”) of 1936, for example, the environment conditions the individual and conversely the individual acts upon the environment to alter those conditions. Each negates the other for the sake of self-affirmation (Z8 58). Yet such negation of the other cannot happen without *self*-negation. One must also negate one’s self vis-à-vis the conditions delimiting one’s state of being. Co-relative determination is thus mediated by mutual self-negation

<sup>14</sup> See Kosaka 1997: 13.

<sup>15</sup> Tanaka 2000: 54.

(see Z8 19). Mutual self-negation inverts obstructive (other-negating) independence into interdependence and correlativity (Z8 13). Nishida calls such negation of negation, “absolute negation” (*zettai hitei* 絶対否定). This occurs not only on the part of individuals but also on the part of the universal embracing them. Nishida calls the universal in this function, the dialectical universal (*benshōhōteki ippansha* 弁証法的一般者) and equates it with the world’s structure that unfolds through history. Its self-negation is its self-determination as individuals<sup>16</sup> (see Z8 13, 91). The entire dialectic thus proves to be complex: The self-negation of the dialectical universal on the vertical plane simultaneously means mutual self-negation among individuals on the horizontal level. Self-negation mediates the dialectic on all levels, as a dialectic of, within, and upon the nothing as its place, whereby the determination is ultimately without determiner, without a self-affirming substance as ground. The dialectic of the world takes place upon, or in, this non-substantial medium. The nothing as such allows for the autonomy and interactivity of beings, and also destabilizes the world as it is, allowing for novelty and fluidity. In that sense its “absoluteness” renders the world unstable.

Nishida makes the religious connotations of his conception of the nothing more explicit during the 1940s in the years before his passing. This is so especially in his final essay, *Bashoteki ronri to shūkyōteki sekaikan* (「場所的論理と宗教的世界観」; “The Logic of Place and the Religious Worldview”) of 1945, where he uses, more than ever, both Christian and Buddhist derived notions to speak of the absolute nothing in terms of “the absolute one” (*zettaisha* 絶対者) or the creator God (*kami* 神) that relates to the world through kenotic self-negation. In that final essay Nishida, borrowing Suzuki Daisetsu’s logic of *soku-hi* or “is/is not” (*sokuhi no ronri* 即非の論理),<sup>17</sup> claims that God’s self-identity as a true absolute is mediated by absolute negation in a dialectic expressed by the *soku-hi* logic of the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtras* (Z10 333). In being opposed by nothing, God is absolute being (*zettai yū* 絶対有), yet in being undelimited by anything, God is the absolute nothing (*zettai mu* 絶対無) (see Z10 315–16, 335). Undetermined by anything, the absolute’s determination occurs only through *self*-negation. Through self-negation it contains all oppositions within. As an “immanent transcendence” (*naizaiteki chōetsu* 内在的超越), the absolute perpetually negates itself in self-inversion to make-room for co-relative and finite beings. It envelops the world through its *kenotic* clearing of space.

At the same time the outward turn he made in the 1930s now re-returns inward to the interior depths of the self. Here deep within, where one encounters the abyssal nothing in the self-negation of ego-death, one meets God (see Z10 315, 325; Z13 235). Self-negation in this case means the realization of an existential contradiction that culminates in the self’s “vanishing point” (*shōshitsuten* 消失点) (Z10 356) in what Nishida calls the “religious mind” (*shūkyōshin* 宗教心) (Z10 312–13). In thus confronting one’s “eternal death” (*eien no shi* 永遠の死), the true self is

<sup>16</sup> This is Nishida’s development of Hegel’s concrete universal.

<sup>17</sup> The term *soku-hi* connotes the dialectical inseparability and bi-conditionality between contradictories, i.e., affirmation and negation, *is* and *is-not*, via mutual reference and interdependence, founded upon the Mahāyāna notion of emptiness (i.e., the absence of ontological independence; non-substantiality). Suzuki developed his notion in his own reading of the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtras*, especially the *Diamond Sūtra*.

authenticated in its finite existence—what Zen calls “seeing into one’s nature” (*kenshō* 見性) (Z10 352–53). To elucidate this idea Nishida repeatedly quotes Dōgen’s statement from the *Genjōkōan* that “to study the Buddha way is to study the self; to study the self means to forget the self; and to forget the self means to be authenticated by the ten thousand *dharmas*” (Z10 336; see also Z8 512, 514; Z10 326). Nishida finds such “religious” self-realization via self-negation evident also in the True Pure Land Buddhist idea of relying on other-power (*tariki* 他力) (Z8 514). In both Dōgen’s “forgetting oneself” and Shinran’s (親鸞) “relying on other-power,” one discovers true self-identity in self-negation, whereby one faces one’s ultimate *other* by realizing one’s true nature as the self-negation of the absolute, a mirror image of God (see Z10 314–315). Just as the dialectic of individual and world developed through the 1930s was predicated upon mutual self-negation, here the dialectic of religious encounter operates through the mutual self-negation of man and absolute—what he now calls their inverse correspondence (*gyakutaiō* 逆対応). Nishida thus takes religious doctrines, such as God’s kenotic grace through incarnation and death as man in Christianity or Amida’s (阿弥陀) infinite compassion (*jishi* 慈悲) expressed in his vow to save all and man’s corresponding faith expressed in *nembutsu* (念仏) (see Z10 345) in Pure Land Buddhism, to be sectarian expressions acknowledging our existential implacement within, and dependence upon, a self-inverting non-substantiality or a de-substantializing nothing.

Although, when looking at Nishida’s language of negation, readers may notice his terminological borrowings from Hegel’s dialectic, there are differences we ought to keep in mind between Nishida’s and Hegel’s understanding of nothingness. For Hegel, nothingness is relative to being and is but a moment within the dialectic of being and non-being in the process of becoming. For Nishida, the nothing is absolute: As self-forming formlessness it enfolds and unfolds the world in its creative self-negation, an absoluteness embracing but paradoxically predicated upon its own relativization. The absolute nothing here serves to negate all apparent substances, including the knowing subject itself. The subject or spirit then cannot be absolute; there is always its implacement in the pre-given un-objectifiable place of concrete immediacy. Any rationalist attempt to reduce concrete awareness to a self-conceiving concept in Hegelian fashion is thus precluded. What Nishida expresses in the thought of the nothing is rather a self-learning that is a “self-forgetting” in the fashion of the Zen thinker Dōgen.

Nishida is also careful to distinguish his philosophy of the nothing from ontological nihilism. According to Nishida the nothing’s self-negation serves to affirm the very beings it embraces as their *place*; it makes-room for their co-being (see Z10 315–16). Nishida’s absolute nothing encompasses both negativity and positivity, negation and affirmation, non-being and being, destruction and creation, while being irreducible to either pole. It designates the non-substantiality of concrete reality as an un/grounding abyss that releases, without securing, grounds and principles. With this concept of an unreifiable, unobjectifiable concrete source that is always “beyond” the horizon, wherein being and non-being could be meaningfully distinguished, Nishida attempts to tread a middle path that avoids the pitfalls of substantialism on the one hand and ontological nihilism on the other. This

distinction from Hegel's conception as well as nihilistic notions of the nothing, is something that we also find in Heidegger, to whom we now turn.

