

NON-I AND THOU: NISHIDA, BUBER, AND THE MORAL CONSEQUENCES OF SELF-ACTUALIZATION

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For some time now I have been interested in what happens to the I-Thou relationship in the shift from a philosophy of being to a philosophy of nothingness. In pursuing that interest, I have found again and again that untangling the latent assumptions continues to defer the satisfaction of a clear answer. Even now I am astounded at the enormous lack of clarity of the question. In the midst of this astonishment I would like to offer a preliminary attempt at an answer.

Remapping the History of Philosophy

In Western intellectual history, to speak of the "philosophy of being" is to speak of a class of systems defined by a great diversity with the slenderest of commonalities: the idea that the nature of reality is being. At first glance, just as it is superfluous to speak of a "philosophy of reality"—as if there could be any other kind of philosophy—so, too, the qualification "of being" seems no less superfluous. If the class of philosophy of beings embraces all philosophies without exception, then it no longer makes sense to speak of it as a class.

Ever since the Enlightenment, European philosophy has known of systems of thought from "the East" which claim that reality is ultimately not being but nothingness. The blossoming of mythological research and comparative religion in the last century, as well as the rigorous study of Far Eastern cultures, drew further attention not only to the age of these systems and the sophistication of their logics but also to the possibility that they may have influenced Greek philosophy already from its formative period. What delayed full recognition of these systems of thought by the Western philosophical community was not only the unfamiliarity of their terminologies and method of argumentation but their apparently insoluble bonds to moral and religious traditions still alien to Western culture.

In the wake of the birth of the new human sciences of anthropology, sociology, and psychology, Europe and later the United States witnessed the birth or reemergence from obscurity of a litter of new "wisdoms" that claimed to pick up where traditional religion and philosophy had left off, reasserting the unity of all true knowledge, rejecting the separation between religious truth and scientific truth, reestablishing the practical use of wisdom as the ultimate healer, reopening the hidden treasures of the esoteric tradition, and making its powers available to a new world in the making. Not only did movements like theosophy and anthroposophy claim the authority of classical and esoteric Western thought, but they embraced the

traditions of the Near and Far East as well, culling ideas freely from the Christian, Islamic, and Buddhist world for their stew.

Little, if any of this, has ever been given a formal place by intellectual historians in the story of philosophy or the story of science, though such wisdom movements have continued to arise and pass away up to the present. In any event, this was the climate in which a range of philosophies of the East made their own way to the West early in this century, independently of each other and independently of their importation by Western movements. That they were received in the main as "esoteric" is not surprising. For one thing, their categories and discourse were closer to Western esoteric traditions than to anything in the mainstream. For another, like the wisdom movements just referred to above, although for quite different reasons, Eastern systems of thought did not make a point of distinguishing the philosophical from the moral and the religious, and in general lacked the kind of methodological self-awareness that philosophy had come to demand of itself as a result of the critiques of mathematics and the natural sciences. Absent the textual and cultural context that made such systems of thought classical in their own countries, there was no way for them to be accepted as they are into the history of philosophy.

It has only been in the latter half of our own century that this has begun to change. To mention only one sequence of symbolic events, in 1951 Charles Moore and others inaugurated the journal *Philosophy East and West*. In 1957 Moore joined hands with S. Rhadakrishnan to publish the *Source Book in Indian Philosophy*, which was followed by Wing-tsit Chan's *Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* in 1963. These works quickly found their way into philosophical libraries around the world as standard reference works. Projected volumes on Buddhist and Japanese philosophy were never completed, but the inclusion of Chan among the editors of the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* published in eight volumes by Macmillan in 1967 and the smattering of articles on Eastern thought signaled that a change had taken place. The updated version of the *Encyclopedia* has made considerable efforts to cover the field in much greater depth.¹

This broadening of the map is one of the most important events in the history of Western philosophy, and may indeed mark the most important watershed since the European Enlightenment. This is a tale that historians of the next century will have to sort out in hindsight. For now, it is enough to note that, as a result, ideas have been brought to the fore that have traditionally been relegated to the background of Western intellectual history. Among them is the reversal of the belief that being belongs to reality and nothingness to illusion. From a number of perspectives and with a theoretical diversity no less wide-ranging than that found in philosophies of being, philosophies of nothingness beat against the shores of classical Western ontology with a new set of questions. The underlying assumption of Heidegger's now classic question "Why are there beings rather than nothing?" begins to lose its rhetorical edge once the assumption is removed that nothingness is not, after all, merely an oppressive shadow of meaninglessness enveloping the world of beings. And once the identification of being with reality has been questioned, there is no

way simply to un-ask the question without forsaking one of the cardinal marks of philosophy, whatever its provenance: the quest for clear thinking.

Tracking the Shift from Being to Nothingness

Of course, not all non-Western philosophy, and not even all Buddhist philosophy, shares this idea of ultimate reality as nothingness. Still there is no tradition in classical Western philosophy to compare with the solid base that this idea has in the East, even where it is espoused only as a counterposition. What is more, it would be a mistake to assume that the initiative for broadening the history of philosophy to bring these systems into the picture has come principally from within Western philosophy. The principal stimulus has not come from Western philosophies reaching out to welcome alternative systems, but from non-Western philosophies struggling to pry open the assumptions about what constitutes world philosophy from within the language and argumentation of the West. If we are to track the shift from being to nothingness, this is best accomplished in the first place from within an intellectual history where the contrast has been studied in its most informed and critical manner, namely in the East. One of the chief reasons that the Buddhist philosophers of the Kyoto School—most notably Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945), Tanabe Hajime (1885–1962), and Nishitani Keiji (1900–1990)—have attracted attention in Western philosophical circles is precisely that they have been engaged in this prying open of classical philosophy from within, and have done so through a stress on the reality of “absolute nothingness.”

As I noted in passing above, the mixture of logic and speculative reason with moral and religious transformation that is commonplace in Eastern philosophies is not the case in the West. The earliest attempts at histories of non-Western “philosophies” written in the middle of the twentieth century point this out almost uniformly. For example, E.W.F. Tomlin wrote in 1950:

In the history of Western thought there is a thing called philosophy and there is a thing called theology; and it has usually been possible, except during certain periods such as the Middle Ages, to distinguish between the two. In the history of Eastern thought there is only a thing called theology.²

This is not simply a Western perspective imposed on the East. The first issue of *Philosophy East and West* opens with comments by George Santayana, John Dewey, and S. Radhakrishnan. While the two Westerners focus on the possibility of synthesis and dialogue among traditions, only the Easterner puts his finger on the crucial difference:

If the Greek origins of European philosophy have made it more intellectual, in the East the emphasis has been on the unease of the soul rather than on metaphysical curiosity. While the Western mind asks, What is it all about? the Eastern asks, What must I do to be saved?³

The consequences of this difference reach deeper than the mere risk of tainting clarity of thought with religious beliefs, or the mere possibility of enhancing cool, objective speculation with the fervor of religious faith. In a talk delivered to a Western audience in 1960, Takeuchi Yoshinori, perhaps the most illustrious of Tanabe's disciples, described the difference this way:

The life of religion includes philosophical thought as its counterpart, a sort of centrifugal force to its own centripetal tendencies. Strictly speaking, Buddhism has nothing like what Saint Paul refers to as the "folly of the cross." This ... has led it in a different direction from Western philosophy and religion. ... Philosophy has served Buddhism as an inner principle of religion, not as an outside critic. ... That is to say, philosophy in Buddhism is not speculation or metaphysical contemplation, but rather a metanoia of thinking, a conversion within reflective thought that signals a return to the authentic self—the no-self of anātman. ... It is a philosophy that transcends and overcomes the presuppositions of metaphysics. ... But how is one to explain this way of doing religious philosophy and reconstruct it in terms suitable to the present world when the very idea of philosophy and metaphysics has been usurped by Western models?⁴

Typical of the style of the Kyoto philosophers, Takeuchi then draws on Western tradition—notably Hegel, Kierkegaard, and Heidegger—to make his explanation. Without going into the details of his argument and particular reading of Buddhism, a number of points need clarifying before proceeding to the more specific concern of this essay.

First, a philosophy of nothingness obliges us neither to nihilism nor to a "becoming indifferent to the world, which is the source of evil."⁵ Granted there are nihilistic strains in Eastern philosophy and religion, and indeed nihilisms of many varieties. But there is no more direct connection between a philosophy of nothingness and a world-negating nihilism than there is between a philosophy of being and a world-affirming optimism.

Second, faced with a philosophy that claims nothingness as the ultimate nature of reality, a philosophy grounded in being is predisposed to reject the claim by showing that any genuine insight in the former is already accounted for in its own system, and that the failure to see this is based on a failure to understand the nature of being. When a philosophy of nothingness tackles a philosophy of being head-on, it may then return the compliment by showing how the preoccupation with being is laudable but misguided, and that the best achievements of that preoccupation are better preserved by making being subservient to nothingness. In what follows, I am assuming that both of these generalizations—whatever their psychological advantages—do an injustice to the facts of the matter: that the differences are not merely oversights but point to genuinely different insights.

