# Voice of the Valley Stream[1]

*Keiji Nishitani and His Standpoint of Śūnyatā*

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[1] This is the title for a theoretical project that *could* become much larger than the work presented here.

Abstract

In this paper I offer a reconstruction and analysis of Keiji Nishitani's primary philosophical position, "standpoint of *śūnyatā,*" as detailed in *Religion and Nothingness*. Nishitani, also known by his Buddhist name *Keisei* (Voice of the Valley Stream), was a prominent figure of the Kyoto School. The Kyoto School is group of 20th century Japanese philosophers who were primarily engaged with the philosophical implications of the Buddhist concept of nothingness. Studying Western philosophy, and spending two years under the supervision of Heidegger, Nishitani became very knowledgeable about the Western philosophical tradition. Nishitani argues that, from the ordinary position of consciousness (that is expounded upon in the Western philosophical tradition), nihility is inevitable. In an attempt to overcome this nihility, Nishitani challenges us to uproot the way in which we think and the way we approach the world. Reaching back into the Buddhist tradition, his own practice in Zen, and his competence in the Western philosophical tradition, Nishitani argues that only from a "standpoint of *śūnyatā*," or emptiness, can we overcome the nihilistic tendencies of contemporary man and reach a philosophical realism that privileges experience and realization over cognition and reason.

*Keywords:* śūnyatā, nihilism, emptiness, nothingness, Keiji Nishitani, Kyoto School, Zen

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## Background

Primarily, this project is an attempt to philosophically engage with, and reconstruct, the thought of Keiji Nishitani. However, in another and equally important sense, this project is an attempt to philosophize globally. Global philosophy is the simple notion that philosophy is a human pursuit that has manifested in many different ways in different places around the world and throughout history. For these reasons, I am of the opinion that interesting philosophical content exists outside of the tradition I am familiar with (from Socrates to Kant). Nishitani, too, recognized the need for global philosophy, asking "How long will Europe be able to go on disregarding the non-European intellectual world?" (Nishitani in Davis, 2013b, p. 58). Nishitani's question can, for the most part, be expanded to include the whole of the Western world. Although Nishitani asked this question some time ago, an answer in the positive has, arguably, yet to be given. In our philosophical pursuits, we far too often discredit and dismiss that which is unfamiliar to us. However, engaging with worldly philosophical traditions is not necessarily a matter of meeting a multicultural quota (however, that would be met as a consequence!). It would be naïve to suggest that truth, wisdom, or knowledge (or whatever you want to call it) is limited to a specific moment or place in history. It follows that some of the most interesting philosophical insights may very well require a broadening of intellectual scope. That is, engaging in worldly philosophical traditions may prove to be fruitful in our own philosophical pursuits. Moreover, a broadening of our scope would allow us to philosophize in the world (in the broadest sense). That is, global philosophy promises dialogical contact between people that is both respectful and productive. Otherwise, as Jay Garfield challenges us, we should rename our Philosophy department(s) as the "Department of European and American Philosophy" (Garfield & Van Norden, 2016).

Although there are many arguments as to how we could engage with worldly traditions, and why we should take worldly traditions seriously in our philosophical pursuits,[2] I consider Bret W. Davis' argument to be the most convincing. Davis argues, correctly, that we "live in an age of cross-cultural encounters, the breadth—if not necessarily the depth—of which is unprecedented" (Davis, 2013b, p. 58). However, and this is critical, Davis suggests that in the West we have yet to honestly engage philosophically with traditions outside of our own. Davis outlines criteria that would verify genuine interaction between philosophical traditions. Davis argues that:

> A genuine dialogue with these other traditions would involve listening as well as speaking, allowing oneself to be critically examined as well as critically examining, and, most importantly, allowing unfamiliar ideas to present themselves as claims to universal truth—or at least as potentially compelling invitations to think and live differently—rather than as mere cultural particularities that pertain only to distant lands. (Davis, 2013b, p. 58)

However, Davis claims that elsewhere, in places such as Japan, "philosophers [such as Nishitani] have approached Western philosophy in this genuinely dialogical manner. It is time now for Westerners to return the favor" (Davis, 2013b, p. 58). Thus, this project is an attempt to "return the favor."

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[2] E.g. (Garfield, 2015), (Shizuteru, 2011)

That being said, I am constantly concerned about the problem of translation. Jan Van Bragt, the translator of *Religion and Nothingness*, discusses the problems of translating dense philosophical material into English from its original Japanese. Nishitani's intended title for *Religion and Nothingness* was *What is Religion?* However, Van Bragt was warned by his publisher that "no philosophical probing is expected from a book with such a title" (Van Bragt, 1989, p. 7).

"Thus," Van Bragt argues, "in the very title, we have already the whole problem of translation in a nutshell" (Van Bragt, 1989, p. 7). Van Bragt holds that words "do not simply have a more or less well-defined conceptual content; they have a background, roots, resonances in a cultural totality—which have to be suggested somehow in the translation" (Van Bragt, 1989, p. 7). In other words, Van Bragt *had* to take certain liberties when translating *Religion and Nothingness*. Not only did he have to make decisions on certain words choices when met with ambiguity, Van Bragt also had to, in a sense, *transplant* the material into the English language. That is, Van Bragt had to make certain decisions in his translation (and in some cases, additions) that would provide a more palatable experience for the English reading audience. However, Nishitani worked alongside Van Bragt on the English translation. While this relationship most certainly aided in keeping the text as close to the original, it also seems as though it would have caused friction between author and translator over such things as word choice and phrasing. However, although Nishitani, at many times, would have been just in becoming frustrated with Van Bragt, Van Bragt claims that "in the twenty years I have known [Nishitani], I have never seen him lose his temper" (Van Bragt, 1989, p. 9).

Despite the possible shortcomings and problems of translation, I still hold to notion that, through translation, I'm engaging in a sort of copy of the original. Of course, this copy is not a perfect copy as I'm sure there are certain important aspects of the text that are lost in translation. However, just as I would legitimately engage in an English translation of one of Plato's dialogues, I may also legitimately engage in an English translation of any given work in any given language. Although I am limited to one translation of *Religion and Nothingness*, I am confident in its ability to maintain authenticity.

## Introduction

Alan Watts, the British philosopher who played a large role in the popularization of Zen in the West, argues, “Zen is above all an experience” (Watts, 1957, p. 15). Watts stresses that Zen is

> nonverbal in character, which is simply inaccessible to the purely literary and scholarly approach. To know what Zen is, and especially what it is not, there is no alternative but to practice it, to experiment with it in the concrete so as to discover the meaning which underlies the words. (Watts, 1957, p. 15)

Zen, at least according to Watts (and I think he is right), is the sort of thing that cannot be grasped through words nor through the intellect itself. For these reasons, I do not intend to pretend that I know, nor do I claim access to, the experience that is Zen. Although this initially sounds non-committal, like any experience, a direction can be given, or a finger can be pointed, towards it. Moreover, due to the experiential nature of Zen, it may be easy to dismiss as a vacuous metaphysical claim. This sort of doubt, however, is easy to address. As the Buddha (supposedly) proclaimed in an address to the people of Kosala (the Kālāmas):

> ‘Yes, Kālāmas, it is proper that you have doubt, that you have perplexity, for a doubt has arisen in a matter which is doubtful. Now, look you Kālāmas, do not be led by reports, or tradition, or hearsay. Do not led by the authority of religious texts, nor by mere logic or

> inference, nor by considering appearances, nor by the delight in speculative opinions, nor by seeming possibilities, nor by the idea: 'this is our teacher.' But, O Kālāmas, when you know for yourselves that certain things are unwholesome (*askusala*), and wrong, and bad, then give them up… And when you know for yourselves that certain things are wholesome (*kusala*) and good, then accept them and follow them.' (Rahula, 1974, p. 2-3)

In a word, the discourses and teachings of Buddhism, specifically Zen, are not necessarily doctrinal, dogmatic, nor are they a series of vacuous metaphysical claims. Neither is the experience of Zen a fideism, that is, an acceptance of some given belief based solely on faith. The teachings are, rather, a way of pointing at a certain sort of experience that can be had in the world. The teaching and doctrine of Zen is not Zen itself. The truth of Zen is found only in its practice or *praxis* (a Greek term that Nishitani often uses). The burden, then, of either affirming or denying the truths presumably found under the suggestions of teachers such as Watts or the Buddha, relies on an individual's actual *doing*. In other words, no matter how rigorous I am in my argumentation, and no matter how factual my evidence is, I am never able to represent any given experience as the experience itself. Wittgenstein was correct to suggest that, "There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They *make themselves* manifest. They are what is mystical" (1961, p. 151). Words can only ever function as a sort of *pointing to* but never as a representation of any given experience. This distinction is important to make for the sake of avoiding Wittgenstein's accusations that "what can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence" (Wittgenstein, 1961, p. 3). And although it could be argued that some experiences are easier to point to than others, the experience of Zen (or religious experience in general) is particularly challenging. Despite that I intend to make claims about Zen, there is no alternative to the experience itself.