## 2 Heidegger

If Nishida is known to be the thinker of the nothing, Heidegger is known as the thinker of *being* par excellence. *Being* (*Sein*) has been Heidegger's "obsession, his first and final word."<sup>18</sup> And yet in relation to this, a major theme we see time and again in his various works is the nothing (*das Nichts*), a theme that certainly distinguishes Heidegger from the mainstream of the Western tradition. As is known, Heidegger's main concern from the start of his project of fundamental ontology during the late 1920s was the "meaning" or "sense" (*Sinn*) of being (SZ 1). But this inquiry into being at the same time proves to be an inquiry into the nothing. Heidegger provides an exposition of this issue of the nothing especially in his 1929 lecture *Was ist Metaphysik?* ("What is Metaphysics?").<sup>19</sup> The nothing is implicit in other works as well and is at the core of his concept of the ontological difference (between being and beings), such as when he states in *Sein und Zeit* (*Being and Time*) that "the being of beings [*Das Sein des Seienden*] 'is' not itself a being [*ein Seiendes*]." (SZ 6) or that being "cannot be conceived as a being" (SZ 4). *What a being is* depends on certain conditions in the background that constitute its sense or meaning, that is, its *being*. Hence *being* is not itself a being, not a *thing*. The nothing thus belongs to the very *being* of what-is (GA9 120/PM 94).<sup>20</sup>

The mode of human existence is always in reference to a contextual horizon. Heidegger during the period of his fundamental ontology (late 1920s as exemplified in *Sein und Zeit*) designates human existence as a being-(t)here (*Dasein*). The "(t) here" (*Da*) of "being-(t)here" (*Da-sein*) names this site or scene wherein or whereby we find ourselves *always already* as an opening for the unfolding of being. We encounter beings only against such a background of meaning—the "manifestness of beings as such as a whole" (*Offenbarkeit des Seienden als solchen im Ganzen*) or the world in its significance (*Bedeutsamkeit*) structured by meaning-giving references (SZ 87; GA9 110/PM 87; GA29/30 412/FCM 284).<sup>21</sup> An implicit awareness of this *whole* (*Ganz*) is the basis of our ability to encounter beings even if it is not the center of our focus, as our focus is usually on those beings encountered on the basis of that whole. The opening of the whole in that sense "withdraws before beings in

<sup>18</sup> Schürmann 1990: 3.

<sup>19</sup> This is the text whose discussion of the nothing Heidegger claimed was understood in the Far East after the appearance of its Japanese translation in 1930 as a word for being, while it was misunderstood in Europe as nihilism. See note 9.

<sup>20</sup> On this basis one might still question whether Nishitani's evaluation of Heidegger's sense of the nothing was valid when Heidegger conceived it in relation to the ontological difference between being and beings, whereby the nothing cannot be defined as mere non-being in contrast to being. Heidegger states that the nothing is not the opposite of beings but belongs to the being of beings (GA9 120/PM 94).

<sup>21</sup> Heidegger gives the example of the classroom as the setting wherein a blackboard makes sense and is relevant. Any assertion about the blackboard presumes prior understanding of this context (GA29/30 501/FCM 345).

order that they may reveal themselves...” (GA9 188–189/PM 144). With the ontological difference in mind, Heidegger thus states, “The world is nothing.... The world: a nothing [*Nichts*], not a being [*kein Seiendes*]—and yet something; nothing that is [*nichts Seiendes*]—but being [*Sein*]” (GA26 252/MFL 195). In our situatedness, we find that we are “thrown” into that “nothing of the world” (*Nichts der Welt*) that brings beings into being.

A major focus of *Sein und Zeit*, as is known, is our relation to death. The *not* as the “transcendental” condition of our being-in-the-world is explicated in *Sein und Zeit* in terms of the mortal condition of our existence. To be “thrown into the nothing of the world” is precisely to be “thrown into death” (SZ 308). Death is “the possibility of the impossibility of one’s existence” (SZ 266), the possibility that the very possibilities making up the world could not be at all. This possibility is revealed via the fundamental mood of *Angst*, translated as anxiety or dread, thematized in both *Sein und Zeit* and *Was ist Metaphysik?* It is not of this or that thing that we are anxious; what we dread is indefinite, indeterminate, undefinable (GA9 111/PM 88), an indefiniteness that signifies the essential impossibility of defining the “what.” As beings for whom being is an issue, when we are reminded of the *radical*—in the sense of originary—temporal finitude of our own presence, the familiar inconspicuousness of the everyday world, in light of which things have meaning, is disturbed and the meaningfulness of things thus falls away (SZ 186–187). Without a contextualizing whole, beings—including ourselves—are disclosed in their strangeness as radically *other* in contrast to the nothing from which they stand out, in the fact that they *are* rather than not (GA9 113–114/PM 90). Anxiety is fundamental in thus bringing us face-to-face with the nothing—the disclosure of the ungroundedness of the opening of meaning and being—even if it occurs only rarely and for a few moments (*nur für Augenblicke*) and despite our will (GA9 111/PM 88). It is as if the nothing is at one with beings as a whole.

For this nothing that anxiety reveals is *at the same time* what opens the world as world. It constitutes the space wherein beings and meanings are possible: “Only on the basis of the originary manifestness of the nothing can being-(t)here of man approach beings and deal with them. Insofar as being-(t)here in its essence comports itself towards beings..., such being-(t)here always already emerges out of the manifest nothing” (GA9 114–115/PM 91). Only by being held-out into the nothing (*sich in das Nichts hineinhält*) can the human being-(t)here be open and relate to beings (GA9 121/PM 96). Being-(t)here is thus saturated with its relation to the nothing, which is always revealed even if obscurely, and even if anxiety is required to make that revelation explicit (GA 9 117/PM 93). The nothing then is the ulterior aspect of being that constitutes the ultimate horizon for the emergence of beings in their meaningfulness. This means that it cannot be objectified, posited as *this* or *that*, to answer the question, “*What* is nothing?” (GA9 107/PM 85). The contextualizing background that makes beings meaningfully manifest eludes meaningful focus; or put it another way, the meaning of meaning is meaningless, the being of beings is the nothing. Yet Heidegger was not completely satisfied with his pre-1930s treatment of this *other* to beings. In a marginal note added to his 1943 postscript to *Was ist Metaphysik?* he states that the “absolute other” (*schlechthin Andere*) is “still stated there metaphysically in terms of beings” (GA9 306 and n.a/PM 233 and n.1).



If Heidegger's focus pre-1930 was on the sense or meaning of being as the very horizon wherein beings can meaningfully come to presence, after 1930—shifting his approach from *Daseinsanalytik* to *Seinsdenken*—he inquires further into the very *event* that establishes that horizon to clear the space for the unconcealment of beings. So how would the nothing figure in Heidegger post-1930? The nothing is not totally absent. For in *Einführung in die Metaphysik (Introduction to Metaphysics)* of 1935 Heidegger says that his goal is to “go in the *inquiry* into being expressly to the border of the nothing and to incorporate it [nothing] into the question of being” (GA40 212/IM 217–218).

As Heidegger moves away from the project of fundamental ontology, he tries hard to eliminate and avoid any possible remainder of the metaphysical tendency to conceive being in light of beings, as universal beingness (*Seiendheit*), the “most general” determination of being (GA65 278/CP 219, §156). And in terms of the nothing, this misconception would be to take it as non-being, the negation of beings. Thus in *Beiträge zur Philosophie (Contributions to Philosophy)* of 1936–38, for example, Heidegger attempts to think being differently, using its archaic spelling as *Seyn* (*beyng*) and questioning it as *Ereignis* (event, enowning). He explains: “...beyng can no longer be thought from beings, it must be thought from out of itself” (GA65 7/CP 8, §2). And thought from itself, beyng is the “event” (*Ereignis*) of beings, their transitory configuration and local happening, marked by irreducible singularity and uniqueness (*einmalig*) which serves to inaugurate a horizon for the emergence of meaning. (GA65/CP §§4–5).