Third, as Takeuchi attests, for the thinkers of the Kyoto School the bond between a metaphysics of nothingness and philosophical conversion is tied to the idea of non-ego, which seeks to displace the ego as the heart of philosophical reflection. Insofar as this entails adjusting one's idea of the structure and ideal form of the "I," it also brings into question the structure and ideal form of the "I-Thou" relationship.

Hence to ask what difference it makes to shift from a philosophy of being to a philosophy of nothingness is also to ask how the two accounts differ in their understanding of the general form of the forms of interhuman contact. Now while there is no higher court of appeal to weigh the differences objectively, neither is the question merely a clash of biases. In the shift from one philosophy to another one finds oneself quickly entangled in the struggle for the definition of the human and the problem of imposing uniformity on the idea of quality in human interaction. A closer look at this question will take us to the threshold of the comparison that concerns us here.

The I-Thou Relationship as a Context-specific Acquisition

Differences of language, culture, and worldview that give rise to the broad categories of East and West crystallize with special clarity in the idea of the I-Thou relationship.⁶ It is in this basic unit of conviviality that we understand what kind of difference these differences really make to the quality of human life. At the same time, it is only by recognizing the diversity of forms of the I-Thou relationship that one can awaken to one's own understanding of that relationship as a context-specific acquisition.

In the bald, general statement, there is little to take issue with in such claims. The evidence for pluralism in human society is too obvious to mention, and the critique of all forms of dogmatic monism too great a hallmark of modern consciousness to challenge. But the commitment to pluralism in today's world tends to slip into cliché: a truism in the abstract, an irrelevance in the concrete. Even as each new enhancement in the tools of communication, information, and travel is welcomed as one more step in the modern world's awakening to the rich diversity of languages, cultures, and philosophies that make it up, the day-to-day management of these tools rewards uniformity and punishes diversity. In our own century the retreat from foreign soil, one after the other, of the governments and armies of the great colonial powers marks the end of ideologies of linguistic, cultural, and philosophical supremacy that we have been taught to scorn as unworthy of the modern mind. In their place, a new, more uniform, and more widespread arrangement of powers and dependencies calling itself "the global community" has entered the picture, inflicted by the world's leading economies on those lagging behind in order to insure for themselves—and hence for the common good of all—free access to the economies of the laggards, who are politely designated "developing markets."

The deeper the forces of globalization penetrate into a particular society, the narrower the range of expression for context-specific diversity. And the narrower the range, the narrower the mind that exercises itself there. In the extreme, driven into a corner in its own native environment, the passion for linguistic, cultural, and philosophical specificity begins to concentrate on reestablishing national or ethnic identity. Rendered impotent and abstract by the ineluctable economic demands for uniformity, it reasserts itself xenophobically, and in so doing isolates itself still further from the mainstream of its own society. For those driven by such passion, as for those who have more or less resigned themselves to the debilitated role of their own

specificity, the *conquista* has made a complete circle: the homeland is turning foreign; what was once everyday practice is now becoming extremist, and attachment to tradition is being transformed into rebellion.

The global community may seem to shake free of its economic associations when it comes to ethical issues that require a consensus on "human nature" and transcend national borders—issues such as violations of human rights and the destruction of the natural environment. But here again, it is only at the abstract level that we can speak of a community based on such ideals. The organization of "community" on a global scale, as well as the clarification and execution of principles decided on, is unthinkable outside the framework of the world economy. What is more, the commitment to democratic process all but insures that a wide range of minority views will be swept to one side. The best a global morality can offer in the way of respect for pluralism is an ethic that enjoins the individual to "think globally, act locally," which is always and ever some form of "think in terms of a dominant specific ideal and apply it everywhere."

The global community does not make a good forum for clear thinking about fundamental differences in approach to what counts for the quality of a human life. But it is a fertile seedbed for generalized humanisms and visions of history designed to weave the whole wide diversity of custom, belief, language, and expression that make up human society on a single transcultural, transhistorical loom in patterns accessible to all people everywhere. New religions, spiritualities, and self-realization movements of every stripe trip over one another in their claims to sublimate the truth of all other religions, psychologies, and philosophies in the fold of some new teaching or revelation. To the outsider not caught up in the fever of the new doctrine, or otherwise committed, the pretense of universality is not difficult to see through. For the scholarly conscience, which is predisposed to view with suspicion coincidences of terminology generated in the translation of texts from vastly different contexts, the parochialism of transcendental truths allegedly confirmed *semper et ubique* is all the more patent. Ironically, it may be precisely by means of this masquerade that such movements do a better job than their traditional counterparts at recognizing the need of people to link the uncontrollable, unrelenting demands for globalization to the more familiar and manageable specificities of everyday life. I do not mean to deny the immense diversity that distinguishes these movements one from another, but I leave that question aside in order to see them as belonging to a larger process in modern society in which a narrow range of context-specific beliefs are elevated to the status of universal ideals in order to suppress the diversity of competing specificities.⁷

Insofar as the form of the concrete, lived I-Thou relationship is an acquisition specified by a particular context of language, culture, and philosophical reflection, radical changes in the context will necessarily affect the nature of that relationship. The claim that a philosophy of nothingness inspires an I-Thou relationship different from what we find in philosophies of being cannot be argued without taking into account the radical pressures on human social interaction to renounce this kind of difference in the interest of conformity to emerging global patterns of behavior.

Comparisons of the I-Thou relationship that abstract to idealized forms may help to clarify logical differences inherent in particular philosophical systems, but they do so at the expense of denying the lived, concrete I-Thou relationship as the primary fact that it is.

It is a short step from acknowledging the I-Thou relationship as a context-specific acquisition to questioning the dominant limits to pluralism in the definition of that relationship and the quality of human life. For now, it is enough to acknowledge that such limits are, in fact, at work, never mind the particulars of why these limits may be judged morally unacceptable. At the same time, I believe that resistance to the globalizing tendency must be grounded on a commitment to pluralism and variety of form that extends to even this most basic of human contacts, and that radical pluralism is more than just one more imposition of human will on the course of history—more than just a temporary fall from original unity or the karmic rubble of some ancient tower of Babel. Contrary to what the myth of the global village would have us believe, I am persuaded that the confidence that the modern mind has in pluralism will prove more resilient in the long run than the vestiges of colonialism, but that argument, too, is wide of my focus here.

To claim that the basic structure of the I-Thou relationship is a context-specific acquisition, and not an a priori given of human nature, complicates but does not necessarily negate the idea of a common human nature at work in the relationship. The search for a general form of the forms of the human is engaged in a paradox: on the one hand, it must attempt to say something universal about human nature; on the other, it must say this from a specific location in language, culture, and intellectual history. The patterns of the I-Thou are like patterns seen through a kaleidoscope. The only way to disable the jumble of possibilities is to take the whole apart and reduce it to a handful of colored stones and mirrors. The only way to enable one pattern is to restore the possibility of many patterns. This is the perennial problem of all analytic thinking, but in the case of a living relationship between conscious human individuals, which is the focus of the I-Thou relationship, the problem is multiplied. To come up with an account acceptable across times and cultures is to succumb to one of two mistakes: either some particularity is judged worthy of universalization or the universal retreats so far from the concrete, lived experience of the I-Thou that no concrete variety could ever falsify it. To refuse all such accounts because of the risks involved is to relinquish the decision to forces outside reflection—forces concentrated in the ideology of the global community and its economic machinery.

My focus here, as I stated at the outset, is on the relocation of the I-Thou relationship in a philosophy of nothingness. For reasons mentioned earlier, I have chosen as my point of departure the philosophy of the Kyoto School. Even here, the variety of ideas of nothingness and no-self frustrate attempts at simple generalization. Accordingly, I shall further limit myself to the ideas of Nishida as set down in a 1932 book-length essay relatively unknown in the West, *I and Thou*. As a counterpart to that book, I have chosen Martin Buber's book of the same name published ten years earlier. Taken together, they seem a suitable paradigm of the comparison.

Comparing Buber's understanding of the I-Thou to Eastern philosophies is not a mere imposition of hindsight. There is strong evidence that Buber's interest in Vedantic philosophy and Taoism were important ingredients in his development of the idea, and in later years he was interested in the affinities with Zen Buddhism. No doubt his study of Hasidism was the greatest determining factor in his attempt to overcome the dichotomy between a simple dualism on the one hand and a simple nondualism of mystical absorption or identity on the other. But already from the first time that he used the term "the I and the Thou" in 1909 he did so in a context that referred to a wide range of Eastern mysticisms.⁸ The contrast between the I-It relationship as one of *making* things happen and the I-Thou as a *letting* things happen echoes a fascination with the *wu wei* 無為 that goes back to a 1911 afterword that he wrote to *The Parables of Chuang-tsu* titled "The Teaching of the Tao." And in his 1916 book *The Spirit of the Orient and Judaism*, he aligns Judaism with the East in contrast to the static and visual orientation of Western philosophy.⁹

I begin by laying out, succinct and seriatim, those aspects of Buber's idea of the I-Thou relationship that seem to me most suggestive of contrast with Nishida's approach to the same idea.