Keiji Nishitani is one of the many teachers who have pointed to the experience of Zen. However, although Nishitani's philosophy primarily concerns the experience of Zen (or as he calls it, the standpoint of *śūnyatā* or *kū no ba*), his position is much subtler than that. With a deep understanding of both Western philosophy and Zen, Nishitani addresses some of the major philosophical problems of the time in his seminal work *Religion and Nothingness*. Nishitani is deeply concerned with the creeping nihilism found within the 20$^{th}$-century person (and arguably even more deeply in the 21$^{st}$-century person). Nishitani attributes the rise of nihilism to the failed attempts at realism through representation (e.g., scientific and philosophical pursuits). These failed attempts, Nishitani argues, do not give us access to the "suchness/selfness" (*jitai* or *tathātā*) of things. Without the suchness of things, Nishitani claims that the world becomes distant, impersonal, and meaningless. In an attempt to overcome nihilism, Nishitani argues that from the "standpoint of *śūnyatā*," the suchness of things is realized. In a sense, Nishitani's philosophical project is primarily soteriological, that is, concerned with salvation. Specifically, Nishitani seeks salvation from the bondage of the standpoint of ordinary consciousness. Although the standpoint of *śūnyatā* is developed with the Buddhist notion of emptiness in mind[3], emptiness in this case does not mean something negative nor does it imply an anti-realist position. Although we generally understand the term emptiness to refer to *null*, *void*, or *nothingness*, emptiness, in the sense that Nishitani develops it, is a positive concept. That is, for Nishitani, emptiness is self-identical to *everything*, and is *full* and *positive*. However, it would be incorrect to identify Nishitani's position as monistic (God, Brahma, etc.). Rather, his position is best understood as non-dualistic (Tao, *śūnyatā*, etc.). That is, reality is neither one nor two. Nishitani, I will find, presents a form of realism that is no doubt strange (especially to those not

[3] *Śūnyatā*, or emptiness, has a deep history. See (Davis, 2013a) for a detailed account of the history and development of the concept.

familiar with Buddhist thought) but his position is a form of realism nonetheless. Nishitani replaces realism through representation with realism through realization. While the representational mode of thought "is a type of thinking that assumes a correspondence between appearance and reality and is supported by a metaphysical edifice" (Olson, 2000, p.22), the "standpoint of *śūnyatā*" is a sort of unconditioned thinking that *realizes* the real.

In this paper I will (i) give a brief account of the Kyoto School, (ii) give a detailed account of the life and career of Nishitani followed by (iii) remarks on his seminal text *Religion and Nothingness*. After completing these steps, I will (iv) provide a reconstruction and analysis of his "standpoint of *śūnyatā*" as detailed in *Religion and Nothingness*. Finally, in my concluding remarks I will (v) offer a final analysis of Nishitani's position and take a look at some of directions that "Nishitanian" scholarship could take. In Nishitani's words, the "standpoint of *śūnyatā*" is an attempt to transform our standpoints of nihility into a position "where we can say Yes to all things" (Nishitani, 1983, p. 124). Nishitani claims access to a realist position that is neither empirical nor rational. Rather, for Nishitani, metaphysical truths are existential, that is, reality is only *realizable*. However, a problem persists throughout Nishitani's position. Nishitani recognizes the problem of representing the non-representational and often speaks in paradox to overcome the dissonance. Because of this, Nishitani only *points* towards a certain sort of experience and fails to directly address the experience itself. That being said, however, I do not think this is an error in reasoning; rather, Nishitani's language and style is a direct consequence of his philosophical position. Nishitani is not an amateur. He is well read in both Western and Eastern philosophical traditions and deeply recognizes the dissonance between the two. Despite his shortcomings, Nishitani is, above all, a diplomat searching for common ground between worlds. When all is said and done, I argue that the essential point in Nishitani's argument is that experience and realization take epistemological authority (concerning reality) over cognition and the intellect/reason.

## The Kyoto School

The term "Kyoto school" was first used in "a 1932 newspaper article by Tosaka Jun entitled 'The Philosophy of the Kyoto School'" (Heisig, 2001, p. 3). The Kyoto School, which began with Nishida Kitarō, is loosely understood as group of thinkers who share a similar intention. That intention, very broadly speaking, is to engage philosophically with the Buddhist notion of nothingness, or emptiness (Davis, 2017). Moreover, Heisig suggests, "For the Kyoto philosophers, thinking either transforms the way we look at things of life or it is not thinking in the fullest sense of the word" (Heisig, 2001, p. 14). Although the Kyoto School philosophers engage philosophically with the Buddhist notion of emptiness, it is not necessarily for the pursuit of knowledge or truth, but rather for the purpose of transforming the way in which we navigate the world. In this way, their intentions mirror that of the Buddha's who, 2500 years earlier, was also concerned with transforming the way in which we navigate the world in order to overcome the great suffering that takes place in the world. To overcome in this sense, does not suggest to eliminate suffering but, rather, to learn to accept suffering as something factual about our experience.

Although Japan, in the 20$^{th}$ century, had access to its own rich heritage (which is best understood as philosophical in its own right), philosophy, as the practice we understand in the West, was only recently imported (yes, quite like a commodity) into Japan (Heisig, 2001, p. 10). The Kyoto School philosophers stand at the intersection between the newly imported philosophy (*tetsugaku*) and their own rich philosophical tradition (Zen, Shinto, Taoism, etc.). Nishitani, especially, is located at this intersection. As Davis claims, Nishitani's thought is best understood "not only as a *philosophy of (about) Zen*; it also as a *philosophy of (from) Zen*" (Davis, 2004, p. 140).

Nishitani is one of the prominent figures of the Kyoto School, generally considered to be a second-generation member of the Kyoto School. The first generation is made up of Nishitani's teacher, Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945), and Nishida's contemporary Tanabe Hajime (1885–1962). Ueda Shizuteru (1926–) is considered the prominent member of the third generation, and Ōhashi Ryōsuke (1944–) is considered to be the prominent member of the fourth and present generation of the Kyoto School (Carter, 2013, p. 10).

## Keiji Nishitani's Life and Career

Born in 1900 on February 27, Nishitani was off to a rough start. After losing his father to tuberculosis in 1914 at the age of fourteen, Nishitani, too, was ill "from the same tuberculosis that had killed his father" (Heisig, 2001, p. 183). Despite his academic excellence, Nishitani's frail disposition temporarily halted his progress. In 1917, with some much needed time and healing, Nishitani, at the age of seventeen was finally admitted "to enter the prestigious Daiichi High School" (Heisig, 2001, p. 183). During his time of healing, Nishitani had his first experience with Zen. Heisig explains that Nishitani

> took some comfort from the novels of Natsume Sōseki, where his attention was caught by references to the Zen state of mind. This lead him to reading what he could find on Zen, where he met the writings of D. T. Suzuki. (Heisig, 2001, p. 183)

Shortly after his initial experiences with Zen, Nishitani's search for meaning spread exponentially. Nishitani describes his search for meaning as "running up against the problems of life, struggling to deepen their own self-awareness and at the same time to understand what I means to be alive" (Nishitani, 1991, p. 7). Nishitani read the "works of Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, Ibsen, Emerson, Carlyle, and Strindberg, as well as the Bible and St. Francis of Assisi" (Heisig, 2001, p. 183). Concerning these figures, Nishitani notes that they "burned a lasting impression deep into my soul—as I suppose they may still do to many young people today—and the tremors I experienced at the time have continued to make my heart tremble ever since" (Nishitani, 1990, p. xxxiii). Most importantly was Nishitani's encounter with the work of Nishida Kitarō. During summer vacation, near the end of his high school career, Nishitani stumbled upon Nishida's *Thinking and Experience* in a bookshop (Nishitani, 1991, p. 3). Nishitani claimed that his encounter with Nishida was a "chance encounter" that "affected the entire course of [his] later life" (Nishitani, 1991, p. xxvi). Coming to the end of his high school career:

> Three choices lay before him: to enter a Zen temple and become a monk, to pursue his interest in philosophy, or to join a newly-begun utopian community called 'New Town' founded by the literary figure Mushanokoji Saneatsu. (Heisig, 2001, p. 183)

Not only did Nishitani choose to study philosophy, he studied in Kyoto under the very man who initially piqued his interest in philosophy, Nishida Kitarō. Under his new teacher, Nishitani devoted "himself especially to German idealism and German mystical thought" (Tsutomu, 1992, p. 94).

Nishitani, recalling Nishida's striking appearance and stature, explains that his forehead "looked almost as if it did not belong to his face at all but had an independent existence all its own" (Nishitani, 1991, p. 9). Nishida was short and aged, but his "manner, the tone of his voice, and the working of his mind all gave the impression of something keen and overflowing with vigor" (Nishitani, 1991, p. 10). Despite Nishitani's perception of his teacher, in 1924 (only ten years after his father's death), Nishitani, at twenty-four years old, completed his studies with Nishida "with a thesis on Schelling" (Heisig, 2001, p. 183).

Described as “a brilliant disciple of Nishida,” (LaFleur, 1988, p. 90) Nishitani enjoyed a great deal of success after his studies with Nishida. Beginning his teaching career, from 1924-1932 Nishitani “taught philosophy at local high schools” (Heisig, 2001, p. 183). In 1928, Nishitani, while continuing to teach philosophy in high schools, was assigned as an adjunct lecturer at Otani University where he more deeply cultivated his interest in philosophy. Not only did Nishitani publish a great amount on Kant, he also developed an interest in mysticism and its history (Heisig, 2001, p. 183-4). By 1932, Nishitani was lecturing at Kyoto University and “three years later he was promoted to associate professor” (Heisig, 2001, p. 184). During this time, Heisig claims that Nishitani’s work “focused on religion and the religious dimension of existentialism” (2001, p. 184). Nishitani’s focus on religion and existentialism would come to have a fundamental impact on his mature philosophy.

