The Macksey Journal

Volume 2 Article 137

2021

A Contentious Legacy: Nihilism and the Encounter Between Nietzsche, Heidegger and Nishitani

Rafael Schultz
Soka University of America

Recommended Citation
Schultz, Rafael (2021) "A Contentious Legacy: Nihilism and the Encounter Between Nietzsche, Heidegger and Nishitani," *The Macksey Journal*: Vol. 2, Article 137.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by The Johns Hopkins University Macksey Journal. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Macksey Journal by an authorized editor of The Johns Hopkins University Macksey Journal.

Published by JHU Macksey Journal, 2021

A Contentious Legacy: Nihilism and the Encounter Between Nietzsche, Heidegger and Nishitani

Rafael Schultz

Soka University of America

Abstract

In the wake of the rapid modernization of Japan following the Meiji Restoration of 1868, the philosophers of the Kyoto School sought to reconcile traditional Japanese philosophical concepts with the newly imported tradition of Western academic philosophy. Out of this context, Nishitani Keiji's *Nihilism* asserts the importance of the study of "radical," "affirmative" or "European" nihilism in post-war Japan. Nishitani's account of nihilism readily distinguishes itself from those of his predecessors and contemporaries, and perhaps most notably from that of his former mentor, Martin Heidegger. In the following paper I will attempt to map the encounter between the philosophies of Nietzsche, Nishitani, and Heidegger, all the while providing historical context, as well as framing Nishitani and Heidegger's contentions over Nietzsche's legacy against Nietzsche's own writings on nihilism.

Keywords: Nietzsche, Nishitani, Heidegger, Nihilism

Introduction

Nineteen hundred marked the thirty-third anniversary of the Meiji Restoration of 1868 in Japan; in the intervening years, "the whole sea change that went under the name 'modernization'" (Heisig 10) began to radically alter Japanese society, following nearly three centuries of self-imposed isolation. It was within this context that on February 27, 1900, the Kyoto School philosopher Nishitani Keiji (西谷 啓治) was born in Ishikawa Prefecture, Japan. Six months later in Weimar, Germany, the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche died, a little over a decade after his infamous collapse in Turin. Nietzsche had attempted to reveal to European society the nihilism that lurked underfoot with that infamous phrase, "God is dead." Nishitani later argued that as a consequence of its rapid modernization, nihilism, or "the historical actuality of Europe," had similarly taken root in Japan (Nishitani 174).

Like Nietzsche, Nishitani's early life was marked by the death of his father, alongside illness and academic promise. He contracted tuberculosis at 17, the same disease that had killed his father, and upon recovery entered the German law course at Dai-ichi High School in Tokyo (Keta 217). This was a difficult period for the young Nishitani; he found solace in Zen, having encountered the writings of D.T. Suzuki (1870-1960), as well as the works of Nietzsche (1844-1900), Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881) and Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), among others. Heisig reports that Nishitani carried a copy of Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* "like a Bible" during these formative years (192). It was also around this time that Nishitani first encountered the thought of his later mentor, Nishida Kitaro (西田 幾多郎).

Alongside the various reforms of the Meiji Period came philosophy in the Western, academic sense. Philosophy, as Heisig notes, is first and foremost "a critical body of thought dealing with ultimate questions, systematically recorded and transmitted" (Heisig 7). Understood in this sense, the practice of philosophy had been recorded in Japan since at least the ninth century, beginning with the Buddhist thinker Kukai. It was in the aftermath of the Meiji Restoration that philosophy, understood as "the particular intellectual tradition that began in Athens," formally arrived in Japan (7). The Japanese name for this latter form of philosophy, *tetsu-gaku* (哲学), translates as "science of wisdom" in English (Schinzinger 17). Moreover, three schools of philosophy were particularly prominent within the early Meiji academy: German Idealism, American Pragmatism, and Bergson's philosophy of the *élan vital* (18).

Nishida (1870-1945) was among the first to seriously undertake the study of Western philosophy in Japan, as the field was initially ignored by many of the scholars of the Meiji Period. Heisig notes that the nascent idiom of Japanese academic philosophy was "still a wet puddle of clay" when Nishida entered the academy; therefore, "in creating an original philosophy [Nishida] was also creating an original way of writing about it" (Heisig 17). Nishida had entered the Western philosophical tradition during the era of post-Kantian preoccupations with epistemology, scientific methodology, and the overcoming of metaphysics (Heisig 12). All the while, he took to practicing *zazen* meditation, beginning in 1897. However, by 1907, Nishida's interest in Zen appeared to have become purely theoretical, prompting Heisig to remark: "the vestiges of an inner struggle remain, how to reconcile the intuitive nonreflective consciousness cultivated in the East with the logical, reflective consciousness cultivated in

Western philosophy" (29-30). The philosophy of Nishida's successors—collectively referred to as the Kyoto School—and in particular the philosophies of Tanabe Hajime (1885-1962) and Nishitani Keiji (1900-1990), aimed to mediate these two forms of philosophy within the context of post-Meiji Restoration Japan.