First, as a description of the relationship between God and the human individual, the I-Thou relationship is meant to displace the simple idea of one being, a contingent "I," existing by virtue of another being, an "absolute Other" that grounds it.¹⁰ In this connection Buber's view contrasts sharply with that of Kierkegaard, otherwise one of the greatest influences on his thought.¹¹ The latter's formulation is well known: "By relating itself to its own self and by willing to be itself, the self is grounded transparently in the Power which constituted it."¹² Here, in the act of affirming itself as being both what it is as it is and what it is as a being that wants to be itself fully, the self becomes aware of an Other that made it as it is and continues to sustain it. Having stood up to its own limitations, "alone before God," the individual is said to have opened up the fullest meaning of being an I. Neither the I facing itself in deep and honest self-reflection nor the I facing its constituting Other can serve as paradigm for the I-Thou relationship that Buber has in mind. The one lacks partnership, the other reciprocity. Buber's objection to each is clear: "speaking with God is something *toto genere* different from 'speaking with oneself'; whereas, remarkably, it is not something *toto genere* different from speaking with another human being."¹³

In the second place, the I-Thou relationship is not merely an overlay of human consciousness on the idea of a distant God in order to draw it closer to earth and experience, but the claim to discovery of a quality of being itself. As such it extends beyond the relationship with other humans and with God to include the relationship with nature and with the latent spirituality of certain things and ideas (*geistige Wesenheiten*).¹⁴ The relationship is not an abstract quality extended from one realm to another by analogy, but a primary event of reality with its own history. In his later thought, Buber felt obliged to introduce the idea of the *Zwischen* (between) to de-

scribe this event as something different from the latent potential within consciousness to relate to things, from the particular history of its realization (*Beziehung*), and different, too, from a general environment of conditions within which relationships take place. As an actual event of relating, the *Zwischen* does not erase the differences between an I and a Thou or close the gap between them; nor does it necessarily deny that they participate together on a common ground of being. It merely bridges the gap by redefining the differences as the condition that makes a relationship possible, and the common ground of being as a *meeting* ground. Simply put, every existent is by nature a coexistent, and reality is the forum of the relationships working themselves out.

Third, Supreme being is not something that envelops the whole or undergirds it in order to provide unity *ab extra* to the manifold of relationships. Its supremacy is that of an "eternal Thou," the purest form of relatedness *ab intra*. That purity is circumscribed by the ideal of self-transcending love, and the closer one approaches that ideal, the closer one comes to the eternal Thou. But insofar as we are possessed of the potential for self-transcending love, we are already in touch with reality in its supreme form. This is why Buber can insist that "in each Thou we address the eternal Thou."¹⁵

Fourth, in extending the I-Thou relationship among human persons to a general principle of ontology, the measure of the fullness of reality remains in personal consciousness. The I-Thou relationship among human individuals is so basic that "everything else lives in its light." True, Buber does see I-affecting-Thou and Thou-affecting-I as a "primal experience" out of which the I emerges only when the experience has become secondary, split asunder in consciousness.¹⁶ But despite this distinction between primary and secondary aspects of experience, it is clear that Buber gives consciousness a privileged position in the order of things precisely because of its greater potential for expressing what it experiences. The contrast between the I-Thou and the I-It assumes that the presence of the I points to an achievement higher than anything a mere It-It relationship of dependent co-origination could attain. This is not to say that he wished to deny the latter idea. In his lengthy piece on "The Teaching of the Tao" he affirms it clearly:

Tao is the way things go, it is their manner, their peculiar order, their oneness. But as such it exists in things only potentially. It is only when things come in contact with other things that it becomes active. "If there were metal and stone without Tao, there would be no ring. They have the power to ring, but it does not come out of them if they are not struck together. So it is with all things."¹⁷

For Buber there is no question of consciousness creating or even opening up a higher order of reality, but only of enjoying a greater potential for participating in the dynamics of reality as it is. Things can give themselves to each other and interact with one another; only human consciousness can receive things as a question eliciting a response. This transition from things as *data* to things as *vocata* does not make sense outside human consciousness.

This brings us to a fifth point. At first sight, all of this seems to ring of an extreme

idealism for which there is no world without a conscious subject to experience it. If the claim is made that the ground of existence is a meeting ground for I and Thou, and that the I has the capacity not only to accept another I as a Thou but to receive any It in the world as a Thou, deprived of an I to accept it, the nonconscious things of the world seem to lack a place in reality. In order not to back down on the universality of the I-Thou relationship or reduce it to mere metaphor, Buber seems obliged to conclude that things, insofar as they are real, are at least inherently personal. But he does not. Instead, he begins from the conviction that the power of consciousness to manipulate things does not extend to the power to reduce the nature of things to mere objects of manipulation. In his vocabulary, the personal presence of God is not absent from anything anywhere. There is nothing that is a mere It to God, and all things are therefore eternally Thou to the eternal I.

Sixth, Buber brings the I-Thou relationship to bear on a critique of the divergent tendencies to collectivism and to individualism in contemporary society.¹⁸ This is more than a broadside swipe at the “impersonality” of the pace and the quality of life in scientific-industrialized society. It locates the godlessness of the world in the collapse of relationships into the narrow confines of self-development or group identity. To the extent that self-transcending love has ceased to be conceived of as the axis of the world and has been moved to the outer perimeters like a mere tangent to the “harsh realities” of life, our view of the world ceases to be real and has become an illusion.

In the seventh and final place, Buber closes the circle on his philosophy of I-Thou by claiming that insofar as philosophy aims at the knowledge of reality, the execution of that aim must reflect the highest form of the self-expression of reality itself. The transmission of philosophical wisdom cannot be entrusted merely to logical argumentation or written texts. It requires the direct transmission of insight from an I to a Thou. The master-disciple relationship that plays such a major role in the Hasidic tradition is more than a gloss on a completed system. It belongs to the critical apparatus of philosophical thinking itself and accounts for the importance he gave to the Hasidic tradition of storytelling—as well as for his attraction to Zen. At the same time, Buber broadens the *Zwischen* of the master-disciple relationship beyond the limits of interhuman contact to include the encounter with the written text, a fact attested to less in statements to that effect than in the way he read and did his translations.¹⁹

The Non-I and Thou Structure of Nothingness

As obvious as it is that Buber's is a philosophy of being, it is equally apparent that it is a very peculiar version of a philosophy of being. To savor the flavor of the texts on which the comments above are based is to feel the strong undercurrents of the long tradition of mystical theology, the careful touch of the poet, and the faint but unmistakable glow of Eastern ideas. It is the moorings in Western philosophy that make these other elements recognizable and give them their place in the whole. Things are very different when the Western reader comes to Buddhist-inspired philosophies of

the East, where it is not so easy to distinguish foreground from background, the novel from the classic, the meat from the spices. In this regard, a remark in the editors' introduction to volume 1 of *Buddhist Spirituality* bears repeating:

While Western metaphysics has developed a sophisticated array of alternative accounts of *being* and *essences*, the philosophical schools of Mahāyāna Buddhism have developed a no less impressive and pluralistic array of theories about *nothingness* and *emptiness*. Much that appears repetitious is so because the significance of the minor difference is lost on the non-Buddhist, while much that appears simplistic and uncritical is so because the Buddhist tradition has focused its sights elsewhere.²⁰

There is much in Nishida that is common to Buddhist-inspired philosophies of the East, and much that is also common to philosophies of nothingness in the East. There is also a genius of originality at work in the arrangement and development of ideas. To gloss over these distinctions is to forfeit the possibility of any dialogue between traditions. To concentrate on them is to forestall the process indefinitely.

In presenting a sketch of Nishida's I-Thou to contrast with Buber's, we cannot merely assume that the two are variations on the same theme, a theme with which we may assume to be basically familiar. Despite his continued references to Western philosophical classics, Nishida's context is different from Buber's. The kinds of liberties that Buber takes with "the East," lumping Vedantic thought, Taoism, and Zen together on the basis of an overarching standpoint grounded in a quite other tradition, are not tolerated so lightly in philosophies of the East. But, by the same token, Nishida does not give any evidence of having appreciated the contrapuntal nature of mysticism in the West, not to mention the place of the Hasidic tradition in Judaic thought.

I do not mean to pull the rug out from under all comparison. Nor do I mean to deny that there is any place within ordinary human experience that one can stand to appreciate the terms of the comparison. I only wish to reiterate an admonition that I have grown accustomed, as a result of repeated error more than anything else, to issue myself at these junctures: to abstract from context in the interest of clarity is to introduce a confusion wilder than anything that outright prejudice for one context over another can work.

Nishida's Turn to the I-Thou

In later years, Nishida attempted to redress the imbalance that had set in his thought as a result of his stress on the nature and process of self-awareness. His introduction of the historical world, and more particularly a culturally pluralistic world, are clear in his idea of locating beings on the field of absolute nothingness (the "logic of place"). The same idea allowed him to speculate on the structure of the I-Thou relationship, also passed over in his early work. This speculation is concentrated in his book *I and Thou* (I will refer to this work from here on by its Japanese title, *Watakushi to nanji 私と汝*, to avoid confusion with Buber's book.²¹), which is best read in conjunction with a companion essay, "Love of Self—Love of Other and the Dialectic," that appeared four months earlier.²²

Apart from its title, *Watakushi to nanji* is unlike *I and Thou* in nearly every respect. Stylistically, it has none of the aphorism of the latter, none of the poetic expression, the rhetoric, or the proximity to experience that draws the reader into the fabric of the text. Theoretically, too, Nishida's argument differs from Buber's by virtue of its basically structural aims. Where Buber begins and ends with the concrete encounter "between man and man," Nishida focuses on applying the logic of place—the standpoint of seeing all being as "being within" a particular locus, which ultimately opens out into a field of infinitely expanding circumference or absolute nothingness—to time, history, and the relationship between the I and other beings in the world, including the Thou.