This happening itself is an ungrounded or abyssal (*abgründig*) occurrence that as such remains remote from all beings (GA65 477/CP 375, §268). In *Einführung in die Metaphysik* Heidegger asks whether being as ground is the absence of ground (*Ab-grund*) or a non-ground (*Un-grund*) (GA40 5/IM 3). As “...being remains untraceable...,” it “...is almost like the nothing, or in the end *exactly* [*ganz*] like it” (GA40 39/IM 38). But the unground is also a clearing for beings. In this denial of ground, “...originary emptiness [*ursprüngliche Leere*] opens up, and the originary clearing [*ursprüngliche Lichtung*] occurs... the first clearing of the open [*Lichtung des Offenen*] as ‘emptiness’ [*Leere*]” (GA65 380/CP 300, §242), an opening wherein beings—man, gods, earth, world—emerge in their mutual strife, be-fitted, en-owned, into their own (*er-eignet*) and to each other, gathered in their mutual differentiation. In *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes* (“Origin of the Work of Art”) of the same period (1936) as well, this clearing that “encircles all beings” “...grants us access to beings that we are not and admittance to the being that we are” and thus is “more ‘being’ than beings [*seiender als das Seiende*]...”, yet “is like the nothing we scarcely know” (GA5 40/OBT 30). The clearing is the *emptiness of the nothing* that permits the *fullness of being*. The temporal character of the event then as this clearing of contours is also a spacing of the field, whereby *aletheia* appears as the “free space of the clearing” (*Freien der Lichtung*) (SD 74/TB 67). Ceaselessly bringing everything into definite accord, releasing them, however, beyng remains nothing (GA65 246–247/CP 193–194, §129; GA65 286–287/CP 225, §164). It is the *no-thing* which enables every-thing by making-way for them. But what is underscored now is that in virtue of its irrepeatable singularity, beyng as *event* can never be reproduced or represented, hence cannot be grasped in terms of a

generalizing abstraction of beings (see GA65 206/CP 161–162, §107). Instead it is permeated in its essential occurrence by an all-pervading not (*Nichthaft*) (GA65 267/CP 210, §146). And with this understanding, the ontological difference—the *not*—becomes the differentiation of beings *from*—and *in*—this very event of their presencing, the dynamism of which, in its withdrawal from presence, Heidegger also refers to as the self-nihilation (*Nichtung, Nichten*) of the nothing (see GA9 114/PM 90, GA15 361/FS 57).

In the later years beyond the 1930s and up until his passing, Heidegger continues his inquiry that uncovers the intimacy between being and nothing. If “presencing” (*Anwesen*) in 1951 is another name for “being” (GA7 234/EGT 7), Heidegger adds in *Zur Seinsfrage* (“On the Question of Being”) of 1955 that “the nothing belongs... as absencing [*ab-wesend*] to presencing [*Anwesen*]” (GA9 413/PM 312). In his 1959 pseudo-dialogue between a Japanese and an Inquirer Heidegger has the Inquirer speak of the nothing as “...that essencing [*jenes Wesende*] that we try to think as the other [*Andere*] to everything presencing [*Anwesenden*] and absencing [*Abwesenden*].” (US 108/OWL 19). Their intimacy is such that being is both presencing and absencing, and so is the nothing.<sup>22</sup> Thus: “Being and the nothing are not given beside one another. Each uses itself on behalf of the other in a kinship whose essential fullness we have hardly begun to ponder” (GA9 419/PM 317). This leads Heidegger to suggest that in that fullness of their kinship, “the nothing... is equi-originarily the same as being” (GA9 421/PM 318). And while “being ‘is’ no more than nothing ‘is’... *there is a giving of* [or: *it gives*] [*Es gibt*] both” (GA9 419/PM 317).

In a 1949 note added to *Was ist Metaphysik?*, Heidegger had written: “nothing and being the same” (“Nichts und Sein das Selbe”) (GA9 115/PM 91). But now in the 1950s his thought that being that is absolutely no being “can present itself only as nothing” (GA9 418/PM 316) leads him further to remark that with respect to this nothing, being can be thoughtfully formulated only as “being” with a cross over it (GA9 385, 410ff/PM 291, 310ff). In the Le Thor Seminar of 1969, before stating explicitly that the “nothing is the characteristic [*Kennzeichnung*] of being” (GA15 363/FS 58), he states, “it is better to give up the ‘is’ here” and “simply write: being: nothing [*Sein: Nichts*]” (GA15 347/FS 48). He repeats the formula some pages later: “being: nothing: same [*Sein: Nichts: Selbes*]” (GA15 363/FS 58).

We might conclude then that for Heidegger in his later years, being and nothing are inseparable and “the same” in their givenness, whereby beings are (*es gibt*, “there is...”), and yet *other* than beings. As *no-thing*, it has no opposite that can stand-opposed to it so that it surpasses not only beings but their negation. The being/non-being—affirmation/negation, yes/no—distinction would pertain only properly to beings. Its alterity is such that Heidegger remained unsure about the very term “being” (*Sein*), causing him to experiment during the 1930s with the eighteenth century spelling *Seyn*, during the 1950s by writing *Sein* with a cross over it, and

<sup>22</sup> The Japanese then replies that emptiness is the loftiest name for what the Inquirer means by “being” (US 109/OWL 19). The reference here is presumably to the East Asian Mahāyāna concept of emptiness. Interestingly there is also the mentioning in this dialogue of the open as the empty sky, a reference to that East Asian notion of emptiness (whose graph 空 can also signify “sky” as well as “space”). This East Asian idea, needless to say, is one major source for Nishida’s conception of the place of nothing.

during the 1960s by doing away with the copula in the identification of being and nothing. In these repeated re-formulations of his thought concerning being and nothing, we see Heidegger struggling with language, specifically Indo-European grammar and its tendency that drives one to think in terms of beings, which the matter (*Sache*) of Heidegger's thought is *not*. Although *being* has indeed been Heidegger's "obsession, his first and final word," Heidegger towards the end of his life, in recognizing the limits of language, could no longer bear to hear the word "being."<sup>23</sup>

In Heidegger's discussions of the nothing, the same questions that arose concerning Nishida's discussions can be raised, that is, its relationship to Hegel and to nihilism. Throughout his works Heidegger repeatedly distinguishes his bringing-together of being and nothing from Hegel's position that "pure being and pure nothing are... the same" ("Das reine Sein und das reine Nichts ist... dasselbe").<sup>24</sup> For Hegel, they are the same in their indeterminateness and immediacy (GA9 120/PM 94–95). Being/nothing is the indeterminate immediate for consciousness and as such is the moment of the absolute's alienation and hence the starting point for consciousness as mediation and determination (GA15 349/FS 49). Heidegger's point rather is that *only* beings *exist* as something that *is*. Being itself does not exist, *is not*. And the very *being* of beings is their finitude in being manifest in the backdrop of the nothing (GA9 120/PM 94–95). From the standpoint of beings, the nothing is their *not*, their *difference* from their *other*. Heidegger thus attempts to think the identity of being and nothing in departure from the *ontological difference* rather than as an ontological affirmation of the absolute (GA15 360–361/FS 56–57). The word/s "being: nothing: the same" sounds from where the horizon of the difference becomes visible, as the *place* (*Ort*) for the grounding of metaphysics (GA 15 361/FS 57). The difference as the nihilating nothing (*nichtendes Nichts*) is a turning away from beings to clear a distance *wherein* beings can become apparent: "the nothing in its nihilation [*Nichten*] refers to being in its manifestation" (GA15 361/FS 57).

