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Nishitani Keiji's Solution to the Problem of Nihilism: The Way to Emptiness (63 pg.)

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In *Religion and Nothingness*, Nishitani Keiji offers a diagnosis and solution to the problem of nihilism in Japanese consciousness. In order to overcome the problem of nihilism, Nishitani argues that one needs to pass from the field of consciousness through the field of nihility to the field of emptiness. Drawing upon Japanese Buddhist and Western philosophical sources, Nishitani presents an erudite theoretical resolution to the problem. However, other than Zen meditation, Nishitani does not provide a practical means to arrive on the field of emptiness. Since emptiness must be continuously emptied of conceptual representations for it to be fully experienced, I argue that solving the problem of nihilism in Japanese consciousness requires individuals first become aware of the reality of the problem of nihilism in Nishitani's terms and then personally contend with emptying representations of emptiness in their own lives.

Nishitani Keiji's Solution to the Problem of Nihilism: The Way to Emptiness

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Nishitani Keiji's Solution to the Problem of Nihilism: The Way to Emptiness

INTRODUCTION

Nishitani Keiji (1900 – 1990),[1] a central figure in the Kyoto School of philosophy, took the problem of nihilism to be the center of his personal and philosophical life and career. For Nishitani, nihilism is a personal problem that emerges when the self becomes a question for itself as well as a social problem that emerges historically when a cultures' meaning making source collapses. In Japan, Nishitani believes that there exists a problem of nihilism due to the structures of modernity cutting Japan off from its intellectual traditions. In order to solve the problem of nihilism, Nishitani argues that nihilism can only be overcome by passing through nihilism to emptiness. In order to articulate this, Nishitani draws from the Japanese intellectual tradition to describe an architecture of the human experience of the world in three possible modes or fields, namely, the fields of consciousness, nihility, and emptiness. While Nishitani offers a theoretical resolution to the problem of nihilism in Japanese consciousness, he does not offer a practical method by which one will be able to solve the problem in their own life and arrive on the field of emptiness. Accordingly, I offer an interpretation of Nishitani's philosophy of emptiness that lends itself to *education* about the problem of nihilism in Nishitani's terms being the start of a practical method for overcoming nihilism in Japanese consciousness.

In Chapter 1, "The Formation of the Problem of Nihilism in Nishitani's Existential

[1] In Japanese fashion, names are listed Last First. I will do so in this thesis.

Philosophy," I introduce Nishitani's philosophy and his formulation of the problem of nihilism through his influencers from both the Japanese and European philosophical traditions. Nishitani's conception of emptiness was influenced by his teacher Nishida Kitarō and Zen Buddhism, and his formulation of the problem of nihilism was developed through his study of Friedrich Nietzsche and the writings of Martin Heidegger. The difference between the historical problem of nihilism in Europe and Japan is that Japan inherited the European problem of nihilism but not its intellectual tradition. Nishitani's attempt to solve the problem of nihilism in Japan involves reconnecting the contemporary problem of nihilism in Japan with its intellectual tradition through the concept of emptiness.

In Chapter 2, "The Three-Field Topography: Consciousness, Nihility, and Emptiness," I reconstruct Nishitani's articulation of the three-field topography of consciousness, nihility, and emptiness as his solution to the problem of nihilism. I start by describing what Nishitani means by "reality" insofar as it informs his conception of emptiness and how "reality" would be understood and experienced on the field of emptiness. I, then, draw from Graham Parkes, Bret Davis, and the founder of the Soto school of Zen in Japan, Dōgen (1200 – 1253), in order to articulate the theoretical traversal of the three fields and explicate the degree to which Nishitani appropriates Zen Buddhist terminology and the extent to which he reinterprets those concepts in the context of Japanese modernity.

In Chapter 3, "The Start of a Practical Method for Overcoming Nihilism," I offer an interpretation of Nishitani's philosophy that lends itself to a first step in a practical method for overcoming the problem of nihilism in Nishitani's terms. While both *satori* and emptiness are empty concepts, arriving on the field of emptiness is not equivalent to the Zen Buddhist notion of enlightenment. Nishitani is not advocating that Japanese people become enlightened in order to

solve the problem of nihilism. Rather, I argue, the traversal of the three-field topography is a non-linear, existential process that requires one continuously empty conceptual representations of emptiness as one continues to navigate and negotiate with the world on a daily basis on the fields of consciousness and nihility. As such, a practical starting point from which one can begin the process that Nishitani advocates for is becoming aware of the problem of nihilism and the Japanese intellectual tradition.

Accordingly, I argue, drawing on Nakama Yoshiko, that the start of a possible practical method for overcoming nihilism to emptiness is Japanese simply becoming educated about the problem of nihilism and Nishitani's theoretical solution. While arriving on the field of emptiness brings one back to a released engagement with the world, similar to the field of consciousness, it is not necessary, in my view, for every Japanese to finish the existential path that leads them through nihility to emptiness for the problem to be solved in Japanese consciousness. For the problem of nihilism to be solved in Japanese consciousness, individuals need to at least become aware of the problem of nihilism in the first place. Recognition of the reality of the problem of nihilism in Japanese consciousness is the first step in overcoming it and starting to question the structures of modernity that have led to the pervasive problem of nihilism in Japan.

Chapter 1: The Formation of the Problem of Nihilism in Nishitani's Existential Philosophy

Introduction

In this chapter, I investigate how Nishitani developed his position concerning the problem of nihilism by inquiring into various strands of thought that have influenced that development. I begin by discussing Nishitani's personal confrontation with nihilism which serves as the primary motivation for his lifelong concern with the project of overcoming nihilism. Next, I investigate how the Kyoto School and Zen Buddhism influenced his thoughts. Then, I inquire into the influence of Western nihilism in his work *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism* (1949) focusing on his interpretation of Nietzsche. After this, I articulate Heidegger's analytic of Dasein insofar as Heidegger's conception of Being and the Nothing had a great influence on Nishitani's position. I end by showing how Nishitani considers Japanese nihilism as different from European nihilism.

1.1 Nishitani's Personal Confrontation with Nihilism

The formulation of the problem of nihilism in Nishitani's philosophy erupted out of a personal confrontation with despair which Nishitani contended with throughout his life. His route to philosophical inquiry was catalyzed by this sense of nihilistic despair over the human condition and his personal place in the world. In many of his writings, there is a pattern of nihilism which overwhelms all of existence and then is finally overcome by passing through it to

emptiness. According to James Heisig, renowned scholar of Japanese philosophy and friend of Nishitani, "behind these ideas lay the story of a troubled youth who seemed to have constellated in his person the anxieties of the age."[2] For Nishitani, philosophy was a personal and existential pursuit, not just an academic endeavor commanding research and teaching for the sake of making a living. In his life and work, Nishitani embodied the questions that plagued him from his youth:

> My life as a young man can be described in a single phrase: it was a period absolutely without hope…. My life at the time lay entirely in the grips of nihility and despair…. My decision, then, to study philosophy was in fact—melodramatic as it might sound—a matter of life and death.[3]

During his studies, as he dove deeper into German idealism and the Christian mystics, the more he suffered from what he described as "a great void inside of myself."[4] He felt that philosophy and the academic life was cutting him off from seeing things as they really are. He wanted to confront the anxiety and darkness that awaited outside the comfortable environment of the university setting. This continued throughout his academic philosophy career, often causing him to feel distanced from life, himself, and his academic position.

In his professional life, Nishitani attributed his concern with nihilism to the "general malaise of the loss of identity among Japanese intellectuals, who distanced themselves from the common people and the 'native ground of traditional culture' to lose themselves in Western ideas

[2] James W Heisig, *Philosophers of Nothingness: An Essay on the Kyoto School*, (Honolulu, HA: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001), 191.
[3] Heisig, *Philosophers of Nothingness,* 191.
[4] Heisig, *Philosophers of Nothingness,* 191.

that could not provide them with an identity either."[5] After WWII[6], Nishitani became pessimistic about Japan being cut off from its traditional roots grounded in Daoist, Buddhist, Confucian, and Shinto thoughts, histories, and traditions:

> Religion is impotent in Japan. We don't even have a serious atheism. In Europe, every deviation from tradition has to come to terms with tradition or at least runs up against it. This seems to explain the tendency to interiority and introspection that makes people into thinking people. In Japan…ties with tradition have been cut; the burden of having to come to terms with what lies behind us has gone and in its place only a vacuum remains.[7]

The nihilism that Nishitani engages with and confronts in his life and work is not the mere meaninglessness of life and one's existence that is overcome by appealing to some other religious tradition or philosophical system; its overcoming is only accomplished by passing all the way through nihilism to emptiness.[8] Nishitani's starting point for overcoming nihilism was his own in that he had his own experience with personal nihility, despair, and negativity, but his quest also reflects the human condition itself, alone in the dark searching for some ground on

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[5] Heisig, *Philosophers of Nothingness,* 192.
[6] Thomas Kasulis discusses Nishitani's association with the ideas of the militarist Japanese government during WWII in *Engaging Japanese Philosophy: A Short History,* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018), 531, 538, 540. Nishitani participated in the Chuokoron Discussions (CD) in November 1941, March 1942, and November 1942. These discussions were public record discussion groups consisting of Kyoto School philosophers, and their purpose was to rethink Japan's international position and reinterpret Japan's role as a major player in global affairs. For example, they discussed the possible implications of Japan rising as a global world power in Asia. According to Kasulis, from the Chuokoron Discussions, Nishitani clearly accepted some racist theories prevalent in Germany at the time. Instead of focusing on Nishitani's problematic political statements, however, Kasulis recommends we look more closely at Nishitani's analysis of the broader intellectual character of our times and its relevance to religion. For more on this and the connection between the Kyoto School and Japanese nationalism, see also *Rude Awakenings: Zen, The Kyoto School, and the Question of Nationalism*, edited by James Heisig, and John Maraldo.
[7] Heisig, *Philosophers of Nothingness,* 192.
[8] Heisig, *Philosophers of Nothingness,* 192.

which to stand. Some of Nishitani's early writings were concerned with the problem of nihilism, but it was not until after WWII that it became the focal point of his work:

> I am convinced that the problem of nihilism lies at the root of the mutual aversion of religion and science. And it was this that gave my philosophical engagement its starting point, from which it grew larger and larger until it came to envelop nearly everything….The fundamental problem of my life…has always been, to put it simply, the overcoming of nihilism *through* nihilism.[9]

His first book on nihilism was published as a series of lectures in 1949 titled, in English, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*. In that text, Nishitani laid out the contours of Western ideas of nihilism, influenced by his interest in Nietzsche. According to Heisig, "Nishitani was not simply concerned with laying out the contours of western ideas of nihilism, but with trying to find a way to overcome it, or more correctly to letting it overcome itself—a problem in which his philosophical concerns and his personal concerns drew together as never before."[10] The development of Nishitani's formulation of the problem of nihilism in Japanese consciousness was influenced by several sources including his teacher Nishida Kitarō, his lifelong engagement with Zen Buddhism, Nietzsche's characterization of nihilism in Europe, and the work of Martin Heidegger.

[9] Heisig, *Philosophers of Nothingness,* 215.
[10] Heisig, *Philosophers of Nothingness,* 215.