In the sense that Nishida's concern is mainly with logical categories, it is unfair to expect that his account would display the human face that Buber put on the I-Thou relationship. If Nishida did not philosophize with heart about the interpersonal relationship and love, it was not only for lack of external stimulus. True, Nishida had not read Buber's book, but he did know of it indirectly through the writings of the dialectical theologian, Friedrich Gogarten, who sought to transfer Buber's stress on the I-Thou relationship to Christian circles.²³ It is difficult to tell just how far Nishida's reading of Gogarten influenced his thinking, but the idea of love as a manifestation of absolute nothingness that can only take place between persons drops so unexpectedly into Nishida's writings, and is then absorbed back into familiar categories so soon and almost without trace in later writings, that it is hard to think of the I-Thou relationship as a philosophical question that Nishida had been struggling with already on his own.

That having been said, the way in which Nishida locates the I-Thou in his philosophy of nothingness is not merely a function of his own character and interests. The perspective that sees ultimate reality as nothingness rather than being *already* orients his thought in a particular direction. In a sense, he is a type of that orientation. Using Nishida and Buber as an occasion to raise the question about philosophical orientation may provide some footing to take a few steps, but this does little in the end to lift the fog to see where it is all going. The poverty of comparative studies on philosophies of being and nothingness is indicative of a general lack of familiarity with the question, not to mention a general lack of method for tackling it. At least the whole issue is becoming an annoyance, and in that regard I have some hope of making a contribution.

A Critique of Buber from the Perspective of Nishida

In order to draw attention to the critical differences that Nishida's nothingness makes to the I-Thou relationship, I begin with Ueda Shizuteru's attempt to contrast Nishida and Buber, the only such comparison with which I am familiar.²⁴ Although I believe his reading of Buber to be mistaken, the points at which it is mistaken can help direct our attention to the heart of the matter.²⁵

Ueda sees Buber's I-Thou as a reaction against the atomistic, mechanized view of the human individual that resulted from the tendency in modern thought to give primacy to the I and that has left in its wake a sense of isolation and meaninglessness.

ness. He sees Buber's *Zwischen* as a third category distinct from the individual and the universal, a kind of *Ur-kategorie* intended to preserve the uniqueness of the human: it appears only in the encounter between one subject and another subject and is indeed what makes that encounter possible. Where this is absent, the I can only have a one-way relation to others as objects or It. The ideal of the I-Thou relationship, in contrast, is a reciprocity of full and immediate contact between one subject and another, but for Ueda the very term "I and Thou" suggests that the nature of the *Zwischen* is that it is still dominated by the I, which at any moment can turn the Thou into an It. If the I defines itself only in confronting a Thou, then only a Thou of infinite power can address itself to the I in such a way that the I is powerless to objectify it. No other Thou can be so completely "other" as to call the I once and for all out of its inherent tendency to affirm itself by objectifying everything and everyone it encounters. While Buber posits the presence of just such an "eternal Thou" behind every Thou, Ueda argues that this does not give the quality of absolute otherness to any but the eternal Thou, with the result that the I-Thou relationship in ordinary experience is always biased in favor of the absolute selfness of the I. What is more, by seeing the I-Thou relationships of human experience as the locus for the working of the absolute, eternal Thou, Ueda concludes, Buber fails to make room for He and She and They—except as marking the absence or breakdown of an I-Thou encounter. By restricting the third person to the It of the I-It relationship, history—the fact of "being-in-the-world"—is left out of the picture.

On this basis, Ueda suggests that Nishida's idea of the I-Thou corrects Buber's at each stage because it challenges the primacy of the subjective I more radically than Buber was able to do, and does so by relocating the absolute from being to nothingness. The logic of the comparison is clear: only a radically self-negated I can encounter the world as it is. But if the I and the world belong to the universal of "being" as its subjective (self-conscious) and objective (phenomenal) poles, then every encounter with the phenomena of the world—including the encounter with other subjects—ends up reinforcing the I. Therefore only a universal of "nothingness" in which the subject-object dichotomy has been cut at the roots can allow for a truly self-conscious encounter with the world.

Since my concern here is to sharpen the contrast rather than to enliven one view by deadening the other, I will not make any attempt to frame a reply to Nishida from Buber's perspective. At the same time, to avoid contrasting the wrong elements, at each step along the way something must be said of Ueda's presentation of Buber's ideas.

Relationship in Being, Relationship in Nothingness

To begin with, what Ueda refers to as the *Zwischen* seems closer to what Buber meant by *Beziehung*. The difference between the two terms is not trivial. It is the latter, not the former, that embraces the idea of a latent possibility of two individuals meeting one another as I and Thou, but it does so not as a metaphysical a priori but as a process in time. As Buber himself notes,²⁶ the *Beziehung* is the "relationship" that precedes the I-Thou relating and remains when a particular, concrete I-Thou

relating dissolves into a particular, concrete I-He or an I-She relating. As such, it does not seem unfair to characterize it as an original category of "the human," and even to say that it preserves the identity of the rational, objectifying I, provided it is seen that it also preserves the possibility of the I overcoming itself. If it is the natural business of the I to relate to the world, the history of relationships that blossom into the deepest encounter (*Begegnung*) of I and Thou leaves tracks on the human spirit not there at birth. This trail is the fact that *Beziehung* seeks to express.

But even the individual story of personal relatedness is still one step removed from the concrete encounter of I and Thou itself. Stepping back to look at the place of the I-Thou in the history of a particular relationship helps shed light on the dialectic interplay between distancing and relating, but it does not describe the special quality of the *Begegnung* of I and Thou that sets it apart from all other relating. To circumscribe this quality one must of course say something of what happens to the I, but even this is one step removed from the happening itself in which the categories of I and Thou are superseded. This is what Buber tried to capture with the term *Zwischen*. It is the very opposite of a latent tendency, a context, or a register of effects. It is an actual taking place that takes the place where I used to stand and where the Thou used to stand opposite me and encompasses them (*Umfassung*) in a new place. To speak of it as "appearing in the I-Thou encounter" or "making that encounter possible" is to miss the point. The *Zwischen* is the encountering itself.

The discovery that one thinker has misread another is not of itself very interesting if the oversight was simply due to carelessness. In Ueda's case, however, there is insight in the oversight: the allusions to Buber are intended primarily to accent an originality in Nishida's ideas that cannot be accounted for in classical Western philosophy. The *Zwischen* is thus presented as an approximation of Nishida's idea of *basho* (locus) only in order to argue that it fails in the end to measure up. Two points emerge from this strategy, both of them crucial.

First, since the final, all-encompassing locus of reality for Nishida is nothingness, any quality of being that adheres to events, processes, individuals, or to the categories of thought used to express these and that is further presumed to point to something "ultimate" must be relocated against a wider horizon in which the item in question shows itself to be secondary or derivative. For Nishida, the ultimate structure of nothingness as it presents itself to consciousness is that of a "self-identity of absolute contradictories." In contrast, any relationship of individuals based on a "being with" or "encounter" that mitigates the absolute otherness of one to the other is based on a mental fiction of "unity in being." The *Zwischen* not only does this between persons, but it relativizes the eternal Thou by locating it on the field of the encounter between human persons.

For Nishida, to see reality as ultimately an absolute nothingness means that no relationship is exempt from the dialectic of coming to be and passing away. All continuity rests on a radical discontinuity. When he says that "Each individual is an individual only in opposition to another individual,"²⁷ he is not making a metaphysical claim about all existence as coexistence. He means that the very idea of an individual *being* requires that it *not be* another individual being and yet that it define

itself in terms of the other that it is not. If there is anything like a general atmosphere that surrounds and pervades this interplay of being and not being, of affirmation and negation, of birth and death, it is best characterized as something other than just the sum of all the moving parts or a lowest common denominator—namely as Being or being. There is no better name for it than nothingness. To call it *absolute* nothingness is to say that it is beyond encompassing by any phenomenon, individual, or event in the world. To call it *absolute nothingness* is to say that it does not itself come to be or pass away. To call reality itself *absolute nothingness* is to say that all of reality is subject to the dialectic of being and not-being, that the identity of each thing is bound to an absolute contradictoriness. In other words, nothingness not only relativizes the “ground of being”; it relativizes any model of coexistence that sublimates, transcends, debilitates, or otherwise obscures that contradictoriness—as Buber’s *Zwischen* finally does.

Second, when Nishida speaks of a locus or *basho* of absolute nothingness, he is referring to something very different from a common ground on which human individuals can meet and enhance the quality of one another’s lives. Not that he fails to recognize the importance of such a common ground, as we shall see later. His concern is rather to place consciousness, the crowning achievement of the world of becoming, in the picture. He does so by challenging the primacy given to the idea of the disciplined intellect reasoning about the world. For Nishida, the field of subjects dealing with objects, whatever the level of achievement, is a small and artificial circle drawn within a wider field of immediate experience in which there is no distinction between subjects and objects. Buber’s *Zwischen* is given as an example of reaching beyond the narrow confines of the subject-object field by distinguishing between an I-It and an I-Thou, only to be rejected as a failing to take the final step beyond I and Thou into the wider field of pure and direct experience.