In 1921, Nishitani began his studies under Nishida at the Kyoto Imperial University, later graduating with a thesis on "Schelling's Absolute Idealism and Bergson's Pure Experience" (Keta 218). During the 1920s, Nishitani's senior, Tanabe, traveled Germany with the intention of studying under Husserl. After becoming disenchanted upon meeting Husserl, however, Tanabe quickly befriended a young Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), then professor at Marburg, and chose to study under him instead (Heisig 108). As evidence of the proximity between the German and Japanese academies of the era, Graham Parkes notes that the first foreign-language translation of Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* was published in Tokyo in 1939, as *Sonzai to jikan.* (Parkes xxiv). Nishitani himself traveled to Germany in 1937, and for a period of two years studied under Heidegger at the University of Freiburg; the two would regularly meet to discuss Zen Buddhism, as both were fans of D.T. Suzuki, as well as the philosophy of Meister Eckhart (Moore 15-16).

While in Freiburg, Nishitani attended the lectures—delivered between 1936 and 1940—which later formed the basis for Heidegger's essay "The Word of Nietzsche: 'God is Dead'" (Parkes xvi). Upon returning to Japan, Nishitani published his first work, an essay entitled "Nietzsche's Zarathustra and Meister Eckhart," which had originally been prepared for one of Heidegger's courses (Keta 218). Moreover, Karl Löwith, another student of Heidegger, published a series of works throughout the 1930s and 1940s which significantly influenced

Nishitani's reading of Nietzsche, especially as pertains to the issue of nihilism (Parkes xvii). Then, during the 1940s, Nishitani gave his own series of lectures on Nietzsche and nihilism in Kyoto. These lectures were published in 1949 under the title *Nihilism* (ニヒリズム), and later translated into English as *The Self Overcoming of Nihilism* by Graham Parkes and Setsuko Aihara (1990).

Nishitani's *Nihilism* is significant for a number of reasons. First, as Parkes notes, it marked the "first substantial introduction of Nietzsche's philosophical ideas to a general Japanese audience" (Parkes xx). Furthermore, following the publication of Löwith's essay "European Nihilism" in 1948 and Nishitani's *Nihilism* in 1949, the subject of nihilism, "so germane to an understanding of [Nietzsche's] thought as a whole," was generally ignored until Heidegger's *Nietzsche* was published in 1961 (Parkes xxiii). One should also take into account the fact that Nishitani devoted an entire chapter of *Nihilism* to Heidegger's "Nihilism as Philosophy," keeping in mind that the first translation of Heidegger into English did not arrive until 1949 (xxiii). Therefore, *Nihilism* can also be said to constitute an early example of Heidegger scholarship. Perhaps most importantly, Parkes argues that Nishitani's reading of Nietzsche, carried out from the unique vantage point of the Kyoto School, "remains independent of the Heideggerian interpretation" (xxii). Therefore, as both a student and later critic of Heidegger, as well as a contemporary of Löwith, Nishitani's *Nihilism* marks a foundational moment within the global study of nihilism, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, and thus merits further study.

Having contextualized and established the merits of Nishitani's study of Nietzsche, especially as read against that of his former mentor Heidegger, it remains to be seen how

exactly their readings differ from one another. In what follows, I will outline the contours of Nietzsche's own account of nihilism (which Heidegger and Nishitani generally tend to agree upon), before arriving at their contention over Nietzsche's legacy: was Nietzsche "the first consummate nihilist" (as Nishitani held), or "the last metaphysician" (as Heidegger later argued)?

Collapse of Cosmological Values (1887-1888)

In a fragment appearing in the posthumously published *Will to Power,* entitled "Collapse of Cosmological Values," Nietzsche asserts that nihilism is a psychological condition comprised of three distinct phases or forms. Nihilism begins, he writes, "when we have sought a 'meaning' in all events that is not in them: so the seeker eventually becomes discouraged" (Nietzsche WP 12). Here meaning should be understood to include both "value" and "purpose". Considered as a process of devaluation, the advent of nihilism presupposes such "high" or "cosmological" values. In this initial stage of nihilism, the world comes to be seen as null as one "realizes that becoming aims at *nothing* and achieves *nothing"* (12). Where life was once thought to be full of meaning it comes to be seen as meaningless, without intrinsic value or purpose. Having established this most primeval form of doubt, Nietzsche then examines the varied possible expressions of, or responses to, nihilism.