As Nishitani’s search for meaning continued, philosophy “did not entirely satisfy him, and he found his interest in Zen revived” (Heisig, 2001, p. 184). Heisig explains that “in 1936, [Nishitani] traveled to Kamakura with a letter of introduction from D.T. Suzuki to practice Zen under Furukawa Gyodo at Engaku-ji, but returned after a week to be with his wife for the birth of their second child” (Heisig, 2001, p. 184). A year later, Nishitani, at the age of thirty-seven,

> took up practice at the temple of Shokoku-ji under Yamazaki Taiko, since it was close to his home. It was then, for the first time, that he says he understood what Nishida means by ‘direct experience.’ He continued his practice with Yamazaki for twenty-four years, interrupted only by the two years he spent studying abroad. In 1943 he was given the layman’s name of Keisei, ‘voice of the valley stream.’ (Heisig, 2001, p. 184)

Ueda Shizuteru (a prominent student of Nishitani’s) later recalls an instance where Nishitani was practicing Zen during a trip to Mount Kōya. During their stay, they were privileged to stay at a Shingon temple. One evening, noticing that the lights were turned off in Nishitani's room, Shizuteru, knowing that it was neither likely that Nishitani was out or asleep, was concerned. Upon entering Nishitani's room, Shizuteru explains that he "could not see professor Nishitani there was only the darkness which was, paradoxically, transparent" (Shizuteru, 1992, p. 4). But, from the darkness, Shizuteru "saw [Nishitani's] silhouette" and he "was sitting in meditation" (Shizuteru, 1992, p. 4). Shizuteru notes that he learned "much later that [Nishitani] had been a lay practitioner of Zen" (Shizuteru, 1992, p. 4).

Although Zen would prove to have a profound effect on Nishitani's mature philosophy, it was "not initially of his academic interest" (Heisig, 2001, p. 184) despite his deep practice and understanding of Zen. "Rather," Heisig claims, "[Zen] was a matter, as [Nishitani] liked to say, of a balance between reason and letting go of reason, of 'thinking and then sitting, sitting and then thinking.'" (2001, p. 184).

In 1937, when Nishitani was thirty-seven years old, he received a scholarship that allowed him to study outside of Japan. Nishitani had the intention to study abroad under Henri Bergson. Bergson was popular in the intellectual sphere of Japan and Nishitani was eager to study with him. However, after Nishitani learned of Bergson's poor health, Nishitani "was allowed to go to the University of Freiburg instead, where he spent two years studying under Martin Heidegger" (Heisig, 2001, p. 184). During his time in Germany, Nishitani had many informal meetings with Heidegger (Parkes, 1996, p. 103-4). Although it is evident that Heidegger had a great impact on Nishitani's thought, Nishitani's influence on Heidegger was more elusive, or rather, hidden away. Heidegger, at almost every opportunity, failed to credit either Nishitani or the Zen tradition in the development of his own thought (May, 1996, 52). That being said, William Barrett notes,

> A German friend of Heidegger told me that one day when he visited Heidegger he found him reading one of Suzuki's books; "If I understand this man correctly," Heidegger remarked, "this is what I have been trying to say in all my writings." (Barrett, 1956, p. xi)

Despite Heidegger's shortcomings (and there are many, but I will not go into detail), Nishitani was deeply influenced by Heidegger (this is demonstrated very clearly, *with citations*, in Nishitani's mature philosophy). During his time with Heidegger, Nishitani "prepared and delivered a talk on Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* and Meister Eckhart" (Heisig, 2001, p. 184). Nishitani later commented on his interest in the German mystics during this time, such as Meister Eckhart, claiming, "in the mystics the confluence and union of religion and philosophy reached a high point" (Heisig, 2001, p. 184).

In 1939 the war and its many effects were waiting for Nishitani's arrival from his studies. Although Nishitani's research was primarily concerned with religion and philosophy, Nishitani was "drawn into questions of political ideology" (Heisig, 2001, p. 184). The milieu of Japan at the time demanded no less of Nishitani and he recognized that. However, Nishitani did not directly resist Japan's war efforts. Rather, he hoped "that his ideas would add something important to the small chorus of voices resisting the irrationalities of the prevalent ideology" (Heisig, 2001, p.184-5). Heisig notes that despite Nishitani's venture into political philosophy, Nishitani is at his "least perceptive […] when he is dealing with public or social issues" (2001, p. 185).

Although Nishitani continued to passively resist the wartime ideology of Japan, he was granted the principal chair of religion in 1943 despite tensions between Nishitani and the Ministry of Education (Heisig, 2001, p. 185). During this time, Shizuteru recalls,

> In the fall of 1943, in the midst of the Second World War, I attended a lecture Professor Nishitani delivered at the Daiichi Kōtō Gakkō in Tokyo. I was in my freshman year. I waited seated in the audience, knowing nothing about him. He had come all the way from Kyoto for the lecture, despite the almost intolerable wartime traveling conditions. He appeared on the podium dressed in a kimono, a rare sight in those days. Yet he did not look out of place and in fact his appearance seemed quite natural. At the same time, there was something different about him; he seemed untouched by the turmoil of the time. (Shizuteru, 1992, p. 2)

Shizuteru's description of Nishitani demonstrates his resilience throughout the war. Despite the unrest of the war, and with the assistance of Nishida, Nishitani received his "doctoral degree with a thesis entitled 'Prolegomenon to a Philosophy of Religion'" two years after receiving his position as the principal chair of religion (Heisig, 2001, p. 185). Nishitani's vitality, and the resilience he demonstrated during the war, buckled under the pressure of the war. In 1945, Nishitani's teacher and mentor, Nishida Kitarō, passed away (Nishitani, 1991, p. 37). Shortly after, Japan surrendered. Nishitani, who was unfortunately also defeated by war (figuratively), "was obliged to take a leave of absence from the university" (Heisig, 2001, p. 185). Moreover, soon after Nishitani took his leave, the occupational forces deemed Nishitani "unsuitable for teaching" and Nishitani was "relieved of his position from the university [and] was banned from holding any public position on the ground of having supported the wartime government" (Heisig, 2001, p. 185). During this time, Nishitani "intensified his practice of Zen, which seems to have given him added strength to accept the affront silently and with tranquility, though not without considerable distress" (Heisig, 2001, p. 185). Despite the solace Nishitani found in Zen, Heisig notes that it "was a difficult time for him, and his wife, who would watch him spending whole afternoon watching lizards in the yard, was afraid he would crack under the pain" (Heisig, 2001, p. 185).

Although Nishitani believed that he was treated unfairly during and after the war, "Nishitani took it as an opportunity to rethink his philosophical vocation" (Heisig, 2001, p. 185). After the war, Nishitani refrained from engaging in political philosophy. Nishitani's decision to refrain from such dialogue was most certainly informed by the way that both the Japanese government and the occupational forces had treated him during and after the war. Nishitani's focus turned to "the insight of the individual rather than the reform of the social order" (Heisig, 2001, p. 185-6). Nishitani's move inward shifted his philosophical intentions towards the problem of nihilism and, more importantly, how to overcome it. During this time, Nishitani wrote a series of essays that would form the basis for his mature thought (Heisig, 2001, p. 186).

Nishitani, now in his fifties, was slowly recovering from the war. In 1952, at the age of fifty-two, not only did Nishitani receive back his position as the chair of religion he lost five years earlier, six years later, in 1958, Nishitani "was moved to a chair in the history of philosophy" (Heisig, 2001, p. 186). After being reinstated, Nishitani wrote an essay titled "What is Religion?" In 1961, this essay developed into his masterpiece *Religion and Nothingness.* And in 1982, Nishitani's pupil Jan Van Bragt translated it into English (Heisig, 2001, p. 186). Two years after publishing his magnum opus at the age of sixty-three, Nishitani "retired from Kyoto University in 1963" (Heisig, 2001, p. 186). In good health, Nishitani "accepted a post as professor at Otani University in Kyoto," and year a later "was named professor emeritus of Kyoto University" (Heisig, 2001, p. 186). Nishitani's competence in both English and German allowed him to be active not only in Kyoto but also abroad in his retirement years. "Moreover," Heisig notes, "[Nishitani] was a popular contributor to roundtable discussions" (Heisig, 2001, p. 186-7).

If this demonstrates anything, it is that Nishitani stayed very active in his retirement years not only as an active scholar, but also as an active citizen. Nishitani's activity in his retirement years truly demonstrates his vitality and his great level of scholarly capabilities. He accomplished much and his successes did not go unnoticed. Not only did Nishitani serve as the chief editor of "*The Eastern Buddhist*, a journal begun by D.T. Suzuki and published at Otani University," Nishitani, between 1964 and 1972 "traveled abroad to the United States and Europe on several occasions to address international conferences and deliver special lectures" (Heisig, 2001, p. 187). Also during this time, Nishitani received a series of awards honoring his contributions. And starting in 1986, his legacy was brought together in his *Collected Works,* which have yet to be translated into English (Heisig, 2001, p. 187).