As I have tried to show above, the criticism falls wide of its mark, but when we see the way in which Nishida gradually elaborated the intervening process in the step from the subject-object field out into the field of immediate experience, the corrective becomes secondary. On a model of concentric circles, Nishida takes a series of steps (whose connections continue to baffle me) that lead from the imperial I standing in judgment over the phenomenal world, to an I humbled by reflection on its own workings and the limitations of language, to an I disillusioned with its own subjectivity by awakening to itself as the object of the things it knows, to an I aware of itself as an instance of the self-awareness of reality: absolute nothingness manifest in experience of the world as it is.²⁸ Even if we draw the field circumscribed by Buber’s *Zwischen* of the I-Thou relationship more generously than Ueda does, sooner or later Nishida’s thought must break through it to the final, circumferenceless circle, the *basho* of absolute nothingness in which all contact of consciousness with reality, all our attempts to express its ultimate structure, every encounter with reality, whether I and Thou or I and It, is negated and then restored, one by one, in a self-conscious affirmation of the phenomenal world just as it is.

In the exercise of the logic of *basho*, then, the I-Thou can never appear as ultimate or absolute, no matter who the I or what the Thou. Nor can the opposition

between the I and the Thou ever be reduced to a mere *paradox* or logical *contradiction* attributed to the limitations of conscious knowing or the transcendence of a Supreme Being. For Nishida the structure of reality cannot be described on the model of a dialogue between persons any more than nothingness can be reduced to the affirmation or negation of a mere quality shared in common by beings.²⁹ From the standpoint of a philosophy of absolute nothingness, insofar as Buber's *Zwischen* is said to constitute an archetypal experience from which the structure of reality can be deduced, it reveals its attachments to a philosophy of being.

The I of Being, the I of Nothingness

The relocation of the I-Thou relationship on a field of absolute nothingness where it forfeits its ultimacy does not of itself constitute a description of that relationship or dispense with the need for judging its meaning as an ideal of social existence. Even if we grant the radical relativity of all personal relationships, and even if we go the step further to reject the idea of an eternal Thou at work within those relationships that calls the I out of its self-enclosure into the fullness of being, we are still left to contend with the fact that the human person is equipped by nature to relate to other human persons and indeed to the world in a manner different from the way other items in the world relate to one another. In questioning Buber's ideal of a reciprocity of full and immediate contact between an I and a Thou, Ueda sees a shadow cast over Buber's ideal by the fact that the I and the Thou are not true contradictories, with the result that the dialectic between the two cannot go beyond reiterating a common, even if not sufficiently attended to, ontological ground, and in that sense reinforcing the I. For Nishida, on the other hand, I and Thou are absolute contradictories—by which he means “absolutely independent and absolutely bound”³⁰—which makes it possible for the I fully to negate itself and open up beyond the personal dimension into a wider horizon of reality. The consequences of this difference of approach for moral action will be touched on later. First, we need to draw attention to a fundamental disparity in assumptions about the I.³¹

Ueda is correct: for Buber, the I defines itself only in the encounter with a Thou, and the more complete the encounter the greater the enhancement of the I; for Nishida, the I depends for its identity on an other, and the fuller the confrontation the deeper the bond, and the deeper the bond with the other the richer the identity of the I. In each case a distinction is drawn between the everyday I and a truer, more real I.

For Buber, all transformation of the I hinges on the response of the I, not on any particular quality in the Thou: “To the person of the other I owe the fact that I have this Thou; but my I—by which here the I of the I-Thou relationship is to be understood—I owe to saying Thou, not to the person to whom I say Thou.”³² For Buber it does not make sense to speak of an I being enhanced by another, whether against its will or through a deliberate abandonment of the self to the power of an other. That the I preserve its ability to respond to or to ignore the call of the other is requisite for all personal transformation. Conversely, the I cannot stand proxy for another by accepting it as a Thou and enhance it from the outside. The Thou is always and ever

its own I. Not even God, the eternal Thou, is exempted from this structure of personal encounter. Still, let it be recalled, the enhancement of the I is not an event that takes place *within* the I but only *between* the I and the Thou.³³

Buber's I-Thou belongs in the tradition of radical personalism, which has always been an option in Western philosophy. The definition of supreme being as personal is perhaps nowhere clearer in Western intellectual history than in the neo-Scholastics, but the idea of reality as fundamentally personal can also be found in neo-Hegelians like T. H. Green. The greatest array of explicitly personalist philosophies appears only in the twentieth century, but predecessors are scattered throughout the history of philosophy. Most commonly, the centrality of the personal plays around in the shadows of assumptions whose only proof is in their tacit acceptance. In any case, whether in the form of a personal socialism like Berdyaev's or an egocentric personalism like Max Stirner's, the idea that the distinctive quality that makes an I an I can serve as a fundamental ontological category is altogether at home in a philosophy of being. Buber is only one example.

For Nishida, if not for all philosophies that define ultimate reality as nothingness, the option for radical personalism in any form is excluded precisely because the fulfillment of the I is located in its transformation into a non-I.³⁴ It is common in the West to draw analogies to the loss of self in mystical union in order to clarify this difference (and Buber himself does so³⁵), but it is just as common in the East to reject the analogy as misplaced. As with the notion of nothingness in comparison to being, the notion of the non-I exhibits a range of interpretations in Eastern traditions every bit as wide as the interpretations of person in Western philosophy. Nishida is only one example.³⁶

From the opening pages of *Watakushi to nanji*, it is clear that the defining activity of personhood is self-reflection, a dialogue between I and I, and that this is the locus for the encounter of I and Thou. The fruit of this dialogue is meaning, which is not something inherent in things merely because of their being, something that simply needs to be recognized by a subject as an objective fact. Meaning must be an activity of reality itself, and therefore the unity of consciousness from one day to the next that allows for the constellation of meaning in the flow of actual events must ultimately be the particularization of a universal in which there is no distinction between that which expresses and that which is expressed—namely, the universal of nothingness:

Each element that goes into this constellation of meaning is an expression of the individual consciousness. The true significance of conscious unity lies in the fact that the expresser and the expressed are one and the same. The I is in dialogue with the I within the mind. . . . The I of yesterday and the I of today exist in the world of expression, just as I and Thou do. . . . All individuals must somehow be conceived of as determinations of a universal . . . and by the same token, the individual must determine the universal. . . . The meaning of the individual and the universal must consist of a dialectical determination between the two—not a universal of being determining the individual, but a universal of nothingness in which determination takes place without anything doing the determining.³⁷

In the dense prose from which I have extracted the above comment lies the basic structure of the argument that preoccupies Nishida for the rest of the book. The initial impression that the I-Thou relationship looks to be no more than a secondary, derivative function of self-reflection on the field of absolute nothingness is confirmed again and again. The encounter of an I with a Thou is simply one instance of the I en route to its own negation in self-awareness of nothingness: "What we think of as transcending the self always confronts us in one of three modes: (1) as a thing, (2) as a Thou, or (3) as a transcendent I . . . The personal self-awareness that sees an absolute other within the self includes these three confrontations."³⁸ To speak of self seeing itself in itself means that the self sees an absolute other and that this other is the self. What unites seer and seen, what determines without anything doing the determining is the universal of nothingness.³⁹

It is hardly surprising that until the concluding pages, when Nishida turns his attention to love, no particular attention is drawn to the I-Thou relationship. Even in "Love of Self—Love of Other and the Dialectic," the I-Thou (or, more often, the I-Other) refers principally to the basic unit of human society; not even in the perfection of love does it rise to a stature comparable to that which Buber gives it. In the end, the I-Thou is no more than a stage in self-awareness, the stage in which one awakens to the fact of social existence.⁴⁰

When Buber says that the I that emerges out of the I-Thou relationship is another I than the I that functions in an I-It relationship, he means that there has been a change in the history of a particular *Beziehung* and a broadening of the *Zwischen* in the world. In no sense is it a mere transformation of interiority:

When I say that out of the I-Thou relationship another I emerges than out of the I-It relationship, that there and here a different I actualizes itself, then it is, to be sure, correct to understand this as the "self-realization of the I through his awareness." But it is inadmissible to continue by saying that "the I is also a self because of the inner center of his existence rooted in his reflection."⁴¹

Man's essential life is not to be grasped from what unrolls in the individual's inner life, nor from the consciousness of one's own self. . . , but from the distinctiveness of his relations to things and to living beings.⁴²

We will have more to say of this by and by. For now it is enough to note that for Nishida, the I that breaks free of the subject-object relationship to the world must also break free of the I-Thou relationship as an external event in order to discover it in the inner recesses of self-awareness. The I liberated from ordinary consciousness by awakening to nothingness, the *true* I, is Nishida's version of the Buddhist notion of the non-I. Kierkegaard's idea of the self constituting itself by encountering the power of an absolute other in self-reflection, the very "sublime mistake" whose rejection set Buber on the path of the I-Thou, finds its mirror image in Nishida's idea of the constitution of the I as non-I. For Buber, the absence of the *Zwischen* in Kierkegaard's case was more a result of the latter having universalized a particular event in his own life.⁴³ In Nishida, it is a logical entailment of seeing reality as absolute nothingness.⁴⁴

The Thou of Being and the Thou of Nothingness

Buber's insistence on the possibility and importance of extending the I-Thou to things in nature is too well known to allow us to take Ueda literally when he describes the *Zwischen* as "only present in the encounter between one subject and another subject." I can only conclude that his intent was to see the I-Thou between subjects as the most basic for Buber,⁴⁵ and from there to argue against the primacy of subjectivity as such.