In response to the loss of meaning, humanity posits a "totality," "systematization," or "organization." Nietzsche refers to this as "the idea of some supreme form of domination and administration" (WP 12). In turn, this sense of totality—this "monism"—comes to be understood as null, thus constituting the second stage of nihilism. According to Nietzsche, the

notion of an "infinitely valuable totality" which works *through* humanity is a mere fiction, conceived so that "man might be able to believe in his own value" (12). What the devaluation of the universal amounts to in actuality is the devaluation of the *self*. Without some grounding in meaning, life becomes impossible. As a result, following the initial onset of nihilism, humanity is only able to affirm itself through the positing of such a totality, to which it then submits itself.

Considering nihilism as a historical phenomenon, Heidegger asserts that these first two forms of nihilism correspond to pre-Platonic philosophy, and argues that Parmenides' doctrine *hen to on,* 'what is is one,' constitutes such an attempt at positing a unity for being (Heidegger 46). Similarly, Nishitani ventures to equate this notion of "totality" or "universal being" with "something like the God of 'pantheism,' immanent in our world" (Nishitani 35). Following the dissolution of pantheistic belief, one seeks *escape* or *refuge* from the world becoming—now considered devoid of the possibility of either *purpose* or *unity*—by condemning it as a deception and positing a "true" world beyond it. Nishitani argues that this third form of nihilism, predicated upon the invention of a *Hinterwelt* (lit. *behind-world*) as a refuge from nihility, is "nothing other than the worldview of Christianity combined with Platonism" (Nishitani 35). Likewise, Heidegger remarks that "Platonism" meant for Nietzsche both "Platonic metaphysics," as well as the "whole of subsequent metaphysics" left in its wake (Heidegger 45). Herein lies the essence of Nietzsche's critique of the Socratic, Platonic, or Apollonian culture that would later give rise to Christianity: he criticizes it for fabricating a metaphysical or "true" world "solely out of psychological needs" (Nietzsche WP 13). Therefore,

this third “Socratic” or “metaphysical” form of nihilism can be said to serve an anodyne or conciliatory function.

The Birth of Tragedy (1871 & 1886)

It was precisely this third form of nihilism, hidden under the guise of metaphysics, that Nietzsche had first encountered while writing *The Birth of Tragedy* (1871), although he did not define it as nihilism at the time. However, in his 1886 “Attempt at Self Criticism,” written for the reissue of *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche examines his earlier work from a new vantage point, that of the author of *The Gay Science* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra.* In bridging the gap between Nietzsche’s early and later periods of thought, the “Attempt” (as I’ll refer to it) brings with it the possibility of reading Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy* as on object of the study of nihilism; the project to which his later work was expressly devoted. Moreover, Nietzsche’s criticism of his younger self operates as a self-diagnosis of a then-unrealized nihilism, itself the product of his former allegiances to Richard Wagner (1813-1883) and Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860). He states towards the end of the opening section of the “Attempt”: “Whatever may lie at the bottom of this questionable book: it must have been a question of the greatest interest and appeal, as well as a deeply personal question” (Nietzsche BT 13).

One ought to note that *The Birth of Tragedy* served doubly as a prophecy of the *rebirth* of tragedy in Germany, epitomized for the young Nietzsche by the mature works of Wagner (Tanner 8). Nietzsche’s love of Wagner’s music was combined with his admiration for Schopenhauer’s philosophy, for whom music held an ontological significance. The significance that Schopenhauer lent to music stemmed from his interpretation of Immanuel Kant’s (1724-

1804) *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781). Kant's metaphysics of the "phenomena," that which pertains to the empirically understood world of *appearances*, and the "noumena," the intelligible and essential *things in themselves*, was reinterpreted by Schopenhauer in terms of "representation" and "Will." As a non-representational art which is unmediated by concepts, Schopenhauer considered music as capable of granting one "direct access to the movements of the Will" (Tanner 17). Nietzsche would come to equate this intimate knowledge of the Will with the Dionysian drive, and beyond that, with the dissonant music of Wagner. Likewise, Nietzsche equated the Apollonian drive with the *principium individuationis* (principle of individuation), the understanding of the world in terms of subject and object which Schopenhauer "had located as the major error that we suffer from epistemologically" (Tanner 10), and considered it to be embodied in the figures of Euripides and Socrates.