Unfortunately, at the age of ninety, Nishitani passed away "in 1990 at his home in Kyoto" (Heisig, 2001, p. 187). At his funeral, his Buddhist name was amended to "The layman called the Voice of the Valley Stream, coming from the west and resounding in emptiness" (Heisig, 2001, p. 187) or "Sairai-in Kūoku Keisei Koji" (Shizuteru, 1992, p. 4).

## Remarks on *Religion and Nothingness* and *The Standpoint of Śūnyatā*

I consider *Religion and Nothingness* as Nishitani's primary philosophical contribution. The "standpoint of *śūnyatā*" is the title of only one of the many chapters presented in Nishitani's *Religion and Nothingness*. However, while the "standpoint of *śūnyatā* [the chapter]", as Robert Thurman claims, "is probably the heart of [*Religion and Nothingness*], in that here Nishitani puts forth the actuality of emptiness, how it is known, and how it is manifest" (Thurman, 1989, p. 156), the "standpoint of *śūnyatā*" is also the central argument in *Religion and Nothingness*.

Although there are a total of eight sections in the chapter titled “The Standpoint of *Śūnyatā*” it will suffice to analyse only sections one to four. The reason for this is that starting in section five, Nishitani reiterates his prior arguments from a different angle. And, although the last four sections are indeed interesting, for the sake of time and to avoid redundancy, in this project I will not be looking at the last four sections of the chapter. A project of larger scope, however, would include these missing sections.

However, before beginning my reconstruction of Nishitani’s “standpoint of *śūnyatā*”, there are a couple of important remarks to make concerning Nishitani’s philosophical style and his intensions. Nishitani asserts that his seminal work *Religion and Nothingness*

> has the concept of nothingness as its central theme and problem. One could treat nothingness from various angles, but my central concern has been to *think* the problem of nothingness. In other words, to approach it as a problem of philosophy. (Nishitani, 1989, p. 1)

Moreover, Nishitani stresses that his decision to study philosophy is deeply informed by his own lived experiences, noting,

> My life as a young man can be described in a single phrase: it was a period absolutely without hope…. My life at the time lay entirely in the grips of nihility and despair…. My decision, then, to study philosophy was in fact — melodramatic as it might sound— a matter of life and death (Nishitani in Heisig, 2001, p. 191).

Nishitani’s standpoint *of śūnyatā* is a series of ideas that intersect conventional categories of philosophy (to name a few: epistemology, metaphysics, ontology, and existentialism). In one sense, Nishitani’s project is *philosophical* while in another his project is *religious*. From both points of view, Nishitani is unconventional. It is important to note that, in Japan, the categorical distinctions between different modes of thought never manifested. Religious thought and philosophical thought were never distinguished as one and the other in the same ways they were in the West (Carter, 2013, p. 7). Whether or not Nishitani's project is one of either philosophical or religious intent, Nishitani's framework is primarily *existential*. By *existential* I first of all mean to suggest that Nishitani is concerned with human experience. Specifically, Nishitani concerns himself with religious experience. Religious experiences, Nishitani suggests, are those moments that can not be explained or justified, where we can't help "considering as very real the admiration [one] feels for a piece of Greek sculpture or the gloom [one] feels during the rainy season" (Nishitani, 1983, p. 7). Religious experience, for Nishitani, is the sort of thing that does not "spring from scientific or metaphysical reflection" (Nishitani, 1983, p. 8). In this way, Nishitani's religious experiences, in many ways, mirror William James' mystical states. James, who was a favorite of Nishida's, laid the groundwork for the philosophical analysis of religious experience in the West sometime before the inception of the Kyoto School. James argues that mystical states have four qualities. First, mystical states are ineffable in the sense that "no adequate report of its contents can be given in words" (James, trans. 1961, p. 299-300). Second, mystical states have a noetic quality, in that they "are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect" (James, trans. 1961, p. 300). Third, mystical states are transient in that they "cannot be sustained for long" (James, trans. 1961, p. 300). And finally, mystical states are passive in that "the mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he were grasped and held by a superior power" (James, 1961, p. 300). For the most part (aside from the last characteristic) James' criteria also fit Nishitani's notion of religious experience. For Nishitani, religious experience *is* everyday experience. Religious experience is not transcendent for Nishitani; rather, religious experience has an immanent quality.

That is, instead of “leaving the world,” religious experience for Nishitani means a “return to the world.”

Furthermore, Nishitani’s thought is *existential* in a second sense in that is concerned with salvation or liberation. Much like the Buddha before him, Nishitani’s philosophical intention lies in *getting beyond* the standpoint of consciousness to a standpoint that liberates us from meaninglessness and nihility. Moreover, Nishitani’s project bears a resemblance to Watts’ suggestion that “a way of liberation can have no positive definition. It has to be suggested by saying what it is not, somewhat as a sculptor reveals an image by the act of removing pieces of stone from a block” (Watts, 1957, p. 21). Although *emptiness* is ineffable, or non-representational, I think it is reasonable to “beat around the bush” or *point towards*. As Heisig notes, there “is no proof or disproof of what [Nishitani] is arguing, any more than was the case with Descartes’s experiment with doubt, without the experience of having followed the path oneself” (Heisig, 2001, p. 221). Thus, Nishitani’s argument hangs on experience versus the structure of the argument itself, which is more often than not unclear and hard to follow.

Although Nishitani is sometimes unclear and frequently speaks in paradoxes, I, however, do not think this is a result of inadequate philosophical rigour. Rather, I think that Nishitani’s position is *metaphilosophical*. That is, Nishitani challenges the very notion of what is means for thought to be *philosophical* in the traditional sense. Although Nishitani’s method may come across as provocative, his philosophical position is immensely deep and can be easily misunderstood under certain circumstances. If we were to only regard philosophy as a process of utilizing rigorous methods and logic to discover or uncover the truth of things, Nishitani does not qualify as a philosopher.  However, if we broaden the scope of philosophy to include a sort of transformative quality, Nishitani certainly does qualify as a philosopher.

**Summary and Reconstruction of The Standpoint of *Śūnyatā* Sections I-IV**

Nishitani's standpoint of *śūnyatā* stands in opposition to (or stands before), what Nishitani calls the standpoints of consciousness and nihility. From the standpoint of *śūnyatā*, Nishitani claims that we can break through the bondage of ordinary consciousness to a position where *jitai* (suchness) is realized. Davis describes the fact that "Nishitani was concerned with the question of how to think the topological pathway leading to such a breakthrough to non-duality" (Davis, 2017). Nishitani's position is topological in the sense of movement, and interconnectedness, between different mental states. Another way to put it is that Nishitani's "discussions are based on his notion of the so-called 'real realization of reality,' which is possible only in the locus of *śūnyatā*" (Abe, 1989, p. 17). Thurman outlines Nishitani's three-part topology as follows:

ordinary being – sensation/reason – objects out of reach

nihility – nullification/negation – objects dissolved

emptiness – be-ification/affirmations – objects at hand (Thurman, 1989, p. 157)

The position of "ordinary being," or the "field of consciousness" takes place in the everyday world. Here, we are subjected to "Cartesian ego; subject/object dualism", "immediate experience", and "intellectual knowledge and science" (Rockefeller, 1989, p. 210). From the standpoint of "nihility," the "field of nihility," or, as Nishitani suggests, "relative nothingness," we gain an "awareness of suffering (*dukkha*); awakening to impermanence, death, nihility, questioning the meaning of life; being grasped by nihility" (Rockefeller, 1989, p. 210). Finally, from the standpoint of emptiness, the "field of *śūnyatā*," or "ultimate reality," we experience "*kenshō*: breakthrough to awareness of *śūnyatā*; 'self awareness of reality' realized in the individual; no self" (Rockefeller, 1989, p. 210). Rockefeller also describes this as "Great

Enlightenment (*sambodhi*, *satori*): realization of non-dualism involving: identity of ultimate reality and everyday world [and] non-duality of self and other—compassion (*karunā*)" (Rockefeller, 1989, p. 210).

Beginning his formulation of the "standpoint of *śūnyatā,*" Nishitani explicates the standpoint of consciousness (or "ordinary being"), first with a discussion of the concept of substance (*jittai)*. "Ordinarily," Nishitani claims, "it is thought that substance makes a thing exist as itself. Substance is used to point out the essence of a thing, the self-identity in which a thing is what it is itself" (Nishitani, 1983, p. 119). For a thing to be said to exist *as itself,* means to suggest the relationship that thing has only to itself. Substance is the term denoting that quality. For Nishitani, substance is "the *being* of a being" (Nishitani, 1983, p. 119). Amidst the inherent flux or the "variety of qualities or attributes, their so-called accidents, such as size, shape, and so forth" (Nishitani, 1983, p. 119) of all things, Nishitani claims that it is substance which "expresses what a thing is, what *kind* of thing it has its being as" (Nishitani, 1983, p. 119). Although the notion of substance is a complicated concept with a deep history, Nishitani claims that *any* notion of substance always attempts to conceive of the permanent substratum of any given thing beneath the perpetual flux of all things. However, Nishitani is skeptical as to whether or not any notion of substance can truly denote the suchness of any given thing.