This still leaves us with the question of how the I-Thou between things is different in a philosophy of nothingness from what Buber imagined it to be. In each case, the encounter with nature reflects the pattern used to understand the encounter among persons, and in that sense reconfirms the differences between the two.

Nishida's ideas of pure experience and active intuition often led him to talk of contact with nature—"To know of the bamboo, learn from the bamboo"—in terms altogether reminiscent of Buber's language in *I and Thou*. What is more, like Buber he resists Scheler's idea of an *Einsfühlung* in which the I is submerged in an other through a kind of emotional transference,⁴⁶ preferring instead the model of intuition that can apply as well to things as to persons:

As a direct contact between one person and another, the I knowing a Thou or the Thou knowing an I must take the form of direct intuition. As we are accustomed to think in the classical form of intuition, artistic intuition, this is not a matter of directly uniting with an object, but of recognizing oneself as harboring in the recesses of interiority an absolute other and turning to that other to see it as absolute other, not to unite with it.⁴⁷

The recognition of the other as absolute in an act of intuition seems to paraphrase Buber's recognition of the other as a Thou on a field of personal encounter. Both refuse to see the other as merely an extension of the self or as an abyss into which the self can drop away. The difference is that for Buber the recognition of the other is seen to open up into the recognition by a personal I of a personal Thou, whereas for Nishida the intuition of the other entails a depersonalized I encountering a deobjectified other, a seeing without seer or seen.

For Nishida both the I and the other are enhanced reciprocally in the encounter, but there is no possibility of the absolute nothingness that grounds this event itself becoming a Thou. The non-I affirms everything it touches by negating its attachments to being, the natural and human worlds together. For Buber, it is only the I that is enhanced, but that enhancement enables the revelation of an eternal Thou.⁴⁸ The I of the I-Thou affirms everything it touches by personalizing it, even the impersonal things in the natural world. In this sense, for both the philosopher of nothingness and the philosopher of being, encounters with the things of nature do not differ essentially from encounters with other persons. But whereas the former philosopher begins from the experiencing I alone, the latter begins from the I that experiences persons.

The I-Thou of Being and the I-Thou of Nothingness

Despite the difference of accent on the I-Thou relationship, both Buber and Nishida understand it as leading to the ideal of human love. In this connection, Nishida's

philosophy is much the poorer, and not only for reasons of Buber's superior poetic gifts. One of the reasons for the wide influence of Buber's thought both inside and outside philosophical circles is that he tells us, reasonably and with passion but also with a great deal of surprise, of something we are not only prepared to hear but long to hear: love makes the world go 'round. Love does not just improve the quality of social life or fulfill the promise of humanity implanted in each of us from birth. It moves the world. The idea of love we find on the *basho* of absolute nothingness, for all its claim to concreteness, nowhere engages the reader's experience the way the love in Buber's I-Thou relationship does.

This does not mean that Buber locates love in a particular feeling or emotional state. It is not a matter of a state of being or self-awareness at all; in fact, it is not even in the individual person at all but in the *Zwischen* of I and Thou. Moreover, the I-Thou relationship does not consist simply of being *responsive* to the call of the Thou but of accepting *responsibility* for the Thou. It is precisely here, not in inner sentiment or mystical rapture but in the ethical overflow of love, that the eternal Thou makes its presence felt.⁴⁹

The locus of love in Nishida's philosophy, while not contradicting Buber in content, gainsays it mightily in spirit. Even the gems he picks out of Scholze and Nygren in the concluding pages of *Watakushi to nanji* seem to glitter less for the inferior setting in which they have been mounted. Nishida's clearest statements about love appear in contrast with the failure of love: love is not a satisfaction of personal desire. It does not turn the other into an object. Love discovers the self by negating the self. It does not value an other in terms of what lies outside the other. It is not rational but spontaneous. It is not longing but sacrifice. One cannot love oneself without loving others.⁵⁰ His most direct descriptions are set in a language of dialectics that paraphrases classical expressions about love without seeming to add anything of significance. Note the following description of his of Christian agape:

By seeing the absolute other in the recesses of my own inwardness—that is, by seeing a Thou—I am I. To think in these terms, or what I call “the self-awareness of absolute nothingness,” entails love. This is what I understand Christian agape to be. . . . It is not human love but divine love; it is not the ascent of the person to God but the descent of God to the person. . . . In the same way that Augustine says that I am I because God loves me, so I am truly I because of God's love. . . . We become persons by loving our neighbor as ourselves in imitation of the divine agape.⁵¹

It is not clear whether the Christian idea of the selfless love of God for humanity is being used to paraphrase the idea of the self-awareness of absolute nothingness or the other way around. Or what one idea has to contribute to the other. In any case, Nishida makes the claim that this loving self-awareness of absolute nothingness discloses an “infinite responsibility” of a historically situated I toward a historical Thou. To take this claim at face value—that is, to accept it as more than a link in a logical argument—is to raise an important question, since the evidence in his own writings seems to point in the opposite direction, away from responsibility to the concrete demands of history.

There is no question that Nishida sees love as a function of the sense of responsibility generated in the I-Thou encounter. But for all his attempts to insist that he is talking in concrete terms, the concreteness is located not in a call to reform one's values or to exercise them in action, but in an increase of self-awareness:

There is no responsibility as long as the Thou that is seen at the bottom of the self is thought of as the self. Only when I am I by virtue of the Thou I harbor at my depths do I possess an infinite responsibility at the bottom of my existence itself. This Thou cannot be a universal, abstract Thou nor the recognition of a particular object a simple historical fact. . . . The genuine "ought" is only conceivable in recognizing the other as a historical Thou within the historically conditioned situation of the I.⁵²

The self of Nishida's self-awareness relates to the world and to the Thou as a kind of no-self, which is said to give itself more fully to the other because it is grounded in a nothingness rather than in being. But no other criteria are given for judging this self-giving. It remains locked up within the self's ascent to self-awakening.

Curiously, Emmanuel Levinas makes the claim that Buber's shift from the I-It manipulation of the world to an I-Thou encounter is possible within the world of being precisely because being itself is neither I nor Thou, neither subject nor object.⁵³ But the real problem is not which of the conflicting claims is more logical, but rather the moral consequences of taking one position rather than the other. As far as I am able to judge from Nishida's work, the consequences of his position come down to this: the non-I that emerges from the self-awareness of absolute nothingness looks for all the world to be a highly cultivated form of ataraxia, a self-transcendence whose highest good consists of its inability to be moved by either good or evil.⁵⁴ Again, I do not attribute this to a failure in Nishida's system, where a suitable place is found for responding to the demands of history. But something is there in the philosophy of nothingness that finally directs the moral imagination differently from the way a philosophy of being does—namely *toward* insight into the structures of time and history in general, *away from* the exercise of judgment and virtue in the here and now.

Ueda's attempt to elevate Nishida's idea of I and Thou against Buber's as closer to the concrete historical world distracts from the real question at issue for the philosophy of nothingness in general, and for Nishida's philosophy in particular: namely, how to cultivate critical, moral conscience in the non-I. The question is not clearly put, and as a result there is nothing that enables one to discern what the word *loving* has to add to the cultivation of self-awareness. Max Scheler is said to have complained of Buddhism in general: "The Buddha recommends the point of departure of love but not the end to which it leads. In other words, it is only the self-detachment, the self-denial, which love implies, that he approves."⁵⁵ This remark is typical of the way Buddhism was being received in the 1920s in Europe, and its refutation need not detain us here. I cite it only because it seems to capture the question we are left with after following Nishida's account of the I-Thou relationship grounded in absolute nothingness.⁵⁶

Concluding Remarks

Early in this essay I made reference to the tendency to colonize Eastern intellectual history with Western ideas by taking the latter as the measure of what is philosophy and what is not, a tendency consistent with the advance of "global culture" but inconsistent with a respect for the pluralism of language, thought, and social mores. At the same time, I insisted that philosophy cannot simply forfeit its aim to give an account of the human qua human, and hence its hope of different intellectual traditions enriching one another by mutual criticism. I should like to conclude by returning to this question briefly.

When Buber was writing his philosophical essays, his audience was the whole world. Even if he had given no thought to his words being translated into foreign languages, it would not have occurred to him to direct them only at the German-reading world, let alone at the Jewish German-reading world. There is nothing particularly virtuous about this—it is the way philosophy is done in the West, even the most jargon-riddled, in-house brands of philosophy. When Nishida was writing, however, his audience was decidedly Japan, not the Japanese-reading people of the world, but *Japan*. He did not anticipate, or as far as I can tell even hope for, a response from the outside, West or East. Translation and the spread of the Japanese language has changed the environment in which his books are read, both in Japan and abroad. The audience for his own writings aside, Nishida did intend his work to contribute to breaking down the barriers between Japan's intellectual history and that of the West. And that it did. After Nishida, no student of Western philosophy in Japan can simply be a translator or expert in foreign affairs. Even those who do not espouse his ideas, or who prefer to specialize in one or another classical Western thinker, cannot escape the influence he had on securing the importance of the Japanese contribution to world philosophy as a distinctive standpoint for criticizing and being criticized. The watershed would have been marked whether Nishida had lived or not. That it was marked with such genius and profundity must be counted as one of the blessings of Japanese thought in the twentieth century.