Nietzsche renounces his prior admiration for Wagner in the "Attempt," stating that he has "learnt to think despairingly and mercilessly" of "German character" and "German music," which he then proceeds to call "Romantic through and through" and "the most un-Greek of all forms of art" (Nietzsche BT 11). The older, ardently anti-Romantic Nietzsche of the "Attempt" then proceeds to raise the question: "What would music have to be like to be no longer of Romantic origin, like German music—but *Dionysian?"* (11). Thus, it can be said that Nietzsche's attacks on Wagner and Schopenhauer in the "Attempt" betray a deeper purpose, that being the revaluation of his Dionysian ideal, which he had previously equated with the works of Wagner and Schopenhauer. He quotes Schopenhauer in *The World as Will and Representation*: "What gives tragedy its curious uplifting momentum, is the dawning of the knowledge that the world, that life can offer no real satisfaction and as a result does not *merit* our devotion" (BT 10). This

is the essence of Schopenhauerian pessimism; it is a recoil at the horror of the world of becoming, which Schopenhauer considered to be the mere representation of an underlying and blind Will to life. Moreover, it is a recoil which ultimately drives one to asceticism. In opposition to Schopenhauer's pessimism, the Nietzsche of the "Attempt" states: "Oh how differently Dionysus spoke to me! Oh how far removed I was from precisely this whole attitude of resignation!" (10). Nietzsche's various rejections of Wagner and Schopenhauer throughout the "Attempt" point to one of the central tensions in *The Birth of Tragedy*, one which was made apparent to Nietzsche only in hindsight: "I labored to express in terms of Schopenhauer and Kant new and unfamiliar evaluations, which ran absolutely counter to the spirit, as well as the taste, of Schopenhauer and Kant!" (10). Here Nietzsche's attempted self-critique becomes a vindication and confirmation of an earlier suspicion—that of the inadequacy of his predecessors.

In the final section of the "Attempt at Self-Criticism" Nietzsche poses the following question: "But sir, if *your* book is not Romantic, then what in the world is ... is this not the tried and true Romantic confession of 1830, behind the pessimistic mask of 1850?" (BT 11). Thus, the question of his prior Romanticism (allegiance to Wagner) and pessimism (allegiance to Schopenhauer) becomes a powerful diagnostic tool in the hands of the late Nietzsche. He similarly quotes a section from *The Birth of Tragedy* on the "dragon-slayers" (perhaps pre-cursors to the "free spirits" of *The Gay Science*), those who "turn their back on all the weakling doctrines of optimism in order to 'live resolutely' as completely as possible": "*would it not be necessary* for the tragic man....in the process of his self-education in seriousness and terror to desire a new art, the *art of metaphysical consolation?"* (11).

The aged Nietzsche's response to these "young Romantics" is an emphatic "No, three times no!" (12). He repudiates this earlier desire for metaphysical consolation, stating that it is the way in which "Romantics end, *Christian*..." (12). Whereas the young Nietzsche had viewed the works of Schopenhauer and Wager as embodiments of his Dionysian ideal, the late Nietzsche of the "Attempt" understands them as forms of metaphysical consolation. In rejecting this metaphysical consolation, this submission to the order-less Will through music, Nietzsche alerts the "young Romantics" that: "You should first learn the art of the consolation of *this world*—you should learn to *laugh*, my young friends, if you are determined to remain thorough pessimists" (12). In contrast to the pessimism of Schopenhauer, these "thorough pessimists" embody Nietzsche's new ideal. He fittingly ends the "Attempt" with an expression "in the language of that Dionysian monster called *Zarathustra"*: "The crown of the man who laughs, this crown of roses: I placed this crown upon my head, I myself proclaimed my laughter holy. I could find no one else strong enough today" (BT 12). Thus, following his attempt at self-critique, Nietzsche announces his new Dionysian ideal: the overman, the free spirit, or the one who laughs at becoming, all the while rejecting the doctrines of 'metaphysical consolation.'

A Pessimism of Strength (1883-1889)

Seeing as he could not abide by Schopenhauer's "weak" pessimism, which recoils at becoming, the question for Nietzsche became: "Is there such a thing as a *strong* pessimism? An intellectual preference for the hard, horrific, evil, problematic aspects of existence which stems from well-being, from overflowing-health, from an *abundance* of existence?" (Nietzsche BT 4). Following his account of the third form of nihilism in the "Collapse of Cosmological Values," Nietzsche goes on to describe precisely this "final form of nihilism." It is none other than the pessimism of

strength alluded to in the "Attempt at Self-Criticism," written a year prior to "Collapse of Cosmological Values."

