

The Passage from Virtual Nihilism to the Standpoint of *Sunyata*

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In short, nihilism refuses treatment as merely an *external* problem for one's self, or even *contemplation* as a problem internal to each individual self. This is the essence of nihilism. This is the most primordial and fundamental of the various refusals that nihilism presents. Nihilism demands that each individual carry out an experiment within the self.

—Nishitani Keiji

Vertical Contextuality and the Problematics of Nihilism

In my cross-cultural investigations of the relations between philosophy and religion, I have raised critical issues about modernist disciplinary parameters which would exclude inquiry that is centered around soteriological or liberatory concerns from the sphere of "philosophy," restricting such concerns to the domain of "religion" or "theology." I have concluded that the formulation of such boundary constraints are the product of pedantic habits of interpretation that entomb the philosophical significance of non-ordinary states of experiencing and filter them through a grid of unwarrantable assumptions. Despite this, the vertical contextuality suggested by the notion of a "way of life" emerges periodically as a common denominator between philosophy and religion. In the case of Indian philosophy, the categorization of philosophy as a discipline rigidly independent from religion did appear in the notion of philosophy as *anviksiki* formulated in the *Kautiliya-Arthasastram*. It also appeared in the delimitation of philosophy to logic made by the Nyaya scholar, Vatsyayana. Such instances of horizontally monological parameter delimitation, however, do not reflect the prevailing pattern in either the six orthodox *darsanas* of the *astika* or in the *nastika* worldviews or schools of thought.

In the case of Chinese and Japanese traditions, Nakamura (Larson, 1988:150) observes that what is analogous to "philosophy" or "religion" in other traditions has been called merely "way of life" (*Dao*). Prior to the influx of western thought, "Buddhism" was named *Butsudo* (Buddhist Way of Life) rather than *Bukkyo* (Teachings of Buddha). Nakamura explains that the term *Bukkyo* connotes "doctrinal or dogmatic tendencies, the attitude of esteeming dogmas, which are very important in some other religions but do not matter much in Buddhism." In his work of 1874, *Hyakuichi Shinron*, Amane Nishi [1829-1897] coined the term *tetsugaku* to mean "philosophy." Although there was certainly philosophical thinking before the time of Amane Nishi, there was no independent discipline of scholarship. Nakamura (Larson, 1988:138) explains that

Probably one reason was that there was no antagonism toward religion, and intellectuals saw no need to develop a separate discipline with a different name. When Amane Nishi coined the word *tetsugaku* as the Japanese translation of the term "philosophy," he meant both the "Way of Heaven" (*Tendo*) and the "Way of Man" (*Jindo*). He included Confucianism, Buddhism, and all other ideologies within the concept of *tetsugaku*.

In coining the term *tetsugaku*, Amane Nishi was attempting to introduce western philosophy into Japan. In doing this, he saw fit to maintain a sense of vertical contextuality (the "Way of Heaven" or *Tendo*) along with horizontal contextuality (the "Way of Man" or *Jindo*). The term *Tendo*, understood as the "Way of Heaven," of course, cannot be assumed to be inter-translatable with the conception of a "Way of Heaven" depicted by the supernatural, monotheistic "people of the book" religions. In the field of cross-cultural philosophy, vertical contextuality pertains to our human endeavor to overcome a radically unsatisfactory "spiritual disposition," so to speak. Concomitantly, our "ultimate concern" with this endeavor can be framed in reference to a wide spectrum of metaphysical orientations. Does this philosophical "verticality" lead us into a relativistic vertigo?

Cross-cultural investigations of the relations between philosophy and religion seem, inadvertently, to induce a sort of propaedeutical *epoche*. The "impossible" demands of so-called "East-West comparative philosophy" seem to require that we avoid privileging any particular

cultural standpoint in the process of interpreting the appropriate parameters of signification for the philosophical enterprise. Consequently, for example, scholars in the field must avoid imposing a western grid in interpreting the philosophical character of Indian *darshana*. If Indian *darshana* is generally centered around the project of *moksa* liberation, then we throw an untold measure of excess baggage into the playing field if we interpret this totalistically as indicative of an exclusive reliance on the authority of so-called “revealed knowledge” held in opposition to the knowledge induced by inferential, rational or critical thinking. The epistemological disjunction between “revealed knowledge” and rational knowledge deriving from the so-called “natural intellect” is not only misleading, but it has had potentially dubious consequences. In the domain of philosophy, soteriological or liberatory possibilities have been gradually buried under the weight of this categorical delineation. In my investigations, I have genealogically traced this entombment to inadvertent effects of the Scholastic relegation of philosophy to the status of a “handmaiden of theology” and the ensuing *ressentiment* of a discipline that grew ever more adamant in asserting its autonomy and epistemological transcendence. One of the most significant factors that plays into this scenario is the rising impact of science.

In order to avoid an obtrusive “gridlock,” we need a standpoint from which there is no *presupposed* justification for any given revelation by virtue of an appeal to scriptural or ecclesiastical authority, rationalistic theology, or the testimonies of mystics or prophets. On the other hand, we require a standpoint from which there can be no *presupposed* repudiation *against* any given revelation on the basis of an atheistic empiricism, such as might be ventured by way of a form of scientism. We ask, then, what happens once we have bracketed-off any presupposed justificatory appeal to epistemological foundations *for* or *against* the validity of revelation. Ironically, it may seem as though our *epoche* is at risk of imposing the presumption of a “gridless grid.” Or are we? What happens when we take a *gridless* standpoint? Are we now thrown back on our own resources, on our “selves” — as it were? If so — if the filters are truly purged — then we must be ripe for a revelation. Whose filters are purged?

Even purged filters, however, are filters. If revelation transpires, we are still obliged to *interpret* our revelatory experiencing subsequently.

Were there no preconceptions impinging on the nature of the experiencing in the first place? How are we to go about interpreting our experiences? We might recall, at this point, that for Hans-georg Gadamer understanding is not a mere cognitive process that can be regulated and monitored by means of a method. Understanding is the way in which we strive to come to terms with the world. As such, it requires us to be aware of our own preconceptions. In addition, it requires that we have some awareness of the limits to the possibility of such self-knowledge, since all our knowledge and all our experiencing is rooted in our given "situatedness." Consequently, our *epoche* leads us back to the hermeneutical circle where we encounter ourselves as interpretative beings.

What sort of approach are we to take in doing comparative philosophy if we are to emphasize the philosophical openness needed for liberation from the presumptions of the gridlock and the chronic attempts to compare philosophies from a putatively objective, neutral, and transcendent vantagepoint? While exploring the virtues and weaknesses of other approaches, Raimundo Panikkar (see Larson, 1988:127) suggests the stance of *imparative* or dialogical philosophy. From such a philosophical stance we may be acutely cognizant of our historico-cultural situatedness, and yet open to other philosophies and ready to learn from all of them. By using the term "*imparative* philosophy," rather than "comparative philosophy," we eschew the implication of adjudication from a fixed and transcendent vantagepoint. The process of *imparare* liberates us from the limited horizon of any one fixed, single philosophical view. It frees us from our dogmatic adherence to assumptions that we treat superior to others — or what for postmodern philosophers are epistemologically "privileged representations" — without maintaining the deception involved in those approaches which would proceed as though we can ignore the partialities inherited from our given historico-cultural situatedness. In addition, the lack of a fixed, transcendent vantagepoint does not imply a relativistic meltdown wherein all points of view are regarded as equally valid. This is the perennial charge made by those essentialists or absolutists who evidently suffer chronic seizures of anxiety at the mere thought of losing grip on whatever putatively transcendent vantagepoint has come under the most favor. However, "all points of view" can be regarded as potential sources of *imparative* edification without placing undue doctrinal commitments on us vis-à-vis "each and every point of view." Those points of view which com-

mand our greatest attention will be those that respond to our greatest needs and heartfelt concerns at shared moments in history wherein a "fusion of horizons" becomes possible.

That may be well and good. However, on what basis are we to adjudicate between competing claims on our attention? In terms of East-West comparative philosophy, how can we confront the problem of underlying methodological presuppositions and still avoid the presumption of access to a transcendent vantagepoint from which to adjudicate the virtues of various philosophies globally? In this article, I want to suggest the possibility that East-West cross-cultural philosophy can and should be vertically centered on the axial "problem of nihilism." If we can regard "nihilism" as the paramount exemplification of a radically unsatisfactory "spiritual disposition" in contemporary times, then our philosophical project can be understood as vertically geared toward the task of emancipation from this malady. This does not mean that we enter into anti-nihilist, essentialist apologetics. Ironically, a key may be unearthed precisely at that point wherein the essentialist's anxieties are most acute. To "overcome nihilism," we must embark on the daunting task of attempting to understand it. Nihilism is not something that we can understand by analyzing it objectively. We must pass through it. Often associated with extreme skepticism and relativism, nihilism is also thought of in connection with the belief that life is meaningless and purposeless. Existential nihilism is centered on the belief that existence itself — all activity, effort, and emotion — is ultimately pointless. In the twentieth century we have seen this nihilistic challenge to all forms of teleological metaphysics grow more compelling due to the impact of the scientific world-view. Hence, nihilism has also come to be associated with positivism or scientism.

If we turn to Nishitani Keiji and the Kyoto School's description of the central task of the philosophy of religion we see that the task is characterized as that of "overcoming nihilism."¹ Is it possible to regard a

¹The so-called "Kyoto School" of philosophy (*tetsugaku*) is a tradition deriving from the work of specialists in the philosophy of religion at Kyoto University. In its foundations, the driving force behind this new approach to *tetsugaku* came from Nishida Kitaro [1870-1945]. Tanabe Hajime [1885-1962] was an outstanding early member of the School. Watsuji Tetsuro and Kuki Shuzo were perhaps somewhat peripheral to the School, but closely associated with it. The internationally acclaimed

cross-cultural examination of the phenomenon of “nihilism” and the possibilities of “overcoming nihilism” as the pivotal task of East-West comparative philosophy in the new millenium? More specifically, the task requires that we endeavor to “overcome nihilism” without stumbling into any pit of dogmatic, monocentric essentialism or politically manipulatory totalism, and also without collapsing into any sort paralysis of extreme relativism, despair or apathy. A full-fledged explication of such a problematic would survey the relations between the perspectives of relativism, skepticism, humanism, scientism, secularism, pluralism, *et cetera*. It would approach this with a vital sense of existential, pragmatic, ethical and soteriological — or, liberatory — urgency that holds serious implications for our understanding of nothingness, being, selfhood, history, time, society, language, and religion. In this article, we can only proffer some propaedeutical suggestions.

Why do we specify the application of the problem of nihilism to the discipline of East-West comparative philosophy? It seems clear enough that the loss of a sense of meaning and purpose is a problem that crosses boundaries. And, if it has been associated at times with the rise of western science, technology, and consumerism, the global expansion of these makes it all the more imperative to study the problem in the context of East-West comparative philosophy. If, indeed, this is the case, then it becomes especially striking that the history of “nihilism” and the notion of *nihilum* in western thought stands in such stark contrast to the Buddhistic perspective on *sunyata*. Ostensibly, the Latin root, *nihil*, and the Sanskrit root, *sunya*, both mean “nothing” or “empty.” And yet, the western notion tends to evoke images of desperation and despair, whereas the eastern notion is suggestive of the bliss of nirvana. Again, Nishitani — and the Kyoto-School of Japanese *tetsugaku* — may prove instructive in this regard. In order to consider this properly, however, let us first reflect on the impact of science on religion and the shifting sands of scientific and religious territoriality.