Against that backdrop, there is a certain anomaly in Nishida's thought that seems to put it at one remove from the lived reality of the Japanese society in which he wrote. I refer not only to the failure of Nishida and his colleagues in the Kyoto School to apply their ideas to a criticism of the military escapades of Japan in the middle third of this century, but to the failure to apply them to a criticism of Japanese culture. Buber's I-Thou, it will be recalled, was aimed directly against the complementary tendencies to collectivism and individualism in modern society. Nishida's championing of the "self-awareness of absolute nothingness" as the foundation for the I-Thou relationship had no such aim. Alas.

On the one hand, thought in contemporary Japan is not dominated by philosophy of a Western origin, but neither is it dominated by the Buddhist or Neo-Confucian classics. To paraphrase an argument alluded to by Frederick Copleston, it makes about as much sense to promote an understanding of the United States through a study of the fragments of Parmenides and Heraclitus or the writings of

Nicholas of Cusa as it would to promote an understanding of Japan through a study of the Confucian Analects or the Lotus Sūtra. We need to look to the present, not to the arcana of the past, to evaluate and apply an idea like the I-Thou relationship critically. The argument is familiar but fits the reality of the present rather badly. As Copleston notes:

The classical philosophical tradition of a culture most probably expresses in specifiable ways attitudes and modes of thought which persist and which may very well mould and change whatever has been received from outside. . . . We cannot simply detach past from present . . . and regard the former as something purely external to the latter.⁵⁷

On the other hand, the thinking of contemporary Japan in matters of science, technology, economics, politics, urban planning, environmental and biological ethics, education, health, transport, and communication—in short, what makes up the bulk of everyday social existence—is very much dominated by the same forces that dominate thinking in Western societies. Insofar as this dominance leaves its marks on the quality of the I-Thou relationship, it is the business of philosophical reflection on that relationship to reattach the past to the present.

I do not for a moment imagine that Japan in general, or the quality of interpersonal relations in particular, would benefit by a still further erosion of bonds to its past. But neither do I imagine that Western modes of thought, however sympathetic to the problem, can do much to stay the process. It is not to Buber's *I and Thou* that one should look for deliverance, but to its modern Japanese counterparts.

Because Nishida did not take up this challenge, we come to the following anomaly: the non-I of the self-awareness of nothingness that is said to promote a loving I-Thou in the real historical world in fact promotes a radically individual transformation that contrasts so markedly with the reality of collective consciousness in Japan as to forfeit all claim to support its distinct strengths or to challenge its oppressions.⁵⁸ As a result, the expectations in the popular mind for philosophy with a Japanese face are swallowed up in the expectations for philosophy with a Western face—namely, a detached, disinterested withdrawal from the present into a realm of eternal verities, written in an esoteric jargon by experts for experts. That this is precisely the popular view of Nishida's writings about absolute nothingness cannot be blamed entirely on the ignorance of mass culture; part of the responsibility lies with the ignorance of philosophy.

Notes

- 1 – David A. Dilworth and Valdo H. Viglielmo, with Agustín Jacinto Zavala, have translated and edited a selection of twenty-two representative pieces of Japanese thought in their recently published *Sourcebook for Modern Japanese Philosophy: Selected Documents* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1998). A similar anthology of translations was published in two volumes by Agustín Jacinto Zavala, as *Textos de la filosofía japonesa moderna: Antología* (Zamora: El

Colegio de Michoacán, 1995) (vol. 1), and *La otra filosofía japonesa: Antología* (1997) (vol. 2). Routledge has also announced plans to prepare a full-fledged *Encyclopedia of Asian Philosophy*. The change in climate is also reflected in volume 3 of the French *Encyclopédie philosophique universelle* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1992), though not yet in the standard German *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, edited by J. Ritter and K. Gründer, where not even the essays on “Nichts” and “Ich” in volume 6 (Basel: Schwabe, 1984) make mention of Eastern philosophies. Similar neglect appears in the recent two-volume *Handbook of Metaphysics and Ontology*, edited by H. Burkhardt and B. Smith (Munich: Philosophica Verlag, 1991).

Ironically, one of the first philosophers of Europe to recognize the challenge of Buddhist philosophies from the East was Edmund Husserl, a point he notes explicitly in a brief notice on Karl Neumann’s German translation of texts from the Buddhist canon, *Die Rede und Sprüche Gotama Buddhas* (1925). See James G. Hart, “Transcendental Phenomenology and Zen Buddhism: A Start of a Conversation,” *Zen Buddhism Today* 5 (1987): 145–160. The influence of the Japanese philosopher Nishida Kitarō seems to have played a part in this turn of Husserl to the East, as he encouraged a young disciple of Nishida’s, Tanabe Hajime, to bring transcendental philosophy back to the East to further the exchange.

It is also of some symbolic importance that the eminent historian of Western philosophy Frederick Copleston devoted the last part of his life to a serious study of Indian and Chinese philosophy, as evidenced in *Philosophy and Cultures* (Oxford University Press, 1980) and *Religion and the One: Philosophies East and West* (New York: Crossroad, 1982). We were privileged to have him as a guest at our home in Japan during the time when he was writing this latter work, in which he reconfirmed what he said to me a number of times: that the identification of ultimate reality with emptiness or nothingness simply did not make sense to him.

- 2 – E.W.F. Tomlin, *The Oriental Philosophers* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), p. 21.
- 3 – S. Radhakrishnan, “On Philosophical Synthesis,” *Philosophy East and West* 1 (1) (1951): 4.
- 4 – Takeuchi Yoshinori, *The Heart of Buddhism* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), pp. 3–4. As the original translator of this passage, I have taken the liberty of adjusting it here and there without drawing attention to the fact.
- 5 – John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (New York: Knopf, 1994), p. 86. On this point, the bishop of Rome has yet to stand corrected.
- 6 – In two important footnotes to his massive *Ideas of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), Charles Taylor issues a passing warning against ethnocentrism in our model of what the self

- should be, mentioning by name the “radically different doctrine and outlook” of the Buddhist idea of no-self (pp. 526 n. 20, 535–536 n. 4).
- 7 – I have taken this question up in the context of Kyoto School philosophy in an essay titled “Tanabe’s Logic of the Specific and the Critique of the Global Village,” *Eastern Buddhist* 28 (2) (1995): 198–224.
 - 8 – Martin Buber, *Ecstatic Confessions* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996).
 - 9 – For documentation on this, see Maurice Friedman, “Martin Buber and Asia,” *Philosophy East and West* 26 (4) (1976): 411–426.
 - 10 – On his own account, Buber resisted dialectical theology’s idea of an absolute God who is *totaliter aliter*. See Martin Buber, “Reply to my Critics,” in Paul A. Schilpp and Maurice Friedman, *The Philosophy of Martin Buber* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1967), p. 712.
 - 11 – For details of his difference from Kierkegaard, see Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1964), pp. 52 ff.
 - 12 – Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling: The Sickness unto Death* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1954), p. 262.
 - 13 – Buber, *Between Man and Man*, p. 163.
 - 14 – This contact with the possibility of the things of Mother Earth is close to what Rilke calls “the play of pure forces which no one touches who does not kneel and admire.” In his 1899 *Stories of God*, the young Rilke wrote a “Tale of One Who Listened to Stones,” which captures the idea in a simple but striking way. Buber was, of course, familiar with Rilke’s writings.
 - 15 – Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1958), pp. 6, 103.
 - 16 – Buber, *I and Thou*, pp. 21–22.
 - 17 – “Die Lehre vom Tao,” in Martin Buber, *Werke* (Küsel: Lambert Schneider, 1962), 1: 1041.
 - 18 – Martin Buber, “What is Common to All” in Buber, *The Knowledge of Man*, ed. with an introductory essay by Maurice Friedman, trans. by Maurice Friedman and Ronald Gregor Smith (London: Allen and Unwin, 1965).
 - 19 – See Walter Kaufmann’s praise of Buber as a translator and, by comparison, his spirited critique of Heidegger and Jaspers in “Buber’s Religious Significance,” in Schilpp and Friedman, *The Philosophy of Martin Buber*, pp. 667–677.
 - 20 – *Buddhist Spirituality: Indian, Southeast Asian, Tibetan, and Early Chinese*, ed. Takeuchi Yoshinori, World Spirituality, vol. 8 (New York: Crossroad, 1993), p. xxiv.
 - 21 – The first Japanese translation of Buber’s work appeared in 1958 as 『孤独と愛』

(Solitariness and love), followed by another in 1964 titled 『人間の復興』 (The restoration of the human). Only in 1979 was the original title faithfully rendered 『我と汝』. None of the translators gives any reason for their arbitrary titling, or whether Nishida's work had any influence on it.