Throughout his oeuvre, Heidegger is also at pains to distinguish his position from nihilism since he takes as his task, the "true overcoming [*Überwindung*] of nihilism" (GA40 212/IM 218; also GA9 422/PM 319). Western metaphysics, throughout its history from Christianity to Hegel and up to contemporary nihilism, according to Heidegger, has taken the standpoint of beings to misconceive the nothing as the opposite—negation—of being (GA9 119–120/PM 94). But Heidegger repeatedly makes the point that the nothing and its nihilation (*Nichtung*, *nichten*) cannot be reduced to negation (*Verneinung*) since, just as it makes beings possible in their disclosure as what they are, it also makes possible their negation as what they are not; the nothing is the very source of, more originary than, negation (GA9 108, 114, 117/PM 86, 90, 92; also GA65 267–8/CP 210–211, §146). He distinguishes it, using different terms, from "empty nothing" (*leere Nichts*) (ID 104 g/39e), "nugatory/negative nothing" (*das nichtige Nichts*) (GA9 419/PM 317), defect, privation, or lack (*Mangel*, *Fehlen*) (GA65 356/CP 281, §228; GA15 363/FS 58), or *nihil negativum* (GA9 123/PM 97). All of the above, including negation (together with assertion and

<sup>23</sup> Schürmann 1990: 3.

<sup>24</sup> Hegel 1963: 67, 1969: 82.

any kind of logical articulation), signify an ontic relation among beings and derives from our encounter with beings within a purposive semantic framework or “understanding of being” (see SZ 157f; GA27 320–321), which is possible only on the basis of the nothing of the openness of being-(t)here. To say that the nothing is the negation of everything—the totality of all beings—thus places it in the category of *what-is-not*, the non-being (*Nicht-Seiende*), assuming the negatable (GA9 107–108, 116–117/PM85, 92). In *Beiträge* Heidegger thus clarifies that the nothing (*Nichts*) is “higher” than or beyond all “positivity” and “negativity” of beings taken together (GA65 266/CP 210, §145).<sup>25</sup> His inquiry into the nothing is thus an inquiry into the *origin* of the *yes* and the *no*, affirmation and negation, including their difference and opposition (GA65 247/CP 194, §129). Such opposites belong together in their *difference* in the “house of being” and their supposed alternation (*Wechselspiel*), the “concealed middle” (*verborgene Mitte*) between them, is their very being (GA15 277/FS 4). Heidegger’s stance here seems to resonate with Nishida’s in that true nothing for both is not reducible to mere negation or ontic being. It falls under neither of the either/or of beings and their lack. In that regard he is in agreement with the general Kyoto School critique of Western ontology.

A significant difference in focus for Heidegger, however, is that this has to do with the being of beings. Heidegger explains in his 1949 preface to *Vom Wesen des Grundes* (“On the Essence of Ground”): “The nothing is the not of beings and thus being as it is experienced from beings” (GA9 123/PM 97). Being is not a being, does not appear as some *thing*, for it is neither conceived nor represented. As such it is the nothing that, according to *Was ist Metaphysik?*, is revealed in anxiety as *different* from beings when beings as a whole no longer count. Yet almost ten years later in *Die Zeit des Weltbildes* (“The Age of the World Picture”) of 1938, “the nothing... is being itself whose truth will be given over to man once he has overcome himself as subject and, that is, when he no longer represents beings as objects” (GA5 113/OBT 85).

### 3 Comparison

Both Nishida and Heidegger sought to escape the traps of thing-centered thinking and the subject-object framework, which Heidegger associated with metaphysics and which Nishida called object-logic. If Nishida rejected a static and negative view

<sup>25</sup> To state that Heidegger’s ontology is “defined by the opposition of being and nothing” as Klooger does (2013: 2) is thus misleading. While conceding that the “negativity of nothing” in Heidegger has a positive function (2013: 3), Klooger goes on to point out that the designation “nothing” nonetheless evokes all the connotations implied by the concept of the nothing (2013: 12). Heidegger himself was obviously aware of this issue as he struggles with different ways of conveying both “being” and “nothing,” and certainly his interest in language, especially as it comes up in his later works, attests to this. Klooger charges Heidegger’s philosophy for setting up a simplistic dichotomy between the determinacy of beings and the indeterminacy of the nothing with no room inbetween for a partial determination of the nothing or the indeterminacy of beings (2013: 12). In arguing thus, Klooger misunderstands the entire theme in Heidegger of the *being* of beings, the ontological difference and *aletheia*, the un/concealment of beings involving the inseparable pairing of concealment and unconcealment. Klooger’s reading misses the subtlety in Heidegger’s thought and ignores the entire context of Heidegger’s project extending beyond *Was ist Metaphysik?*.

of the nothing as the mere negation of being, Heidegger disparaged the Western tradition for misconceiving being as mere continuous entitative presence. In his inquiry into being *as such*, as non-ontic, not a being, nothing, Heidegger, beginning with his conceptualization of the ontological difference, is led to cast it in its archaic spelling of *Sein* in the 1930s, to cross the word out, “being,” in the 1950s, or to do away with the copula in his formula, “being: nothing: same,” in the 1960s. This attests to his uncertainty concerning the very word, “being” (*Sein*), and his struggle in trying to find the appropriate mode of expressing the matter of his thought. Nishida on the other hand reserved the term “being” (*yū*), for the most part, to a sense that Heidegger might call “ontic,” that is, beings in their determinateness and correlativity that can be objectified. In his attempt to defocus attention away from the object as such, Nishida thus looks to the nothing (*mu*) as more fundamental than being. Heidegger’s point, on the other hand, premised on his earlier ontological distinction between the ontological and the ontic, or his later emphasis that being cannot be reduced even to a general beingness among beings, is that being *is not* a being and from the perspective of beings is nothing (*Nichts*). Both look to what is *not*, yet *prior to*, the *thing*. Several commentators have thus noticed their overlapping or crossing of concerns with the nothing.<sup>26</sup>

For both thinkers, the nothing is an originary un/ground of beings, an opening from which subject and object are derived. For example, Heidegger’s clearing (*Lichtung*) that is “like the nothing we scarcely know” (GA5 40/OBT 30) is that “into which all beings stand... and from which they withdraw” (GA5 39/OBT 29), while Nishida’s place of nothing (*mu no basho*) is where the generation and extinction of all occurs (Z3 423).<sup>27</sup> Indeed, taking subject and object as beings, the nothing would be that open space wherein they can come and go and interrelate. Both thinkers understand the nothing to be irreducible to, while making possible, beings and their opposite, yes and no, affirmation and negation. Heidegger’s words in response to the charge of nihilism, when he characterizes the nothing as “*more being*” than any being and “*higher*” than all “positivity” and “negativity” of beings taken together (GA5 40/OBT 30; GA65 266/CP 210, §145),<sup>28</sup> indeed resonate with Nishida’s own distinction of the *true* nothing from both being and non-being as enveloping both, as well as with the general Kyoto School critique of nihilism and substantialism. I have called Nishida’s scheme that avoids reduction to *on* or *mēon*,

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, Maraldo 2003: 32–33; Ōhashi 1994: 240; Parkes 1996: 99; Takeuchi 1991a: 76 and 147.n.18; Takeuchi 1991b: 198–201; and Weinmayr 2005: 243.