D. T. Suzuki was a lifelong friend of Nishida. Although Suzuki was not a member of the School and had no formal philosophical training, he was an important influence on the School. The Kyoto School took a new form in the next generation with philosophers such as Nishitani Keiji [1900-1990], Hisamatsu Shin'ichi, Abe Masao, Takeuchi Yoshinori, and Ueda Shizuteru. Today it is widely recognized throughout the world that the Kyoto School is a vanguard in the field of comparative philosophy of religion.

Covert Operations at the Borderline

Postmodern hermeneutes have applied imparative inquiry to the problem of the foundations underlying the division between the “human” and the “natural” sciences. The suggestion that the “human” and the “natural” sciences are not as divisible as they were once held to be, challenges a paramount feature involved in the hegemony of traditional European academic delineations established in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Hans-georg Gadamer, in effect, turned the positivist perspective on its head. Like the human or social sciences, the natural sciences are the fallible products of traditions of interpretation and their norms and standards are historically constituted. Consequently, it is improper to regard the natural sciences as an exemplar for all forms of knowledge as if they possessed some sort of trans-historical sanctity nullifying all historically constituted norms. Methodological guidelines for the study of both natural and human phenomena develop *within* history. As such, they adopt historical prejudices as to *what* is important to study and *how* it should be studied.

The proposition that the natural sciences hold no authoritative, methodological influence over the human sciences challenges the positivistic presuppositions engendered in the nineteenth century in the philosophy of Auguste Comte [1798-1857] and, taking a different form, in the twentieth century with the logical positivism of the Vienna circle — presuppositions which remain powerfully influential in our own times. These inherited taxonomies, categories and methodological presuppositions form the context or “playing field” wherein the discipline of East-West comparative philosophizing — as it is known thus far — has developed. However, the postmodern and hermeneutical shift not only raises serious doubts about the presuppositional delineations employed in the structures utilized by academic orthodoxy, but it overturns the pretense to some sort of “universalist,” “presuppositionless” vantage-point, packaged and crafted in Europe and made to endure eternally in absolute dominion over all cultures.

If contemporary philosophical hermeneutics calls into question the traditional understanding of the nature, methodology, and parameters of the human sciences and the natural sciences, the same line of questioning challenges the point of view of conventional European ideational architectonics wherein “philosophy” is regarded as an indepen-

dent discipline engaged in a kind of objectivistic purging of subjective bias. Not only does philosophy fail to provide objective epistemological foundations for science, but it refuses to become collapsible into the positivist paradigm for knowledge. The Gadamerian headstand on positivism not only denies trans-historical status to the natural sciences, but it liberates philosophy from foundationalist presuppositions. In doing so, does it not jettison the assumptions that all forms of soteriological questing are unrelated to philosophy proper, that eastern philosophy is somehow "tainted" by religious underpinnings, and that East-West comparative philosophy needs to find a trans-cultural and philosophically objective (*i.e.*, positivistic) or transcendental standpoint from which to adjudicate? Meanwhile, it has hardly been business as usual in the contemporary realm of science. The so-called "mechanistic" viewpoint of modern science begins to look like a worn-out machine itself when viewed from the standpoint of neoteric paradigm mutations.

The implications of philosophical hermeneutics here for East-West cross-cultural philosophy consist not only in the eschewal of the assumption of a trans-historical objectivity, but also of the presumption of a trans-cultural objectivity. Instead, we recognize that the shared meanings that are created in a "fusion" of historically situated horizons are created in a fusion of culturally contextual horizons, as well. By calling into question our historically and culturally situated vision of the parameters of human knowledge, we are provoked to reconsider the meanings that we ascribe to the various projects that we may associate with such "knowledge." Concomitantly, we are obliged to reconsider the parameters of what is meant by the word "philosophy" and how such parameters relate not only to our understanding of "science" and "religion," but also to our understanding of the concepts of "history" and "culture." As anticipated by Friedrich Nietzsche, the rise of modern science has posed a serious challenge for traditional forms of religion in the west. The failure of twentieth century scientific optimism to replace traditional religion now testifies to the emergence of an inverse challenge casting doubt on the putative objective transcendence and neutrality of the scientific world-view. Through the penetrating self-analysis provoked by the history of their tension, science and religion are both transformed. As a former servant to both, philosophy must surely be radically transformed by both transformations.

According to Gadamer (1976:3), the central question of the modern age is one that is posed by the existence of modern science. It is the question how our natural view of the world "is related to the unassailable and anonymous authority that confronts us in the pronouncements of science." The "unassailable and anonymous authority" of science has severely undercut the credibility of religion. This authority stands indifferently before the inability of philosophy to provide epistemological foundations for scientific truth claims. The agitation in the philosophy of science only seems to highlight the vacillations in the philosophy of religion vis-à-vis the sweeping impact of science on contemporary societies. In this context, soteriological possibilities are inadvertently buried beneath the failure of traditional religion to be doctrinally convincing in the face of the scientific world-view. From the viewpoint of Nishitani Keiji — one of the best known of the Kyoto School philosophers — the bewilderment of philosophy before modern science is no surprise when viewed in the context of the pervasive impact of the Greek and Christian rationalist traditions which he sees as having indirectly spawned the modern scientific world-view. Ironically, it seems as if these traditions are in process of being devoured by their own progeny. A profound sense of meaninglessness bubbles to the surface in diverse forms of nihilism, absurdism, surrealism, anarchism, and postmodernism.

In *Religion and nothingness*, Nishitani (1983:77-78) asserts that "One of the greatest, most fundamental problems all religions face in our times is their relationship to science." He notes that it is often suggested that there is no need for any conflict between religion and science as long as each sticks to its proper domain. Theologians lack the conceptual tools to deal with science, and scientists make shoddy theologians. This suggestion, however, merely begs the question — the boundary that is the point of contention is regarded as the solution. Ultimately, this approach is a disingenuous retreat from the issue, designed to stultify further inquiry. Nishitani observes that,

A boundary separates one area from another and yet at the same time belongs to both of them. The foundations of the conflict between religion and science lie surely concealed in just such a boundary.

Often reacting in a confrontational manner, both religion and science fail to see that the boundary that separates the two realms also belongs to both of them. Basking in its unassailable authority, science tends to deny that any boundary exists. Putatively religious truths are to be elucidated and subsumed by the authority of science. The assumed objectivity of science, the empirical verifiability of results, and its exclusionary attitude toward non-scientific perspectives, is such that it "... seems to regard its own scientific standpoint as a position of unquestionable truth from which it can assert itself in all directions." Unwilling to relinquish its teleological world-view, religion responds, in turn, by stiffening the boundary and disqualifying any scientific excursions into its dominion.

As science prevails more and more in explaining things that are traditionally accounted for by religion, it has often been assumed that science will eventually supplant religion altogether. The credibility of this assumption is enhanced by the success of modern science in predicting natural phenomenon and the status assumed by modern atheism and secularism in acting proxy for traditional religion. Nishitani avers that modern atheism and science are allied in their mutual rejection of teleological metaphysics in favor of mechanistic worldviews and notions of human progress. Before the advent of modern science, however, natural laws were seen as part of a divine order. Consequently, humanity was allied with nature in an over-arching teleological scheme. For this reason there was little conflict between religion and science in the early stages of modernity. Many scientists thought that they were performing a theological service. By discovering and formulating the laws of nature it was hoped that they would ultimately be establishing the veracity of religion. The failure of science to help in this project incited a turning point in the history of science that set it on a path diametrically opposed to religion. On the one hand, the teleological conception of religion held that the universe was created for the purpose of life. On the other hand, modern science rejected teleology in favor of a mechanistic view of nature. Asserting a materialistic conception of the universe in which life appears as a mere accident, it became death-oriented.

Once the modern scientific view of the world became firmly established, teleology dissipated. Nishitani (1983:48) notes a striking early example of this dissipation in the reaction to the Lisbon Earthquake of

1755. After the catastrophe, the English clergy is said to have attributed the earthquake to the city's predominant Catholic population, while the Catholics imputed the disaster to the license that had been given to Protestants to live within the city limits. Immanuel Kant [1724-1804] denounced the misguided thinking involved in any teleology that could interpret such an event as indicative of divine justice. Of course, Francois Marie Arouet Voltaire [1694-1778] cited the Lisbon earthquake in the finale to *Candide* wherein he parodied Leibnitzian theodicy. As the credibility of the traditional teleological viewpoint waned, Nishitani avers, "the natural world assumed more and more the features of a world cold and dead, governed by laws of mechanical necessity, completely indifferent to the fact of man."

Nishitani contends that this gradual shift in perspective was facilitated early on through the impact of the modern traditions of empiricism and rationalism. According to Nishitani (1983:10-11), empiricism and rationalism are both predicated on the subject-object division so pervasive to modern western thought. The vantagepoint taken on "things without" from this "field within the self" was given ontological formulation in Descartes' categorical dualism of *res cogitans* (or consciousness) and *res extensa* (or extended matter). Seeking apodictic foundations, Descartes established the *ego cogito* as "a reality that is beyond all doubt," whereas the natural world "came to appear as bearing no living connection with the internal ego." Hence, Nishitani says that the natural world became "the cold and lifeless world of death." This mechanistic view of the world set the stage for the development of natural science and opened the way for modern scientific technology. There were, however, other consequences. The ontological exclusion of consciousness and physicality inadvertently furnished support for the anthropocentric, instrumental view of nature as a mere collection of indifferent materials that exist for our use. Nishitani (1983:10-11) explains that

To the self-centered ego of man, the world came to look like so much raw material. By wielding his great power and authority in controlling the natural world, man came to surround himself with a cold, lifeless world. Inevitably, each individual ego became like a lonely but well-fortified island floating on a sea of dead matter. The life was snuffed out of nature and the things of nature; the living

stream that flowed at the bottom of man and all things, and kept them bound together, dried up.

The cold and indifferent world available for human control and exploitation stands at the heart of the problem of nihilism in contemporary society.

Nishitani was convinced that the problem of nihilism (*kyomu*) is rooted in the mutual aversion of religion and science. The problem of nihilism is the philosophical starting point that grew to encompass and inform Nishitani's entire philosophical career. Nishitani observes a curious irony with respect to the scenario described above. In its zeal to consume religion, science has not only failed, but has actually ensured the perpetuation of religion by rendering the question of the meaning of life truly exigent. A peculiar inversion seems to take place between man and the laws of nature. With the increasing sophistication in scientific and technological control over nature, humanity acts more and more as if it is exempt from these natural laws by using them to pursue its own ends. Meanwhile our lives seem to become increasingly mechanized as technology grows globally pervasive. Many have observed a strange loss of meaning in our lives as technological devices replace human activities. The indomitable authority of science and the manipulations of technology seem of little help to us before this loss of meaning. They are impotent when we are confronted with nihility.