1.2 The Kyoto School and Nishida Kitarō

Traditional Japanese religion, philosophy, and culture is influenced by Daoism, Buddhism, Zen Buddhism, Hinduism, and Shintoism.[11] According to Robert Carter's *The Kyoto School: An Introduction*, the Kyoto School philosophers strive for a synthesis of East and West, a synthesis between their own Western philosophical education and their Japanese Buddhist, Confucian, and Shinto traditions. In this way, the Kyoto School philosophers are in a rather unique position. As Nishitani writes:

> We Japanese have fallen heir to two completely different cultures….This is a great privilege that Westerners do not share in…but at the same time this puts a heavy responsibility on our shoulders: to lay the foundations of thought for a world in the making, for a new world united beyond differences of East and West.[12]

Even among the Kyoto School philosophers, Nishitani is unique in that he did not attempt to build a closed philosophical system like his contemporaries Nishida Kitarō and Tanabe Hajime. Rather than continuously updating and redefining working concepts in a body of thought, Nishitani was concerned with finding a standpoint by grappling with a range of topics from Eastern and Western religion and philosophy, literature, and poetry. According to James

[11] Robert E Carter, *The Kyoto School: An Introduction*, (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2013), 5. While Hinduism is not an obviously influential tradition on Japanese culture, it does have a small presence in Japan. Moreover, there is debate regarding its influence on various Shinto deities and practices. See: Iyanaga, Nobumi, and 彌永信美. "Medieval Shintō as a Form of 'Japanese Hinduism': An Attempt at Understanding Early Medieval Shintō." *Cahiers D'Extrême-Asie* 16 (2006): 263-303.

[12] Keiji Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, trans. Jan Van Bragt (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983), xxvii.

Heisig, "he was always looking for the same thing, and once he found it, he went out to look for it again."[13] Nishitani was trying to uncover a sense of things, just as they are, by accumulating insights, reevaluating them, and then continuing to uncover what may lie beneath. His only concern was creating a standpoint, from which he thought he would be able to *see* into the true nature of things: "he wanted only to see, nothing more."[14] Nishitani's standpoint of emptiness was something he believed, from which, one would be able to "realize" the true nature of reality. Instead of "seeing" objects from the perspective of the subject, the subject-object divide would dissolve such that objects would be experienced in there "suchness" rather than from the perspective of the ego.

Like Nishitani, Nishida Kitarō is one of the central figures of the Kyoto School.[15] Nishida was the first Japanese philosopher to attempt to articulate the "Japanese standpoint" in Western philosophical language. For Nishida, Western culture historically focused on the primacy of *being* in contrast to Eastern cultures which focused on *nothingness*. Nishida's distinction between being and nothingness provided him with a conceptual scheme to articulate the concept of nothingness and how it has informed the philosophical perspective of the Japanese in contrast to Western traditions. In the thought of Nishida, nothingness is not only the negation of being, it also goes beyond the dichotomy between being and non-being to an absolute nothingness. Where the opposite of being is non-being, there is no opposite to nothingness. Nishitani was also concerned with the concept of nothingness and its relationship to European philosophies of being; however, Nishitani drew more explicitly from the Japanese Zen Buddhist tradition in

[13] Heisig, *Philosophers of Nothingness,* 189.
[14] Heisig, *Philosophers of Nothingness,* 189.
[15] Those associated with the Kyoto School of philosophy are usually those in Nishida's academic lineage who took up the concept of nothingness in their work. While the concept of nothingness, absolute nothingness, and/or emptiness is developed extensively by members of the Kyoto School, there is debate concerning who is considered a "member" of the Kyoto School, even if they did not write on the concept of nothingness.

order to develop his conception of emptiness.

1.3 Buddhism, Zen, and Nishitani

According to Heisig, "while continuing his existentialist approach to religion, [Nishitani] also kept up an interest in a wide variety of cultural issues, as well as a critique and appreciation of Japanese spirituality."[16] Zen sitting meditation was both of philosophical and personal interest and later became a permanent feature of his life. He was first introduced to Zen philosophy and practice through the writings of D. T. Suzuki, a Japanese author who was influential in spreading Zen Buddhist to the West. Though zazen started as a personal practice outside of his academic pursuits, it later became a philosophical research interest. He would return to practicing zazen at different periods of his life and often spoke of his academic life and practice of zazen as a balance between reason and letting go of reason. In his words "thinking and then sitting, sitting and then thinking."[17]

Nishitani maintained a Zen Buddhist position in which "reality" was found in everyday life and not in a theoretical account of reality. While reality is there in everyday life, some digging and sweeping away is required to become aware of it. Nishitani's standpoint of emptiness is a result of that digging and sweeping. From that standpoint, Nishitani believed one could perceive the ordinary world in extraordinary ways. This way of seeing has been available all along for anyone to look at from the standpoint of emptiness.[18]

Instead of using the concept of nothingness like his contemporaries in Japan, Nishitani chose the concept of emptiness from the Mahayana Buddhist tradition in order to articulate his

[16] Heisig, *Philosophers of Nothingness,* 186.
[17] Heisig, *Philosophers of Nothingness,* 184.
[18] Carter, *The Kyoto School*, 94-95. For a more in-depth explanation of Nishitani's conception of "reality," see Chapter 2: Section 2.1.

thought. Like the concept of nothingness, emptiness is a concept that also goes beyond the dichotomy between being and non-being. In Buddhist philosophy, something is empty if it has no substantial or intrinsic nature. For something to be empty means that it is "empty" of intrinsic nature. Since all things, according to Buddhism, are mutually dependent on other factors for their existence, everything is empty of intrinsic nature. Since everything is empty, existence is a unified, nondual whole. However, that nondual whole is not a unified oneness or a kind of monism. Since everything is empty, emptiness as the absolute totality of all things is also empty of intrinsic nature. Thus, everything exists in relation to everything else in an interdependent totality.[19]

Drawing on Nishida's conception of nothingness and the Zen Buddhist notion of emptiness, in *Religion and Nothingness,* Nishitani works to establish a "standpoint" of emptiness. From such a standpoint, one would be able to experience reality as it is. The concept of emptiness was able to capture what Nishitani was looking for in his existential philosophy because it was both within the Japanese religious tradition but had not yet been used in dialogue with the European continental tradition in Japan.[20] According to Ueda Shizuteru, from the perspective of the modern world, Nishitani developed an embodied understanding of the notion of emptiness from Mahayana Buddhism while also "carrying out an extensive dialogue and confrontation with the Western history of thought."[21] Nishitani borrowed the concept of emptiness and used it freely in the modern context with traditions it had never been used in before.

[19] This conception of emptiness has roots that stem all the way down through the Mahayana Buddhist tradition to the concept "sunyata" in Sanskrit from the work of Nāgārjuna (ca 150-250 AD). However, Nishitani mostly draws from the Zen Buddhist tradition's use of the term in his appropriation of it.
[20] Shizuteru Ueda, "Contributions to Dialogue with the Kyoto School," in *Japanese and Continental Philosophy: Conversations with the Kyoto School,* ed. Bret W Davis, Brian Schroeder, and Jason M Wirth (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 27.
[21] Ueda, "Contributions to Dialogue," 27.

Even though the notion of emptiness comes from the Buddhist religious tradition, Nishitani does not advocate that everyone become a Buddhist or adopt Buddhist precepts. Rather, Nishitani attempts to point at a problem that he believes exists in Europe and Japan, namely, the problem of nihilism, and he uses the Buddhist concept of emptiness to articulate that shared problem and his proposed solution. For the Japanese to reconcile with the problem of nihilism in Japan, Nishitani believed that its solution had to come from its own traditional roots.[22] However, in developing his conception of nihilism and its solution, Nishitani was influenced by Nietzschean nihilism and Heidegger's philosophy of Being and the Nothing.

1.4 Nietzsche, Nishitani, and Nihilism

Nishitani believes that the problem of nihilism is ultimately a problem of the self, and that the European problem of nihilism is something with which all Europeans have to contend if they are going to face Nietzsche's declaration of the death of God. "[Nietzsche's] nihilism emerged with the death of the Christian God, and his existential attitude is that of a seafarer departing on a voyage of dangerous exploration into the vast ocean of life that had opened up as never before through the death of God."[23] According to Nishitani, before the death of God, human existence and morality were understood in relation to God or some transcendent world beyond the everyday world. The relationship between human beings and God had its ground in this transcendent world. Human reason was also modeled on the divine or perfect reason of this beyond-world. Thus, according to Nishitani, human subjectivity was established with respect to

[22] Radicalizing nihilism by way of overcoming the dualism between subject and object is the only solution to the problem of nihilism in Europe as well, but, according to Nishitani, it must be done by way of Europe's traditional philosophical and religious concepts.
[23] Keiji Nishitani, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, ed. Peter J. McCormick and trans. Graham Parkes (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990), 70.

the transcendent world. With the death of God, however, the transcendent system collapsed, leaving a void or abyss. According to Nishitani:

> Up until this point human existence had a clear and eternal meaning, a way in which to live. To follow that way or not was a matter of personal choice. But now existence is deprived of such meaning; it stands before nihility as having been stripped naked, a question mark for itself. And this in turn transforms the world itself into a question. The fabric of history is rent asunder, and the 'world' in which we live reveals itself as an abyss. From the bottom of the self the world and the self together become a question—at the same time a historical and a metaphysical question.[24]

Without a clear meaning to existence or clear way to determine what values to adopt and follow, one's sense of self becomes a question with respect to the world.[25] The advent of nihilism, for Nietzsche, is the gradual crumbling of ideals and values humans received from the transcendent world. However, because the entirety of European life is structured around these values, nihility does not only become a problem for the individual and how they ought to live, it also becomes a cultural problem that opens up an abyss under the feet of an entire people's history.

[24] Nishitani, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, 4.
[25] Nishitani often uses the phrase 'becomes a question mark' to articulate how nihilism affects the self and how the self relates to itself and the world. In confronting nihilism, one's existence, how one ought to act in the world, and one's relationship to any transcendent realm is put into question. This kind of questioning is not one that can ever result in a clear answer. The question mark represents the question that must continue to be asked as one attempts to engage in forming new values for oneself.

According to Nishitani, Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God caused people to see European philosophy and religion as man-made, casting all forms of security into radical doubt. The European response to nihilism was to admit the truth of it and live in the face of it by reevaluating one's values. Each person now had the responsibility to create values for themselves. As Carter asserts, "for centuries, Christian values had themselves protected its followers from despair at the meaninglessness of human existence."[26] Humans had absolute value because they were made in the image of God, and they were given assurances of good and evil, right and wrong, from God-given morality. With the death of God, these assurances were taken away, leaving a great abyss. For Nishitani, the abyss is always present, even if we create our own meaning and values; the abyss is always just underfoot.[27]

While the problem of nihilism in Europe can be understood as a particular historical phenomenon that took place in a specific time and place, Nishitani argues that nihilism is also a universal human problem: "If nihilism is anything, it is first of all a problem of the self. And it becomes such a problem only when the self becomes a problem, when the ground of the existence called 'self' becomes a problem for itself."[28] While our historical and religious traditions offer ways to turn from nihilism by having values and morality given to us through a transcendent realm, we are still individually deciding to believe and act on what is given by that transcendent realm. Even before the death of God, the problem of nihilism continued to lay just underfoot, waiting for us to confront it. Thus, Nishitani asserts that "the roots of nihilism reach down into the essence of what it is to be human, and as such it represents an eternal problem transcending particular times or places."[29]

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[26] Carter, *The Kyoto School*, 96.
[27] Carter, *The Kyoto School*, 97.
[28] Nishitani, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, 1.
[29] Nishitani, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, 3.

Nihilism appears when the value systems which support social and historical life crumbles, revealing a groundless foundation. Viewed in this way, one can say that nihilism, for Nishitani, is a general phenomenon that occurs from time to time in different places throughout history. Post-war Japan is one such instance: For Japanese, "while the spirit of nihilism has its origin in Europe, it is by no means unrelated to us in the modern era. We have been baptized in European culture, and European education has more or less become our own…There lurks the *unique* character of the issue of nihilism in Japan."[30]

1.5 Heidegger, Nishitani, and Nihilism

While nihilism, for Nishitani, is a particular phenomenon that occurred in Europe and in Japan in their own ways, nihilism is also a shared problem that is recognized and becomes a problem when the self confronts something that crumbles its foundations of meaning. However, Nishitani also asserts that the abyss of nihilism is always lurking just underfoot. Nishitani believed that Martin Heidegger recognized this phenomenon as well. Rather than discussing human being's relationship with nihilism through personal experience, Heidegger offers a theoretical justification for understand nihilism as a universal structure of human existence. Just as Nishitani argues that nihilism, whether we confront it or not, is always lurking just underfoot, Heidegger argues that what characterizes our situatedness in the world is the fact that we are always "held out into the nothing." Heidegger argues for and articulates this through his inquiry into the question of the meaning of Being and the Nothing with respect to the history of metaphysics in the Western tradition.