<sup>27</sup> Parkes 1996: 99. Parkes even claims that Heidegger’s *Lichtung* may be seen as the German version of Nishida’s *mu no basho*. See Parkes 1992: 393–394. See also Weinmayr’s juxtaposition of two quotations showing this similarity (in Weinmayr 2005: 234): “We actually think that a being becomes accessible when an ‘I’ as subject represents an object. As if an open region within whose openness something is made accessible as object *for* a subject... did not already have to reign here as well!” (N2 138/N IV 93). And: “In order for consciousness and the object to be able to relate to one another, there must be something that includes both within itself. There must be something like a place in which they can relate to one another” (Z3 417).

<sup>28</sup> Indeed, Heidegger’s characterization of the nothing here is in correspondence with his general characterizations of being as both indeterminate and full, both empty and abundant (see N2 250–251/N IV 192).

*anontology*.<sup>29</sup> Would the same designation perhaps be appropriate for Heidegger, as he struggles with the very word “being” (*Sein*) and if he was on his way to abandoning the word though not the content of his thinking? Both struggle to think what lies *behind* the foreground of what we attend to and relate to as some *thing*. Nishida initially discovered that nothing within the interior depths of self-awareness below the field of consciousness but then moves to broaden its significance externally to the world. Heidegger initially focused on our temporal finitude that shapes the meaning of existence as revelatory of the nothing but then extends his focus to the openness of the truth of being and its clearing as event. The nothing for both grounds meaning and being while itself eluding our attempts to ground.

For Heidegger, it is the ontological difference of being, or the *not* of *beyng*, that allows for—releases—beings into their *own*, as *what* they are. The dynamism of this *not*, expressed in terms of the nihilation of the nothing opens the clearing wherein beings emerge. But there is a similarity here with Nishida’s understanding of the nothing as *absolute*, that is, un-opposed, un-determined by anything. For it is precisely in its non-objectifiability, indeterminacy as a being that allows for beings, things, objects, to be determined co-relatively within its space. Nishida thus spoke of a “determination without determiner” (*genteisurumononaki gentei* 限定するものなき限定) (See Z6 15, 20–21, 116, 149, 162, 307–08; Z7 12, 205; Z8 408). And it is the self-negation of the absolute nothing that expresses this dynamism. In a similar vein Heidegger in *Aus einem Gespräch von der Sprache* (“A Dialogue on Language”) refers to an “undetermined determiner” (*jenes unbestimmte Bestimmende*) (US 112, also see 100; OWL 22, also see 13). Both thinkers notice what is fundamental to beings, the sayable, as the unsayable that precisely in its unsayability permits the arising of the sayable, i.e., beings.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup> I have used this to designate Nishida’s sense of the nothing as what encompasses, without being reduced to, being and its opposite, non-being, i.e., the ontological and the meontological, *on* (ὄν) and *mēon* (μηδόν).

<sup>30</sup> This common concern between the two naturally leads to the question of common sources that they may have drawn from for their thematization of the nothing. I will refrain from discussing this topic since this would require another full-length investigation. I have already discussed the sources for Nishida’s concept of the nothing in Krummel 2014b. And for possible Eastern sources for Heidegger’s conception of the nothing, and which may perhaps provide some common ground with Nishida, see May 1996, including Parkes 1996, especially 79–80.

Especially interesting is the possibility of a common source of influence between Nishida’s notion of the place of nothing and Heidegger’s notion of the clearing that is a nothing. *Lichtung* in German customarily means clearing in the woods and Heidegger himself defines it as “...to make something light, free and open; for example, to make a place in the woods free of trees. The open space that results is the clearing” (SD 72). But the Chinese ideograph for nothing (*wu* 無) that Nishida uses *also* originally referred to an open clearing made in what was previously covered by thick vegetation (see May 1996: 32). May here cites Morohashi Tetsuji, *Dai kan-wa jiten* [Chinese–Japanese dictionary], 13 vols. (Tokyo, 1986), entry no. 19113, also 49188, 15783, 15514. Although it is unlikely that Heidegger could have drawn from this source. May (1996: 33–34) speculates that Heidegger may have been familiar with some of the German sources discussing the Chinese concept of *wu* and that he could have assimilated the East Asian notion of the nothing (From Daoism and Zen) through his acquaintance with East Asian thought and through conversations with his East Asian interlocutors. And of course in addition to Eastern sources, there were certainly Western sources for the notion of the nothing both thinkers were familiar with, for example, Plato’s notion of *chōra*, the Christian mystical tradition (Pseudo-Dionysius, Meister Eckhart, Nicholas of Cusa, Jakob Böhme), and German Idealism (Hegel, Schelling). And certainly the Neo-Kantian understanding of the realm of validity qua intelligibility in distinction from being and especially



At the same time, however, we cannot ignore important differences between the two thinkers as well as criticisms that have been or can be projected from the standpoint of each thinker to the other. To critique Heidegger for his alleged inability to see what is beyond being, however, does not do justice to his musings. It ignores both what he says in his discussions of the nothing and the subtlety in what he means by “being.” If Nishida does not mean by “absolute nothing,” a literal nothing, neither does Heidegger mean by “being,” a substance or anything ontic. Heidegger certainly does not mean by “being,” something demarcated in its distinction from its opposite, “non-being.” In this regard one often notices a misunderstanding not only in the East, but in the West as well—e.g., his alleged “metaphysics of presence”—concerning the “ontological difference.” In turn, when comparing Heidegger and Nishida, one must remember that Nishida understands being differently by reducing it to the determinate, e.g., when he speaks of being as “possessing form.” But from the Heideggerian standpoint Nishida’s reduction of being misses a certain sense of being that is *other* than the ontic. And if Heidegger has been attacked by critics of both East and West for his notion of “being” (in its alleged opposition to beings), Nishida in turn has been critiqued, by his contemporaries and former students in Japan, for his “absolutization” of the nothing (in its opposition to the relative). Indeed, from a Heideggerian perspective, Nishida’s locution and terminology does seem metaphysical. Yet both “being” in Heidegger and the “absolute” in Nishida, in their intimation or indexing of “the nothing,” ought to deconstruct or destabilize any alleged “metaphysics of presence” or metaphysical hierarchy. The absolute for Nishida, as nothing, negates itself to give rise to the relative. Being for Heidegger is the event or clearing of the presencing and absencing of beings. Heidegger, as we saw, assimilates a certain understanding of the nothing (*Nichts*) to this understanding of being. And the absolute in Nishida is precisely the nothing (*mu*), wherein beings arise and perish. Neither term designates some transcendent factor or metaphysical principle standing apart from the concrete world.

Both thinkers associate death and mortality to the nothing. For Heidegger during his period of fundamental ontology, we face the nothing when we realize our being-

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Footnote 30 continued

Emil Lask’s notion of domain predicates (*Gebietspredikate*) or domain categories (*Gebietskategorien*) was also significant to both thinkers.