Nihility Underground

Surrounded with the "cold, lifeless world of death" associated with the mechanistic world-view and the concomitant manipulations of technology, how are we to confront the problem of nihilism. In days of old it was commonplace to find some sort of philosophical consolation in the thought that humans are not merely "featherless bipeds," but are uniquely and distinctively rational, thinking creatures. Perhaps, if the horrors of history could somehow be "rationalized," we might imagine that there is some miniscule justification for such *hubris*, but attempts to do so evoke an image of fools trying to carry water in buckets made of perforated paper. However, not only does the challenge pointedly expose the limits of rationality, but in the process we also come to realize that our capacity for reasoning inadvertently increases our propensity to produce ever-new forms of horror. By the Kierkegaardian

admonition, we may be featherless and rational, but what is most significantly universal to the human is a certain "sickness of the spirit." To be human is to be "always in a critical condition." (1959:133) For Soren Kierkegaard, we are all in despair though we generally deceive ourselves and do not know it. In vain, we create endless strategies of diversion and self-deception, fleeing from our despair. Like flies, we hover in the crowd to keep despair at bay — wondering, perhaps, how it is possible to be so forlorn with so much company. Overwhelmed by dread, a few of us wander far from the crowd, losing taste for the noise. For Kierkegaard, the masses who persist in keeping despair at bay are life's most pathetic losers. Our despair, our anxiety is the key that opens the door to the ultimate. "Whosoever has learned to be anxious in the right way has learned the ultimate." (Kierkegaard, 1980:155)

Nishitani (1983:57) affirms that in *The Concept of Dread*, Kierkegaard holds the germ of the idea of an ecstatic transcendence in the nihility at the base of the being of the self. However, he thinks that Kierkegaard has still not passed through "the purgative fires of the mechanistic world view" in the manner of Nietzsche.² Perhaps we can say that in the modern age we see what Kierkegaard called "leveling" taking form in industrial mass production, in the increasing mechanization and bureaucratization of life, and in the impersonal commodity orientation. The "leveling" of massive populations on such a monstrous scale has led many to proclaim that the modern age is in a "crisis of alienation." The Marxists have counseled us to make work meaningful and to create a "classless society" through the "rule of the proletariat." Religionists have advised us to restore spirituality and a moral community. Radical individualists have incited us to reject the pressure of the masses and proclaim our individuality. Whatever their respective merits, each of these views assumes that the source of alienation is outside

²Nishitani (1983:57) comments that "... whereas Nietzsche's thought came to maturity after passing through the purgative fires of the mechanistic world view and so was able to enter into confrontation with the new way of being human concealed in the emergence of modern natural science, there is no such radical confrontation to be found in Kierkegaard's thought. Consequently nihility does not take on for him the sense of the abyss where the self-being of man comes to its ecstatic transcendence. The germ of this idea can be seen in *The Concept of Dread*, but it did not develop within his general thought to an adequate encounter with the problem of religion and science."

of us and that there is some solution for it. Suppose they are all wrong in this assumption. Suppose that alienation is endemic to the human condition. In that case, each age and each culture may express alienation differently, but the romantic quest for the "good old days" before alienation may be utterly otiose. Another implication would be that those who claim to suffer no feelings of alienation are possibly the sickest among us, since such a claim could only be sustained through gratuitous and disingenuous strategies of deceit. In any case, the manifest prevalence of alienation serves as testimony to the fragility of the human condition.

The word "alienation" derives from the Latin word *alienus*, which means foreign, strange, or belonging to another. The term may indicate feelings of estrangement or detachment from others, nature and the world, and from ourselves. Our alienation from others is evident, as cited above, in the paradoxical sense of isolation that is sometimes felt in the midst of a crowd. Our alienation from nature and the world is evident in the prevalent feelings of homelessness. Such feelings become particularly acute in the context of the "cold and indifferent" world of the mechanistic age. Since the 1500s, modern science has irrevocably changed our relationship to nature. As discussed above, the natural world, seen in mechanistic and instrumental terms, becomes increasingly demystified and spiritless. Alienated from ourselves, we flee in vain to the crowd, only to become estranged in the crowd. Alienated from ourselves, we flee to the diversions of our mechanized world, only to be overtaken by inexplicable feelings of homelessness. However, what can it mean to be alienated from oneself? If the self is whole, continuous and identifiable — as postulated by the Cartesian theory of the self — how can such a *self* be alienated from *itself*? Does the experience of alienation make one into two selves? If not, how are we to explicate the phenomenon of self-deception, what Sartre calls *Mauvois foi* ("bad faith")? How can we explain duplicity such as is depicted in the celebrated story of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde? In addition, how is it that humans can doubt and question their own identities?

At the beginning of *Religion and Nothingness*, Nishitani asserts that nothingness or nihility comes forward whenever adversity and uncertainty fracture the routine passage of life. Nishitani speaks of those for whom life has become meaningless due to the loss of a loved one or the

failure of an undertaking. In such situations our assumed purposes and taken-for-granted meanings collapse. Here a void appears which cannot be filled. A "meaninglessness" emerges at the ground of everyday, routine activities. One becomes a question to oneself and realizes that this abyss "is always just underfoot." (1983:3) Karl Jaspers had such situations in mind when he spoke of the *Grenzsituation* — or, the "boundary situation." In the boundary situation one's everyday being is shattered. This kind of rupture may be brought on by sickness, accidents, despair, guilt, death of a loved one, broken-heartedness, serious interpersonal problems, divorce, losing a job, being a victim of a crime, homesickness, some sort of radical change in life circumstances, *et cetera*. Understood in this context, feelings of despair or "meaninglessness" are part and parcel of the human condition. No one wonders why we feel despair in such boundary situations. However, we usually think that such despair should pass after some "appropriate" length of time. When despair is excessively protracted or morbid it is regarded as pathological. We tend to think of despair in this sense as treatable with therapy.

However, we must dig deeper here. Is there another kind of despair, one that cannot be treated or cured in any clinical sense? Is there is a kind of despair which cannot be explicated by reference to some specifiable event or something one can pinpoint in time and space? Such despair would not be a despair that is understood as either normal or pathological. Perhaps, such despair is best captured in the Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno's well-known phrase, "tragic sense of life."³ With the mythical exception of the prophet, Zoroaster, we are born into the world crying and gasping for breath.⁴ Hence, for Unamuno (1954:211) "suffering is a spiritual thing." As the very origin of consciousness, suffering is the starting point of existential philosophy. In Buddhistic terms, suffering is universal to the human condition. Consequently, the First Noble Truth affirms that "Life is suffering." This does not imply that there is no enjoyment, but rather that even our enjoyment is entangled with suffering. But, how are we to respond to the "tragic sense of life"? Not only do many of us find magnificent beauty and indescribable joy in life, but we have often grow hopeful that

³See Unamuno's work entitled *The Tragic Sense of Life* (Unamuno, Miguel De. 1954. *The Tragic sense of life*, trans. by J. E. Crawford Fritch, New York: Dover Publications).

⁴Legend has it that the Persian prophet Zoroaster was born laughing.

human problem-solving capacities can at least mitigate the burden of human suffering. Of course, beauty can be sad and joy can be born of great pain. In this context, it is important to understand that existential inquiry need not imply any wholesale rejection of the good things in life and the noble endeavors of humanity in the face of adversity. Is it not possible that on a deeper level our failure to follow through with existential questioning actually diminishes our ability to appreciate the good things of life and to respond pragmatically to adversity? Thus, without assuming any kind of adversarial stance toward the human projects of science, progress, and development — for example — an intrepid follow-through must still inquire what ultimate benefit our science, progress, and development actually holds in the face of the “tragic sense of life;” that is, vis-à-vis the problem of nihility.

Broadly speaking, we can distinguish five existential responses to the problem of nihility: (a) existential theism, (b) existential absurdism or revolt, (c) pessimistic existential nihilism, (d) creative or dynamic existential nihilism, and (e) Zen Buddhistic existentialism. Despite apparent overlapping due to shared features, each of these five vantagepoints is distinct from the others on vital points. For the existential theist, although this contingent world is ultimately without meaning, there is still hope in that which is absolute, transcendent, and unconditional. Hence, Gabriel Marcel [1889-1973] (1973:32) asserted that the only genuine hope is the “. . . hope in what does not depend on ourselves.” For Paul Tillich [1886-1965], the “courage to be” is faith in the face of the meaninglessness of the contingent world and our anxiety over death and non-being.⁵ Such faith is a risk. There are no guarantees. For Karl Jaspers [1883-1969], the tragic sense of life comes to all of us eventually in the *Grenzsituation* (“boundary-situation”) wherein one’s everyday sense of being is shattered.⁶ In the process, we confront a reality greater than ourselves. He calls this denouement “transcendence.” This transcendence is a movement beyond our finite nature. The existential nihilist agrees with the existential theist in “the basic premise that the world of the contingent is without meaning.” However, they find no

⁵See Tillich’s work entitled *The Courage to Be* (Tillich, Paul. 1952. *The Courage to be*, New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press).

⁶See Jasper’s work entitled *The Way to Wisdom* (Jaspers, Karl. 1951. *The Way to wisdom*, trans. by Ralph Manheim, New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press).

recourse in any kind of theistic faith in something “absolute” or “unconditional.” From the standpoint of the existential nihilist, there is only the world of contingency and the world of contingency has no genuine value or meaning.

For the “existential *rebel*” or “absurd hero” our projects and our freedom are all that we have and these provide meaning for human existence. The meanings that we have are the meanings that we make. Though this meaning is contingent and subjective, it is *all* that we have and it will have to be enough. Though there is no “absolute,” and no “eternal life,” and we all die without ever truly completing any project, we can still struggle defiantly like Sisyphus.⁷ This is our “revolt”: to struggle defiantly despite a full-blown consciousness of the tragic. Hence, Albert Camus (1955:44) imagines Sisyphus happy — defiantly happy. In a sense, our happiness is our “revolt.” The “absurd man” who practices this conscious revolt can see the limited, temporal, contingent, indifferent world as it is, “burning and frigid.” He can then “decide to accept such a universe and draw from it his strength, his refusal to hope, and the unyielding evidence of a life without consolation.” Although the world is absurd and reason is feeble, there is no need to resign ourselves to suicide or hedonism or otherworldly hopes. There may be no “ultimate meaning,” but that does not mean that there is no meaning at all for the human person. There must be meaning for us, since we are the only creatures “to insist on having one.” (Camus, 1961:14) We make our own meanings. We *are* our own meanings. At the end of *The Plague*, Dr. Rieux as exhausted and yet transformed — “the hero without God.” This heroism is our rebellion against death, though we know we are outmatched. Dr. Rieux exemplifies the “absurd hero” who goes on fighting against the plague even though he knows fully well that it is not only a losing battle in the confines of the quarantined city, but that the deadly bacilli returns periodically after a state of dormancy. Although the absurd hero understands the nihilist anger at the purposelessness of the world he adopts a kind of courage akin to the theistic “courage to be.”

⁷In Greek mythology, Sisyphus was condemned by the gods to eternally push a rock up a hill. See Camus’ work entitled *The Myth of Sisyphus* (Camus, Albert. 1955. *The myth of Sisyphus*, trans. by Justin O’Brien, New York: Vintage Books).

Ostensibly, then, whereas the existential nihilist agrees with the existential theist on the basic tragic premise that the contingent world is without meaning, they find no recourse in any kind of theistic faith in something beyond this world of contingency. We have also observed that whereas the existential absurdist agrees with the existential nihilist *and* the existential theist with regard to the basic tragic premise that the finite, contingent world is without meaning, the existential absurdist is closer to the existential theist in affirming a stance of courage in the face of the tragic meaningless of the contingent world. Nihilism is generally described as the belief that there is no foundation on which to establish values, knowledge, or communication. Existential nihilism is thought of as the belief in the ultimate purposelessness or meaninglessness of existence. As such, it has come to be associated with a radical skepticism and an extreme pessimism that denounces all existence. All human suffering and all human projects are rendered absurd and futile by virtue of the inevitability of death. Since the nihilist holds that life has no purpose (*telos*), meaning, or value, it is generally assumed that the nihilistic life is necessarily destructive. Hence, it is said to digress into wanton hedonism, slothful mediocrity, and an unbridled quest for power, money, and/or gratuitous violence. However, the picture is rendered more complex if — in Nietzschean fashion — we distinguish between a pessimistic (life-denying) existential nihilism and a creative- dynamic (life-affirming) existential nihilism. Although existential absurdism shares a kind of life-affirming perspective with creative-dynamic existential nihilism, there is no defiance against the meaninglessness or purposelessness of the world. In affirming life, creative nihilism affirms even the suffering and lack of meaning that the absurdist defiantly revolts against.