In *Being and Time,* Heidegger begins with an exposition of the question of the meaning

[30] Nishitani, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism,* 3.

of Being. He claims that, though we have the discipline of metaphysics stemming back to the ancient Greeks, the Western philosophical tradition has forgotten the meaning of Being along the way. According to Heidegger, as "the most universal and the emptiest concept," Being resists definition.[31] Heidegger wants to recover the question of the meaning of Being from the three prejudices that have plagued the concept of Being since antiquity. (1) "'Being' is the most 'universal' concept."[32] Being (with a capital B) is always already contained in anything that has to do with beings (with a lowercase b). However, Being is not a being. It is not a genus in the sense that "Animal" is the genus of the species "cat," "dog," and "fish." There is nothing that "surpasses" the universality of Being in the same way that "living thing" might surpass the universality of "animal." Though Being may be the most universal concept, it is not the clearest. In fact, Heidegger thinks Being is the most obscure of all concepts.

(2) "The concept of 'Being' is undefinable."[33] Being is not a being, and thus it cannot be defined by any being or derived from any higher beings. Nevertheless, this does not mean that Being is not a problem for philosophy. Though it may fall outside the realm of classical logic, "the indefinability of Being does not dispense with the question of its meaning but compels that question."[34] (3) "'Being' is the self-evident concept."[35] We intuitively know and understand Being's meaning in language when we say, for example, "the ball *is* red" or "they *are* dancing." We live in an understanding of Being, but, at the same time, the meaning of Being is shrouded in darkness.[36] Though the meaning of Being may be "self-evident" (ala Kant), Heidegger thinks an appeal to self-evidence does not answer the question of its meaning. Not only is the answer to the

[31] Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings: from Being and Time to The Task of Thinking*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993) 42.
[32] Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 42.
[33] Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 43.
[34] Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 44.
[35] Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 44.
[36] Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 44.

question of the meaning of Being lacking, the question itself is obscure. Thus, Heidegger's recovery of the question of the meaning of Being requires the development of an adequate formulation of the question.[37]

In order to formulate a question, we must already have an idea of what is being asked. Thus, according to Heidegger, "the meaning of Being must therefore already be available to us in a certain way."[38] While we know enough to ask the question "What is Being?" we understand verbally what *is* is without knowing what it conceptually means. "We do not even know the horizon upon which we are supposed to grasp and pin down [its] meaning."[39] Heidegger contends, however, that the meaning of Being can be explicitly elucidated from interpretations of Being and beings. Since Being is what is asked about in the formulation of the question of the meaning of Being and "Being means the Being of beings,"[40] what is interrogated in the question are beings themselves. They who ask the question of the meaning of Being are beings who have a particular relationship with their Being insofar as they ask this question as a mode of being. Heidegger defines this being as *Dasein*, or being-there, the being whose Being is a question.

Two years after publishing *Being and Time*, Heidegger lectures on metaphysics and the relationship between *Dasein* and "the Nothing." According to Heidegger, every metaphysical question always encompasses the entire range of metaphysical problems and that the questioner is present with the question itself insofar as they place themselves in question.[41] Since metaphysical questions have to do with beings and the Being of beings, and Dasein, who asks metaphysical questions, is a being who has a particular relationship with its own Being, insofar

[37] Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 44.
[38] Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 45.
[39] Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 46.
[40] Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 47.
[41] Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 94.

as it is a question, the questioning of Dasein into metaphysics is ultimately a questioning about Dasein itself in its Being. In all inquiry, what Heidegger calls 'science,' "we relate ourselves to beings themselves."[42] In this way, Dasein examines only beings: "What should be examined are beings only, and besides that—nothing; being alone, and further—nothing; solely beings, and beyond that—nothing."[43]

Heidegger claims that the Nothing is rejected by science because of its nullity. It does not make sense for the biologist to study the not-living or for the carpenter to study the not-wood. In this way, "science wishes to know nothing of the nothing."[44] However, we have a conception of the Nothing insofar as we know it as something about which we are not interested in knowing. Discussing the Nothing is difficult because it is easy to mistakenly posit the Nothing as a being. We cannot posit the Nothing as something in the sense that the Nothing is some thing. It would then become a being which the Nothing is not. "For thinking, which is always essentially thinking about something, must act in a way contrary to its own essence when it thinks of the nothing."[45] According to Heidegger, the Nothing is the negation of the totality of beings.[46]

However, as finite beings, we cannot grasp the totality of beings and then negate it. We can only think of the whole of beings as an "idea" and then negate that. "In this way we do attain the formal concept of the imagined nothing but never the nothing itself."[47] But since the Nothing represents total indistinguishability, we cannot obtain a distinction between the idea of the Nothing and the Nothing itself as the negation of the whole of beings. While we cannot comprehend the whole of beings, "we certainly do find ourselves stationed in the midst of beings

[42] Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 94.
[43] Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 95.
[44] Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 96.
[45] Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 97.
[46] Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 98.
[47] Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 99.

that are revealed somehow as a whole."[48] Our fragmented everyday existence may appear to be only dealing with particular beings, but "it always deals with beings in a unity of the 'whole.'"[49] Being as a whole overcomes us in the mood of boredom, according to Heidegger. "Profound boredom, drifting here and there in the abysses of our existence like a muffling fog, removes all things and human beings and oneself along with them into a remarkable indifference."[50] Boredom reveals beings as a whole to Dasein. "But just when moods of this sort bring us face to face with beings as a whole they conceal from us the nothing we are seeking."[51]

An attunement in which man is brought before the Nothing happens in the fundamental mood of anxiety. This is not anxiety in the face of a particular object. Rather, it is an anxiety that has no object, a kind of ill at ease where "all things and we ourselves sink into indifference."[52] As we recede into beings as a whole in anxiety, anxiety oppresses us. "Anxiety reveals the nothing," and Dasein is all that is still there to hold onto in the unsettling experience of hovering there in the Nothing.[53] Once anxiety is dissolved, that anxiety reveals the Nothing. For what we were anxious was nothing. "The nothing itself—as such—was there."[54] From here, according to Heidegger, since the Nothing is revealed in human existence, we can interrogate it.

Rather than the Nothing revealing itself as an object or being that can be grasped, the Nothing is revealed in and through anxiety and is encountered at once with beings as a whole. As Dasein is oppressed in anxiety, the Nothing acts as a repellent of beings as a whole. This action of the Nothing is a nihilation. Nihilation, insofar as it repels the whole of beings, also discloses

[48] Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 99.
[49] Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 99.
[50] Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 99.
[51] Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 100.
[52] Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 101.
[53] Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 101.
[54] Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 101.

beings as other with respect to the Nothing.[55] The original nihilating nothing brings Dasein before beings such that "only on the ground of the original revelation of the nothing can human existence approach and penetrate beings."[56] Since Dasein's existence relates itself to beings which it is *not*, it emerges in existence from the nihilation of the Nothing as it repels the retreating whole of beings in anxiety. As such, "Da-sein means: being held out into the nothing."[57] Dasein is always already beyond beings as a whole, since insofar as it has a relationship with beings that are not it, the nihilation of the Nothing is already at work in making it possible for Dasein to be related to beings or to itself as a being.[58] The Nothing is not an object or a being. The Nothing makes it possible for Dasein to be open to beings as such. The Nothing is not simply the negation of beings as a counter concept; rather "it originally belongs to their essential unfolding as such. In the Being of beings the nihilation of the nothing occurs."[59]

Nishitani understood Heidegger's philosophy of the Nothing and Being as resonating with Eastern ways of thinking. According to Nishitani, "Heidegger gives us nothing less than an ontology within which nihilism becomes a philosophy. By disclosing the Nothing at the ground of all beings and summoning it forth, nihilism becomes the basis of a new metaphysics."[60] For Heidegger, the question of Being is the only issue in philosophy. Our way of being in the world is constituted by our always already being in relation to Being insofar as Being is a question for a particular being, namely, us. Heidegger calls the kind of being in which Being is a question, Dasein. What characterizes Dasein, according to Heidegger is being held out into the Nothing. Nishitani understands the Nothing to be resonant with nihilism insofar as both point at the

[55] Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 103.
[56] Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 103.
[57] Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 103.
[58] Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 103.
[59] Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 104.
[60] Nishitani, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, 157.

meaninglessness and uncertainty lurking at the bottom of our existence.

For Nishitani, Heidegger's characterization of Dasein being held out into the Nothing, and that being revealed through anxiety, is a European characterization of the nihility that he thinks is a universal problem for the self. Nishitani understands this to mean that human beings are exposed to nihility at their foundation. Since our understanding of Being is pre-ontological, according to Heidegger, "the ontological difference in which philosophical problems of Being and Nothing are set up forms the bedrock not only of daily life and experience but also of scientific inquiry and the construction of worldviews."[61] How we conceive of ourselves and orient ourselves in our everyday lives is structured around the dichotomy between Being and Nothing.

For Nishitani, "that nihility lies at the ground of *Dasein* is evident from the phenomenon of *death.*"[62] When we confront the inevitability of death, we realize our finitude and experience anxiety at the ground of the self. "That Dasein is essentially finite comes from the revelation of Nothing at its ground."[63] However, according to Nishitani, this view of nihilism and the Nothing is not pessimistic. Recognizing the reality of the Nothing at the ground of the self, one's finitude, allows one to truly become themselves, unencumbered by the dualistic thinking imposed on them from the world: "The question is whether we *authentically* hold ourselves out into Nothing, become completely finite, and thus become ourselves; or whether we exist inauthentically as members of the public, and lose ourselves by deceiving ourselves with regard to our finitude."[64] For Nishitani, not confronting the Nothing when it is obviously just underfoot is a form of self-deception. To turn away from nihilism to a source of meaning-making from outside oneself

[61] Nishitani, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, 161.
[62] Nishitani, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, 165.
[63] Nishitani, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, 168.
[64] Nishitani, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, 170.

would be going back to before the death of God. If nihilism is truly going to be overcome in Japanese consciousness, Nishitani thinks that it can only be overcome by passing through nihilism to emptiness.

1.6 Nihilism in Europe vs Japan

For Nishitani, nihilism came about through Europe's recognition of the death of God. This crisis can be understood as "a quaking underfoot of the ground that had supported the history of Europe for several thousand years and laid the foundations of European culture, thought, ethics, and religion."[65] Many European philosophers, such as Nietzsche and Heidegger, posed philosophical characterizations and solutions to the problem of nihilism in Europe. Japan, by contrast, did not come to nihilism because of a shaking in the foundations of its religious tradition. Europe's death of God shook the foundations of meaning in Europe and the resolutions to that quake amounted to a kind of renewed meaning making that came from within rather than from some outside meaning making source.

The affirmative nihilism of meaning making that emerged in Europe was a way to overcome the crisis of nihilism at its roots. But, according to Nishitani, the spiritual tradition of Europe is not Japan's; "and in that sense a crisis generated from the shaking of those foundations is not a reality for [Japan]."[66] Japan inherited the social and technological structures of European modernity which emerged out of the Europe's religious tradition's upheaval. However, Japan did not inherit Europe's tradition in order to make sense of the results of modernity due to that upheaval. Nevertheless, Nishitani believes that the Japanese people have lost touch with their traditional past:

[65] Nishitani, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism,* 173.
[66] Nishitani, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism,* 174.