Nietzsche's "final" nihilism consists of a standpoint wherein "one concedes the reality of becoming as the *only* reality," thereby embracing "*disbelief in any metaphysical world*," and thus forbidding "any belief in the *true* world" (Nietzsche quoted in Heidegger 25). Nietzsche's "active" nihilism is a rejection of the metaphysical *Hinterwelt* conceived as a refuge from the horrors of becoming. Moreover, it is a rejection of Schopenhauerian, or "weak," pessimism which often expresses itself when one is faced with the task of becoming.

To live in a world which one cannot endure nor deny—such is the aim of *self-overcoming nihilism*. According to Nishitani, nihilism in its "true," "perfect," or "consummate" form occurs when: "Not only the world of all finite beings (the world of 'phenomena') is seen to be fundamentally null and thus transcended negatively, but also when the world of eternal being (the world of 'essences' conceived after this negative transcended) is negated" (Nishitani 174). Nishitani otherwise refers to this sequence of negation as a "transcendence *to* the world" (Nishitani 33). But what form might such a negative transcendence take? Nietzsche outlines the movement from "weak" to "strong" pessimism in the opening section of the fifth book of *The Gay Science*, entitled "The meaning of our cheerfulness." He begins by referencing the "greatest recent event," the death of God, understood by Nishitani as the death of 'essences'. As in the aforementioned section on "dragon-slayers," Nietzsche speaks to an imagined audience, "the *suspicion* in whose eyes is strong and subtle enough to witness this spectacle" (Nietzsche TGS 279). The recognition of the nullity of the metaphysical world requires a keen eye, according to Nietzsche, one which is capable of bearing witness to "the long plenitude and sequence of

break down" of the Socratic culture. However, he insists that even for these "firstlings and premature births of the coming century," namely, Schopenhauer, even they cannot comprehend much more than the "*initial consequences* of the event" (TGS 279-80). The result, therefore, is Schopenhauerian pessimism. The rest of the passage details the shift from the "passive" nihilism of the doctrines of metaphysical consolation (Socrates, Wagner, Schopenhauer)—which seek merely to conceal, or at best to repudiate, the nihility at the root of life—to the "active" nihilism of the Dionysian philosopher—which seeks to expose and subsequently affirm nihility via the cultivation of a "pessimism of strength."

In the consummation of nihilism, the "initial consequences" of the death of God are found to be "quite the opposite of what one might expect." Nietzsche states, "they are not at all gloomy but rather like a new and scarcely describable kind of light, happiness, relief, exhilaration, encouragement, dawn" (TGS 280). According to Nishitani, Nietzsche's consummate or "active" nihilism is the anticipation of the logical end of metaphysical values; it is from this standpoint of *cynicism* that nihilism is overcome *innocently* (Nishitani 32). Night becomes day and the "nihility of death" gives way to a "nihility of life," "pessimism of strength," or "gay science." So that one might come to terms with this shift in a far more visceral manner, I recommend that the reader listen to the prelude to Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* (a favorite of the young Nietzsche), immediately followed by an excerpt from Bizet's *Carmen* (which Nietzsche praised late in life). Though certain to create a sensation of sonic whiplash in the listener, there is perhaps no better example of the contrast between what Nietzsche referred to as "northern" (read: "German") and "southern" sensibilities (Kaufmann TGS 5). Whereas

Wagner's music captures the languishing resentment typical of Schopenhauer's pessimism, Bizet captures the light, airy mood of the final sections of *The Gay Science*.

Nietzsche's Legacy (1949 & 1961)

Both Nishitani and Heidegger considered Nietzsche's thought to signal the end of Western metaphysics—a tradition spanning roughly from Plato to Hegel. However, whereas Nishitani held that Nietzsche was the *first consummate nihilist*, Heidegger argued that he was in fact *the last metaphysician.*

According to Nishitani, Nietzsche's late philosophy represents the "fundamental integration of creative nothing and finitude" (Nishitani 180), a standpoint which stems in part from the experience of eternal return, first introduced in *The Gay Science.* Heidegger agrees insofar as the eternal return of the same is an important facet of Nietzsche's philosophical development. He states that Nietzsche "had to think the eternal recurrence of the same before will to power," adding that "the most essential thought is thought first" (Heidegger 8). This is to say that Nietzsche could not have created the concept of will to power, which Heidegger relies upon as the basis for his critique of Nietzsche, without the concept of eternal recurrence. Nevertheless, Heidegger argues as if will to power was in fact the "essential thought," and posits that Nietzsche's philosophy is in fact a metaphysics predicated upon the idea of will to power. Thus, Heidegger does not consider Nietzsche's philosophy to be representative of a "counter movement" against nihilism, as Nishitani does. Instead, he reads Nietzsche as a nihilist in the "classical" sense, or as one who ignores the question of Being, in favor of the doctrine of will to power.