Historically speaking the nature of nihilism is complicated by the variety of uses with which the term has been employed. Although nihilism has no organized body of thought and actually takes a variety of disparate forms, all nihilists are generally assumed to: (a) accept the premise that nothing has real *value*, purpose, or meaning in a finite, contingent world, (b) reject the possibility of anything beyond that contingent world. We can cite a variety of forms in addition to what we have been calling “existential nihilism”:

(1) *ethical* nihilism, (2) *scientistic* nihilism, (3) *epistemological* nihilism, (4) *individualist* nihilism, and (5) *political* nihilism. The stress

on the absence of "real value" expressed in this formulation may be indicative of an *ethical* nihilism that rejects any belief in absolute moral values or principles. It can also take the form of a *scientistic* nihilism that rejects any sense of value or purpose based on teleological metaphysics, ethical absolutes, or romanticism. Scientistic nihilism, however, is often ambiguously associated with socialist and/or behaviorist ideology. Nihilism can also take the form of an extreme skepticism. In this case the focus is more on the denial of the possibility of knowledge and truth. This kind of extreme skepticism can be called *epistemological* nihilism. Currently, this form of nihilism has been associated with postmodern anti-foundationalism. A thoroughgoing epistemological nihilism must extend to the belief in scientific truths. Consequently, epistemological nihilism may exclude scientistic nihilism. On the other hand, the relations between epistemological nihilism and ethical nihilism are necessarily murky. The epistemological nihilist must assert that we cannot know whether there are moral absolutes or not.

Nihilism is also associated with philosophical *individualism* or "egoism." Known for his denial of absolutes and for his denunciation of systematic philosophy, Max Stirner [1806-1856] is considered to be one of the first philosophical nihilists. In *The Ego and His own*, Stirner argues in behalf of the uniqueness of the individual.⁸ Citing the motto "*Ich hab' Mein' Sach' auf Nichts gestellt*" (I have founded my affairs on nothing), Stirner (1963:3-5) affirms a standpoint that negates all fixed standpoints. Rather than mere apathy, this is a fluid emptiness, "not in the sense of a void, but creative nothing (*das schöpferische Nichts*), the nothing out of which I myself as creator create everything." We can see here a reflection of the Hegelian notion of *absolute Negativität* wherein realism and idealism are overcome. Against the nomothetic constraints imposed by essentialist notions of fixed ideals, Stirner asserted that the only law is the achievement of individual freedom. Although this kind of freedom is a kind of "insurrection," it is not won by armed uprising. Indeed, Stirner repudiates both socialist and anarchist notions of "revolution." Through "my power" the individual self must realize the self-mastery of "own-ness." This means that the individual must appropri-

⁸Max Stirner's real name was Jasper Kaspar Schmidt. See Stirner's work entitled *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* (Stuttgart, 1981); English translation by S.T. Byington, *The Ego and His Own* (New York, 1963).

ate the world as her own. This individual self-empowerment has profoundly transformative social consequences. However, the realized egoist does not center her affairs on preconceived ideals of social transformation.

Believing in nothing, it is often said that a nihilist has no allegiances, and no aspirations, except perhaps, the desire to destroy. Nihilism understood as political *anarchism* departs from the "creative nothing" of Stirnerian egoism. We see the Latin root, *nihil* (nothing), in the verb, "annihilate," meaning to bring to nothing or destroy completely. Concomitantly, some have associated "nihilism" with the willful political destruction advocated by anarchism. Political nihilism is belief in the destruction of all established political, social, and religious institutions as a prerequisite for improvement. Although political nihilists dispense with beliefs, they evidently hold on to a belief in destruction. In Russia, nihilism became identified with a revolutionary movement [1860-1917] that repudiated the authority of the state, the church, and the family. The anarchist leader Mikhael Bakunin [1814-1876] proclaimed that the passion for destruction is a "creative passion."⁹ Of course, destructive nihilism also takes the form of suicide, the fast-track to self-destruction. Here we confront a curious irony. Since the nihilistic life is without purpose or meaning, no meaning or purpose can be attached to nihilistic suicide. Although the lack of meaning and purpose is thought to impel the nihilist to commit suicide, ironically the act of suicide is also without meaning for the nihilist.

The term "nihilism" is often said to have first come into popular usage after its appearance in the Russian novelist Ivan Turgenev's [1818-1883] novel *Fathers and Sons* (1862), which deals with the theme of a conflict between generations set in the context of the generation gap created by the government reforms of 1856 to 1861. In this novel Turgenev, a friend of Mikhail Bakunin, used the term "nihilism" to describe the crass scientism espoused by one of the central characters, Bazarov. Bazarov, identified with nihilism and called it one of the "most advanced ideas" of the time. He maintained a doctrine of total nega-

⁹Michael Bakunin (1814-76) was the most celebrated nineteenth century anarchist. Bakunin was influenced by Fichte and the "new Hegelian" movement, with its stress on social transformation through revolutionary destruction. In 1865 he established an anarchistic society in Naples known as the "International Brotherhood."

tion, preaching the destruction of the entire structure of society in order to build a new order based on rational scientific principles. Nishitani discusses Bazarov's nihilism in a lecture on "Nihilism in Russia." This was a part of a series of lectures which he gave in Kyoto, originally published under the Japanese title *Nihirizumu* [1949], and appearing in English in 1990 under the title *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*. One of Bazarov's character traits is a fixation with science, especially the latest German science of the time. Nishitani (1990:133) explains

This was not the science that had been subordinated to philosophy, but a science that had broken free of theology just as philosophy had at the beginning of the modern period. German science thus represented the pure and independent scientific spirit. Now the liberation of science from philosophy was a major event that affected the foundation of the spiritual history of Europe.

Here we see a reference to the paradigm shifts that have occupied our attention in the previous sections of this study. If philosophy, the "handmaiden of theology," sought liberation from theology, science sought freedom from both theology and her former handmaiden.

For the character Bazarov, all philosophy is romanticism. His putative adherence to scientific realism is accompanied by some puzzling behavior. Repudiating everything "unscientific," he appears to scorn tradition, love of family, art, poetry, etc., and disgusts his acquaintances by dissecting a frog in his own guest-room. Although he attempts to interact with local peasants and takes pride in his own rustic roots in a farming village, he is depicted as indifferent to the common people. In Bazarov, the concern with scientific realism and socialism seem to collapse into a troubled nihilistic egoism. Nishitani interprets Bazarov's nihilism as naïve. It is a nihilism conditioned by a fanatical belief in science, socialism, and his own ego. As such, it has yet to become a genuine, self-conscious nihilism. Nishitani (1990:136) avers that

The feeling of hallowness remains no more than a vague premonition echoing from the depths of the unconscious. In contrast, a nihilism that has become self-conscious knows itself as despair and as the spirit of radical revolt, doubt, and freedom.

Bazarov's nihilism takes a standpoint opposing such things as philosophy, religion, morality, a socio-political system, but fails to take issue

with the *self* that is doing the negating. However, for Nishitani it is not sufficient to regard matters of religion — for example — as external to the self and then negate them. Such matters must be met “on their own ground.” There must be a struggle between the “believer” and the “nihilist” within the individual self. Only then can the nihilism that is born of the modern scientific spirit even begin to overcome itself.

Curiously, to illustrate the existential struggle between the “believer” and the “nihilist” within the individual self, Nishitani finds the character that he needs in Dostoyevski’s disturbed, hyperconscious “underground man.” The *Notes from the Underground* [1864] is a powerfully singular work that had a great impact on Friedrich Nietzsche and is a fitting prologue to Dostoyevski’s great tragic novels. It has often been cited as the philosophical testament of existentialism.¹⁰ A rather cynical denizen of St. Petersburg, the underground man is alienated from his surroundings, his fellow man, and from himself. Albeit pathetic and depraved, he is an intransigent champion of free will who poses a caustic challenge to the impersonal forces of rationalism, science, progress, and social engineering. Unlike Turgenev’s Bazarov, the underground man is just as unscientific as he is unromantic. In his narration, the underground man sticks rigidly to the “facts,” but these facts are the dark side of man’s inner life: anxieties, moods, and agonizing decisions. They tell a story of recurrent self-contradiction. Although he seems to despise his fellowmen, he thinks that they are better than he is. Although he sees himself as a coward and a slave, he secretly believes that he is superior. Although he sees consciousness as the greatest travesty, he concedes that it is unlikely that anyone would exchange it for something else.

The underground man is consumed by an idiosyncratic envy for the “bulls” (men of action) who act without deliberation and do not suffer his hyperconsciousness. People commonly believe in both the “laws of nature” and in personal responsibility. However, to the underground man the two are contradictory. A “bull” will charge at someone who has wronged him to get revenge. In his innate witlessness he believes

¹⁰See Dostoyevski’s work entitled *Notes from Underground* (Dostoyevski, Fyodor. 1961. *Notes from underground*, trans. by Andrew R. MacAndrew. New York: New American Library). This work can also be found in a collection existentialist writings edited by Walter Kaufmann (*Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, New York: Meridian, 1975).

that someone is responsible. However, if there are laws of nature, then no one is to blame. Although it may seem that the act was committed by someone's will, it is rendered mechanically inevitable by virtue of these determining laws. Such conclusions are, however, radically unacceptable to the underground man. Hence, we see him in passionate, subjective defiance against the laws of reason, against science, against the accumulation of knowledge, and against the ideals of systematization. The more he becomes conscious of the "wall" (the implacable laws of reason and nature), the more resentful and spiteful he becomes. Whereas normal men find some tranquilizing solace in the implacable wall, the laws of nature, the conclusions of natural science and mathematics — the underground man can find no peace there, only a paralyzing inertia. Defiant against any reductionism which would regard him in purely objective, instrumental terms, the underground man asserts that "it seems to me that the meaning of a person's life consists in proving to himself every minute that he's a person and not a piano key." (Dostoyevski, 1961:115) Hence, by a capricious sort of experimentalism, he seeks to demonstrate his freedom to himself and to others.

Dostoyevski's underground man provides us with an extraordinary characterization of a nihilism beginning to become aware of itself in conjunction with the rise of modern science. In *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, Nishitani (1990:156) explains that at the same time that this nihilism becomes more self-aware,

...nihilism becomes a problem for itself, appearing as a complex of deeper self-assertion and deeper self-doubt, of limitless hope and despair, of an infinite sense of power and of helplessness.

For Nishitani, in contrast to this, Cartesian skepticism is half-hearted. Like the Bazarovian nihilism depicted by Turgenev it fails to doubt the doubter. Accepted as an indubitable given, the status and meaning of the *cogito* and its relation to the world is left out of the inquiry. However, when the questioner becomes the question, as we see in the case of Dostoyevski's troubled "underground man," the *cogito* is no longer assumed to be a substance (or *res*) and a path is opened that leads to a deeper radicalism. Of course, Nishitani is not recommending the sort of pathological deepening of self-consciousness that we see in Dostoyevski's "underground" dweller. Clearly, the Zen "investigation of

the self" must pass beyond any such shut off, self-preoccupied standpoint of subjectivism. In an article entitled, "The Standpoint of Zen," Nishitani (1984:2) explains:

To investigate the self itself really means to assume a standpoint which is completely freed from any subjective, vacuous attachment or biased clinging to the self; indeed, the investigation of self first becomes possible from such a standpoint. It must exclude any sort of self-fascination or self-aversion, narcissism or self-torment.