> For us in Japan, things are different. In the past, Buddhism and Confucian thought constituted such a basis, but they have already lost their power, leaving a total void and vacuum in our spiritual ground…. The worst thing is that this emptiness is in no way an emptiness that has been won through struggle, nor a nihility that has been 'lived through.' Before we knew what was happening, the spiritual core had wasted away completely.[67]

The West still has a spiritual base in the history of Christian and Greek philosophy. But in Japan, the Buddhist and Confucian base is now a void.[68] According to Nishitani, what constitutes the void and significance of European nihilism is the fact that European culture was imposed on top of Japan's philosophical and religious traditions. "The reason the void was generated in the spiritual foundation of the Japanese in the first place was that we rushed earnestly into westernization and in the process forgot ourselves."[69] For Nishitani, reconnecting with Japan's traditional roots, and using them to think through its contemporary confrontation with nihilism, will allow Japanese to overcome nihilism through nihilism in a forward looking direction.

According to Nishitani, studying European nihilism is important in three ways. It helps Japanese realize that the problem exists in Japan, overcoming it requires recollection of spiritual depth, and that tradition must be recovered by orienting oneself not toward the past, but toward the future in line with the past. "Our tradition must be appropriated from the direction in which

[67] Heisig, *Philosophers of Nothingness,* 216.
[68] Nishitani, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism,* 175.
[69] Nishitani, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism,* 178.

we are heading, as a new possibility."[70] The solution to the problem of nihilism in Japan cannot come from a turning back to Japan's religious tradition, it must come through a reevaluation of that tradition in a future driven direction. "The way to overcome it must be of our own creation. Only then will the spiritual culture of the Orient which has been handed down through the ages be revitalized in a new transformation."[71]

Nishitani ends *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism* by proposing that the way to overcome nihilism in Japan is by way of the Buddhist standpoint of emptiness.[72] He did not simply rush into trying to do this, however. He knew that "any genuinely philosophical problem needs to emerge from within oneself more than once and in more than one form before one is ready to respond to it."[73] He eventually responded to it in his magnum opus *Religion and Nothingness* in 1961.

[70] Nishitani, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism,* 179.
[71] Nishitani, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, 181.
[72] Heisig, *Philosophers of Nothingness,* 217.
[73] Heisig, *Philosophers of Nothingness*, 217.

Chapter 2: The Three-Field Topography: Consciousness, Nihility, and Emptiness

Introduction

In *Religion and Nothingness*, Nishitani articulates the logic of the existential overcoming of nihilism in terms of the traversal of the three fields of consciousness, nihility, and emptiness. In this chapter, I discuss this three-field topography in Nishitani's philosophy. Drawing on the work of James Heisig, Bret Davis, and Graham Parkes, I articulate the nuances of the individual fields as well as the relationships amongst them. First, I investigate what Nishitani means by "reality," insofar his understanding of reality is key to understanding his notion of emptiness. Next, I inquire into the meaning of the field of consciousness and also explain the "logical" relationship between the field of consciousness and the field of nihility. Then, I discuss how one traverses from the field of consciousness to the field of nihility as well as the aspects of the Japanese intellectual tradition that Nishitani utilizes in his articulation of that process. Finally, I examine the field of emptiness (*sunyata*) and its relationship to the fields of consciousness and nihility. According to Nishitani, once one overcomes nihilism on the field of nihility and arrives on the deeper field of emptiness, one experiences reality as it is. This means that, on the field of emptiness, one experiences objects in there "suchness," a kind of experience which does not involve a subject-object divide. Emptiness is the field on which Nishitani believes the problem of nihilism will be overcome in Japanese consciousness.

2.1 Nishitani and Reality

For Nishitani, from an everyday standpoint, we think of reality in a dualistic sense; we think of objects as separate from us. For example, the mountains, streams, flowers and the universe are separate from us. We also think of other people, societies, nations, and human events and activities as without us. Furthermore, we have our own inner world consisting of our thoughts, feelings, and desires which we can analyze and investigate as objects separate from us.[74] From a scientific standpoint, we think of atoms, energy, and the scientific laws which regulate energy as true reality. A metaphysician, for instance, might say that true reality lies in the world of Ideas beyond the phenomena. The problem, for Nishitani, is that all these "realities" seem to lack unity and contradict each other.

For Nishitani, things cannot exist apart from the physical and mathematical laws of natural science, and thoughts and desires are not separate from the laws of physiology and psychology. While the various standpoints of life, (i.e., everyday life, physics, metaphysics, and psychology) tell us what is real, there are discrepancies. They all cannot be *the* description of what is real at the same time. The scientist has no problem saying that the objects of his scientific study are real and that the objects of his everyday experience are real even if they are completely at odds with each other. Even if those two realities contradict, we are "unable to deny either of them. It is no simple matter to say what is truly real."[75]

Furthermore, death and nihility are also very real. For Nishitani, "nihility is absolute negativity with regard to the very being of all those various things and phenomena just referred to; death is absolute negativity with regard to life itself."[76] If life and objects are real, then death

[74] Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness,* 6.
[75] Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness,* 7.
[76] Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness,* 7.

and nihility are equally real. "Wherever there is life, there must be death. In the face of death and nihility, all life and existence lose their certainty and their importance as reality, and come to look unreal instead."[77]

With all these different standpoints from which one can look at "reality" and call it so, Nishitani thinks that it is rare that we actually get in touch with non-dualistic reality as such. Experiencing objects from a scientific, psychological, or even nihilistic standpoint does not get us in touch with objects themselves because our conception of ourselves as separate from the objects gets in the way. In Nishitani's words, "it is extremely rare for us so to 'fix our attention' on things as to 'lose ourselves' in them, in other words, to *become* the very things we are looking at."[78] Rather, we are used to thinking of things from the standpoint of the self, separate from the objects of our gazes or senses.

Rather than intellectualizing about reality as separate from us, according to Nishitani, pursuing true reality is a feat that is done with one's whole body. It is not simply through concepts and theory that one can really get in touch with reality as it is. For Nishitani:

> Our ability to perceive reality means that reality realizes (actualizes) itself in us; that this in turn is the only way that we can realize (appropriate through understanding) the fact that reality is so realizing itself in us; and that in so doing the self-realization of reality itself takes place…In this sense, the realness of our existence, as the appropriation of reality, belongs to reality itself as the self-realization of reality itself.[79]

[77] Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness,* 7.
[78] Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness,* 9.
[79] Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness,* 5-6.

Reality, for Nishitani, is not something *out there* with which we have trouble getting in contact. Reality is not the "thing in-itself" fundamentally separated from the mind or its representations in our heads. While Nishitani believes that we usually discuss reality, or various realities, through different kinds of representation (i.e., language, models, etc), he does not think that, in our everyday lives, our experiences of objects are *only* representations of some "real" object underneath. When we discuss different realities, we are not getting in touch with reality as it is because we are not considering how we exist *with* objects at a more fundamental level. Rather, we usually think about the reality of objects in terms of their separation and difference from us.[80]

2.2 The Field of Consciousness

In our everyday lives, we exist with objects from a standpoint of separation, from the self. According to Nishitani, "to look at things from the standpoint of the self is always to see things merely as objects, that is, to look at things *without* from the field *within* the self."[81] In this mode, the self and things remain fundamentally separate. For example, in writing this, I am engaging with this computer from a standpoint of separation. I am *using* the computer as a tool in order to accomplish some task. Insofar as I am using the computer, my *self* is separate from it. Of course, as I continue to write, I change insofar as I continue to accumulate experience, and the computer changes insofar as the keyboard keys continue to wear as I press them and the electrons shooting around the motherboard continuously change speed and position as I type away. However, I am

[80] Ultimately, Nishitani believes that, on the field of emptiness, we will be able to experience reality as it is. While Nishitani does not use the same language, I think it is safe to say that the concept of reality that Nishitani is trying to articulate is similar to a Husserlian or Pragmatist phenomenological conception of reality in which there is no fundamental separation between consciousness and objects of consciousness. An important difference, however, for Nishitani, is that he thinks that realizing and understanding this fundamental unity of subject and object requires more than simply adopting a new intellectual framework.

[81] Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness,* 9.

still operating from the standpoint of the self. I am not getting in touch with the computer as it is. I see the computer as a tool, separate from me, for my use.

Even in circumstances where we are trying to get in touch with things as they are, according to Nishitani, we still do so from a separated standpoint. For example, the particle physicist attempting to discover what is truly real in the most fundamental particles studies particle phenomenon from a separated perspective. They are trying to get at reality itself, but once the work is done, they go about living their lives in their usual way as if that were also just as real. One's self and life as a physicist is separated from their life as a human being living in whatever context. The metaphysician engages with concepts in a similar fashion. Even though concepts can be understood as "within the mind," they are treated as objects separated from the self. For Nishitani, "this standpoint of separation of subject and object, or opposition between within and without, is what we call the field of 'consciousness.' And it is from this field that we ordinarily relate to things by means of concepts and representations."[82]

On the field of consciousness, the self stands center stage. We do not get in touch with things as they are and "face them in their own mode of being."[83] We also think of our "inner" thoughts, feelings, and desires as real. But it is doubtful whether we properly get in touch with ourselves. For Nishitani, "precisely because we face things on a field separate from things, and to the extent that we do so, we are forever separated from ourselves."[84] When we interact with objects in the world, we examine them from a removed perspective. The desk is *here* and I am using the desk in such and such a way. I and the desk are separate. We do the same when we think about our thinking, emotions, and desires. We place the thinking, emotion, or desire in an

[82] Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness,* 9.
[83] Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness,* 9.
[84] Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness,* 10.

artificial bubble away from ourselves so that we can analyze it. Nevertheless, according to Nishitani, on the field of consciousness, we do not get in touch with objects—whether they be objects in the world or our mental objects—in their own mode of being. We are only getting at them from one particular angle, (i.e., physical, metaphysical, psychological, etc). We do not get in touch with the *true* reality of these objects.

Our own selves are also "objects" that we do not get in touch with, according to Nishitani. Even when we try to get in touch with our own selves, we set the self as an object against the self. Nishitani is not denying the reality of our internal life, however. "Things, the self, feelings, and so forth are all real, to be sure."[85] Rather, when we try to get in touch with ourselves, we can only do so through analysis of feelings, desires, and so forth as they are represented as objects for us to investigate. Insofar as feelings and desires are my own, they are not removed from me as objects of investigation. As soon as I try to remove them, they become representations of those feelings and desires rather than the feelings and desires themselves. For Nishitani, as long as we do not break through the field of consciousness, we will continuously lack unity regarding our experience of reality in its various modes.[86]

Graham Parkes highlights that, if Nishitani is correct that Western philosophy has generally failed to explore the other two fields of experience (i.e., nihility and emptiness), then our experience and philosophy has been impoverished.[87] These fields of experience are not fields that one can only access only through some particular philosophical method, such as one only found in the Asian tradition. Rather, they are always present and accessible to everyone, everywhere, yet somehow hidden. In order to fully experience reality in its various modes, we

[85] Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness,* 10.
[86] Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness,* 10.
[87] Graham Parkes, "Nishitani Keiji: Practicing Philosophy as a Matter of Life and Death," in *The Oxford Handbook of Japanese Philosophy*, ed. Bret Davis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020) 466-467.

must break through the field of consciousness. According to Bret Davis, the willful subjectivity of the ego attempts to secure its existence by possessing/controlling objects, blind to the fact that ultimately, the human being is reduced to an object of possession and manipulation. In order to break out of this, we must first "step back" to the abyss of nihility lurking beneath the field of consciousness.[88] This "step back," however, is not a step away from consciousness. Rather, it is a reframing of the way in which we engage with the world. Ultimately, the field of emptiness is another such reframing, rather than an independent step away.