Substance, Nishitani claims, is a consequence of of the very act of thinking. That is to say, the mind and its faculties function in such a way that tends towards the essences of things. "The function of thinking," Nishitani argues, "as an activity of reason in us, is to journey beyond the field of sense perception to a field on which things can be made disclose their selfness" (Nishitani, 1983, p. 119-120). However, arising from the function of thinking, which is a necessary component of speculation itself, a troubling consequence follows. That consequence is that “the ‘substance’ grasped on the field of reason cannot but be the mode of being of a thing in its selfness insofar as it appears *to us* and insofar as it is seen *by us*” (Nishitani, 1983, p. 120). For Nishitani, he grants Kant’s insights, in that we only ever have access to an appearance of the world and not the world itself. Nishitani holds that the world as we know it has an inherently subjective quality to it. However, Nishitani does not wish to admit that the world is *only* subjective. On the contrary, Nishitani wants to remove the epistemological barrier between subject and object. However, Nishitani claims that access to the real world is independent of any conception of it. Hence, Nishitani claims that “*original* selfness must lie beyond the reach of reason and be impervious to thought” (Nishitani, 1983, p. 120). In other words, according to Nishitani, the selfness of any given thing, contrary to many of the insights of the Western tradition of philosophy (aside from Kant, which will be discussed later), is ineffable; that is, the selfness of any given thing cannot be represented through reason, language, or thought itself.

Nishitani argues that traditional realism, or materialism, does not “express the original selfness of a thing” (Nishitani, 1983, p. 120). Nishitani describes traditional realism, or materialism, as object-oriented. “Such reality”, Nishitani elaborates, “is represented as the point within things appearing on the field of sensation as objects of sense perception which goes beyond immediate perception and beyond perceiving subjectivity” (Nishitani, 1983, p. 120). “But”, Nishitani claims, “this manner of representation stems from a field on which the subjective and the objective are set in opposition to one another, from the field of objects and their representations” (Nishitani, 1983, p. 120). Unfortunately, Nishitani does not think that object-oriented theories of reality free us from the opposition between subject and object because “so long as they are looked upon objectively as objects—their objective reality has yet to elude the contradiction of being represented as something lying beyond representation” (Nishitani, 1983, p. 120). In other words, to assume a direct correlation between your perception of reality and reality itself ignores the qualities of our perception that seem to condition reality in one way or another. For example, consider the problem of qualia (color, taste, smell, etc.). The problem with qualia is that we cannot claim objectivity in any of these qualities because they seem to differ from one person to another.[4] Primary qualities too, such as shape, size, weight, are relative to a certain sort of perspective, scope, and relation.

Put another way, Nishitani suggests, "the mode of being which is said to have rid itself of its relationship to the subjective has simply been constituted through a covert inclusion of a relationship of the subjective, and so cannot, after all, escape the charge of constituting a mode of being defined through its appearance *to us*" (Nishitani, 1983, p. 120). Nishitani calls this the "paradox of representation" (Nishitani, 1983, p. 120). The inescapable faculties of the subject always taint the position of the materialist, or realist.

However, Nishitani claims that idealist trends in metaphysics also do not grant us access to the selfness of any given thing. In either the idealist, subject-oriented thought (*shutai*) or materialist, object-oriented thought (*jittai*) strands of metaphysics, Nishitani claims that they (the standpoint on consciousness, or reason and sensation)

> lose sight of the basic field where the reality of things and praxis initially come about; they lose sight of the sort of field where things become manifest in their suchness, where every action, no matter how slight, emerges into being from its point of origin. (Nishitani, 1983, p. 121)

Graham Parkes describes Nishitani's field of consciousness as a "mode of experience" in which "we find ourselves, as subjects of consciousness, in a world of objects, to which we ordinarily

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[4] For a contemporary example, Google "The Dress."

relate (if we think about it) ‘by means of concepts and representations.’” (Parkes, 2015, p. 6). Moreover, Parkes argues, on “the field of consciousness we ‘see things from the standpoint of the self.’” (Parkes, 2015, p. 6). From another perspective, Masao Abe (a Kyoto School thinker) describes Nishitani’s field of consciousness as “the locus of separation of subject and object, or opposition between within and without. There, self and things remain fundamentally separated from one another” (Abe, 1989, p. 20). Hence, Nishitani resists the claim that we are granted access to the world through reason and sensation. “Although we ordinarily think of things in the external world as real,” Nishitani argues, “we may not actually get in touch with the reality of those things” (Nishitani, 1983, p. 9). Nishitani could be understood as a radical *perspectivist* much like how Zen master Dōgen suggested the fact that “When one side is illuminated, the other side is darkened” (Dōgen, trans. Davis in 2009, p. 256). However, although it could be argued that on the field of consciousness, that is, of objects, that we are granted access to a certain aspect of reality, Nishitani seems to be suggesting that the field of consciousness does not grant access to a sort of higher, or ultimate reality. However, Nishitani does seem to think that there is a *way* to access a complete, “ultimate” reality.

Despite Nishitani’s reluctance that either of these methods grant privileged access to the *jitai* (suchness) of all things, Nishitani claims that a third possibility, one that could go “beyond consciousness and intellect,” can give access to the suchness of any given thing, and would be best understood as a “field of *śūnyatā* or emptiness” (Nishitani, 1983, p. 121). Thurman notes that Nishitani “runs into the ancient difficulty with representing the awareness on this field as some sort of third level of consciousness” (Thurman, 1989, p. 157). This field, Nishitani claims, is a field or standpoint of wisdom, a wisdom of what “we might call a ‘knowing of non-knowing.'" (Nishitani, 1983, p. 121). In other words, this field of wisdom is an acceptance of the ineffability of the real. "From this field", Nishitani argues,

> we could take a second look at conscious or intellectual knowing and see it reduce finally to nothing other than a 'knowing of non-knowing.' Similarly, it would be a field of a praxis that might be called an 'action of non-action,' whence we could even take a second look at all our activity and see it as nothing other than an 'action of non action.' (Nishitani, 1983, p. 121-122)

Moreover, "it would be a standpoint where knowledge and praxis are one, a field where things would become manifest in their suchness" (Nishitani, 1983, p. 122). Heisig claims the standpoint of *śūnyatā* "is not so much a philosophical 'position' as it is the achievement of an original self-awareness (our self-nature), compared to which all other consciousness is caught in the fictional darkness of ignorance, or what the Buddhists calls *avidyā*" (Heisig, 2001, p. 223).

This conversion from the standpoint of consciousness to nihility "comes about as nihility appears at the ground of those fields and as subject and object are 'nullified' from the ground up" (Nishitani, 1983, p. 122). Hence, since "both subject and object are affected, the field of nihility differs from the field of 'materiality' and the field of 'Ideas'" (Nishitani, 1983, p. 122). However, the positions of materiality and ideas, according to Nishitani, "are identical in that both are conceived of in terms of things that appear as 'objects' on the field of the opposition of subject and object" (Nishitani, 1983, p. 122). In this sense, the positions of materiality and ideas do not differ from one another. However, in the field of nihility, "all that is ordinarily said to exist or to be real on the fields of sensation and reason is unmasked as having nihility at its ground, as lacking roots from the very beginning" (Nishitani, 1983, p. 122). "In other words," Nishitani argues,

> Directly beneath the field of man's being-in-the-world, and the field of the very possibility of that being, the field of the impossibility of that being has opened up. The field where man has his being is his teleological dwelling place; it is the place where he has his life with a conscious purpose as a rational being. And yet it is disclosed as a field merely floating for a brief moment within a boundless, endless, and meaningless world governed by mechanical laws (in the broad sense of the term) and devoid of any *telos*.
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> Our human life is established on the base of an abyss of death. (Nishitani, 2004, p. 110)

Mirroring early Buddhist notions of impermanence (*mujō*), Nishitani argues that there is an essential nihility, or nothingness, beneath all things in the universe. That is, in due time, all things in both a cosmological and existential sense, will cease to exist. From the standpoint of consciousness, this fact is recognized. This realization, comes from those questions we tend to ask ourselves in times of despair, such as, "Who am I? Why do I exist?" (Heisig, 2001, p. 220). Following this recognition, however, one is transported to the field of nihility. "On the field of nihility," Nishitani argues, "all that is ordinarily said to exist or to be real on the fields of sensation and reason is unmasked as having nihility at its ground, as lacking roots from the very beginning" (Nishitani, 1983, p. 122). This "nullification", Nishitani argues, "is nothing more than a display of the form of 'illusory appearance' essential to all beings" (Nishitani, 1983, p. 122). Heisig describes Nishitani's challenging notion of nihility as

> the nullification of the self by the nullification of the ground it has to stand on. It is not that the self is annihilated out of existence, but that all certitude is completely absorbed in doubt, and that this doubt becomes more real than the self or the world it belongs to. It is a Great Doubt. (Heisig, 2001, p. 220)

However, Nishitani argues that although nihility, nothingness, or impermanence, is “still looked upon as something outside of existence it is still being viewed from the side of existence. It is a nothingness represented from the side of being, a nothingness set in opposition to being, a *relative nothingness*” (Nishitani, 1983, p. 123). Nothingness is seen as something on the horizon of being, and is never in focus. Nothingness in this sense is always a projection and never actualized. This is why, Nishitani claims, it is necessary to have “nihility go a step further and convert to *śūnyatā*” (Nishitani, 1983, p. 123). However, the conversion from the regular standpoint of consciousness, that is, “the field of sense perception or the field of rational thinking,” (Nishitani, 1983, p. 122) to the new standpoint of emptiness, requires an intermediate step. Although Nishitani is not concrete in his reasons as to *why* nihility must be overcome and converted to *śūnyatā*, Abe distills three reasons as to “why Nishitani thinks nihility must be overcome, and second, why Nishitani maintains one must convert nihility to *śūnyatā* beyond nihility” (Abe, 1989, p. 24). (i) Nishitani thinks that nihilism must be overcome because “nihility is not completely free from representation. As the negation of the existence of things nihility stands in opposition to existence” (Abe, 1989, p. 24). The problem with nihility as something that stands in opposition to existence, Abe argues, is that unlike “the existence of things, nihility is not an object of consciousness, and yet there remains a sense in which nihility is still viewed objectively” (Abe, 1989, p. 24). “In other words,” Abe concludes, “[nihility] is still being viewed from the side of being, a nothingness set in opposition to being, a *relative nothingness*” (Abe, 1989, p. 24). (ii) Abe argues that on the field of nihility, “nihility is seen lying ‘outside’ of the existence of the self” (Abe, 1989, p. 24). Finally, (iii) “nihility is essentially of a transitional, not definitive character. If in nihility, while the existence of subject and things is disclosed in its reality, it is transformed into a question, the standpoint of nihility cannot resolve that question" (Abe, 1989, p. 25).

