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Heisig/Philosophers of Nothingness

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Preface to the English Edition

The idea of writing a book about the leading figures of the Kyoto school has been in the back of my mind longer than I care to remember. What kept it from moving forward, more than anything else, was the expectation that someone qualified would soon be taking the project up and perhaps even asking for assistance. As expectations go, it was not unreasonable. There are any number of people well suited to the task, and there were many others like me willing to help out where we could. The years went on, and while the amount of specialized and more narrowly focused research on the Kyoto school increased, the challenge of producing a general overview went unanswered both in Japan and abroad. A number of circumstances then came together that persuaded me to take the matter in hand myself.

In 1999 we invited a young scholar from the Universitat Pompeu Fabra in Barcelona, Raquel Bouso, to join us at the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture in Nagoya, Japan, to complete her Spanish translation of Nishitani Keiji's *Religion and Nothingness*. She came accompanied by Professors Amador Vega and Victoria Cirlot, and the four of us collaborated for six intense weeks on the final editing and revision of the work, which was published later that year. I was subsequently offered a visiting professorship at Pompeu Fabra, and the staff of the Nanzan Institute encouraged me to accept the position, offering to take over my duties for the year. A generous grant from the Itō Scholarship Foundation enabled me to purchase the sizable collection of resource materials needed to undertake the work away from Japan. This collection has since been donated in its entirety to Pompeu Fabra, where it will be available to other scholars in Europe interested in the Kyoto school.

So it happened that I came to Barcelona, where ideal working conditions made it possible for me to complete the book you now have in your hands. Despite the simple organization of the chapters, and the style in which I have presented them, I have to admit that the work of condensing the data and ideas often got the better of me. As I look back over the results,

I can still see the tight pleats where pages of writing have been squeezed into a single paragraph, and the seams where whole bolts of material have simply been cut. For a general audience interested in twentieth-century Japanese philosophy, it may be a tight fit; for the more specialized reader already familiar with the subject, I am afraid it may still be too loose.

At least part of the reason for the ambivalence is that the project was tailored to my personal investment in the subject matter. From the outset, I wanted to take the opportunity to sort out what I understood about the Kyoto school from what I only thought I had. In reviewing the notes and translations I had compiled over the years, I soon realized that there was a lot less to lift from them—and indeed from my precious publications on the subject—than I had anticipated. Too much of it was cavalier or misleading. I also realized that there were large amounts of secondary literature that deserved more careful attention, and fairer judgment, than I had given them in the past. In any case, my main concern throughout the body of the text was to make sense, to my own satisfaction, of the three major figures of the Kyoto school, Nishida, Tanabe, and Nishitani. Wherever I could, I found sense in their own explanations or in that of their principal commentators; where I could not find it, I made it. In the notes I have turned the lining inside out to show not only the sources I consulted and my reactions to many of them, but also the tangle of threads and loose ends hidden by the abbreviated accounts and cleaner patterns I have labored to present on the surface.

I had thought at first to wait for reactions to the original Spanish edition of the book before preparing an English translation, reckoning that more criticism and a little distance would make for improving the text. On further reflection, I realized that the most efficient course of action would be to make the rendition while everything was still fresh in my mind. Accordingly, there is very little here that differs from the original Spanish.

Questions of composition and technicalities aside, I remain as convinced as ever that there is a wisdom to be discovered in philosophies of nothingness like that of the Kyoto school. Like all awakening, it comes in sparks, only to be swallowed up again in the ordinary conventionalities of thought. It is when those sparks pickier closer together and for longer periods that the darkness of philosophical jargon begins to yield something of its secret. My only excuse for injecting a résumé so long and winding as this one has turned out to be is the hope of communicating something of the illumination these philosophers have brought me.

There are so many people to thank, I hardly know where to start. Ueda Shizuteru and Horio Tsutomu were most unselfish in answering my many

questions, usually in much more detail than I had asked for. Paul Swanson, in addition to taking over the directorship of the Nanzan Institute, had to put up with my incessant requests for books and articles. Ed Skrzypczak read through the entire text with his usual devotion to detail. And finally, there is that wide and sympathetic community of Kyoto-school scholars around the world, without whose advice and resources at each step of the way this book would be much the poorer. To all of them, my thanks.

James W. Heisig
Barcelona
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