According to Nishitani, in the modern age, our dominant mode of conceiving of reality is that of self and object on the field of consciousness. This is because of the influence of Descartes. Descartes established the ego as a reality beyond all doubt and as the starting point for his derivation of everything else that exists. However, he also posed the ego as being disconnected from everything outside of it. Things outside the ego "became, so to speak, the cold and lifeless world of death."[89] For Descartes, animals, including human bodies, are simply complex machines. According to Nishitani, in order to get in touch with reality, we need to break through the field of consciousness so that we can have a new perspective that is not conditioned by the ego.[90]

2.3 The Field of Nihility: The Great Doubt

The contemporary conception of the everyday self, according to Nishitani, is of the Cartesian type. We think of the self as "constituted self-consciously as something standing over against the world and all the things that are in it."[91] We are unable to conceive of subjectivity

[88] Bret W Davis, "The Step Back Through Nihilism," *Synthesis Philosophica* 19, no. 1 (2004): 156.
[89] Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness,* 11.
[90] Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness,* 13.
[91] Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness,* 13.

without also conceding that each individual has an independent and absolute ego. For Descartes, the subject is the point of departure from which we designate everything else. Descartes took the 'cogito, ergo sum' to be "an immediately evident truth, the one thing that stood above all doubt and could therefore serve as the starting point for thinking about everything else."[92] However, Nishitani remarks that the cogito does not give us a standpoint from which to consider the cogito itself. Since it is the ego which positions the ego as the standpoint from which to consider everything else, the "ego is seen as self-consciousness mirroring self-consciousness at every turn and the *cogito* is seen from the standpoint of the *cogito* itself."[93] The ego, thus, becomes a mode of being that closes itself up within itself. According to Nishitani, insofar as Descartes conception of the ego pervades the modern conception of the self, one's conception of their own subjectivity, their ego, becomes a mode of being of the self that is closed up within itself. "In other words, ego *means* self in a state of self-attachment."[94]

Nishitani thinks that, as we inquire into the self and its relationship to the world, eventually, questions regarding egoism, the potential good or evil nature of the ego, the loneliness and loss of the self in society, and the possibility of knowledge become questions for the ego which is "self-centered on itself and clinging to itself."[95] These questions lead one to question the truth of the cogito. According to Nishitani, "its self-evidence becomes a kind of self-deception, or a fallacy unto itself, since the elemental ground of the ego itself has been closed off to the understanding of the ego."[96]

For example, one way that the truth of the cogito can be cast into doubt is through the

[92] Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness,* 13.
[93] Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness,* 14.
[94] Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness,* 14.
[95] Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness,* 15.
[96] Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness,* 15.

loss of a loved one, which induces one to face their finitude. "Contained in the pain of losing a loved one forever is a fundamental uncertainty about the very existence of oneself and others."[97] This doubt can take a variety of forms. For example, Nishitani discusses the Zen notion of the Great Doubt. The doubt's "greatness" refers to the content of the doubt being the basic existence of the self and others (i.e., persons and objects) in the world. When the self contends with the reality of death, it realizes that death is at the foundation of one's life and existence in the world. For Nishitani, this realization is one of nihility. For Nishitani:

> To that extent the realization of nihility is nothing other than the realization of the self itself. It is not a question of observing nihility objectively or entertaining some representation of it. It is, rather, as if the self were itself to *become* that nihility, and in so doing become aware of itself from the limits of self-existence.[98]

It is when the self breaks through the field of consciousness that it comes to stand on the ground of nihility. Nihility is not something that the self holds as an object of consciousness. While it can be a concept that we analyze and discuss, the *experience* of nihility on the field of nihility is not an object of consciousness because it opens up the shared ground between the self and objects in the world, namely, their negation. On the field of consciousness, nihility is covered up and cannot make itself present. Just as Heidegger describes the Nothing as that which science avoids because of its nullity, Nishitani argues that "on the field of consciousness this nihility is covered over and cannot make itself really present."[99] According to Nishitani, when

[97] Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness,* 16.
[98] Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness,* 16.
[99] Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness,* 17.

nihility makes itself present, the self and objects on the field of consciousness are "nullified but not annihilated. Self-being and the being of all things combine to make one question; all being becomes a single great question mark."[100]

This is a state of a fundamentally different doubt from the Cartesian type. The Great Doubt is the doubt that comes at the point where the nihility that is hidden at the ground of the self makes itself present as a reality to the self in a way that the self and its existence along with the world becomes a single great doubt. This Great Doubt presents itself as *reality* in the same way that doing metaphysics presents reality in a particular way as opposed to the everyday presence of reality.[101] The difference between experiencing reality as a Great Doubt and experiencing reality through a metaphysical or scientific lens is that the self is included with the doubt. According to Nishitani, "the self *becomes* the Doubt itself…[and] the uncertainty that lies at the ground of the self and of all things is appropriated by the self."[102]

This kind of doubting is a doubt of the self, but it is not doubt that is done *by* the self in the Cartesian sense. For example, experiencing doubt regarding the way one has lived their life or someone whom they thought loved them is not a doubt of the existence of a particular object. It is a Great Doubt, a kind of doubt about one's entire existence and how they conceive of the meaning in/of their lives. Because the object of doubt constitutes the ground upon which one's self stands, when that foundation crumbles, the self and the object of doubt become one single Great Doubt.

For Descartes, his doubt is a methodical doubt, not the kind of doubt where the self and object join to become a single doubt. "If we grant that Cartesian philosophy is the prime

[100] Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness,* 17.
[101] Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness,* 18.
[102] Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness,* 18.

illustration of the mode of being of modern man, we may also say that it represents the fundamental problem lurking within that mode."[103] The Great Doubt oversteps the field of consciousness since the single doubt of the Great Doubt does not consist of the self doubting some object in particular on the field of consciousness. This "overstepping" leads one to the field of nihility.

2.4 The Field of Nihility: Zen and the "step back"

According to Davis, nihility is an absolute negation aimed at all existence, which means that it is a negation relative to existence.[104] The field of nihility is not a standpoint because one cannot maintain a position on the field of nihility. If any object, including the self, becomes apparent on the field of nihility, it is immediately negated or else one returns to the field of consciousness. However, even the field of nihility understood as a place to stand must be negated as well. And in going about one's everyday life, one cannot maintain a position on the field of nihility because interacting in the everyday world requires an affirmation of objects.[105] Insofar as the field of nihility is not a standpoint or a field one can maintain a position on, it is difficult to discuss the field of nihility by itself. Rather, the field of nihility is described by Nishitani with respect to the fields of consciousness and emptiness.

When someone's life becomes meaningless as a result of the loss of a loved one or when one fails at something which they have staked their whole life on, Nishitani claims that questions become apparent:

[103] Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness,* 19.
[104] Davis, "The Step Back," 157.
[105] Davis, "The Step Back," 156-57

> Why have I been alive? Where did I come from and where am I going? A void appears here that nothing in the world can fill; a gaping abyss opens up at the very ground on which one stands. In the face of this abyss, not one of all the things that had made up the stuff of life until then is of any use.[106]

When the problem of our existence arises, nihility has emerged from the ground of our existence. This nihility "refers to that which renders meaningless the meaning of life."[107] Normally, we go through life with our eyes fixed on something or other. These engagements, on the field of consciousness, prevent the deepening of our awareness. But when the abyss opens up at the bottom of our continued engagements, our life is brought to a halt and it makes us take a "step back."[108]

Understanding the "directionality" of this "step back" in Nishitani's philosophy is important insofar as it clarifies how Nishitani uses traditional Zen Buddhist concepts to orient the way in which we must overcome the problem of nihilism. Davis, in "The Step Back Through Nihilism," explores the contours of Nishitani's thought in terms of this "directionality." According to Davis, Nishitani suggests that the way out of nihilism is through a reorientation in the direction of a regression, or "step back" to the field of emptiness as the "absolute nearside."[109] Rather than taking a "step back" to the time when Dōgen, for instance, was writing and articulating a solution to nihilism as an overcoming by adopting meaning from that past context, Nishitani utilizes Zen Buddhist concepts in order to help articulate how we can "step back" to the world unconditioned by the ego. According to Davis, "Nishitani's radical re-gress

[106] Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness,* 3.
[107] Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness,* 4.
[108] Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness,* 4.
[109] Davis, "The Step Back," 140.

thus leads, neither back to a bygone age, nor beyond to an other-worldly mystical union, but rather to a released engagement in the world of radical everydayness."[110]

Nishitani's "step back" to the Zen tradition for answers regarding how to overcome nihilism in the present is not a step back in order to re-appropriate those traditional values so as to flee from the current problem of nihilism either. Rather, Nishitani's "radical step back through nihilism is mediated by a hermeneutical step back as a critical and creative retrieval of tradition."[111] This retrieval is always oriented from the context of the contemporary world and toward the future. It is a step back to look for a ground, open field, or clearing from which progress can be oriented.[112] Drawing on Davis, Parkes, and Dōgen, the rest of this section articulates a "step back" to the Japanese intellectual tradition in order to describe how Nishitani formulates his retrieval of that tradition in the context of the contemporary problem of nihilism in Japan.

For Nishitani, stepping back through nihilism to emptiness is not a willful overcoming of nihilism. Just as the presentation of nihility occurs as the Great Doubt without conscious control or willfulness of the self, the breakthrough to nihility and emptiness is the same. The step back to the field of emptiness is made possible by breaking through the self-will of the ego. This may involve a kind of "will not to will," but the shedding of the self as ego is not done by the will of the self.[113] Davis argues that overcoming nihilism through nihilism should be understood as "a *step back through nihilism* that takes place by way of *non*-willing (in the sense of twisting free of

[110] Davis, "The Step Back," 141.
[111] Davis, "The Step Back," 145.
[112] Davis, "The Step Back," 146. While Davis conceptualizes about emptiness, in order for him to become aware on the field of emptiness, he would have to empty his conceptual representation of emptiness and go beyond it without treating Nishitani's conception of emptiness as the "true" or "ahistorical" conception of emptiness in a dogmatic or universal sense.
[113] Davis, "The Step Back," 146.

the very dichotomy of active willing and passive unwilling)."[114]

The ideas of "not-seeking," and "non-willing" permeate Chinese Daoist and Buddhist philosophy and inform Nishitani's conception of the three-field topography. Like the concept of emptiness, many of the concepts Nishitani employs have roots in Daoist and Zen thought. According to Parkes, Chinese Daoist philosophy understands life and death as independent and complementary.[115] Ordinary people overlook this because they are preoccupied with life. This is also prominent in the *Zhuangzi* in which it is explained that conventional views of life as good and death as bad are ultimately wrong. Life and death are like day and night, they come together.[116] Zhuangzi is influential in the writings of Zen master Dōgen who influenced Nishitani's thought in *Religion and Nothingness*.

Central to Dōgen's philosophy is the idea that everything comes into being and returns to nothing at every instant. Zazen, sitting meditation, helps us notice this condition of impermanence. Parkes defines impermanence as "all existence—human life naturally included—is understood as a beginningless and endless cycle of arising and perishing, generation and extinction, being born and dying away."[117] The challenge of Zen Buddhist practice is to "maintain complete relaxation of the body and mind together with fully alert attention: without trying to do anything (especially not attain enlightenment)."[118] Not being attached to either birth or death is what liberates one from birth and death and it is through zazen practice that one is able to do this.

In his "Universal Recommendation of Zazen," or "Fukanzazengi," Dōgen writes that we

[114] Davis, "The Step Back," 147.
[115] Parkes, "Nishitani Keiji," 467.
[116] See *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings* and Roger Ames, "Death as Transformation in Classical Daoism."
[117] Parkes, "Nishitani Keiji," 468.
[118] Parkes, "Nishitani Keiji," 468.

ought to put aside intellectual practices and instead "learn to take the backward step that turns the light and shines it inward."[119] In practicing zazen, one is charged with giving up on the operations of the mind, intellect, and consciousness. According to Davis, "the step back in Zen can thus be defined as a matter of 'not seeking' in the direction of the outside, but rather turning around to clarify the original mind or essence of the self within."[120] Instead of looking outward for authority, Zen master's urge us to turn the light inward and find the light in ourselves. For Dōgen, if we practice zazen, "body and mind themselves will drop away."[121] Nishitani's "step back" to the field of emptiness is akin to Dōgen's notion of the "body and mind dropping away" through zazen practice insofar as one "steps back" or "turns around" in order to shine the light inward which eventually leads to the realization of enlightenment.