Heidegger breaks down what he considers to be Nietzsche's metaphysics into five "rubrics": "nihilism," "revaluation of all values," "will to power," "eternal recurrence of the same," and "Overman" (Heidegger 9). He maintains that "what Nietzsche perceives and posits as the basic character for beings as a whole," that is to say, Nietzsche's "metaphysics," consists of "what [Nietzsche] calls the 'will to power'" (7). Accordingly, the idea of will to power "reins in" Western metaphysics on the basis of valuative thought, and as a result, Heidegger argues, "it should finally become a metaphysics of will to power" (58). Moreover, Heidegger reads will to power as intrinsically related to domination, "the being in power of power" (50). Considered as merely a valuative metaphysics, Nietzschean nihilism partakes in "the essential nonthinking of the essence of nothing" (22), characteristic of Western metaphysics, and thus "conceals the truth of the Being of beings" (11). Heidegger considers the history of nihilism to be coterminous with that of metaphysics; they are, in a sense, the same thing. Moreover, read as a metaphysics of value and domination, Nietzsche's philosophy constitutes a perfected form of nihilism, given that it provides no account of being outside of valuation. Such an account rather conveniently places Heidegger as the philosopher who ultimately recovers "the truth of Being," following Nietzsche's perceived failure to do so. This has prompted Parkes to assert that "one is tempted to call" Heidegger's interpretation of Nietzsche "a 'willful' misreading of the idea of will to power" (Parkes xxii).

In contrast, Nishitani argues that Nietzsche's affirmative or "consummate" nihilism distinguishes itself via the movement "to and out of nihilism" (Nishitani 32). According to him, consummate nihilism "experiments with nihilism as the logical consequence of [cosmological] values and ideals, anticipating it psychologically" (Nishitani 32). It is precisely this sort of

experiment that Nietzsche carries out in the "Collapse of Cosmological Values." Nishitani asserts that in the anticipation of nihilism there arises a "counter movement against the current of history rushing headlong toward nihilism" (32). This, in other words, is "gay science," "pessimism of strength," or the affirmation of becoming from the standpoint of affirmative nihilism. Here Nishitani appears to expand upon one of Nietzsche's subtler insights: that the "will to truth," the mark of Socratic *serenity* and Christian *sincerity*, ultimately comes to *devalue itself*. Therefore, history moves towards nihilism as the "logical consequence" of metaphysical or "cosmological" values, namely, "Truth," "Good," and "One."

Once negated, the absence of these values, expressed as a form of "cynicism," results in a "counter movement" *against* nihilism from *within* nihilism. It is for this reason that Nishitani refers to Nietzschean nihilism as the *self-overcoming of nihilism.* This "innocent" notion of nihilism as *self-overcoming* marks a radical departure from the Heideggerian interpretation of Nietzsche's nihilism as a metaphysics of "overcoming" or "domination" on the basis of valuative thought.

Nishitani states that from the standpoint of affirmative nihilism, "finite self-being, though *in* the world, embraces the world *within* at the ground of its nihility" (Nishitani 174). This statement appears to betray the influence of Eckhart's idea of *grunde* on Nishitani, who would compare Eckhart's notion of 'living without a why' with the 'great doubt' of Zen philosophy, and moreover, with Nietzsche's active nihilism. Nietzsche himself references Eckhart in *The Gay Science* when he states: "I ask God to rid me of God" (TGS 235). Moreover, according to Nishitani, the philosophies of Nietzsche, Stirner, and Heidegger "all carry this sense" of affirmative nihilism or negative transcendence (174). As such, the affirmation of

nihilism becomes something of a comparative framework for Nishitani. While commenting on Stirner's "standpoint based on 'nothing,'" he remarks that Stirner's "negative positiveness" and "nonchalant acceptance of things" bears certain affinities to the notion of "empty non-attachment" found in the works attributed to Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu (Nishitani 103). Similarly, Nishitani compares Nietzsche's Dionysian "new god" with Eckhart's standpoint of "living 'without why' in the 'God'-less 'desert' of divinity" (48). Further comparisons are made when Nishitani writes of Zarathustra's "yearning for laughter" as the "self-overcoming of nihilism itself in Nietzsche" (68). He compares Zarathustra's laughter to Zen Buddhism, which he calls "a paradigmatic example of a religion that has attained the stage of being able to laugh" (66). In other words, it is a religion that is able to affirm becoming from the standpoint of radical doubt.