As I already alluded to above there is also the interesting issue of a possible influence or fertilization of ideas from one to the other. Parkes suggests that Heidegger may have been influenced by Nishida’s concept of the nothing via Tanabe Hajime, who had been following Nishida’s thought for ten years and who came to Freiburg to study during the early 1920s (see Parkes 1992: 382–383, 1996: 89–90, 92, 97–99). During this time Tanabe was invited to give a presentation on Nishida’s philosophy to a group of German philosophers, including Heidegger, at Husserl’s home. On this see James Heisig’s forward to Tanabe 1986: xi. By 1927, Heidegger had engaged in philosophical dialogue with Tanabe as well as Miki Kiyoshi and Kuki Shūzō, all major philosophers of the first half of the twentieth century Japan, and all of whom were familiar with Nishida, especially Miki who had studied under Nishida. Heidegger would thus have had ample opportunity to learn about Nishida’s concept of the nothing. On the other hand Heidegger seemed to have regarded Nishida as too metaphysical based on the little he knew, as we also discussed above. And there is also the case of Nishitani during the 1930s as discussed above. However I choose not to delve too deeply on this issue, which would take us beyond the purpose of this essay to examine and compare their understanding of the nothing.

towards-death. For Nishida the nothing is the place of generation and extinction and, especially in *Basho teki ronri to shūkyōteki sekaikan* (“The Logic of Place and the Religious Worldview”) it is where the finite self faces its other in eternal death. But for Heidegger, in *Sein und Zeit* and *Was ist Metaphysik?*, this is realized through the mood of anxiety (*Angst*) that is absent in Nishida. By contrast the nothing that Nishida and his Kyoto School followers look to, under the inspiration of Zen, is the very standpoint one is to realize in a kind of intuitive self-awakening (*jikaku* 自覚). There would seem to be nothing more contrasting than the mood of anxiety and the calm of meditative awakening. If one accepts Nishida’s dichotomization of West and East in terms of the “culture of being” versus the “culture of nothing,” one might argue that anxiety in the face of the nothing is an inevitable result of the West’s preoccupation with being since the experience of the nothing destroys the ontological assumptions of traditional Western metaphysics. Agniestika Kozyra puts the difference in terms of the contrast between “coming home and sitting quietly” on the side of Nishida and “experiencing an earthquake” on the side of Heidegger.<sup>31</sup> Kozyra reminds us, however, that there is in fact an Eastern concept that approximates Heidegger’s “anxiety,” which would be “the great doubt” (*taigi* 大疑), seen for example in the Zen of Hakuin (白隱), signifying the loss of every foundation in the course of Zen cultivation.<sup>32</sup> It is not the endpoint, however, but a gateway to fuller awakening. But one might also argue that neither is anxiety the endpoint in Heidegger, who in his later works comes to speak, instead, of the comportment of *letting (lassen)* that co-responds to the *letting or releasement (Gelassenheit)* of beings. But already in *Was ist Metaphysik?* Heidegger suggests that the proper response to anxiety’s disclosure of the nothing would be to let oneself go, release oneself into the nothing (*Sichloslassen in das Nichts*) (GA9 122/PM 96).<sup>33</sup> There is a change in tone from the revelation of something “threatening” (*Drohende*) (SZ 186) and “uncanny” (*unheimlich*) and of the sense of not being at

<sup>31</sup> Kozyra 2006: 136–137. Tsujimura Kōichi who has been interested in resonances between Heidegger and Zen has nonetheless been critical of this aspect of *Angst* that emerges in Heidegger in contrast to Zen and also notices a difference between the later Heidegger and Zen as one between “thinking” (*shii* 思惟) and the “non-thinking” source of thought (*shii no kongen* 思惟の根源) (Tsujimura 1971: 44–45; 2011: 414–415). Tsujimura sees Heidegger as still confined to the realm of thought without taking a leap into the unthought origin of thought (*shisaku de wa nai shisaku no kongen* 思索ではない思索の根源) (Tsujimura 1989a: 79–86, 1991: 203) even if it responds to the call of that which is beyond thought, in Schelling’s terms, the “unprethinkable” (*Unvordenkliche*) (GA77, 146, 231; Tsujimura 1971: 44–48; 2011: 413–418; also see his 1991: 359–360). Tsujimura concludes that Heidegger and Zen are not the same but also suggests that they are complementary (Tsujimura 1971: 47–48, 53, 1989b, 165, 2008: 355, 2011: 417–418, 425). On the above analysis of Tsujimura, also see Davis 2013b. And correspondingly Bret Davis points to the difference between Heidegger’s meditative or commemorative thinking (*Besinnung, Andenken*) and Zen meditation’s more radical non-dualistic descent into the nothing by way of “non-thinking” (*hi-shiryō* 非思量) (see Davis 2013a: 466–468). There certainly is a difference between Zen and Heidegger here but we ought not to stray too far from our main purpose of comparing Heidegger and Nishida as both philosophers and their notions of the nothing. And at the same time we might still direct the same observations Tsujimura makes between Heidegger and Zen to the case of Nishida insofar as he is a philosopher who thinks and writes, making use of concepts and words, even if he also was a Zen practitioner for some time. This certainly is not to ignore, or casually dismiss, the profound influence Zen practice and doctrines have had on Nishida’s thinking.

<sup>32</sup> Kozyra 2006: 136–137.

<sup>33</sup> See Ueda 1992: 58–59.

home (*Nicht-zuhause-sein*) (SZ 188) in *Sein und Zeit* to the pervasion of a “peculiar calm” (*eigentümliche Ruhe*) and a “entranced calm” (*gebannte Ruhe*) in *Was ist Metaphysik?* (GA9 111, 114/PM 88, 90). Then in the 1943 Postscript, he goes on to say that close to anxiety dwells awe (*Scheu*) that clears the locality (*Ortschaft*) wherein the human essence is at home (GA9 307/PM 234). And while the confrontation with the nothing in the earlier work is shattering, as Graham Parkes remarks, a certain equanimity is expressed in the unity of the nothing with beings as a whole in the later work.<sup>34</sup> For the nothing coincides with the original openness of beings as such (*die ursprüngliche Offenheit des Seienden als eines solchen*) (GA9 114/PM 90). Contemporary Kyoto School philosopher, Ueda Shizuteru, in fact makes the point that in Heidegger’s turn from his earlier to his later thinking, there is a deepening from anxiety (*Angst*), in being exposed to the nothing, to releasement (*Gelassenheit*).<sup>35</sup> He states that this turn from *Angst* to *Gelassenheit* is anticipated in that passage towards the end of *Was ist Metaphysik?* where Heidegger speaks of *Sichloslassen*.<sup>36</sup> And releasement on the part of being, we ought to keep in mind, is also what Heidegger discussed in terms of the clearing (*Lichtung*) that is a nothing that nevertheless *permits* the fullness of beings, gives in letting-be (*Seinlassen*).

This issue of letting also relates to Heidegger’s attempts to find a non-objectifying and non-representational mode of thinking that co-responds to being as being. The critique that Heidegger, in his obsession with being, is still trapped in objectifying thought in contrast to Nishida’s turn away from object-logic, ignores Heidegger’s own sustained attempts throughout his career to find such a thinking more thoughtful than representational thinking. By the 1940s Heidegger also comes to speak of a non-objectifying mode of thought, which in his 1943 postscript to *Was ist Metaphysik*, he calls “essential thinking” (*wesentliche Denken*) or “originary thinking” (*anfängliche Denken*) that thinks *being as such*—without objectifying it—an “originary thinking” (*ursprüngliche Denken*) on the part of man in response to the soundless chiming that clears the space for the event of being, a “releasement” (*Gelassenheit*) (GA9 309–310 and n.a./PM 236 and n.a.). And in his 1949 introduction to *Was ist Metaphysik?* (GA9 371–372/PM 282), he states that representational thinking that is set in place by beings must be supplanted by a different kind of thinking, more thoughtful and directed towards a *different origin* (*eine andere Herkunft*), brought to pass (*ereignetes*) by being itself and that is thus *responsive* to being.<sup>37</sup> Heidegger’s attempt here and throughout his later works that experiment with different modes of locution and expression is comparable to Nishida’s own attempts to shift the focus away from the object qua grammatical subject, that is, towards a “different origin.”<sup>38</sup> It is akin to the turn Nishida spoke of

<sup>34</sup> Parkes 1992: 387–388.