For Nishitani, Zen's tradition of turning the light inward entails an exhaustive investigation into the self itself, or a "step back" to the self. This is not to be misunderstood with self-absorption or aloofness. Investigating into the self is "a matter of shining the light back *through* the self-imposed barriers of the reified ego, of breaking down the walls of egocentric representation and objectification that separate the self from others."[122] For Dōgen, it is the opposite of the fixation of the self; rather it is a forgetting of the self: "To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be actualized by myriad things."[123]

However, this does not mean that the standpoint or activity of the self is erased completely. Rather, according to Davis, the "true self (i.e., the non-ego) is able to ecstatically let itself be 'eclipsed' in the face of the presencing of an other."[124] For Zen, the radical 'step back to

[119] Dōgen, Taigen Dan Leighton, and Shohaku Okumura, *Dogen's Extensive Record: A Translation of the Eihei Koroku* (Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 2010), 533.
[120] Davis, "The Step Back," 148.
[121] Dōgen, *Dogen's Extensive Record*, 533.
[122] Davis, "The Step Back," 148.
[123] Dōgen and Kazuaki Tanahashi, *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2012), 27.
[124] Davis, "The Step Back," 148.

the self' is a matter of letting 'drop off' the falsely constructed self-centered ego-subject so that the true self or non-ego may step out into more genuine engagement with others and the world. As a result, the radical re-gress which constitutes the step back implies a pro-gress or step forward into the world at the same time.[125]

In the same way, Nishitani's step back to the insights of Zen Buddhism is not a re-gress back to the wisdom of the past where all our answers might lie. Rather, the step back to Zen, for Nishitani, is a step back and retrieval of insight that is reinterpreted considering the contemporary problem of nihilism which Nishitani wishes to step through as a genuine pro-gress. Nishitani is not taking a position with respect to Buddhist doctrine; rather he uses the concepts found in the Zen tradition in tandem with philosophical concepts because they are helpful and stem from the Japanese tradition. Thus, Davis argues, "it is best to understand Nishitani's thought as intentionally taking an ambivalent stand 'at one and the same time within and without the confines of the Zen tradition.'"[126]

As Dōgen states in "Fukanzazengi," Zen is not based on words or letters. We must "give up the operations of mind, intellect, and consciousness; stop measuring with thoughts, ideas, and views."[127] While words and letters are essential to philosophizing, Nishitani affirms that the practice of Zen involves stepping back to a standpoint that transcends the realm of language words and thought.[128] However, the Zen tradition is of course accompanied by a collection of words and letters. According to Davis, this does not entail that Zen is doctrinal or that we should disregard the words written about Zen. Rather, "perhaps we could say that precisely because no word counts as the final one, each new experience of enlightenment gives birth to a new

[125] Davis, "The Step Back," 148.
[126] Davis, "The Step Back," 149.
[127] Dōgen, *Dogen's Extensive Record*, 533.
[128] Davis, "The Step Back," 149.

expression suited to that particular place and time."[129]

Nevertheless, Nishitani retrieves the insights of Zen in the language of philosophy and interprets that wisdom in a world permeated by modern Western culture and categories of thinking.[130] Davis argues that the tradition of Zen threatens to become rigid if it is not mediated by the contemporary world. Sometimes it can even be necessary to sever the tradition, so that it can be re-understood. According to Davis, Nishitani does just this. The Zen tradition has continued to exist up to the present because it has periodically submitted itself to reflection and critique. The present age of nihilism is thus "a great opportunity for Zen – as a tradition which has its essence in 'the investigation into the self' – to reexamine and revitalize itself."[131]

Considering the Zen roots of the idea of the "step back" and Nishitani's retrieval and reinterpretation of that tradition in light of the present problem of nihilism, the "step back" can be understood as both an ahistorical practice of turning the light inward to reveal the self and involving the historically situated philosophical investigation of the self in the historically determined age of nihilism.[132] The crucial point for Davis, is that the field of emptiness is not something to which we must transcend, rather the field of emptiness is something near to which we must step back. "This stepping back is not a matter of going some place else, but of 'awakening' to what always already lies underfoot. Awakening on/to the field of *sunyata* is said to be nothing less than a 'returning to "as isness.""[133] Insofar as we experience objects on the field of emptiness or *sunyata*, we experience them in their own reality or "as isness" or as they

[129] Davis, "The Step Back," 150. Ultimately, this is what I argue should be reflected in Nishitani's own philosophy. There is no final word, but Japanese should at least be aware of the initial word offered by Nishitani and the Japanese intellectual tradition in order to overcome the problem of nihilism.
[130] Davis, "The Step Back," 150.
[131] Davis, "The Step Back," 150.
[132] Davis, "The Step Back," 151.
[133] Davis, "The Step Back," 152.

are in their "suchness."[134]

2.5 The Field of Emptiness

Throughout the existential traversal of the three-field topography, from the field of consciousness through the field of nihility to the field of emptiness, the self does not stop being a personal being. What is lost is the mode of being of the person as person-centered and grasping itself as a person.[135] Like in the above discussion of Descartes, for Nishitani, the self grasping itself as an object does not experience itself as it is. Only when the self is on the field of emptiness does the self no longer grasp at itself as an object separate from it. On this field, we no longer consider the reality of objects as separate from us. Rather, we realize, non-conceptually, that reality realizes itself in us.[136] For Nishitani:

> Sunyata is the point at which we become manifest in our own suchness as concrete human beings, as individuals with both body and personality. And at the same time, it is the point at which everything around us becomes manifest in its own suchness…It is the return of the self to itself in its original mode of being.[137]

According to Nishitani, emptiness or sunyata is a point at which human beings and objects become manifest in their "suchness." To articulate what it means for something to be in

[134] Again, this should not be confused with an understanding of objects "in-themselves" apart from humanity or human perception. Objects in their "suchness" are not the reality of the objects underlying our phenomenal experience of them. It could be said that, for Nishitani, the phenomenal experience of the object *is* the object, in a Peircean sense, for instance, but actually realizing this requires more than adopting a Peircean conceptual framework. It could potentially take a lifetime of zazen practice, for instance.
[135] Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness,* 71.
[136] Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness,* 5-6.
[137] Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness,* 90-91.

its "suchness" or on its "home-ground" Nishitani uses the example of fire. Traditionally, in the Western philosophical tradition, one conceives of the self-identity of objects in terms of substance. In other words, what an object is in itself is what allows it to be grasped logically.[138] However, Nishitani argues that "the true mode of being of a thing as it is in itself, its selfness for itself, cannot, however, be a self-identity in the sense of such a substance."[139] According to Nishitani, this is an idea that has been present in the Eastern mind since ancient times. It is known as the "logic of not" and is present in the Diamond Sutra.

"Fire does not burn fire." This sentence refers to the self-identity of fire understood from the standpoint of fire, not from the standpoint of fire as an object of consciousness. For Nishitani, it is the self-identity of fire for fire itself on its home-ground, "the self-identity of fire to fire itself."[140] To say that fire does not burn itself, insofar as fire is being fire in itself, shows that fire on its "home-ground" is not simply the substance fire. "The selfness of fire differs from what is expressed by the notion of substance."[141] The true selfness of fire lies in its non-combustion. Fire does not burn itself. For fire to sustain itself in its act of burning means that it does not burn itself. So, according to Nishitani, "because of non-combustion, combustion is combustion."[142] The self-identity of fire is thus unthinkable without its non-combustion. "Self-nature is such as it is only as the self-nature of *non*-self-nature."[143] Therefore, genuine self-identity consists in the self-identity of self-nature and absolute negation. The basic idea is that a thing in itself is not only what it is as a substance but also what it is not. Insofar as something is what it is, it must not

[138] Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness,* 117.
[139] Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness,* 117.
[140] Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness,* 116.
[141] Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness,* 117.
[142] Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness,* 117.
[143] Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness,* 118.

be for itself what it is for us.[144]

The same logic applies to the self on the field of emptiness. It is not that the self and things are empty. That would be similar to the self on the field of nihility. Rather, "not that the self is empty, but that emptiness is the self; not that things are empty, but that emptiness is things."[145] The self as it is in itself is not simply a self conscious of its self as an object of consciousness. Rather, on the field of emptiness, emptiness is the self insofar as the self does not objectify itself as an object on the field of consciousness or negate it on the field of nihility.[146] The self is thus "before" the world in the sense that it exists prior to any objectification, bifurcation, dichotomy, or dualism. Emptiness with respect to the self means that, for instance, the eye does not see the eye. Just like fire in its suchness on the field of emptiness, "seeing is seeing because it is not-seeing. It means that the very sensation or perception called seeing (and consciousness as a whole) is, at bottom, empty."[147]

Emptiness in this sense, for Nishitani, can be understood as a standpoint. The image of standpoint expresses the Buddhist ideal of the "middle way" between the acceptance of the world as objective and the rejection of it as subjective and illusory.[148] Emptiness "is a point from which to philosophize, not a doctrine."[149] The standpoint of emptiness unites the dichotomy between the real in-itself and the real as conscious experience on the field of emptiness. It is easy to

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[144] The language of "for us" should be understood here under the framework of objects being fundamentally separate from the subject of perception. Conceptualizing an object in its "suchness" does not adequately articulate what it would mean to actually experience an object in its "suchness." Conceptualizing about it, as I am doing here, merely "points" at the reality of the situation on the field of emptiness. Any formalization in language about the experience of the "suchness" of objects will ultimately fail insofar as one's conceptualization of the "suchness" of the object is not one's *actual* experience of the "suchness" of that object.
[145] Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness,* 138.
[146] Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness,* 151.
[147] Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness,* 153. For more on the 'Logic of not' from the *Diamond Sutra* and its resonance with Western philosophy, see Shigenori Nagatomo, "The Logic of the *Diamond Sutra:* A is not A, therefore it is A," *Asian Philosophy,* 10, no. 3 (2000).
[148] Heisig, *Philosophers of Nothingness,* 222.
[149] Heisig, *Philosophers of Nothingness,* 223.

conceive of the level of consciousness acquired on the field of emptiness as higher than that of rational thought. However, the field of emptiness "is in fact the most immediate and down-to-earth form of experience."[150] It overcomes the subject-object dichotomy by using Buddhist categories instead of Western ones. [151] On such a field, the self is no longer grasping itself as an object; rather, it simply *is* as its "true self." However, this self is not a permanent identity, individual soul, cluster of potentials, or expanded consciousness. Rather, the true self is a mode of being such that everything is done "naturally" in the same way that the natural world does things naturally.[152]

According to Nishitani, it is only on the field of emptiness or *sunyata* that human beings have a chance of solving the problem of nihilism in the face of the modern age, march of progress, and technology. Nishitani ends *Religion and Nothingness* stating that "unless the thoughts and deeds of man one and all be located on such a field, the sorts of problems that beset humanity have no chance of ever really being solved."[153] However, other than Zen meditation, Nishitani does not leave us with any method by which we can solve the problem of nihilism. While his articulation of the three-field topography provides a potential theoretical resolution to the problem, we are left without a practical next step.

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[150] Heisig, *Philosophers of Nothingness,* 223.
[151] Similar to Hegel's dialectic in *Phenomenology of Spirit,* the endpoint is the absolute where subject and object, fact and theory, reality and realization are overcome and subsumed in the absolute. One of the substantial differences, however, between Nishitani and Hegel is that Nishitani rejected Hegel's claim that realizing it requires a subject-object process. Rather, the process is existential. What exactly this "existential" process entails is never made clear in *Religion and Nothingness*. Rather, Nishitani spends much of the latter half of the text discussing what the field of emptiness is and what an experience of the field of emptiness might entail for a human being. While Nishitani explicitly states in more than one place in *Religion and Nothingness* that emptiness must be realized existentially rather than logically, one may be left puzzled asking what they ought to *actually do* to overcome the problem of nihilism in themselves after reading it.
[152] Heisig, *Philosophers of Nothingness,* 228
[153] Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness,* 285.