Nishitani's inquiry into nihilism treats literature as well; he devotes the seventh chapter of *Nihilism* to nihilism in the Russian context, discussing Turgenev's "Fathers and Sons," as well as Dostoevsky's "Notes from Underground" and "Demons," among others. This broad scope of inquiry—encompassing philosophy, religion, history and literature—is unique to Nishitani. Heidegger, for his part, generally rejects the utility of such a diachronic analysis of nihilism, arguing that "there is little to be gained by recounting the history of nihilism in different centuries and depicting it in its various forms" (Heidegger 53). Heidegger instead carries out his analysis of nihilism synchronically, that is to say, in relation to *Being* or "Sein."

Nishitani held that the radical, affirmative nihilism which emerged out of the post-Kantian tradition in Europe bore a great significance for Japan, following the period of militarization which began during the Meiji Restoration and culminated in the attrocities of the Second World War. As a result, Nishitani's *Nihilism* takes the form of both a philosophical and

historical inquiry. In contrast with Heidegger, Nishitani sought to understand nihilism *existentially* as well as *historically*, that is to say, synchronically as well as diachronically. He asserts that "the sense that life is groundless and human existence without meaning," nihilism, "can arise in connection with the religion and philosophy of any era of history" (Nishitani 173). Thus, a complete understanding of the problem of nihilism necessitates historical investigation.

Similarly, when first introducing the pessimism of strength in the "Attempt at Self Criticism," Nietzsche poses the following question: "Is pessimism *necessarily* the sign of decline, decay, of the failure of exhausted and weakened instincts? —as it was for the Indians, as it is to all appearances for us 'modern' men and Europeans? Is there such a thing as a strong pessimism?" (Nietzsche BT 3). Here Nietzsche appears to echo the sentiment that nihilism "can arise in connection with the religion and philosophy of any era." However, much in the same way Nietzsche's new evaluations "ran counter" to the spirit of his predecessors, Nishitani's reading of Nietzsche rejects the latter's view of Buddhism.

In contrast to the strong pessimism of the Dionysian philosopher, Nietzsche considered Buddhism to be an expression of weak pessimism, itself the result of an *overabundance* of Dionysian sentiment (Smith xix). In *The Gay Science* he states that nihilism, "found its final expression in modern pessimism, and a more ancient expression in the teaching of Buddha; but it is part of Christianity also, if more doubtfully and ambiguously so but not for that reason any less seductive" (Nietzsche TGS 286). As Kaufmann notes, "modern pessimism" should be understood to mean "Schopenhauer's philosophy" (Kaufmann TGS 286 note 17), which Nietzsche otherwise describes as "the whole pose of 'man' *against* the world" (286). Thus, "Buddhism" meant for Nietzsche something akin to "weak pessimism" or "life-denying

nihilism." Nishitani explains that Nietzsche's "biases and oversights" regarding Buddhism, and especially Mahayana Buddhism, ultimately stemmed from Schopenhauer (Nishitani 180). Accordingly, Nietzsche considered nihilism to be a "Second" or "European form of Buddhism" (180), which found expression in Schopenhauer's ascetic pessimism. Nishitani aims to correct this view of Buddhism as the "complete negation of life and will" by arguing that, "it was not in his nihilistic view of Buddhism but in such ideas as *amor fati* and the Dionysian as the overcoming of nihilism that Nietzche came closest to Buddhism, and especially to Mahayana" (180). Nishitani's senior, Tanabe, similarly wrote on the affinities between Nietzsche's thought and Mahayana Buddhism around the time of *Nihilism'*s publication. However, Nishitani adds a caveat, stating that "there is in Mahayana a standpoint that cannot be reached even by nihilism that overcomes nihilism, even though the latter may tend in that direction" (180). What Nishitani is referring to here is the standpoint of "emptiness" or "*ku"* (空), his response to the concept of "absolute nothing" (絶対無) first posited by Nishida, which he would later expand upon in his 1961 book *Religion and Nothingness.* Nevertheless, in correcting Nietzsche, Nishitani hoped to demonstrate the affinities between affirmative or "European" nihilism and Mahayana Buddhism, with a particular regard towards Zen. Nietzsche's intuition, that nihilism was an issue for the "Indians," was in a sense correct; however, lacking an adequate understanding of Buddhism, he was unable to recognize that its standpoint shared certain affinities with his own. Owing to his unique vantage point as a member of the Kyoto School, Nishitani was able to readily connect traditions which, from the viewpoint of the Western tradition, appeared disparate or even unreconcilable.