As mentioned above, Nishitani's interest in the existential anguish of the underground dweller pertains to his interest in Dostoyevski's characterization of nihilism in conjunction with the rise of science. Of course, his concern with nihilism is a focus on that which motivates the investigation of self in the first place.

An Experiment Within the Self

Although Nishitani (1983:9) concedes that Descartes' certitude of self-awareness "was in nature close to the Zen investigation of self," he avers that it soon gets off-track in taking a course of thinking that is persistently inferential. The existential anguish of a penetrating self-doubt is needed to radicalize subjectivity in a way that brings us closer to the inception of the Zen investigation of self. In *Religion and Nothingness*, Nishitani (1983:14) explains that this path leads to "the ground of the subjectivity of the *cogito*," on a plane where "the orientation of the subject to its ground is more radical and thoroughgoing than it is with the *cogito*." Here Cartesian skepticism is radicalized to the standpoint of a non-substantive subjectivity positing the world and itself out of its own nothingness. Nishitani (1983:17-19) contends that the path to this radicalized subjectivity is opened up by the existential concern with alienated existence and the problem of the self. Taking this path we probe deeper than "the self-evidence of self-consciousness clinging to itself" to the point where *cogito* and the being of all things combine to become "a single great question mark." In Zen terms, he remarks that "the *cogito* of Descartes did not pass through the purgative fires in which the ego itself is transformed, along with all things, into a single Great Doubt."

In *Religion and Nothingness*, Nishitani (1983:16-17) asserts that, unlike Cartesian skepticism, existential questioning opens up the "field of nihility." Sufficiently radicalized, the field of nihility breaks through the field of consciousness and self-consciousness wherein the self is still represented and objectivized. Nishitani (1983:65) is convinced that although contemporary existentialism converges on "authentic awareness of subjectivity," it does so

... without passing through absolute negation. Nihility appears at the ground of self-being and renders it ecstatic, but this ecstasy is not yet the absolute negation of being, and thus does not open up to absolute nothingness.

In *Religion and Nothingness*, Nishitani views Nietzsche and Sartre as the principal philosophical representatives of radicalized subjective existentialism. Nishitani (1983:33) observes that in both Nietzsche and Sartre "atheism is bound up with existentialism." This implies that the nothingness of atheism has been "subjectivized" and nihility has become "the field of the so-called *ekstasis* of self-existence."

Nishitani (1983:31) sees Sartrean existentialism as centered around a deepening subjectivization induced by an atheism that, by virtue of disallowing our supernaturalist dependencies, awakens us to the nothingness (*neant*) at the ground of our being. Sartre describes the human "project," as the project of incessantly "overstepping" oneself. Hence it is clear that he recognizes a mode of self-transcendence manifest in the "form of *ekstasis*, a standing-outside-of-oneself." However, this form of *ekstasis* seems to remain fixed in human egoical subjectivity. Although Sartre sees human existence as an ecstatic "project" constituted on nihility, he continues to think of that existence as consciousness. His appeal to Heidegger's radical notion of "Being-in-the-world" soon falls back into the abstracted *cogito* — the Cartesian "starting point" for phenomenological description. Hence, Nishitani (1983:65) maintains that for Sartre, "nihility is not given as the field where the conscious ego is negated or negates itself." Whatever transcendence Sartre's position may allow for, it is founded on a modified Cartesian dualism and a subjective humanism. For Nishitani (1983:33) the putative dignity that Sartre claims for man on the basis of subjective autonomy and freedom is still remote from the authentic dignity found "in the 'new man' that emerges

in us when we are born by dying, when we break through nihility.” Although Sartre regards nothingness as “the ground of the subject,” Nishitani avers that he nonetheless presents it “like a wall at the bottom of the ego or like a springboard underfoot of the *cogito*.” As a consequence of this, nothingness is turned into a dogma “shutting the ego up within itself.” This self-imprisoning of the self in itself remains far from the Great Death of Zen which opens up through the Great Doubt, “since the Great Doubt signals nothing less than the bankruptcy of the Cartesian ego.”

Nishitani contends, however, that Nietzsche goes beyond Sartre in breaking through the ego. This breakthrough is evident in Nietzsche’s vision of the “overman” understood in terms of the doctrine that man is something to be overcome. Nishitani (1983:56) interprets Nietzsche as attempting to “posit a new way of being human beyond the frame of the ‘human’, to forge a new form of the human from the ‘far side’, beyond the limits of man-centered existence, from ‘beyond good and evil.’” Hence, for Nishitani, it was principally in Nietzsche’s work that atheism reaches a “truly radical subjectivization” and nihility takes on “a transcendent quality by becoming the field of the ecstasy of self-being.” We encounter the standpoint of “absolute negation-*sive*-affirmation” in Nietzsche’s proclamation of absolute affirmation — “*Ja-sagen*” — most ardently declared in the formula: *amor fati*.

Remarkably, Nishitani’s (1990:180) observations about the proximity of this side of Nietzsche’s thinking to Buddhism are made with full awareness of Nietzsche’s Schopenhauerian misreading of Buddhism, particularly with respect to Mahayana. Nietzsche thought of Buddhism as a total negation of life and will — as the culmination of *decadence*. Quoting from the *Will to power*, Nishitani observes that Nietzsche

... referred to the most extreme nihilism of ‘nothing (meaninglessness) eternally’ as ‘the European form of Buddhism,’ and dubbed the nihilistic catastrophe about to befall Europe ‘the second Buddhism.’¹¹

¹¹See p.43 [section 64] of the *Will to Power*. Nietzsche writes: “The second Buddhism. The nihilistic catastrophe that finishes Indian culture. — Early signs of it: The immense increase of pity. Spiritual weariness. The reduction of problems to questions of pleasure and displeasure.” (Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1968. *Will to power*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, New York: Vintage Books).

Despite the high regard Nishitani maintains for the revelation of this standpoint in the later thought of Nietzsche, in *Religion and nothingness* he expresses reservations about the linkage drawn to the notions of "life" and the "will to power." It remains unclear to him whether or not Nietzsche has fully overcome the reductive assumptions of a subjective, representationalist voluntarism. Nishitani (1983:66) would still maintain a difference

...between a nihilism proclaiming that 'God is dead' and an absolute nothingness reaching a point beyond even 'God'; or between life forcing its way through nihilism to gush forth and life as absolute death-*sive*-life.

Accordingly, Nishitani suggests "that the nihilism of Nietzsche's nihilism should be called a standpoint of relative absolute nothingness."¹²

In his meditations on western philosophical and religious thought Nishitani (1983:61-66) turns to Meister Eckhart's radical version of negative theology in order to explicate a standpoint that penetrates beyond the standpoint of "relative absolute nothingness"; one which truly approximates the standpoint of *sunyata*. Eckhart distinguishes between God and Godhead (*Gottheit*). The distinction, however, does not imply two Gods. The term "Godhead" is meant to refer to the bottomless ground of God, or to "what God is in himself." The Godhead is an "absolute nothingness" beyond all attributes of either created being or divine being. This absolute nothingness of the Godhead that Eckhart sees

¹²The proximity of positive or "creative" nihilism to the standpoint of emptiness is highly compelling. This makes any contrast suggestive of an "emptiness perversely clung to" most important. Although Nietzsche's "innocence of becoming" is akin to the standpoint of *sunyata*, insofar as this becoming is founded on the "will to power," it remains distant and highly suspect to Kyoto School philosophers. Although it is likely that Nietzsche would interpret such views of "will to power" as indicative of "spiritual weariness," the Zen standpoint of *sunyata* is remote from the attitudes of anti-life weariness and pessimism that Nietzsche describes. Masao Abe concurs with Nishitani's concern about "emptiness perversely clung to," but expresses some reservations about Nishitani's interpretation of Nietzschean positive nihilism. Abe is not sure that Nishitani has adequately distinguished scientific nihilism from Nietzschean positive nihilism. He also raises doubts about the way that Nishitani tends to "lump" Nietzsche and Sartre together. For a discussion of these uncertainties see Masao Abe's article "What is Religion?" [In Memoriam: Nishitani Keiji, 1900 - 1990] in *The Eastern Buddhist*, vXXV / n1 (Spring 1992).

"at the very ground of God himself," Nishitani contends, "must be said to be still more profound than the nihility that contemporary existentialism has put in the place of God." This is "not the atheism of Nietzsche or the theism of Kierkegaard." Here, there is an interiorization of the soul that is so radical that the soul is utterly deprived of egoity. This is the *Abgeschiedenheit*, or utter detachment, from the "subjectivity of egoity." This radical interiorization breaks through to a point beyond the "personal God" who stands over against created beings, to a point beyond any trace of subject-object dualism, beyond even the *unio mystica* — if that implies a union from opposite directions — to a point where not a single thing remains. This is the point where we enter the self-identity of God, or what Eckhart calls the "desert" of the Godhead. Here the "ground of my soul" and the "ground of God" are not different. Hence, Eckhart says that "The eye with which I see God is the eye with which God sees me." Only after passing through this "desert," does the subjectivity of the "uncreated *I am*" appear. Losing myself in the absolute nothingness of the Godhead, life gushes forth as "absolute death-*sive*-life" or "negation-*sive*-affirmation."

Let us recall that in our analysis above we differentiated five basic forms of existential response to the problem of nihility.¹³ We found that although both existential absurdism and creative existential nihilism stand opposed to pessimistic existential nihilism, existential absurdism exercises an attitude of defiance that seems incongruous with the Nietzschean affirmation of *amor fati*, which we are taking here as paradigmatic of "creative existential nihilism." In viewing Nietzschean "creative existential nihilism" and Zen Buddhistic existentialism in juxtaposition, we can note at the outset that although both appear to be life-affirming it is not entirely clear that this affirmation is understood in the same way. What is of interest to us at this point is Nishitani's interpretation of Nietzsche's pivotal concept of "will-to-power" in *Religion and nothingness*. Whereas life-affirmation in Nishitani's Buddhistic perspective is always understood in terms of "life-*sive*-death," Nishitani interprets the concept of "will-to-power" as still too volitionist and representationalistic to convey any appreciable proximity to the standpoint of *sunyata*. From the standpoint of *sunyata*, we might say

¹³See above.

that the true “innocence of becoming” is an innocence of “life-*sive*-death” rather than “will-to-power.”¹⁴

The problem is that no matter how radicalized a subjective existentialism is, insofar as it remains absorbed in subjectivity and subjectivization it falls short of the endpoint of a thoroughgoing, relentless doubt. Sartrean existential phenomenology maintains a Cartesian subjectivity as the “starting-point.” This subjectivity is “deepened” in the shift to the standpoint of atheism whereby there is nothing to rely on either *within* or *without*, and we get a glimpse here of “the distance that modern man has gone since he began to pursue his own path to the awareness of subjectivity.” Despite this, Nishitani (1983:33) holds that the Sartrean fixation on the *ego cogito* creates a desolate cave reminiscent of what Zen tradition calls “living in the Demon’s Cavern”:

One is holed up inside the cave of the self-conscious ego that has nothingness at its ground. And as long as this nothingness is still set up as something called nothingness-at-the-bottom-of-the-self, it remains what Buddhism repudiates as “the emptiness perversely clung to.”

This “cave of the self-conscious ego” is the dimension of the “for-itself” of Hegelian and Sartrean philosophy. To leave this cavern it is necessary to totally overcome the habits of self-objectification, and self-representation. Only if one can break through the field of consciousness and stand on the ground of nihility can one achieve a subjectivity that can in no way be objectivized. Nishitani (1983:17) that this means that “the field of consciousness with its separation of the *within* and the *without* is surpassed subjectively, and that nihility opens up at the ground of the *within* and the *without*.” Although Nietzsche seems to transgress the standpoint of *ego cogito*, the “life forcing its way through nihility” to proclaim that “God is dead” is still a distant cry from an absolute nothingness reaching a point beyond even “God,” a point where life is “absolute death-*sive*-life.”