The third stage (the standpoint of *śūnyatā*), Heisig claims, is reached "when that nihility is itself nullified — again, not annihilated but transcended through its negation — in the awareness that the world of being that rests on the nihility of the self and all things is only a relative manifestation of nothingness as it is encountered *in* reality" (Heisig, 2001, p. 220–221). For Nishitani, *śūnyatā* (*kū*), or emptiness, differs from nihility, or relative nothingness, in the sense that emptiness "is not represented as some 'thing' outside of being and other beings. It is not simply an 'empty nothing,' but rather an *absolute emptiness*, emptied even of these representations of emptiness" (Nishitani, 1983, p. 123). Emptiness, for Nishitani, means to suggest a position that is free from all representation, even of itself. For these reasons, emptiness (null representation) is located nowhere and is self-identical with being. While *relative nothingness* is always projected outside of being, *absolute emptiness* is self-identical with being. This *relative nothingness* can be understood in concrete terms. Consider your own death: although it is positioned outside of existence, it is totally real. *Absolute emptiness* however, is emptied even of representations of itself hence its "non-location location" and why it is self-identical with being (and nothingness). Heisig notes, "Beneath the world, all around it, there is an encompassing absolute nothingness that *is* reality. Nihility is emptied out, as it were, into an absolute emptiness, or what Buddhism calls *śūnyatā*" (Heisig, 2001, p. 221). Nishitani argues that at "the elemental source where being appears as one with emptiness, at the home-ground of being, emptiness appears as one with being" (Nishitani, 1983, p. 123). This elemental source, however, Nishitani stresses, "does not mean some point recessed behind the things that we see with our eyes and think with our minds" (Nishitani, 1983, p. 123). Rather, this elemental source "is as close as can be, 'within hand,' of the things themselves" (Nishitani, 1983, p. 123). For Nishitani, this elemental source is not to be understood as either atomic or monadic, and neither is this elemental source to be understood as our mental faculties that think reality "into" the world. However, we are "used to representing things," Nishitani argues, "as objects on the field of sensation or the field of reason, thus keeping them at a distance from ourselves" (Nishitani, 1983, p. 123). Moreover, Nishitani claims that on the field of reason and sensation "we can go on thinking of ourselves as incapable of coming within hand of things, and of things in themselves as forever unknowable and out of our reach" (Nishitani, 1983, p. 123). Nishitani suggests that from the fields of sensation and reason, things in their suchness are always out of reach.

Nishitani argues that although things appear as substances on the field of *śūnyatā*, they do not appear as substances "in the same sense that each possessed on the field of reason" (Nishitani, 1983, p. 124). However, recall that stepping through nihility is the only way to recognize the field of *śūnyatā*. This transition, Nishitani argues, creates a "difference between what is grasped as the selfness of the thing on the field of reason, and the selfness of the thing as it is in its own home-ground" (Nishitani, 1983, p. 124). While on the field of consciousness (sensation and reason) we can speak of things as "'being one thing or another' or as 'existing as one thing or another'" (Nishitani, 1983, p .124). However, on the field of *śūnyatā*,

> the selfness of a thing cannot be expressed simply in terms of its "being one thing or another." It is rather disclosed precisely as something that cannot be so expressed. Selfness is laid bare as something that cannot on the whole be expressed in the ordinary language of reason, nor for that matter in any language containing logical form. Should we be forced to put into words all the same, we can only express it in terms of a paradox,

> such as: “It is *not* this thing or that, therefore it *is* this thing or that.” (Nishitani, 1983, p. 124)

Again, Nishitani insists that only from the standpoint of emptiness can we break through common duality (the field of consciousness) in order to gain access to things in their suchness. From the standpoint of emptiness, things can no longer be expressed in definite terms. Rather, on the field of emptiness, things can be *approximated* in language through the use of paradox. However, Nishitani recognizes the dissonance of paradox on the rational mind, arguing,

> [o]n the field of emptiness, substantiality is an absolutely non-substantial substantiality. So long as we propose to adopt the rational idiom and intellectual concepts to which talk about substance belongs, we have no choice but to speak of the selfness of things in such terms. For we are faced with something that cannot be expressed originally with words. (Nishitani, 1983, p. 125)

Grasping for words, Nishitani recognizes the ancient dilemma of expressing that which can’t be expressed. The ancient Chinese ran into a similar problem. As noted in the first passage of the Tao Te Ching, “As for the Way, the Way that can be spoken of is not the constant Way” (Lao-Tzu, trans. Henricks, 1989, p. 53).

When Nishitani suggests that “the mode of being of things as they are in themselves is not substance but something that might be called non-substantial substance,” he means to suggest that “being is only being in unison with emptiness” (Nishitani, 1983, p. 125). Recalling ancient idioms, Nishitani claims that “‘Fire does not burn fire,’ ‘The sword does not cut the sword,’ ‘The eye does not see the eye’” (Nishitani, 1983, p. 125). This paradoxical representation of things “bespeaks the selfness by virtue of which the fire is on its own home-ground in the act of combustion” (Nishitani, 1983, p. 125).  “Of course,” Nishitani argues, “when we say that hotness as such is not hot, we do not mean that the concept 'hotness' is not hot. We are calling into question, on a field that transcends even the realm of reason where concepts are constituted, a fact that has become manifest in its suchness" (Nishitani, 1983, p. 127).

For Nishitani, there "are not two worlds, a sensory one and a supersensory one (in Kantian terms, a world of *phenomenon* and a world of *noumena*)" (Nishitani, 1983, p. 127). Neither the sensory nor the supersensory world, Nishitani argues, grant access to "the world in its suchness. Neither of them is the world we actually live in" (Nishitani, 1983, p. 127). Rather, for Nishitani, "the 'world' of primary fact is one" (Nishitani, 1983, p. 127). Moreover, the "very fact that we can consider our extended environment to be a world, and then think up a supersensory world behind it, happens in the first place only because we are actually living in a world of primary fact" (Nishitani, 1983, p. 127). In other words, "a hot thing emerges into being as what it is in itself at a point beyond all categories of substance, quality, quantity and the like—namely on the field of *śūnyatā*, or absolute nothingness. There a thing becomes master of itself" (Nishitani, 1983, p. 127).

In another sense, Nishitani suggests that for a thing to be a master of itself is to suggest that it is autonomous. By autonomy, Nishitani argues, "we do not mean a mode of being of things in which they are revealed to *us*, in which the face they turn in our direction is merely, as it were, the front side or 'surface' of things. It is rather a mode of being that has nothing at all to do with our representations or judgments; yet it is not the back side, or hidden aspect of things" (Nishitani, 1983, p. 127). However, for something to be autonomous, Nishitani does not mean to suggest that all things have a consciousness or subjectivity to them. That is, Nishitani is not advocating for panpsychism. Rather, "we are not thinking of things anthropomorphically" (Nishitani, 1983, p. 127-128). Nishitani claims that language restricts ontological commitments.

As far as language is concerned, we are always limited to talking about the selfness of things as being substantial and the autonomous nature of things as being subjective. However, this problem, Nishitani claims, is a problem of language but not of ontology. “But”, Nishitani argues, “of itself it is neither substance nor subject” (Nishitani, 1983, p. 128). The selfness of things is not dependent on any conceptualization or representation of *it*.

Nishitani claims that if the selfness of things is neither substance nor subject, we then “have here a completely different concept of existence, one that has not up to now become a question for people in their daily lives, one that even philosophers have yet to give consideration” (Nishitani, 1983, p. 128). Reaching back into his own tradition, Nishitani claims that Bashō (one of the greatest, if not the greatest, Haiku poets of Edo Japan) pointed to this concept of existence. Nishitani quotes Bashō’s poem:

> From the pine tree,
> learn of the pine tree.
> and from the bamboo
> of the bamboo. (Bashō in Nishitani, 1983, p. 128)

Nishitani pulls certain subtleties from Bashō’s haiku. Nishitani claims that Bashō

> does not simply mean that we should ‘observe the pine tree carefully.’ Still less does he mean for us to ‘study the pine tree scientifically.’ He means for us to enter into the mode of being where the pine tree is the pine tree itself, and the bamboo is the bamboo itself, and from there to look at the pine tree and the bamboo. (Nishitani, 1983, p. 128)

Nishitani seems to be suggesting an *emptying* of conceptual barriers between the world and the subject. Moreover, Nishitani is advocating for a kind of playful attitude of *becoming* the other. Nishitani claims that Bashō’s haiku “calls on us to betake ourselves to the dimension where things become manifest in their suchness, to attune ourselves to the selfness of the pine tree and the selfness of the bamboo" (Nishitani, 1983, p. 128). Nishitani invokes the term *narau* (the Japanese term for 'learn') to demonstrate this point. *Narau* "carries the sense of 'taking after' something, of making an effort to stand essentially in the same mode of being as the thing one wishes to learn about" (Nishitani, 1983). And again, Nishitani insists that only "on the field of *śūnyatā* that this becomes possible" (Nishitani, 1983, p. 128).