Considering Nishitani's insistence that an individual's overcoming of nihilism through nihilism to emptiness must be existential rather than logical or rational, it is unclear how one ought to orient themselves toward overcoming the problem of nihilism after reading *Religion and Nothingness*. One might argue that Nishitani is advocating that individuals engage in zazen practice since the concept of emptiness comes from the Zen tradition and is resonant with Nishitani's thinking. While, I contend, Nishitani would think engaging in zazen would not hurt in this regard, he would not advocate that Zen meditation is *the* universal practical method through which Japanese can overcome the problem of nihilism in Japan. In light of this, in the last chapter, I offer a practical starting point for overcoming the problem of nihilism in Japan that does justice to Nishitani's personal confrontation with nihilism and his theoretical solution.

Chapter 3: The Start of a Practical Method for Overcoming Nihilism

Introduction

In this chapter, I begin by discussing the significance of the field of emptiness, understood as an empty concept in Nishitani's philosophy, by investigating its similarities and differences with the Zen Buddhist notion of *satori* or enlightenment. Insofar as the field of emptiness is an empty concept, a straightforward conception of a traversal to it does not map onto the actual experience of an existential confrontation with nihilism and an overcoming of it to emptiness, Thus, next, I inquire into the non-linearity of the traversal of the three-field topography. While the logic of the traversal of the three fields can be articulated in a relatively straightforward manner, such as it is articulated by Nishitani's commentators and in the above chapter, the actual traversal of the three fields, in a practical sense, is non-linear with many possible ways of it being traveled. Because the path to the field of emptiness is non-linear, it is unclear whether a linear and universal practical method can be used to become aware on the field of emptiness. Nevertheless, I argue that a practical start that will put one on the non-linear path to traverse the three-field topography culminating in the overcoming of nihilism in emptiness is becoming educated about the problem and Nishitani's possible solution.

3.1 Emptiness and *Satori*

Nishitani draws on Zen Buddhism to articulate the logic of overcoming nihilism in Japanese consciousness. However, he is not employing Zen concepts in an attempt to return to Zen in order to solve contemporary problems. Rather, Nishitani is attempting to re-articulate Zen concepts with respect to the contemporary world and the problem of nihilism. Accordingly, while I investigate the similarities between the two in order to shed more light on the field of emptiness and the non-linear nature of the traversal of the three-field topography, I ague that it is important to distinguish between what Nishitani means by the field of emptiness and the Zen concept of *satori*. While Davis and Nishitani's other commentators usually focus on the resonances between Nishitani's thought and the Zen Buddhist concepts he draws upon, I will highlight what Nishitani is *not* doing when he appropriates Zen Buddhist concepts into his philosophy. Nevertheless, even though there are crucial differences between the field of emptiness and *satori*, I argue that, like *satori*, the field of emptiness cannot be understood as an end that can be completely reached in any final sense through some universal practical method. Rather, everyone must struggle to find their own method, and emptiness, as an end, continuously presents us with the task of emptying out conceptual representations of it.[154]

In *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, D. T. Suzuki discusses the notion of *satori* in Zen Buddhist philosophy. The notion of *satori* has clear resonances with the field of emptiness in Nishitani's thought. However, their crucial differences highlight the fact that Nishitani was not advocating that all Japanese become Zen Buddhists and achieve enlightenment in order to overcome the problem of nihilism. While Nishitani did not reveal much in the way of a concrete

[154] This is so insofar as one's personal struggle to become aware on the field of emptiness requires they contend with personal problems of nihilism and empty conceptualizations of emptiness to which they have discovered and attached themselves.

practical method for one to employ in order to overcome nihilism, his drawing on Zen Buddhist philosophy is not an admittance that zazen is the solution to nihilism. Rather, becoming aware on the field of emptiness is like *satori* insofar as they both entail acquiring new viewpoints and they are both "empty" concepts. I turn to D. T. Suzuki's articulation of *satori* since Nishitani was introduced to Zen through his works.[155]

While *satori* is usually translated as "enlightenment," Suzuki leaves the word untranslated and renders it in English as simply "acquiring a new viewpoint." Suzuki defines *satori* as "an intuitive looking-into, in contradistinction to intellectual and logical understanding…the unfolding of a new world hitherto unperceived in the confusion of a dualistic mind."[156] Like Nishitani's conception of the field of emptiness, *satori* is not something one can come to understand through intellection or logical argumentation. While Suzuki does not use this language, one can say that *satori* is achieved *existentially* in the same way that Nishitani characterizes the overcoming of nihilism to emptiness as personal and existential.[157]

Furthermore, like emptiness, *satori* is an "empty" concept. As soon as one tries to conceive of some thing that is *satori* or some kind of knowledge one may acquire once they experience *satori*, they are missing the point. According to Suzuki, "there is no object in Zen upon which to fix the thought."[158] If *satori* is the goal of a Zen practitioner, then Zen has nothing for them because there is no "thing" that is the goal of Zen. Emptiness, in the context of the field of emptiness in Nishitani's thought, is also empty in this sense.

While there are resonances between *satori* and the field of emptiness as well as all the

[155] Heisig, *Philosophers of Nothingness*, 183.
[156] D. T. Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (New York: Grove Press, 1964), 88.
[157] While intellectual/logical argumentation is not necessarily opposed to existential confrontation, it is not through strict logical or syllogistic thinking that one will come to understand or "know" *satori* or the field of emptiness. Both require personal embodied pursuits rather than intellectual reframings.
[158] Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism*, 41.

other concepts which Nishitani draws on, a crucial clarification between them is that Zen philosophy does not specifically concern itself with the historical problem of nihilism in Japan. As discussed above, insofar as Nishitani draws on Zen Buddhist philosophy, he does so in order to reframe the Japanese philosophical tradition with respect to the current crisis of nihilism in a forward-looking direction. Nishitani does not argue that Zen meditation will solve the problem of nihilism in Japan.[159] Nevertheless, at the end of the *Religion and Nothingness*, other than Zen meditation, we are no closer to finding a practical means by which one may start to overcome nihilism by way of the field of emptiness.

In the same way that the Zen Buddhist concept of *satori* cannot be reached conceptually, Nishitani's field of emptiness is the same. Also, while Nishitani is not advocating that Japanese become Zen Buddhists and reach enlightenment in order to solve the problem of nihilism, *satori* and emptiness are alike insofar as seeking after them as a final state will end in failure. That is, emptiness must be continuously emptied of conceptual representations for it to be fully experienced. Thus, the question of how one can become aware on the field of emptiness cannot be answered by Nishitani explicitly because holding onto Nishitani's conception of emptiness and striving for it will ultimately end it failure. Rather, I argue that the resolution of the problem of nihilism requires individuals to personally contend with the problem of nihilism on their own terms in a non-linear fashion as Nishitani does in *Religion and Nothingness*.[160]

[159] However, I do not think he would disagree that it could help.
[160] The language of "requirement" may be confusing. It is not a requirement in the sense that other options are not allowed. Rather, if someone genuinely attempts to overcome the problem of nihilism, the path to do so will be non-linear.

3.2 The Non-Linear Traversal of the Three-Field Topography

While I and Nishitani's commentators articulate the logic of the traversal of the three-field topography in a linear fashion, namely a traversal from the field of consciousness to the field of nihility, and through it to the field of emptiness, Nishitani's personal confrontation with the problem of nihilism and his writing of *Religion and Nothingness* do not reflect this linear structure. Rather, I argue, they reflect a non-linear and personal confrontation with nihilism which requires that individuals do the same while continuing to empty particular conceptualizations of emptiness.[161]

While Nishitani's commentators articulate the logic of the traversal of the three-field topography in a linear fashion, they, nevertheless, acknowledge that an actual traversal is non-linear because the three fields are simultaneous or co-present. However, its implication for how one might practically overcome the problem of nihilism is underdeveloped. According to Parkes, "these fields are always co-present, and each deeper field is more extensive and encompassing than the one above."[162] Parkes, for instance, identifies the three fields as co-present. However, when they are described by Nishitani and his other commentators, they are usually discussed as independent yet related. Generally, they are characterized in the following way: in our everyday life, we exist on the field of consciousness. Then, through radical doubt, we arrive on the field of nihility. Finally, we, somehow, maybe through the practice of zazen, arrive on the field of emptiness by overcoming the dichotomy between being and non-being. After consulting Nishitani's commentators, it seems that they too focus more heavily on articulating the logic of

[161] While, of course, this places me in a kind of double-bind, my own argument, which implies a particular conceptualization of emptiness, is also subject to being emptied of that conceptualization of emptiness as I, and others reading this, contend with the problem of nihilism in my/their own live(s). My point is to say that there is a multiplicity of possible paths toward the field of emptiness and that they are non-linear. In that sense, there is no universal method.
[162] Parkes, "Nishitani Keiji," 466.

Nishitani's thought in a hierarchical way that attempts to fit his thoughts in one linear form. However, the journey from consciousness to nihility to emptiness is by no means a linear path.[163]

For instance, one cannot go directly from the field of consciousness to the field of emptiness. If it were possible to do so, it could have been guided by institutions and religious authorities, thus leading individuals to dogmatism rather than contending with the problem from their own existential point of view. According to Nishitani, we retreat from nihilism in one of two ways. Either we deny the existence of nihilism's threat to the ego and flee into the material march of progress or we accept the annihilation of the ego but not the negation of the false security of dogmatism and fundamentalism. For Davis, "neither of these responses can truly overcome nihilism; indeed they each, in their own way, serve only to exacerbate it."[164]

As Davis describes, the three-field topography can be understood, not as a linear or hierarchical path, but rather as:

> a three-field spiraling course of trans-descendence: *from* the inauthentic everydayness of the ego on the field of (representational) consciousness and (possession of) being, *through* the field of nihilism and its relative or negative nothingness, and finally (*back*) *to* the non-ego of radical everydayness on the field of *sunyata* as a self-emptying emptiness.[165]

Davis' language of "three-field spiraling course" highlights the simultaneity of the three-field topography. While his analysis breaks up the three fields in order to explain them in logical

[163] My own reconstruction of the traversal of the three-field topography is not immune from this same criticism.
[164] Davis, "The Step Back," 154.
[165] Davis, "The Step Back," 155.

succession and isolation, one's actual traversal of the three-fields is not so simple. One may be confronted with the abyss of nihility and turn away from it toward dogmatism. However, later in their life, they may be confronted again with the abyss of nihility and try to overcome it. While doing so, they must return to the field of consciousness in order to participate in everyday life. However, now they are aware and acknowledge the reality of nihility at their feet. After a time, they may come across Zen Buddhism and the concept of emptiness. Maybe they engage in the practice of zazen as Nishitani did. However, it becomes clear that simply sitting for a specific amount of time every day will not eventually lead them to the field of emptiness or *satori*. Thus, they give up on Zen Buddhism and return to the field of consciousness and try to figure out how to confront the field of nihility and arrive on the field of emptiness through some other means.

This is one particular example of how individuals can travers the three-field topography. It is by no means a linear or universal path as each individual must confront nihility on their own terms. If one is to eventually reach the field of emptiness, it does not mean that the path they took is the foolproof path that all must take. A universal practical method for overcoming nihilism and becoming aware on the field of emptiness cannot be articulated because that particular conception of emptiness must be emptied in order for it to be reached be others.

Nishitani's personal confrontation with nihilism and his writing of *Religion and Nothingness* is another example that highlights the non-linearity of one's personal confrontation with nihilism and continuous emptying of conceptual representations of emptiness. While the conclusion to Nishitani's argument for overcoming nihilism through the use of concepts from the intellectual history of Japan is clear, according to Heisig, "its logical progress is not always clear, and the circularity can be annoying when one wants explicit rational connections."[166] Nishitani

[166] Heisig, *Philosophers of Nothingness*, 223.

wrote *Religion and Nothingness* as a series of essays, each essay attempting to better articulate certain aspects of the first. In this way, one cannot simply read the text from beginning to end and expect to understand a linear flow of a logical argument.