Conclusion

It was my intent to signal the encounter between the thought of Nietzsche, Nishitani and Heidegger, all the while providing as much relevant context as possible, and in doing so form a basis for future research. Perhaps the thorniest aspect of this encounter is the use of the term "nihilism" to signify such a wide array of philosophical doctrines, ranging from Platonism to Christianity, pantheism, Buddhism, and positivism, among many others. These difficulties notwithstanding, there does in fact appear to be a shared notion of "nihilism" between these three thinkers, especially as it relates to the tradition of metaphysics in the West. However, it may prove useful to consider this "nihilism" not as an object of thought, but rather as a sort of logical progression. Nietzsche's own account of nihilism in the "Collapse of Cosmological Values" appears to corroborate this: nihilism must be thought *sequentially*.

Heidegger does not appear to have picked up on this, or in any case did not consider it to be important. Instead, his analysis is carried out with the aim of understanding the *nihil* within the context of his phenomenology of *Dasein*. Nishitani's contribution is therefore unique, especially insofar as it follows the logic of nihilism set out by the late Nietzsche and relates it to the 20th century Japanese context. Despite his confusions, Nietzsche had the intuition to recognize that nihilism is a problem immanent in all cultures and eras, and that it must therefore have appeared in ancient India, just as it did in classical Greece and modern Europe. Nishitani's *Nihilism* expands upon this thought, and in clarifying Nietzsche's view of Buddhism is able to provide a subtler account of the movement "to and out of nihilism."

What remains to be seen is how, following this encounter, Nishitani and Heidegger's competing readings of Nietzsche came to shape their respective philosophies. In his later work, *Religion and Nothingness*, Nishitani provides an account of the standpoint of "emptiness" or

Śūnyatā as one that goes beyond that of affirmative nihilism. Moreover, both Nishitani and Heidegger wrote on the question of technology and mechanization, meaning that the encounter between their thought does not end with the question of nihilism in Nietzsche. There also remains the question of Nishitani and Heidegger's respective roles as philosophers during the Second World War. Heisig treats this manner from the perspective of the Kyoto School at length in his *Philosophers of Nothingness,* and while the topic certainly remains relevant for further studies, I chose not to touch upon it here, given that the scope of this paper would have likely resulted in an inadequate summary of the issue.

Before concluding, I'd like to list a few of the potential fruits that continued study of this encounter might produce:

1. Concretizing a satisfactory definition of nihility within a global context. Such an inquiry would require a detailed comparison of the Latin concept of the *nihil* alongside the Buddhist notions of mu (無), or "nothingness," and ku (空), "emptiness."
2. Understanding Nishitani's Mahayana critique of Nietzsche and Heidegger's "relative nothing," as opposed to the "absolute nothing" of the Kyoto School. The concept of "absolute nothing" appears to have emerged from the juncture of Hegel's idealism and Nishida's experiences practicing Zen; one of Nishitani's contributions to Kyoto philosophy was his retrieval of the Mahayana concept of "emptiness" in response to Nishida's idea of "absolute nothing."
3. Coming to terms with the study of nihilism within the context of the Second World War. Why did Japan and Germany emerge as centers for the study of nihilism? Moreover, how did Nishitani and Heidegger's trajectories differ after the war? How did they

"philosophize repentance" (in reference to Tanabe's post-war project of *metanoetics*), if at all?

I contend that Nishitani's insights into the question of nihilism will be central to answering these questions going forward. As both a world-historical actuality as well as an existential problem, the self-overcoming of nihilism would appear to necessitate the unraveling of these varied trajectories; this is to say that the overcoming of nihilism necessitates an investigation of the problem historically or diachronically, so that the existential, synchronic issue of nihility might be overcome from within.

Works Cited

Heidegger, Martin. *Nietzsche Volume IV: Nihilism*, edited by David Farrell Krell, Harper, 1982.

Heisig, W. James. *Philosophers of Nothingness*. University of Hawaii Press, 2001.

Keta, Masako. "Philosophy of Overcoming Nihilism." *The Philosophy of the Kyoto School,* edited by Masakatsu Fujita, Springer, 2018, pp. 217-229.

Moore, Ian Alexander. Eckhart, Heidegger, and the Imperative of Releasement. SUNY Press, 2019.

Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm. *The Birth of Tragedy*. Translated with introduction by Douglas Smith, Oxford University Press, 2000.

Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm. *The Gay Science: with a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs.* Translated with introduction by Walter Kaufmann. Vintage Books, 1974.

Nietzsche, Friedrich Willhelm. *The Will to Power*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale. Vintage Books, 1968.

Nishida, Kitaro. Schinzinger, Robert. *Intelligibility and the Philosophy of Nothing: Three Philosophical Essays*. Pantianos Classics, 1958.

Nishitani, Keiji. Parkes, Graham & Setsuko, Aihara. *The Self-overcoming of Nihilism*. SUNY Press, 1990.