Furthermore, Nishitani invokes an earlier Sanskrit term *samādhi* (settling). *Samādhi*, Nishitani describes, "has been used to designate the state of mind in which a man gathers his own mind together and focuses it on a central point, thereby taking a step beyond the sphere of ordinary conscious and self-conscious mind and, in that sense, forgetting his ego" (Nishitani, 1983, p. 128). However, Nishitani insists that while *samādhi* can be understood as a state of mind, in another sense, *samādhi* "also applies to the mode of being of a thing in itself when it has settled into its own position" (Nishitani, 1983, p. 128). This "samādhi-being," Nishitani argues, is "no different from designating something as a 'definite' thing" (Nishitani, 1983, p. 128). However, there is a difference in the way we can approach definite things. "Ordinarily," Nishitani argues,

> a thing is defined from a point outside of the thing itself. On the standpoint of reason, for instance, this is expressed by means of a "definition" as the "form" of that thing. Or again, one may consider a specific individual to originate as an amalgam of eidetic form and matter, with matter functioning as the so-called principle of individuation. In either case, things are being viewed from the outside. (Nishitani, 1983, p. 129)

Here, Nishitani is recognizing the problem of objective representation of any given thing. "In contrast," however, "the sheer definition of the selfness of a thing may be expressed as its samādhi-being (its mode of being 'settled'). In such a mode of being, that a certain thing *is* is constituted as an absolute fact" (Nishitani, 1983, p. 129).

Returning again to the notion that "being is only being in unison with emptiness" Nishitani further elaborates. For Nishitani, being in unison with emptiness means "that being possesses at its ground the character of an 'illusion,' that everything that is, is in essence fleeting illusory appearance" (Nishitani, 1983, p. 129). By illusory, and this is an important distinction, Nishitani means to suggest that all things, at their base level, are fleeting or impermanent. Things are illusory in the sense that they appear to be permanent (in their physical state or *form*); however, they are fleeting and dynamic. There are no doubt *reliable* phenomena; however, the point here is that nothing persists forever. It is tempting to interpret this in a cosmological sense (and many Buddhists do), but, for Nishitani, impermanence is an existential concern. That is, our own death is certain and, for the most part, demands our attention at many points in our lives.

In another sense, illusory appearance "also means that the being of things in emptiness is more truly real than what the reality or real beings of things is usually taken to be (for instance, their substance)" (Nishitani, 1983, p. 129). Being, in unison with emptiness (that is, without representation), signifies "the *elemental* mode of being of things on their own home-ground and tells us that this is the thing itself as it is" (Nishitani, 1983, p. 129). This elemental mode of being is, Nishitani argues, intrinsically illusory. However, Nishitani hesitates to use the term illusory in its regular sense, arguing "when we speak of illusory appearance, we do not mean that there are real beings in addition that merely happen to adopt illusory guises to appear in" (Nishitani, 1983, p. 129). Rather, Nishitani is advocating for a sort of "illusory realism." Fundamentally, all things are inherently fleeting.

Another way Nishitani refers to this mode of being is as “the middle” mode of being. Recalling an idiom, Nishitani explains that it “has been said, ‘If you try to explain something by comparing it with something else, you fail to hit the middle.’ We can say something similar with regard to the thing as it is in itself” (Nishitani, 1983, p. 130-131). “If,” Nishitani argues,

> from the standpoint of reason, one conceives of the thing in itself as a substance and explains *what* it is substantially, one does not thereby find the thing itself but only an eidetic form “comparable” to the thing itself. In even trying to ordain it as one thing another by means of thought, one has already missed the thing itself. (Nishitani, 1983)

In a sense, Nishitani is arguing that neither our conceptual personae nor our categorical concepts are ontological. Conceptual personae and categorical concepts are only ever comparable to the world and never indicative of the world itself. The middle mode of being that Nishitani is suggesting is, rather, a sort of unmediated access to the thing itself. That is, according to Nishitani, only from an *emptying* of the intellect (ordinary, standpoint of consciousness) do we gain access to the real. “The thing itself goes on positing itself as it is;” Nishitani claims, “it goes on being in its own ‘middle,’ a shape without shape, a form of non-form” (Nishitani, 1983, p. 131). The thing in itself, for Nishitani, is no longer a *thing* at all. But rather, in the paradoxical terms Nishitani (and many before him) resort to using, the thing itself is *non-substantially substantial*. Again, this paradoxical language is only functional as a sort of approximation. Any form of representation otherwise would automatically position us on the field of ordinary being or consciousness. “In a word,” Nishitani argues,

> all sensory modes and all supersensory eidetic forms of a thing are not to be seen apart from the ‘position’ (the self-positing mode of being) of the things. They are all appearances of the thing itself, which remains through it all in the mode of being of a

> shape without shape, a form of non-form, in its "middle" mode of being. (Nishitani, 1983, p. 131)

Put another way, Nishitani quotes an ancient idiom, suggesting "All things have a hold on themselves" (Nishitani, 1983, p. 131). Again, this is only possible, however, on the field of *śūnyatā* (emptiness). From the standpoint of emptiness, that is, an unmediated imageless image of thought (or earlier noted as a "knowing of not knowing"), "each thing becomes manifest in its suchness in its very act of affirming itself, according to its own particular potential and *virtus* and in its own particular shape" (Nishitani, 1983, p. 131). Thus, Nishitani claims, "the field of *śūnyatā* is nothing other than the field of the Great Affirmation" (Nishitani, 1983, p. 131) spoken of in the Buddhist tradition.

Up to this point, Nishitani has primarily been focused on addressing the substance of *things*. However, shifting gears, Nishitani addresses the subject or the self. Nishitani reiterates that the "notion of substance expresses something that subsists as the ground of the various attributes of a thing. It expresses the mode of being in which a thing comes into being as itself" (Nishitani, 1983, p. 131). "Similarly," Nishitani argues, "the notion of subject expresses something that subsists in a given human being as the basis of his [or her] various faculties as a unifying factor" (Nishitani, 1983, p. 131). However, much like the talk of how substance is meant to express a thing as itself, Nishitani is hesitant as to whether or not talk the notion of subject truly represents any given person. For Nishitani, the notion that "the subject expresses the essence of human existence has become almost too self-evident to bear mention" (Nishitani, 1983, p. 132). Nishitani traces the notion that the subject is self-evident to Descartes and his *cogito ergo sum*. Moreover, Nishitani claims, Kant took Descartes' radical subjectivity to its logical conclusion. "In the theoretical philosophy of Kant," Nishitani argues,

> the standpoint of the subject appears as what he himself calls a “Copernican Revolution.” Our cognition or experience of an object does not result from the intuitions and concepts we have concerning the object being in accord with that object; but on the contrary, says Kant, it results from the object being in accord with the a priori characteristics of our faculty of sense intuition and the a priori concepts of understanding. (Nishitani, 1983, p. 132)

Kant’s position, Nishitani claims, places him somewhere in-between traditional metaphysics and Humean skepticism. Furthermore, Kant’s project became an epistemological problem. That is, “Kant went on to argue that the range of epistemic possibilities is limited for us to the phenomenal world, while the thing-in-itself is behind the phenomenal: actual reality, alone and of itself, but as such unknowable by us” (Nishitani, 1983, p. 132).

The problem with Kant’s transcendental idealism and the thing-in-itself, Nishitani argues, is that it’s based upon a faulty presupposition. Nishitani claims, “Kant looks on things from the very outset as *object*; or, to put it the other way around, his standpoint is that of *representation*. In his theoretical philosophy, an object, representational point of view is presupposed as a constant base” (Nishitani, 1983, p. 133). To presuppose that *things* are already objects, is to “grasp things on the field of consciousness, under the Form they display insofar as they unveil themselves to us” (Nishitani, 1983, p. 133). In other words, to presuppose that *things* in the worlds are objects, we are already limiting ourselves to the standpoint of consciousness. And from the presupposition that *things* are just objects on the field of consciousness, “all objects are received as representations” (Nishitani, 1983, p. 133). From this, a paradox arises. “When a thing as it is in itself is setup up objectively ‘outside’ of the subject,” Nishitani argues, “it is in fact represented as such *by* the subject” (Nishitani, 1983, p. 134). Thus, in Kant’s framework, "substance was changed into one of the elements that go into the makeup of things insofar as they appear as phenomenon. Thus at the same time, there came into being a sharp distinction between the phenomenal world and the world of things-in-themselves" (Nishitani, 1983, p. 134). What this amounts to, Nishitani admits— however crudely—is that

> the old metaphysics and the critical philosophy of Kant do not differ on the fundamental point of taking the standpoint of the object and its representation as basic and presupposed. The only change is the relationship between the object and its representation which operated as a *covert* basis in the former was made *overt* in the latter and there given approval. (Nishitani, 1983, p. 134)

While the old metaphysics "took its orientation from the stance that our representations fashion themselves after their objects," Kant, however, "took his stand on an opposite orientation: that objects fashion themselves after our representations of them" (Nishitani, 1983, p. 134-135). Nishitani suggests that the difference between these two orientations "is not simply a matter of opposing orientation on the same plane" but rather "that the objective-representational point of view is basic to both conception and a presupposition common to both" (Nishitani, 1983, p. 135). That is, while Kant is generally received as "turning the standpoint of the old metaphysics on its head" in actuality, Kant is "at a more fundamental level, still grounded in the same presupposition" (Nishitani, 1983, p. 135).