In the same way, one should not expect to start on the field of consciousness and then progress, through some universal rational or practical method, to nihility and finally emptiness. Solving the problem of nihilism requires constant reevaluation.[167] Just like Nishitani continued to refine his position, or standpoint, in his subsequent essays, emptiness must be reevaluated and re-contended with as one continues their existential journey of overcoming the problem of nihilism. While Nishitani attempted to articulate the logic of the "step back" to the field of emptiness and what arriving on the field of emptiness entailed for the self and its experience of the world in a non-hierarchical, non-dualistic, and non-dichotomous way, he did not offer a prescriptive universal method for becoming aware on the field of emptiness. Rather, I believe Nishitani is offering his own existential confrontation with nihilism as a particular example of how one might personally contend with the problem of nihilism and its solution in emptiness in their own lives.

According to Nishitani, "emptiness in the sense of sunyata is emptiness only when it empties itself even of the standpoint that represents it as some 'thing' that is emptiness. It is, in its original Form, self-emptying."[168] However, we need not reach this ultimate state of emptiness in order to start doing the work that will help solve the historical problem of nihilism in Japan. Arriving on the field of emptiness, understood as a finalizable state that transcends the everyday, would not allow us to turn back to the world and work to dismantle the structures that have led to

[167] It must be noted here that this should not be understood as proposing a universal method. Rather, I am only offering it as one way to start out of many. That is, while I am committed to my interpretation of Nishitani, I am also open to other interpretations as well, and the fact that what may work for me may not work for others. If one were to follow my interpretation, they would eventually have to empty it as they continue their own existential confrontation with nihilism.

[168] Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness,* 96-97.

the current age of nihilism.

Conceiving of emptiness as a finalized state that goes beyond our everyday lives will ultimately fail. Since the three-field topography is simultaneous, overcoming nihilism and arriving on the field of emptiness does not entail a dissociation from the world in an everyday sense. Rather, overcoming the problem of nihilism requires constant negotiation as we continuously empty conceptual representations of emptiness.[169]

While it may be impossible to fully overcome nihilism and arrive on the field of emptiness in any final sense, I contend that an existential quest to solve the problem of nihilism through nihilism in Nishitani's terms may serve as a framework which some individuals can start to engage with in order to eventually collectively overcome the historic problem of nihilism in Japan. For Nishitani, overcoming nihilism in the self is essential for the historical problem of nihilism to be solved. However, even though no universal practical method can be imposed on everyone in order for them to personally overcome the problem of nihilism in their own lives, I contend that a practical starting point is for some Japanese to begin this existential confrontation by being educated about the problem of nihilism and Nishitani's solution. Being educated about the problem of nihilism in Nishitani's terms can serve as an initial step for some to enter into the non-linear process of existentially contending with the problem of nihilism on their own terms.

[169] An example of emptying conceptual representations of emptiness would be to constantly re-interpret the notion of emptiness so that it may better resonate with the contemporary world. That process will continue now and in the future. Any one interpretation of emptiness is tied to the particular historical context. Therefore, with each new generation, that old conception of emptiness needs to be emptied to make room for the next one.

3.4 Existential Education

In this section, drawing upon the work of Nakama Yoshiko, I show how educating Japanese people about their intellectual tradition and the problem of nihilism, as articulated by Nishitani, in their own lives can serve as a practical starting point to help orient their awareness in a direction that could eventually lead them to overcoming of the problem of nihilism in Japanese consciousness. While Nakama articulates, considering Nishitani's philosophy, how educators can help students reach the field of emptiness, I expand on Nakama by arguing that being educated about the intellectual history of Japan and Nishitani's conception of the problem of nihilism is a practical start for Japanese to begin their non-linear traversal of the three-field topography to eventually overcoming nihilism in Japanese consciousness.

As a scholar of education, Nakama is interested in discovering how educators ought to teach their students about living through nihilism in modern culture. While nihilism is a negative concept, experiencing nihilism can lead to positive outcomes. For example, she cites Nietzsche scholars who argue that going through nihilism leads one to strive to relinquish old values for new ones. According to Nakama, since "education is a process of actualizing one's ideal self…it is important for education scholars to analyze nihilism and investigate how nihilistic experiences can be utilized or overcome for self-actualization."[170] She examines Nishitani Keiji's way of actualizing the self by fully experiencing nihilism.

Nakama contends that the form of nihilism in which one questions the meaning of life "is an important step toward actualizing one's ideal self and improving one's life."[171] Indeed, this is how Nishitani characterizes nihilism. When the self is separated from the ground on which it

[170] Yoshiko Nakama, "Searching for an Educational Response to Nihilism in Our Time: An Examination of Keiji Nishitani's Philosophy of Emptiness," *Philosophy of Education Yearbook*, no. 5 (2004): 284.
[171] Nakama, "Educational Response to Nihilism," 284.

supports its life, the abyss of nihilism appears. However, that questioning can help one find their way to emptiness where they can actualize themselves in their true suchness. In order to overcome nihilism, one needs to break through the fields of consciousness and nihility to arrive on the field of emptiness, where "the ideal self grounds itself."[172] Nakama thinks Nishitani's philosophy offers a new way of articulating how one can actualize the self by fully experiencing nihilism.

Nakama asks an important question, namely, how can educators respond to the problem of nihilism? Nishitani would say, according to Nakama, that education must become an endeavor that breaks through our separation from the world in order to reach the field of emptiness. I agree. For the problem of nihilism to be solved and for the structures that exacerbate it in the modern Japanese context to be removed, Japanese should not only be educated about their intellectual history, they should also be educated through the lens of actualizing the self understood on the field of emptiness.[173] Nakama argues that for Nishitani, "the self cannot hold on to the concept of emptiness and must keep emptying conceptual representations created through relating itself to other things."[174] Therefore, according to Nakama, the emptying activity is non-conformist, meaning that the process of education in order to find or uncover one's true self is never ending.[175]

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[172] Nakama, "Educational Response to Nihilism," 285.

[173] I am not proposing that the government impose a nationalized curriculum of Japanese intellectual history onto its citizens so that they can eventually overcome the problem of nihilism. Rather, I am simply suggesting that the first step in solving a problem is recognizing its existence. And the only way to recognize a problem's existence is to see it for oneself or be told about it (i.e., be educated about it). If more Japanese become knowledgeable about Nishitani's characterization of nihilism and his solution, maybe they will look more deeply into the problem and find that Nishitani is fundamentally incorrect in his characterization and solution. Maybe they will find that it is simply the material circumstances exacerbated by the West's imposition of liberal capitalism onto Japanese culture that has led to the problem of nihilism. Either way, in my view, Nishitani is a good place to start in what could eventually overcome the problem of nihilism in Japanese consciousness without turning to consumerist materialism or dogmatism.

[174] Nakama, "Educational Response to Nihilism," 288.

[175] Nakama, "Educational Response to Nihilism," 289.

According to Nishitani, the shift from the field of consciousness to that of nihility and finally to emptiness requires an existential conversion.[176] As Nakama points out, "since reaching the field of emptiness is an existential conversion, we do not know the nature of emptiness until we experience it."[177] Also, even if one can experience the field of emptiness, describing it or teaching it to students is arguably not possible because any propositional formulation will simply be a conceptual representation of emptiness that ossifies it. Some descriptions are better than others (i.e., the "logic of not" points to emptiness). However, since experiencing emptiness is an existential process, it cannot simply be taught to students by teachers even if they have experienced it themselves. Because of this, teachers cannot directly provide students with experiences of emptiness.[178] However, I contend that teaching students about the reality of the problem of nihilism and guiding them in a direction that could lead them to existentially struggle toward the field of emptiness may serve as the start for some of them to search for their own practical method for overcoming the problem of nihilism in Japanese consciousness.

One way that students can be guided is by teaching them about their philosophical and religious traditions through art. In the Zen tradition, for instance, people practice zazen in order to experience *satori*, which is similar to the field of emptiness. But, as Nakama argues as well, it may be too simple to assume we should ask students to practice zazen.[179] Instead, Nakama suggests that we can experience true reality on the field of emptiness through experiences of beauty in nature and art. For instance, Nishitani draws from the haiku poet, Basho, who he believes points to the field of emptiness in his poems:

[176] Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness,* 70-71.
[177] Nakama, "Educational Response to Nihilism," 289.
[178] Nakama, "Educational Response to Nihilism," 290.
[179] Nakama, "Educational Response to Nihilism," 289.

From the pine tree

Learn of the pine tree,

And from the bamboo

Of the bamboo

Basho is not imploring us to observe the pine tree and bamboo from a removed standpoint. He wants us to "enter into the mode of being where the pine tree is the pine tree itself, and the bamboo is the bamboo itself."[180] Here, Basho is pointing to the field of emptiness where we experience objects in their suchness rather than from the perspective of the ego. Through experiences of beauty and art, one is pointed toward emptiness. Experiencing a beautiful object itself is not emptiness, but, I contend, this experiencing orients students toward emptiness insofar as it gives them a place to start in order to contend with their traditional past. Being educated in such a way that orients students toward recognizing the reality of the problem of nihilism will make it possible to overcome it by way of the three-field topography articulated by Nishitani.

Although teachers may not be able to provide students with the field of emptiness itself, "they can help students learn to attune themselves to the suchness of things and provide students with experiences such as those of beauty through nature and works of art, whose power can break through the frame of the self. This will allow the field of emptiness to reveal itself."[181] The question still stands, according to me and Nakama, can we indeed reach the field of emptiness? Along with Nakama, I argue that in order to do so, one must first go through the field of nihility by prompting students to question the ground that they stand on, and thus one must first assist

[180] Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness,* 128.
[181] Nakama, "Educational Response to Nihilism," 290.

students in becoming aware on the field of nihility.

The modern world is filled with enticing reasons to shy away from examining the abyss of nihility. Instead of dealing with the ambiguity of existence, it is easier for many to unquestioningly accept the dogmatic conceptions of the self and world. Moreover, so much of the modern world defines a life of success in monetary terms. One can go through their whole life, accept the world as it presents itself on the field of consciousness and be "successful" without ever confronting the abyss of nihility at their feet. In those rare moments when the structures of meaning are ripped away, one can easily escape to dogmatism and/or consumerism. Because of the structures of modernity and the pressures they impose, it is important for teachers and mentors to help students recognize the reality of nihility despite its terror.[182] However, they must also not impose onto students their own conceptions of emptiness or their own method of confronting similar confrontations with nihilism. While guiding them and sharing knowledge is important, each individual's confrontation with nihilism is ultimately their own.[183]

I do not think it is necessary to answer the question of whether it is possible to reach the field of emptiness in any final sense in order to solve the problem of nihilism in Japanese consciousness. While it may be possible to fully become aware on the field of emptiness just like it may be possible to reach enlightenment or *satori,* the work that needs to be done to solve the problem of nihilism in Japanese consciousness, at the very least, requires an orientation toward emptiness as a regulative ideal. Learning about Nishitani's insights, reconnecting with the

[182] It may not be appropriate to prompt very young students to seriously consider the reality of nihility at the bottom of their existence. However, I would say that teaching these students about the Japanese intellectual tradition, which includes the Zen tradition and the concept of emptiness, will at least help bridge the gap which has led to Japanese consciousness being cut off from its intellectual past.

[183] This point also applies to my own analysis in this thesis. This project can be understood to be in the service of my own confrontation with the problem of nihilism. While others may read it and glean insights from it, they must also empty out my conceptualization of the emptiness so that they can existentially contend with the problem of nihilism from their own context and point of view.

Japanese intellectual history, and reframing how one engages with the structures of modernity may orient the consciousness of some Japanese toward starting to solve the problem of nihilism. However, in the end, each person must find their own way toward emptiness, and constantly walk it, keeping in mind that the realization of emptiness is a ceaseless process, and not a finalizable static state.

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