<sup>35</sup> Ueda 1992: 64.

<sup>36</sup> Ueda 1992: 59.

<sup>37</sup> The charge (made such as in Niigata 1998: 232, 240) that this “essential thinking” still objectifies the nothing simply by virtue of being a kind of “thinking” after the fact seems to ignore what Heidegger’s arguments are attempting to say and amounts to a “straw man” argument. If thinking “after the fact” necessarily objectifies, then no philosophy, not even Nishida’s, can escape this fault.

<sup>38</sup> Another possible key to solving the issue of how to depict being/nothing non-metaphysically may be in Reiner Schürmann’s schematization of the different modes of the ontological difference, taking off

from object-logic in the place of beings to self-aware intuition in the place of absolute nothing. Nishida's charge that Heidegger fails to get to that standpoint of the nothing (*mu*) upon which objectification is predicated (Z5 129, 132ff)—based on his reading of *Sein und Zeit* but without any awareness of the post-1930 Heidegger—thus needs to be amended.

One thing conspicuous in Heidegger's discussions, in comparison with Nishida's, at least at first glance, may be a certain dynamism in connection to the aspect of temporality associated with being, not only in the notion of being-towards-death in his earlier fundamental ontology, but also in the *aletheic* un/concealment of being through historical epochs and even in his later topology of being. The understanding of being as an *event* that initiates a historical epoch or a specific *topos* for the *presencing* of beings and that in its withdrawal is the nothing may perhaps be contrasted to Nishida's understanding of the nothing as a field or place that is absolute and without opposition or determination. There is the significance of *difference* in both thinkers, however, that serves to determine beings in their constitution. But if the difference entails the event of enownment (*Ereignis*) or the happening of the unconcealment (*aletheia*) of beings for Heidegger, in Nishida it assumes the very place of the occurrence of beings, a nothing that negates itself to affirm beings. For Heidegger beings are constituted in their difference from that very event, their unconcealment or presencing, while for Nishida beings are constituted in their difference from that very place qua nothing. Both event and place here are *nothing* in that they recede into the background and are unobjectifiable, non-ontic. In Nishida the emphasis is on the *place* wherein beings arise, whereas in Heidegger the emphasis is on the *event* that clears room for beings. Yet we also cannot deny that the event for Heidegger is the *clearing* of a place—the open or what he calls in the 1960s, the topology of being—and that the place for Nishida is still dynamic in its self-negating movement that he grasps in terms of history in the 1930s and 40s. There is still a sense then in which *event* and *place* in both thinkers converge in the notion of a *clearing of space* for beings and that in its otherness to beings (*onta*) is *no-thing*.

How then does one convey such an *other* that is *no* thing—the *Sache selbst* for both thinkers? Here lies, in my view, perhaps the most significant difference between the two thinkers. Nishida, as an intellectual among the early generations of modern Japan that enthusiastically embraced philosophy when it was being aggressively imported from the West for the first time, especially in its German incarnations, sought to describe that reality of the nothing he may have experienced in his Zen practice with the terminology of Western, in particular German—Kantian and Hegelian for the most part—philosophy. And like his German forebears who sought to erect a logic (*Logik*) for metaphysics, Nishida looked for a *logic* (*ronri* 論理) that could expound it. Despite his above-mentioned critique of object logic,

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Footnote 38 continued

from, and developing, Heidegger's ontological difference: difference as metaphysical (being as universal beingness vs. the particular entity), difference as temporal (being as presencing vs. the present entity), and, finally, difference as symbolic (being by *doing* or *being* vs. the object of thought). The final mode of difference seems to hint at one way of authentically characterizing being in distinction from its objectification or reification. See Schürmann 1978: 199, 207, 221, 1979: especially, 103.

Nishida never explicitly raises the issue of the kind of metaphysical language that he himself employs in his speculations and the possibility that it might tend towards an object-logic. Heidegger, on the other hand, who initially attempted to set up a fundamental ontology, in his later works begins to look for a more explicitly non-metaphysical mode of conveying the matter of his thought that would escape subsumption to any “logic.” While Nishida attempts to raise Eastern thought (*shisō* 思想) to the standards of Western philosophy and its discourse or logic, Heidegger attempts to overcome philosophy, identified with metaphysics, with what he calls a non-metaphysical “thinking” (*Denken*). He states that all logic and metaphysics fails for grasping beingness only from within *thinking* (GA65 §129 247/CP 194). Heidegger in the mid-1950s seems to show here keener awareness of the limits of language as such in its association with logic and metaphysics (e.g., GA9 405/PM 306). On the one hand Nishida looks for a logic that could adequately describe what is not a being. He does occasionally make use of phrases and locutions taken from traditional Zen and other Mahāyāna texts, but they are sparse in comparison to the general metaphysical language he employs in his explicit attempt to erect a “logic of place” (*basho no ronri* 場所の論理, *bashoteki ronri* 場所的論理). Despite his intentions, his own writing style demonstrates a firmer faith in the language—such as the terminology and locution—of Western metaphysics. One wonders whether Nishida’s attempt to construct a “logic of place” harbors what contemporary Japanese philosopher Karatani Kōjin (柄谷行人) calls a “will to architecture” that is operative behind Western metaphysics.<sup>39</sup> Heidegger, on the other hand, experiments with a-logical and poetical modes of locution to convey being.<sup>40</sup> Aware that being withdraws from the thinker even while giving beings for thought, he attempts to express an authentic response in words to that sending of being, and this attempt comes out in his experimentation with non-metaphysical and poetical language in his later works. That mittence of being, the event, is experienced in the moment, at the border between absence and presence in the simultaneity or coincidence of emergence and withdrawal—or in Nishidian terms formlessness and form. Heidegger is acutely aware of the difficulty of conveying this in language, such as when in the aforementioned pseudo-dialogue, *Aus einem Gespräch von der Sprache*, he has the Inquirer respond to the Japanese’s statement that emptiness (*die Leere*) for the Japanese is the loftiest name for what the Inquirer means by “being,” with the remark that the name “being” however also occasions great confusion for belonging to the patrimony of the language of metaphysics (US 109/OWL 19). Nishida, by contrast, despite his repeated reformulations in response to charges of an alleged absolutism and/or idealism, continued to harbor a kind of metaphysical tendency in his mode of description, not only, for example, in his characterization of the nothing as absolute or eternal but in the nominalization of the latter as “the

<sup>39</sup> See Karatani 1995. Nevertheless—to continue with Karatani’s idea of “architecture as metaphor”—the nothing uncovered in that attempt to erect a foundation, Nishida’s very own place of nothing, would ultimately destabilize, unground, that construction, that is, metaphysics itself.