It might be said that the characteristic existential alienation suggested by the crisis of nihilism is highlighted in the “problem of the self.” Not only is this “self” capable of complex forms of “self-deception,”

¹⁴We cannot elaborate here on Nishitani’s reservations about Nietzsche’s concept of “will-to-power” in reference to the philosophy of history and time.

throwing doubts on our ordinary assumptions about the integral unity of the self, but this self is a problem for itself. Heidegger (1962:32) bears this out by describing *Dasein* as an entity that "is ontically distinguished by the fact that, in its very Being, that Being is an issue for it." We have seen, then, that although Nishitani sees a deepening subjectivization in the existential nihilisms of Sartre and Nietzsche, what still needs to happen is a radical questioning of subjectivity itself and of its ecstatic nihilism; only through such questioning is it possible to reach the level of "absolute emptiness" or *sunyata* — which is the heart of Buddhist thought. Here, the emptiness of the nihilizing vantagepoint is itself emptied. From the vantage point of this emptiness, the field of consciousness with its separation of inside and outside can for the first time "be overstepped" and a stand taken on "the true no ground (*Ungrund*)."¹ In Buddhism the experience of the "Great Doubt" is the portal opening to this *Ungrund* where the dichotomy between doubter and doubted is dropped and where the self becomes doubt itself. It is the portal opening to the Great Death.

Although the standpoints of Sartre and Nietzsche seem to fall short of the Great Death it is clear that Sartre and Nietzsche initiate the kind of radically subjective inquiry which Nishitani sees as proximal and even propaedeutic vis-à-vis the Great Doubt of Zen.

Eckhart's experience of the absolute nothingness in the self-identity of the Godhead is the only western example that Nishitani cites as truly comparable to the standpoint of *sunyata*. With Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, Nishitani concedes that this is a matter for thinking passionately (*leidenschaftlich*). The problems of despair, alienation, and nihilism, cannot be reduced to the scientific, socio-psychological study or pathology. As Nishitani (1990:1-2) explains in his early work, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, "However appropriate a detached spirit of inquiry may be for other intellectual problems, in the case of existentialism and nihilism it is inappropriate." As long as we insist on thinking about nihilism as objective observers surveying it, we can never touch the heart of the matter. It is this peculiar feature of the inquiry that makes the question of nihilism a truly radical question. Nishitani explains:

In short, nihilism refuses treatment as merely an *external* problem for one's self, or even *contemplation* as a problem internal to each

individual self. This is the essence of nihilism. This is the most primordial and fundamental of the various refusals that nihilism presents. Nihilism demands that each individual carry out an experiment within the self.

It is interesting to consider Nishitani's (1983:2-3) description of this "experiment within the self" with his later description of religion at the beginning of the chapter, "What is religion?" in *Religion and nothingness*. "Religion," he contends, is not something to consider in terms of utility, as if we are called merely to assess whether it is needed for natural or for cultural life. Religion is about life itself. It can be seen as a need "only at the level of life at which everything else loses its necessity and its utility." Nishitani also explains that

...religion is at all times the individual affair of each individual. This sets it apart from things like culture, which, while related to the individual, do not need to concern each individual. Accordingly, we cannot understand what religion is from the outside.

Just as the problem of nihilism demands that the individual carry out an "experiment within the self," it is only by making the religious quest as an "individual affair" that one can acquire a key to understanding it.

As indicated above, then, this "experiment within the self" is an existential inquiry that opens up the "abyss of nihility" by way of a radical subjectivization leading to a mode of ecstatic self-constitution. To move beyond this point and overcome the "Demon's cavern" of "emptiness perversely clung to," there must be a radical transgression of egoical subjectivity, and emptiness must *empty itself*. True emptiness, or *sunyata*, Nishitani (1983:65) writes, is "what reaches awareness in all of us as the field of what Buddhist teaching calls emancipation, or what Eckhart refers to as *Abgeschiedenheit* (detachment)." Some would call this field our own "absolute self-nature." This is the "self" which has broken through the field of consciousness and cannot be objectified or represented in any manner whatsoever. It is "selfhood" only in a totally vital non-substantial, non-subjectivist sense. This is the "Buddha-nature" which we learn only by "killing the Buddha." Hence, Dogen [1200-1253] cryptically remarks: "To learn the Buddha way is to learn one's self; to learn one's self is to forget one's self."¹⁵ What is needed, then, is

¹⁵Quoted in Koller, 1998:218. Also See Koller 1998:209-210 on Dogen. (Koller,

a truly, radical “experiment within the self” which will lead through the portals of the Great Doubt to the complete loss of self in the Great Death. In the Great Death the jewel of the “uncreated *I am*” is unearthed.

The Great Kalpa Fire

According to Tanabe Hajime [1885-1962], death is no longer merely the inevitable possibility that extinguishes the imminent possibility of the individual self; it is the all-pervasive threat of collective, self-destruction.¹⁶ Death in this guise is not an inherent feature of natural processes, it is a cosmic intervention. Our capacity for such massive self-annihilation appears at the extreme limit of our potential for technological wreckage. The forms of security and comfort that accompany human “mastery over nature” come with a host of dehumanizing liabilities. We stand bewildered before the sudden — and relatively recent — arising of science in the history of civilization, which has rapidly engulfed the entire globe. For many, the problems incited by science and technology are not peripheral philosophical issues; they pertain to the central problematic of the current era. Martin Heidegger discerns in technology a profound and “supreme danger” that exercises a claim on us which leaves us “unfree and chained . . . whether we passionately affirm or deny it.” The supreme danger is that we may cease to exist as “openness-for-Being” and come to understand ourselves, others, and nature in merely instrumental terms. Rather than proposing remedies for specific issues, Heidegger sought to disclose the ontological foundations of the boundless destructive capacity of technology that is manifest in an untold number of specific problems. Heidegger’s concern is more with the afflictions brought on by the technological understanding of being, rather than with any particular instance of destruction caused by technology.

John M. & Patricia Joyce Koller. 1998. *Asian philosophies*, 3rd edn., New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc.)

¹⁶Tanabe Hajime [1885-1962] inherited the Chair of Philosophy at Kyoto University from Nishida Kitaro. Like his esteemed predecessor he is associated with the Kyoto School of Japanese Buddhist philosophy (*tetsugaku*). The author of many important books and essays, Tanabe is said to have lived a life as a thinker, teacher, and writer of the utmost simplicity. His work entitled, *Philosophy as Metanoetics*, is the first of his book-length works to be translated into English.

In *The Question Concerning Technology* [1977], Heidegger calls the dehumanization in modern society the “darkening of the world.” It is important, however, to understand that in this work — based on four lectures delivered in 1949 — Heidegger attempts to disclose a “saving grace” lurking in this darkness. He observes that our common tendency is to understand technology as a means to an end, as a contrivance, or in Latin, *instrumentum* (“that which functions to build up or to arrange”). We also understand it as a human activity. This is the instrumental and anthropological conception of technology. By virtue of this conception, we hope to manipulate it and keep it properly under our control. The more it slips from our control, the more urgent the will to mastery over technology becomes. But, Heidegger (1977:5-6) inquires, “suppose now that technology were no mere means, how would it stand with the will to master it?” In raising this query, of course, he reminds us that he does not doubt that the instrumental definition is “correct.” The problem here is that this correctness leaves the essence of technology hidden. Heidegger (1977:4) asserts that

... the essence of technology is by no means anything technological. Thus we shall never experience our relationship to the essence of technology so long as we merely conceive and push forward the technological, put up with it, or evade it. Everywhere we remain unfree and chained to the technology, whether we passionately affirm or deny it. But we are delivered over to it in the worst possible way when we regard it as something neutral; for this conception of it, to which today we particularly like to do homage, makes us utterly blind to the essence of technology.

If we probe the matter, Heidegger (1977:12-14) asserts that technology is no mere instrument, rather, it is a “way of revealing.” He reminds us that the Greek word *Technikon* means that which belongs to *techne*. *Techne* refers not only to the skills of the craftsman, but also to fine arts, as well as philosophical reflection. Hence, “*Techne* belongs to bringing-forth, to *poiesis*; it is something poietic.”

In its initial usage, *techne* signified knowledge, not as the accumulation of information through observation, but as the realization that brings-forth the illuminative power (*physis*) of an entity. Heidegger also points out that in early Greece the word *techne* was associated with the word *episteme*. Both words are names for knowing in the broadest sense.

They implied being entirely at home in an activity, understanding it with expertise. Aristotle, he observes, saw *techne* as a mode of *aletheuein*, as that which “reveals whatever does not bring itself forth and does not yet lie here before us...” This revealing “gathers together” with a view to “the finished thing envisioned as completed.” It is a bringing-forth of that which has been envisioned. As such, what is original and essential to technology is not instrumentality or manipulation. The genuine meaning of *techne* is closer to art than it is to science or technology because it does not passively investigate or deliberately disrupt beings, but allows them to be as they are. Consequently, Heidegger asserts that: “It is as revealing, and not as manufacturing, that *techne* is a bringing-forth.”

However, if technology is such a mode of “revealing,” how are we to understand modern machine-powered technology? It is also a revealing, Heidegger contends, but its “bringing-forth” does not unfold in the sense of *poiesis*. The revealing that dominates modern technology “is a challenging (*Herausfordern*), which puts to nature the unreasonable demand that it supply energy that can be extracted and stored as such.” This mode of “challenging revealing” is the essence of modern technology. It clashes with everything it encounters. Its dominion is such that it modifies everything it encounters in order to suit its own purposes. Consequently, nothing is allowed to appear as it is in itself. Everything is objectified and determined for instrumental use. A “standing-reserve” of such instrumentation is made available to us in the network of Enframing (*Gestell*). Enframing sets up and challenges nature to yield a kind of energy that can be stored and transmitted separately from its source. Heidegger illustrates this Enframing by contrasting the traditional windmill or waterwheel and the modern hydroelectric plant. Each seeks to harness the energy of nature to serve human ends. However, the windmill and waterwheel remain dependent on and illuminative of nature like a work of art. By contrast, the power plant unlocks and stores up physical energies transformed from the river that are then deposited in another location unrelated to the source. The power plant is fixated on preserving the quantity of released material, rather than on any concern for the quality of human participation in nature.

Heidegger (1977:28) quotes Holderlin, to affirm the uncanny possibility that a “saving grace” lurks in the danger of technology:

*But where danger is, grows
The saving power also.*

Ironically, technology can provoke us into a rediscovery of the very primordial ground that it veils. As Enframing, modern technology is not simply a result of human volition; one can neither simply wish it away nor escape from it. Like sorrow or grief, the age of Enframing must be endured until it subsides on its own. Through meditative, poetic releasement, or *Gelassenheit*, we may come to respond to the primordial call of Being and thereby restore the original aesthetic meaning of *techne*.

In somewhat similar fashion, Nishitani sees a "saving grace" that lurks in the dangers of technology and the modern mechanized worldview. Speaking in reference to modern mechanized science, Nishitani (1965:86) asserts that: "The essence of science is not 'scientific.' The essence of science is something to be brought into question in the same realm where the essence of man becomes a question to man himself." Nishitani regards the affirmation of lifeless matter (death) associated with the modern scientific world-view as a gateway to the "Great Death" of self-abandonment. The "Great Death" paves the way for the radically positive experience of the Zen realization of absolute nothingness. In this connection, Nishitani (1965:92) asserts that "the sword which kills is at the same time a sword which brings life." Citing the three metamorphoses described by Nietzsche at the beginning of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Nishitani (1965:80-81) likens modern science to the camel that goes into the midst of a desert. He says that,

The progress of modern science has presented the real face of the world as a desert not inhabitable by living beings; and since, in this world, all things in their various modes of being are finally reduced to elements of matter — to grains of sand of the desert called the physical world — modern science deprived the universe of the character of a "home."