However, Kant's radical subjectivity could only go so far. Nishitani suggests that Kant's radical subjectivity eventually "reached the standpoint of reason, of absolute reason; and then, breaking through still further, it laid bare the nihility at its own ground" (Nishitani, 1983, p. 135). "But", Nishitani argues,

> when the concept of substance, which was supposed to express the selfness of things, and the concept of subject, which was supposed to express the selfness of the self, strike against nihility at their very ground and there negated, they make a leap forward onto a field where the things and the self they were out to prehend manifest their selfness. This means that, on the field of nihility, neither things nor the self are objects of cognition and, hence, can no longer be prehended or expressed conceptually (as *logos*). (Nishitani, 1983, p. 136)

Thus, Nishitani claims, we "seem no longer to be able to say 'what' they are" (Nishitani, 1983, p. 136).

Nishitani's suggestion, that nihility opens up at the ground of all things, is subtle. What Nishitani means to suggest by this is that "the existence of things and of the self are both transformed into something utterly incomprehensible, of which we can no longer say 'what' it is" (Nishitani, 1983, p. 136). Moreover, Nishitani claims that this Great Doubt differs from any form of skepticism. While the skeptic *does* doubt, the "Great Doubter" *is* doubt. For Nishitani, this intermediate step, the movement onto the field of nihility, is an essential movement towards the field of *śūnyatā*. "On the field of nihility," Nishitani argues, "where the field of reason has been broken through, cognition is no longer the issue" (Nishitani, 1983, p. 136). Rather, "things and the self are no longer objects of cognition" and the "field of nihility is rather the appearance of the self-awareness that the selfness of things and the self are utterly beyond the grasp of cognition" (Nishitani, 1983, p. 136).

However, from the standpoint of nihility, Nishitani does not give up the notion of the *real*. Reality, and the apprehension of it, is still possible. Yet, reality is not reclaimed by return to the standpoint of consciousness. Rather, as Nishitani claims frequently, from a step past the standpoint of nihility reality to the standpoint of *śūnyatā* reality is accessible. *Śūnyatā*, or emptiness, differs from nihility in the sense that while nihility is viewed in opposition to existence itself, *śūnyatā* “is another thing altogether” (Nishitani, 1983, p. 138).

The standpoint of *śūnyatā* is not a “negative negativity, nor is it an essentially transitional standpoint. It is the standpoint at which absolute negation is at the same time […] a Great Affirmation” (Nishitani, 1983, p. 138). Neither is the standpoint of *śūnyatā* a position in which all things and the self are empty. “If this were so,” Nishitani argues, “it would be no different from the way that nihility opens up at the ground of things and the self” (Nishitani, 1983, p. 138). Rather, the “field of emptiness goes beyond both the field of sense intuition and rational thinking; but that does not mean that the subject turns to the object and complies with it, as is the case with sensual realism or dogmatic metaphysics” (Nishitani, 1983, p. 139). Moreover, the field of emptiness “pertains to the realization (manifestation-*sive*-apprehension) of the thing itself, which cannot be prehended by sensation or reason” (Nishitani, 1983, p. 139). Thus, the standpoint of *śūnyatā* is, ultimately, an epistemological “non-paradigm paradigm.”

## Conclusion

In this paper I have (i) provided a brief background to the paper in which I portray Nishitani as a diplomat between two philosophical worlds. Nishitani, I argue, is an example of how dialogical encounters between East and West *should* look. Moreover, I claimed that, in many ways, my project was a political statement. That is, although I don’t necessarily agree with Nishitani on every point, my project was an attempt to honestly philosophize with a figure outside of the Western tradition of philosophy. After that, (ii) I provided a brief introduction to the project in which I insist on the importance of practice over argumentation. I argued that above all rigorous argumentation; nothing can replace the actual practice of Zen. Following the introductory remarks, (iii) I gave a brief account of the history and naming of the Kyoto School of which Nishitani was a part. Following that, (iv) I gave a detailed account of Nishitani's life and career. I found that through many hardships, Nishitani stayed resilient and active as a scholar. Finally, (v) I gave a detailed reconstruction and analysis of Nishitani's standpoint of *śūnyatā*.

Nishitani's standpoint of *śūnyatā* proves to be challenging to a Western audience (including myself) for a couple of different reasons. First of all, Nishitani is frequently unclear in his definitions. And although there are very good reasons as to why he is unclear in his definitions, it can be frustrating at times. This is evident in Nishitani's distinction between the standpoints of consciousness, nihility, and *śūnyatā*. It's not entirely clear what each of these distinctions are, and in many, are greatly related, or interconnected, to one another. However, and this is critical, Nishitani is *not* an analytic philosopher. Rather, Nishitani is a mystic, or an existential Buddhist. That is, his terms are not well defined because his very position demands that the terms of his very analysis cannot be defined at all. Moreover, Nishitani's arguments *must* be interpreted as a sort of "pointing towards." Nishitani's arguments are only a suggestion, or approximation, of the experience itself. Nishitani, in his later years, envisioned his philosophical project as the "standpoint of Zen" (Davis, 2017). For these reasons, I insist that any refutation of Nishitani's position through rigorous argumentation falls short, and does no justice, to the experience that Nishitani is "pointing at."

Secondly, Nishitani's metaphilosophical position, his challenge to the presuppositions of what philosophy is generally understood to be, is also frustrating. What I mean to suggest is that Nishitani's position privileges experience and realization as the epistemological authority of reality over cognition and the intellect/reason. In this sense, and in a rather "Nishitanian" sense, Nishitani is advocating for a "non-philosophy philosophy," *If* we confine philosophy only to matters of intellect or reason, the standpoint of *śūnyatā* is not a philosophical position. Moreover, from Nishitani's position, it seems as the though the division between religion and philosophy seem to vanish. What we are ultimately left with is a philosophical realism that is no doubt *weird*. Things, and the subject, are still real but beyond cognition. For Nishitani, like the ancients before him, claim that reality is ineffable. From this, Nishitani *must* make certain ontological commitments. No longer can Nishitani grant the existence of, for example, conceptual personae and categorical concepts. Rather, Nishitani is, ontologically, left only with particulars—even in repetition. Thus, Nishitani is a radical non-essentialist.

If Nishitani is correct, it seems to be the case that the conversation must end and we must pay heed to Wittgenstein's warning concerning the ineffable—that we can't speak of it. However, I claim that if we loosen our grasp on language and allow for language to operate as approximation, I see no reason as to why the ineffable cannot be a topic of philosophy. While language is generally rigid, direct, and correlative, language can also, as I mentioned before, *point towards*. That being said, where does "Nishitanian" scholarship go? Although Nishitani diligently conversed with traditions outside of his own, it was not reciprocated until much later. Despite Nishitani's constant engagement with the continental trends in philosophy, engagement with Nishitani's thought remained minimal (see my earlier comments on Heidegger). However, Kyoto School scholarship, and its relationship to Western philosophy, has been active in the last fifteen years. Books, such as *Japanese and Continental Philosophy* by Davis, Schroeder, and Wirth and *Zen and the Art of Postmodern Philosophy* by Olsen, demonstrate the vitality of such a project. That being said, figures of the Kyoto School, such as Nishitani, are also being taken seriously in other philosophical trends such as logic and analytic philosophy.[5] "Nishitanian"

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[5] See (Tanaka, Deguchi, Garfield, & Priest, 2015), (Garfield, 2015)

scholarship has taken many forms but what I find to be most interesting and fruitful is the engagement between Nishitani and contemporary philosophical trends. Despite the similarity between Nishitani and contemporary continental philosophy, there are very important differences between the two. Although Nishitani is caught up in the post-Kantian clutter, his perspective is radically different. I generally agree with Olsen, who suggests that although "some postmodern philosophers share the attempt to overcome representational thinking with Zen philosophy, the overall outcome and general perspective of postmodern philosophy is very different than Zen. If postmodern philosophy is, for instance, a search for new paradigms, Zen philosophy undermines all past, present, and future paradigms" (Olson, 2000, p. xii). This distinction has interesting implications in practical, and even social, affairs. I argue that Nishitani has something to offer to current philosophical problems. After all, Nishitani claimed numerous times that his philosophical insights were to function as a *place* in which to do philosophy. Nishitani's standpoint of *śūnyatā* is most certainly a practical position. Nishitani's epistemological approach, his non-dual metaphysics, and his "non-philosophy philosophy" could have interesting implications in philosophy, the social sciences, and beyond. However, scholars must take that first step towards "global philosophy," and begin to take seriously traditions outside of their own, before interesting philosophical synthesis or revelations can occur.

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