<sup>40</sup> Graham Parkes in fact suggests that it is Heidegger’s encounter with East Asian texts such as the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi* that had the effect of changing his style of prose to the poetical locutions of his later works. See Parkes 1992: 392. But we have to also remember, as Parkes himself mentions in 404.n.49, the effect of German poets like Hölderlin on Heidegger.

absolute” (*zettai* 絶対, *zettaisha* 絶対者) in his latest work. Heidegger accuses Schelling for ignoring the finitude (*Endlichkeit*) that essentially belongs to being and the experience of truth to instead focus on the absolute that has no being (GA42 280/STE 161–162). If Heidegger had read Nishida, would he have leveled the same critique against Nishida, perhaps, in the same way some of Nishida’s own students charged Nishida for his “absolutization” of the nothing? One could say that Nishida’s terminology and locution inevitably tends to do what he wants to avoid, that is, to objectify and to objectify precisely what cannot be objectified. Even if one could level the same criticism against Heidegger himself, he seemed to be more self-reflective and aware in regard to this issue of language. Nishida’s language, by contrast, may have been less faithful to his own insights obtained in Zen. Hence his frustration in his repeated attempts to reformulate his thought, while being unable throughout to extricate himself from the fetters of metaphysical language. Instead his endeavor led him to a complex Hegelian-influenced dialectic. Heidegger on the other hand, by the time he commented that “tautology is the only possibility for thinking what dialectics can only veil” (GA15 400/FS 81), had been experimenting with poetical modes of expression. In fact it is Nishida’s own Kyoto School descendant—a student of a student of Nishida’s—Ueda Shizuteru, who remarked that in response to the call of that nothing lying yonder that constitutes the very horizon of being and thinking, thought will have to proceed not through a fundamental ontology or an attempt to ground metaphysics or return to its ground, but rather by listening to the words of poetry (or myth).<sup>41</sup>

Heidegger and Nishida, each in his own distinct way, seem to have had an intuitive grasp of the un/ground foundational to human experience and being despite—and, in fact, permitting—their differences. And precisely here their paths cross where Heidegger moved to overcome a philosophy of beings that looks for their ground through recognition of their groundless nothing, and Nishida moved to raise

<sup>41</sup> Ueda 1992: 62–63. Ueda remarks that every horizon emerges from and disappears into its “yonder” that is an endless or boundless open (Ueda 1992: 101–102, 106, 139). While being perhaps the last significant representative of Kyoto School philosophy, Ueda, may be the one who comes closest to successfully synthesizing the thoughts of Heidegger and Nishida with his own conception of being-in-the-twofold-world whereby man’s being-(t)here (*Dasein*) is implaced in the world that is in turn implaced in the nothing (e.g., Ueda 1992: 50–51, 57). On Ueda’s synthesis of Nishida and Heidegger, see Krummel forthcoming. Other Kyoto School philosophers, who I should mention here, who show an appreciation of Heidegger, with an understanding of his later works, and have noted the resonances between Heidegger’s and Nishida’s thoughts, along with differences, are Takeuchi Yoshinori (武内 義範) (1991a) and Ōhashi Ryōsuke (大橋 良介) (1994). And of course we cannot forget to mention here Tsujimura Kōichi, a Kyoto School philosopher who is known, within the Kyoto School, for his interpretations of Heidegger’s philosophy. See, for example, Tsujimura 1989b and 2008. His own synthesis of Zen, Nishida, and Heidegger is expressed in Tsujimura 1977 and 2011. However Ueda may be the one who had successfully managed to synthesize key concepts from Heidegger’s and Nishida’s philosophies in a creative manner. It is also interesting to note that these Kyoto School philosophers who expressed greater appreciation for Heidegger’s thought were third generation (Takeuchi, Tsujimura, and Ueda) or fourth generation (Ōhashi) members of the Kyoto School, while Tanabe and Nishitani who had studied with Heidegger but were harsher on Heidegger’s treatment of the nothing were of the first generation (Tanabe) or second generation (Nishitani). It may be that the later generation had more time to study and absorb Heidegger’s *later* thought as it unfolded through the decades after the World War. But this is not to ignore that this later generation did have its differences with Heidegger (as in Tsujimura’s contrasting of Heidegger and Zen as discussed in note 31).



the assumption of the nothing that ungrounds beings to the level of a philosophical—and that is, metaphysical—discourse. This non-substantialist anontology in their respective works resonates, to a certain extent, with certain currents—or rather undercurrents—of thought existent within Western thought as well as currents more manifestly dominant in Eastern thought. In the West these would be the negative theologies of Pseudo-Dionysius, Meister Eckhart, Nicholas of Cusa, Jakob Böhme, and others—with their references to a nothingness or an abyss that also serves as the source of creation—as well as modern thinkers like Schelling and Nietzsche among others who also recognized an abyssal un/grounding of being and the world, and all of whom both Nishida and Heidegger were quite aware of. In the East these would be the traditions of Daoism and Mahāyāna Buddhism with their notions of *śūnyatā*, *kong* or *kū* (空), and *wu* or *mu* (無), also referred to above, which Nishida was certainly aware of and Heidegger may have had some acquaintance with, at least, through his East Asian students and interlocutors. But this anontological strain in both also aligns with more recent attempts in philosophy to overcome tendencies of substantialism, not only within the Kyoto School (with people like Ueda Shizuteru) but outside of it in the West, for example in Cornelius Castoriadis' references to *chaos* as the *nihil* from which the world is continuously instituted *ex nihilo*, or in Jean-luc Nancy's references to the nothing as the un/ground for the world's self-creation. I would even argue that Reiner Schürmann's discussions of ontological *anarché* that precedes principles and *archai* expresses this sort of an ontology in looking to the abyssal ground of being.<sup>42</sup> The current Kyoto School representative Ueda moreover seems to recognize this very anontological *resonance* between the two as he makes use of Heideggerian motifs in his reading of Nishida and, conversely, makes use of Nishidian motifs in his reading of Heidegger.<sup>43</sup> The juxtaposition of Heidegger and Nishida indeed suggests further development, especially in relation to notions of place, horizon, and world as starting points. It is worth underscoring that this notion of an abyssal or anontological un/ground has implications for contemporary metaphysics as well as the phenomenology of the world. This is worth pursuing as traditional metaphysical assumptions of transcendent—or even transcendental—universals and eternal principles upon which to model our understanding of the world may no longer be feasible. For example, their spatial understanding of the nothing—the clearing or open for Heidegger, the place of nothing for Nishida—can point us to a renewed understanding and appreciation of the Greek concept of *chōra*, not unrelated, etymologically, to *chaos* and with ontological (or anontological) significances for Castoriadis and Nancy among others. *Chōra* provides a clue to the inversion, or rather collapse, of the transcendence/immanence dichotomy in Platonist metaphysics. This together with the terminology of anontology—in contrast to the metaphysical vocabulary embraced by Nishida but which Heidegger tried to discard—I suggest, at least, opens an avenue to overcoming the limitations of traditional metaphysics. Moreover, this overturning of traditional metaphysics via an

<sup>42</sup> See Krummel 2014a for Schürmann and Castoriadis; Krummel 2014c for Nancy in comparison with Nishida; and Krummel 2017 for Schürmann in comparison with Nishida.

<sup>43</sup> On this see Krummel forthcoming.

understanding of the world as constituted out of the nothing, has ethical implications as well. For the world is a world wherein we encounter and interact with one another and other beings. All of these issues call for further investigations and discussions beyond the scope of this work.

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