In an effort to "present as the true feature of the world material processes without life and spirit and devoid of *telos* and meaning" nothing escapes scientific exteriorization. Even psychical activities are reduced to objective entities. In Buddhistic terms, the five "heaps" or *skandhas* — [body, feeling, conception, karmic disposition, and consciousness]

— are rendered lifeless. Still, Nishitani (1965:85) comments, the scientific exclusion of the teleological view of the natural world is executed by scientists who live and breathe in the *Lebenswelt* “as if their lives had purpose and meaning and as if they were living outside of the mechanical, material universe which they observe.”

In Nishitani's view, the waning credibility of the teleological perspective put traditional religion in a quandary. It could either try to defend itself against the challenge of science or confront the implications involved in dropping it. Nishitani finds the first option untenable. In fact, he goes so far as to assert that

We must have the courage to admit that the ‘spiritual’ basis of our existence, *i.e.*, the ground from which all the teleological systems in religion and philosophy up to now have emerged and on which they rested, has been completely destroyed, once and for all.

If this drives us into what Nietzsche (1995:26), in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, called “the loneliest desert,” that must be accepted whether we like it or not. The consequent state of homelessness renders the *self* a question to itself. As such, the question goes beyond the sphere of science itself. It is at this point, Nishitani (1965:86) observes, that the essence of science is “brought into question in the same realm where the essence of man becomes a question to man himself.” Here, the problematization of the essence of science coincides with problematization of the self.

The existential problematization of the essence of science eludes the philosophical standpoint of atheistic “scientism.” Nishitani notes that the shallowness and naïve optimism of the standpoint of atheistic scientism and progressivism is especially evident when contrasted with the Nietzschean atheism wherein pessimistic nihilism is transmuted into a creative, dynamic nihilism. Nishitani (1965:83) explains in this regard that

The profundity of this affirmation of life grasped from the bottom of a pessimism, in which man was without hope, is beyond the reach of all “scientistic” philosophies and their atheistic attitude.

The existentialization of the scientific world-view probes beyond the reductive assumptions of scientism to the nihility beneath our feet. When Nietzsche speaks of the “abyss of scientific conscience” he does

not intend to be casting doubt or aspersion on the conscience of scientists, he is interested in relentlessly following through on the scientific "will to truth" vis-à-vis the essence of science itself. To do this it is necessary that the scientific account of the universe in terms of lifeless materiality be faced as a "field of existential death" for oneself and all humanity. For Nishitani (1965:87), to take science upon oneself in this way incites what Zen calls "self abandonment." It means to take science "as a fire with which to purge and temper the traditional religions and philosophies."

Nishitani (1965:88-89) provides us with a radical hermeneutical experiment in order to elucidate the existentialization of the scientific world-view. He tells how Buddhism appropriates the ancient mythical eschatology of the great all-consuming cosmic conflagration. Seen from this standpoint, the great Kalpa fire is an existential problem. The great fire is this world just as it is. Hence, Nishitani asserts that "The end of the world is an actuality here and now, is a fact and a fate directly underneath our very feet." He also examines several Zen koans concerning the mythical eschatology of the great fire. In the first koan (originally from the *Keitei-dentoroku*), a monk asked the teacher, Tai-sui: "The all-consuming Kalpa Fire now rages; the thousand great worlds all perish. I wonder, does *This One* perish or not?" The teacher replies, "It perishes!" Nishitani interprets "This One" as referring to an inner dimension of self-realization. Such a dimension maintains a stranglehold on a standpoint of inwardness. As such, it remains teleological. This last refuge, however, is burned up in an instant at Tai-sui's curt response, "It perishes!" At this moment, the self is abandoned and all attachments are consumed. These words strike the questioning monk like a "dagger of death" demanding the annihilation of the self. But, this "Great Death" brings a startling revelation. Nishitani (1965:93) declares that, "Just where everything is negated radically and brought to ultimate extinction — just there, an indication of the life path is given by the master."

After totality — internal and external — is consumed in the great Kalpa fire, that which lies beyond the duality of life and death remains — like a "piece of ice glistening in the midst of a fire"¹⁷ That which is, in Buddhist terminology, "unborn as well as imperishable" is unveiled.

¹⁷A well-known Zen aphorism attributed to Chang-ch'ing [854-932].

Citing Heidegger's usage of the term, *Aletheia*, Nishitani says that "this 'grand exposure' is none other than the Truth (*Aletheia*) itself." This unveiling is a revelation of the great "Unborn Self." The monk in dialogue with the teacher, Tai-sui, is "taken in and brought to the dimension where he can find his salvation, the dimension in which he exists truly as himself, in which he is in his *Aletheia*." In another koan, the teacher responds to the question, "How is it at the time of the all-consuming fire?" by saying, "An unspeakably awesome cold." For Nishitani this koan indicates the paradoxical indivisibility of the contradictory elements of teleology and mechanism, personal subjective experience and objectivity, the inner dimension of self-realization and the external universe. This startling interpenetration is manifest as "a wooden man sings and a stone woman dances."¹⁸ Here the world presents itself on a "field of emptiness (*sunyata*)" — what Nishitani's mentor, Nishida Kitaro called *mu no basho* ("the place of nothingness") — which lies beyond both the *Nachtansicht* (night-aspect) of the mechanistically viewed world and the *Tagesansicht* (day-aspect) of the teleologically viewed world. Nishitani (1965:99) explains that "It is at once neither of them and both of them."

The Bottomless Basket

We have seen that Nishitani seeks to disclose the essential nature of religion by pursuing what — drawing on Panikkar — we earlier termed East-West "*imparative philosophy*." Utilizing the *kojo* (self-surpassing) standpoint of Zen, Nishitani works *imparatively* to overcome partiality and narrowness, including his own biases rooted in traditional Mahayana Buddhist doctrine. He establishes an *imparative* encounter between the teleological view of traditional religion and the mechanistic view of science. This project is informed by the ontologically unreifiable and epistemologically non-thetic, non-ideational "groundless ground" of the Zen experience of absolute nothingness. By virtue of a synchronous de-mythologization of the eschatological myth of the Great Kalpa Fire and an existentialization of the scientific (mechanistic) aspect of the cosmos, the apocalyptic possibility is realized as an existential here-and-now encounter with "absolute nothingness." We

¹⁸A Zen Buddhist expression.

have seen that this is the alethic, liberating revelation of the “Unborn Self.” And, as noted above, the problem of nihilism is the philosophical starting point that grew to encompass Nishitani’s entire philosophical career. The soteriological revelation of the “Unborn Self” can be understood as the fulfillment of the task of “overcoming nihilism.”

However, we must ask why it is that so many seem to shut themselves off from the possibility of a soteriology of “nothingness”? Why is it that the history of “nihilism” in western thought stands in stark contrast to the Buddhist perspective on *sunyata*? Ostensibly, the Latin word, *nihil*, and the Sanskrit word, *sunya*, both mean “nothing.” And yet, the western notion of nothingness tends to evoke images of desperation, meaninglessness, and despair, whereas the eastern notion can be described as the ontological correlate of the bliss of nirvana. The word *sunya* — and its substantive *sunyata* — are not easy to translate. They derive from the root *su* that means, “to be swollen,” both in the sense of a hollow balloon and like a pregnant woman. This admixture of relevant etymological nuances makes it important to supplement the usual English translation “empty” and “emptiness” with a stress on the notion of originary, creative potency such as that indicated in the phrase, “pregnant with possibilities.” Rather than *sunyata* being solely a negative concept, it is radically positive.

It is only because everything is *sunya* that any change, including spiritual transformation, is possible. This view of *sunyata* as the unconditioned *Ungrund* of all phenomena is especially important to Chinese Buddhism due to the Taoist legacy wherein the nameless *Dao* is the origin of all things. Although Sartrean existential phenomenology goes so far as to characterize the “unintelligible spontaneity” that is human consciousness, as “nothingness,” he describes this nothingness as “a worm in the hole of Being.” Such images are more suggestive of pessimistic nihilism. As noted above, Nietzsche — under the sway of his mentor Schopenhauer — saw Buddhist nothingness as a decadent negation of life and will. This notion led him to describe the approaching catastrophe of European nihilism as “the second Buddhism.” These viewpoints make it very difficult to conceive of nothingness as harboring a positive import in connection with the project of “overcoming nihilism.”

To the western mind, emptiness — the fountainhead of Buddhist thought — generally suggests an attitude of complete withdrawal or world-denial. Clearly, however, the nothingness which Nishitani — and

the Kyoto School thinkers in general — are concerned with, is far from any pessimistic denial or vacuous negativity. This “nothingness” pertains to the positive, pro-generative “pregnant emptiness” at the *Ungrund* of reality. As such, it is fully vital, life affirming, and life sustaining. This is entirely different from some sort of dark, morose, nihilistic disposition wherein there is a desire to destroy; or a paralysis of the *psyche*, a refusal to engage. Dismal, melancholic moods are not “empty” at all, they are crammed full of gloom and dark phantasms. They are inert, stagnant, self-indulgent modes of apathetic stupefaction. The nothingness of melancholia is a mere relative nothingness. It stands relative and opposed to the fullness of being. By contrast, *sunyata* is the creative emptiness in which subject and object, being and non-being, cause and effect, time and eternity, all things and no things, arise. Thus, in the “dialogue on language” between Heidegger (1982:19) and a Japanese friend we see the metaphysical hiatus that tends to split eastern and western attitudes toward emptiness disclosed when the Japanese expresses amazement at western reactions to Heidegger: “We marvel to this day how the Europeans could lapse into interpreting as nihilistic the nothingness of which you speak. To us, emptiness is the loftiest name for what you mean to say with the word ‘Being.’”

Complicating the issue further, are the various assumptions drawn from both western and eastern vantagepoints on the meaning of the word “nirvana.” Often “nirvana” is simplistically described as the “extinction of desire.” However, asserted without qualification, such an interpretation carelessly ignores Gautama Buddha’s repudiation of asceticism and disclosure of the “Middle Way.” In fact, Nietzsche’s Schopenhauerian misreading of Mahayana Buddhism can be explicated in terms of the strangely, ironic tendency to misconstrue Buddhism as a form of asceticism. In both practical and philosophical terms, the Middle Way (*Madhyamika*) effectively challenges pessimistic accounts of Buddhism. In his elucidations on the Middle Way in the *Mulamadhyamika-karika*, the Indian philosopher Nagarjuna [ca. A.D. 150-250] — the founder of Madhyamika Buddhism — mounted a formidable opposition to both pessimistic and absolutistic accounts of Buddhism.¹⁹ The Middle Way tradition of *sunyata* as espoused by

¹⁹Nagarjuna (c. 150-250 CE) is regarded as the founder of the Middle Path School of Mahayana Buddhism. He authored the Treatise on the Fundamentals of the Middle

Nagarjuna in second century India, traces back to Gautama Buddha himself. Madhyamika has had a major impact on the development of Buddhism throughout Asia. In our time it is still fundamental to both Tibetan Buddhism and Zen. *Sunyata*, or absolute nothingness or emptiness is, of course, axial to Mahayana teaching and appears as the pivotal theme of the *Prajna-paramita* sutra. It is widely recognized that Madhyamika is really an extension of the antecedent *Prajna-paramita* ("Perfection of Wisdom") tradition.²⁰ Due to its accent on *sunyata*, as well as on the Bodhisattva ideal, the early *Prajna-paramita* tradition is usually identified with the origins of Mahayana.