- 22 – Both of these essays are included in volume 6 of Nishida's collected works, 『西田幾多良全集』 (Tokyo: Iwanami, 1979), hereafter cited as *NKZ*.
- 23 – Nishida cites Gogarten's *Ich glaube an den dreieinigen Gott* (*NKZ* 6:417), a work in which Buber's influence is evident. The first allusion to Buber's work appears in Nishida's diaries in 1934, two years after the publication of his own book. Ueda Shizuteru reconfirms my suspicion that Nishida could not have known any more than the title of Buber's work when he composed his own (上田閑照, 『西田幾多良を読む』 [*Reading Nishida Kitarō*] [Tokyo: Iwanami Seminar Books, 1991], pp. 350–351).
- 24 – Ueda, *Reading Nishida Kitarō*, pp. 352–358.
- 25 – The only extensive treatment of the subject that I know is a collection of essays by Noguchi Tsuneki 野日恒樹 composed between 1941 and 1975 under the title 『西田哲学から我汝哲学へ』 (Ise: Shōhakusanbō, 1982). Although the author attempts to show the continuity between the two essays of Nishida's that are treated here and Nishida's earliest work, and to reply to criticisms, the questions dealt with in the present essay are not asked.
- 26 – I am drawing freely here on Buber's lengthy "Reply to My Critics" in Schilpp and Friedman, *The Philosophy of Martin Buber*.
- 27 – 個は個に対して個である。
- 28 – In *Watakushi to nanji* he speaks of this as a transition from "noemic" consciousness focused on objects or the process of objects advancing along a temporal continuum from the past to the future to a "noetic" consciousness focused on consciousness as an activity of reality determining itself apart from that continuum. The idea of reversing the determination of time by introducing an "eternal Now" that acts on the present from the future—a deliberate confrontation with the philosophies of Bergson and Hegel—figures predominantly in the text from the opening paragraph, but will be omitted here in the interest of brevity. A passage in "Love of Self—Love of Other and the Dialectic" makes the connection among time, consciousness, and nothingness explicit:
- To think of reality determining itself does not mean thinking in terms of a continuity where one point progresses to another or gives rise to another, but of a discontinuous continuity in which each moment passes away, a life through death. To think in these terms does not mean conceiving of nothingness as something in the background that has the farthest reaches of being as its object and determines it, but as something that transcends and envelops this kind of determination altogether—nothingness enveloping being and determining itself, with the result that being becomes visible. (*NKZ* 6:265)
- 29 – The idea of such a reduction may be a peculiarity of English in that the word

nothingness suggests a distinction from “beingness” that is not required by terms like *néant*, *nada*, *niente*, *Nichts*—or, of course, *mu* 無.

- 30 – NKZ 7:266. Ueda cites freely from this 1934 essay’s paraphrase of the structure of the I-Thou. I do not see that it adds anything new to the two works on which I have relied here.
- 31 – Having gone to the trouble of arguing against the unwitting reification of the self in modern thought East and West (“The Quest of the True Self,” *Journal of Religion* 77 [2] [1997]), I do not mean to hoist myself here on my own petard by positing an I or self distinct from the individual person and then arguing that it is understood one way in a philosophy of being and another in a philosophy of nothingness. Buber’s I is too intimately bound to the existential experience of the I-Thou relationship for his substantive use of the relative pronoun to be anything more than just that. In Nishida’s case, the latent associations of the True Self with Buddha-nature that we find in Nishitani are lacking, and it seems fair to characterize his distinction between I and true I as referring to no more than degrees of self-awareness. See also note 36 below.
- 32 – Buber, “Reply to My Critics,” p. 967.
- 33 – Buber, *I and Thou*, p. 81; Martin Buber, *The Eclipse of God* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1957), pp. 3, 123.
- 34 – The influence of T. H. Green on Nishida’s maiden work, *A Study of Good*, is well known. But while Nishida took over the former’s idea of reality itself through the world, he never personalized reality the way Green had.
- 35 – For example, Buber, *I and Thou*, pp. 11, 84. Buber’s proximity to Jewish mysticism is well known, but when asked point-blank whether he was a mystic, Buber replied in the negative on the grounds that the mystic loses touch with the world, which “cannot be known otherwise than through response to the things by the active sense-spirit of the loving man” (Martin Buber, *Pointing the Way* [New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957], p. 28).
- 36 – Unlike later philosophers of the Kyoto School, Nishida uses terms like non-I 無我 and self that is not a self 自己ならぬ自己 sparsely. They do not appear in the two works on which I am focusing here, which prefers the positive expression of true I 真の私 or true self 真の自己.
- 37 – NKZ 6:343–344.
- 38 – NKZ 6:408.
- 39 – NKZ 6:385–386.
- 40 – “What defines I as I defines Thou as Thou. Both are born in the same environment and both extensions of the same universal there. . . . The individual is born in society; social consciousness in some sense precedes individual consciousness” (NKZ 6:348).

- 41 – Buber, “Reply to My Critics,” p. 695.
- 42 – Buber, *Between Man and Man*, p. 199.
- 43 – Namely, his rejection by Regina Olden. See note 11 above.
- 44 – This is not to accuse Nishida of having overlooked something essential in the Buddhist tradition that inspired his idea of absolute nothingness. One is hard-pressed to find a true equivalent of Buber’s *Zwischen* in Buddhist thought. Faced with the claim that Christian theology is able to supply the dimension of the I-Thou that is lacking in Nishida’s philosophy, the Buddhist scholar Kawanami Akira resists the insinuation that the I-Thou relationship is peripheral to Buddhist philosophy. Quoting from the *Pancaviṃśati Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* and the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*, he shows how “the individual is only truly individual when facing the Buddha in an I-Thou relationship very much like what Kierkegaard called *vor Gott allein sein*.” Whatever the case for Buddhist philosophy as a whole, Kawanami’s complaints reinforce the impression that the non-I in effect negates the I-Thou relationship in the same way that Buber saw Kierkegaard’s self doing.
- 45 – Buber himself claimed that his basic insight undercut the “ontological problem” of whether the I-Thou between human individuals was “primary” or not (Buber, “Reply to My Critics,” p. 694).
- 46 – NKZ 6:373.
- 47 – NKZ 6:390.
- 48 – One must be careful here not to accuse Buber of personalizing God, when all he says is that God is personal in the I-Thou. “We are making no statement about the Absolute which reduces it to the personal. . . . We are rather saying that it enters into the relationship as the Absolute Person whom we call God” (Buber, *The Eclipse of God*, p. 127).
- 49 – Buber cites Kierkegaard’s remark that “The only way God has to communicate with man is through the ethical.” See Grete Schaeder, *Martin Buber: Hebräischer Humanismus* (Güttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966), p. 272.
- 50 – NKZ 6:260, 273, 421–427.
- 51 – NKZ 6:421, 424.
- 52 – NKZ 6:420.
- 53 – Emmanuel Levinas, “Buber and the Theory of Knowledge,” in Schilpp and Friedman, *The Philosophy of Martin Buber*, p. 146.
- 54 – Nakamura Yūjirō 中村雄二 sees this tendency in Nishida already from the time of *A Study of Good*, where the highest moral category was that of 誠, “authenticity” or “sincerity,” which is too subjective to ground moral outrage against the status quo (『《誠》という道徳的価値について』[“On the moral value of ‘sincerity’”], in 『内なるものとしての宗教』 [*Religion as inner*] [Tokyo:

- Iwanami, 1997], p. 20). Hase Shōtō parries the criticism by challenging Nakamura's understanding of Nishida's later work on the I-Thou relationship without, however, coming to grips with the fundamental abstractness of an ethic whose *terminus ad quem* remains a heightened sense of self-awareness. See his "The Problem of the Other in Self-Awareness," *Zen Buddhism Today* 15 (1998): 119–138.
- 55 – Cited in Tomlin, *The Oriental Philosophers*, p. 304, as coming from chapter 3 of *Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos*. Neither quotation nor anything resembling it appears in that chapter or anywhere in the book, but it is consistent with Scheler's critique of Buddhism in general.
- 56 – By this I do not mean to imply a stricture against Nishida's understanding of Buddhism, explicit references to which are absent in his treatment of the I-Thou. Buber's reliance on the biblical tradition gives his work a rooting in history and tradition that Nishida's work lacks. This may also help explain why the latter's prose creates a mood of distance from the real world of ethical responsibility, which, as he insists, love entails. By the same token, what thinkers like Mutō Kazuo 武藤一雄 have done to wed Nishida's ideas to Christian theology shows clearly how an Eastern philosophy of absolute nothingness can incorporate the ethical dimension as successfully as a Western philosophy of being can. See his "Christianity and the Notion of Nothingness," *Japanese Religions* 21 (2) (1996): 199–225.
- 57 – Frederick C. Copleston, *Philosophies and Cultures* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. vii.
- 58 – Watsuji Tetsurō's idea of *aida* 間 and its more sophisticated rethinking by Kimura Bin 木村敏 in 『人と人の間』 (Tokyo: Kōbundō, 1973) are attempts to fill this lacuna in Nishida's thought. My plans to introduce Kimura's corrective, and at the same time to suggest that it does not fulfill the complete role of Buber's *Zwischen*, were thwarted by the length to which this essay has already run.