The Middle Way is understood as a *via media* not only between hedonism and asceticism, but concomitantly between the two principal philosophical extremes of "nihilism" and "eternalism" (*viz.*, absolutism, essentialism). In both cases it is understood as a therapeutic corrective for the maladies of obsessive attachment to absolutist extremes. In practical terms, Madhyamika is described as a *via media* between hedonism and asceticism. The liberatory state of bliss, as seen in terms of *sunyata*, involves the pragmatic implication that one should not cling to anything experienced since there is ultimately *no-thing* to legitimate any attachment. The extinction of *tanha* (obsessive craving), as seen from the Middle Way standpoint of *sunyata*, must be understood as a blotting out of *obsessive craving* and as an overcoming of the presumption

Path (Mulamadhyamakakarika), which emphasizes the emptiness (*sunyata*) and the mutual co-dependent arising (*pratitya-samutpada*) of all things. The Middle Path School (*madhyamika*) is the Indian school of Mahayana Buddhism founded by Nagarjuna in the 2nd century CE, emphasizing *sunyata* and the related doctrine of *pratitya-samutpada*.

²⁰In Mahayana Buddhism, the "Perfection of Wisdom" (*prajnaparamita*) is an early collection of writings beginning about 100 BCE which focuses on the importance of wisdom among the ten ideal perfections (*paramitas*); emphasizing the notion of emptiness (*sunyata*), the most famous of these works are the Diamond Cutter Sutra (*vajracchedika-prajnaparamita*) and the Heart Sutra (*prajnaparamita-hridaya*). The word *prajna*, literally "wisdom," refers to one of the ten perfections (*paramitas*) of Mahayana Buddhism; this wisdom is usually seen as an understanding of the emptiness of all things. The term, *paramita* (literally "perfections"), in Mahayana Buddhism describes ten perfections of the ideal bodhisattva: [1] giving (*dana*), [2] morality (*sila*), [3] patience (*ksanti*), [4] vigor (*virya*), [5] contemplation (*dhyana*), [6] wisdom (*prajna*), [7] means-to-ends ability (*upaya*), [8] resolution (*pranidhana*), [9] strength (*bala*), and [10] knowledge (*jnana*).

of permanence and the notion of an autonomous and substantial selfhood. Hence, *sunyata* can be described as the metaphysical counterpart of nirvana releasement. It serves as an ontological — or, de-ontological — synopsis of the “three marks of reality” — *duhkha* (suffering), *anicca* (impermanence), and *anatta* (absence of a substantial selfhood). In pragmatic and phenomenological terms, liberation follows upon realization of the “three marks.”

It is well known that when the Buddha died he did not appoint a successor, rather he counseled: “let the *dharma* be your guide.” Within a few generations, however, the Buddha’s clearly non-doctrinal, non-metaphysical approach gave way to the desire to abstract and canonize an *abhidharma* or “higher dharma” from his extensive discourses. Reasoning that our sense of self-identity arises by virtue of an interaction of disparate factors, the *abhidharmikas* concluded that reality is plural. It was believed that existence is constituted by the various elements that they had enumerated and codified. The one substance of Vedānta was transformed into innumerable substances. The Buddhist path of liberation was transformed into an onto-theological, metaphysical atomism. In the *Mulamadhyamika-karika*, Nagarjuna sought to demonstrate that the metaphysical problems of abhidharmic analysis are intrinsically irresolvable. The *Mulamadhyamika-karika* offers a systematic analysis of all the important philosophical issues of its time, not to solve these problems but to effectively demonstrate that any possible philosophical solution is self-contradictory or otherwise unjustifiable. Consequently, it was disclosed that the various philosophical sects of Buddhism at the time were founded on distinctions that must be regarded as tentative rather than absolute.

Nagarjuna argues compellingly that all reality is “*sunya*” or empty. No thing, including emptiness itself, has *svabhava* or substantial and individual being, self-identity, or self-being. The philosophical Middle Way rejects any notion of permanent, self-existing substances with their own essences. It also rejects the notion that appearances are mere illusion and nothing really exists. Instead, The Middle Way of *sunyata* affirms the mutual interdependence of all things and denies the existence of any metaphysical or onto-theological substratum. In the *Mulamadhyamika-karika*, Nagarjuna describes the Middle Way of *sunyata* as that which has come to be by virtue of “dependent co-arising” at the everyday crossroads of conventional existence. Nagarjuna

(Kalupahana, 1986:339-341) states: "The state that whatever is dependent arising, that is emptiness. That is dependent on convention. That itself is the middle path. [MMK 24.18]" In *The Foundational Standpoint of Madhyamika Philosophy*, Nagao Gadjin (1989:13) explicates the middle path as follows:

The middle path is the identity of dependent co-arising with emptiness, the identity of emptiness with dependent co-arising. Because being and non-being are identical, the middle path cannot affirm either extreme.

That all things arise in mutual interdependency is the doctrine of *pratitya-samutpada*. By virtue of "dependent co-arising" all compound occasions are held to arise through sequences of causes and conditions. Things exist as processes incessantly emerging and expiring in mutual interdependency.

Nishitani Keiji's mentor, Nishida Kitaro [1870-1945] (1987:89) formulates a "logic of nothingness" (*mu no ronri*) that he identifies with the "*sunyata* logic of the *Prajnaparamita Sutra* tradition." This logic exhibits a relational structure that Nishida calls "absolutely contradictory self-identity" and explicates in terms of a paradoxical Zen logic of *soku hi*, "is and yet is not." Nishida sees the logic of *soku hi* as expressing the basic form operative in Nagarjuna's middle path of *sunyata*. In the dynamic interplay of affirmation and negation, all things are simultaneously both present yet absent, absent yet present. In this paradoxical relation of "absolutely contradictory self-identity" a middle path is established between the eternalist assertion of "Being" ("it is") and the nihilist assertion of relative "non-being" ("it is not"). This middle path is the *topos* or matrix of absolute nothingness which Nishida calls "*mu no basho*." Drawing on both Nagarjuna's middle path of *sunyata* and Nishida's related logic of *soku hi*, Nishitani applies the dialectical emptying process indicated by this logic to the problem of "nihilism" (*kyomu*).

Citing the Kyoto School with which Nishitani is associated, Steve Odin (1990:26) discusses their prescription of the *via media* of *sunyata* as remedy for the maladies of contemporary "nihilism." Odin explains in his article, "The Middle Way of Emptiness in Modern Japanese philosophy & the Zen Oxherding Pictures," that

According to the Kyoto School philosophers, the problem of nihilism as defined especially by Nietzsche can be resolved only by converting from relative nothingness to absolute nothingness. Hence, it has now become commonplace to describe the central task of philosophy of religion as defined by the Kyoto School as that of "overcoming nihilism."

As Odin observes, from the viewpoint of the Kyoto School, the problem of nihilism — as defined especially by Nietzsche — can be resolved only by converting from "relative nothingness" to "absolute nothingness." The Kyoto School philosophers see this in terms of a threefold dialectical emptying process moving from "Being" to "relative nothingness" to "absolute nothingness." Odin (1990:32) explains that this process is expressed "by both the Christian *kenosis* (self-emptying) and the Buddhist *sunyata* (emptiness) traditions insofar as both conceive of an act of self-negation as intrinsic to the divine nature, so that Buddha and God both are and yet are not through contradictory self-identity."

Masao Abe (1989:127) explicates the dialectical structure of *sunyata* in logical terms, explaining that,

...since *sunyata* is realized not only by negating the "eternalist" view but also by negating the "nihilistic" view, it is not based on a mere negation but on a negation of negation. This double negation is not a relative negation but an absolute negation. And an absolute negation is nothing but an absolute affirmation.

Viewed in this way, essentialist claims to eternal truths ultimately lead to the nihilistic disillusionment and despair associated with standpoints of extreme skepticism and extreme relativism. Pessimistic nihilism, however, indicates a fundamental failure to push through to the standpoint of *sunyata* wherein "emptiness empties itself" and wherein all phenomena are affirmed just as they are in their positive suchness (*Tathata*). Concomitantly, Nishitani (1990:34) writes that Buddhism breaks through the standpoint of pessimistic nihility to speak of "the emptiness of the nihilizing view." In other words, it breaks through to "that 'absolute emptiness' in which nihilizing emptiness would itself be emptied."

Virtual Nihilism

When we reflect on the “bottomless basket” as indicative of the absence of permanence and self-existence, is this bottomlessness analogous in any sense to the “hyper-reality” postmodern anti-foundationalism? As a heuristic application of the Madhyamikan principles discussed above, let us reflect briefly on Baudrillardian nihilism and what we will call “virtual nihilism”; and, then, in the next chapter of this study, take a closer look at postmodern anti-foundationalism. Influenced by contemporary French post-structuralism, the post-modernist Jean Baudrillard discerns no appeal beyond the structures of representation and the discursive practices that determine what is to be privileged in a given interpretive context. It seems that for Baudrillard, however, contemporary structures and practices are semiotically determined by the narcissistic and superficial universe of *simulacra* generated by mass media. Media practices alter our sense of space and time and lay claim to our sense of reality. The result is a kind of “hyper-reality,” an implosion of the opposition between reality and illusion.²¹

Concurring with Marshall McLuhan’s assertion that “the medium is the message,” Baudrillard views the *form* of the media, rather than content, as the entire message.²² The excess of information creates in us a correlative refusal of meaning. Unable to cope with information overload, we succumb to a passive consumerist diet of images without content, signifiers *without signifieds*. The past becomes a resource for the plundering of images that are dissolved into a phenomenalist hyper-reality of the present. In terms of Heidegger’s analysis discussed above, the past itself becomes a sort of hyper-real “standing-reserve.” This “standing-reserve” serves as a kind of postmodern artifice in the denial of historicity. In the universe of simulacra, there is an implosion of all traditional hierarchies and distinctions. There is no origin, referent or ground. Previously fixed referents become “floating signs.” Mass

²¹According to Madan Sarup (1993:165-167), “Hyper-reality is a new condition in which the old tension between reality and illusion, between reality as it is and reality as it should be, has been dissipated. In Baudrillard’s world everything is ‘hyper’ — in excess of itself. Being hyper means dissolving the old oppositions, not transcending or resolving them.”

²²See Marshall McLuhan’s book entitled *The Medium is the Message* (McLuhan, Marshall. 1967. *The medium is the message*, New York, Bantam Books).

media serves to isolate and privatize individuals imprisoning them in a universe of simulacra wherein reality and illusion are no longer distinguishable.

Baudrillard's universe of simulacra is a bottomless hyper-reality that disowns any notion of an underlying metaphysical unity. Baudrillard expresses a kind of pessimistic, semiotic determinism. In a manner that would give a Platonist virtual nightmares, Baudrillard finds truth-telling, fantasy-telling, and the telling of falsehoods wholly indistinguishable. For him, truth claims in philosophy or Critical Theory are generated by antiquated "Enlightenment" habits of thought. This side of Baudrillard is part of a general postmodern trend toward epistemological, political and ethical relativism. For critics like C. Norris, the result is a nihilism wherein the epistemological distinction between truth and falsity is undermined, just as political and ethical issues are placed outside the possibility of responsible debate.²³ In fact, Baudrillard (1994:159-162) affirms his "nihilism" in *Simulacra and Simulation*. Baudrillardian nihilism, however, is remote from the forms of existential nihilism that we discussed above in this chapter. This nihilism, as he explains it,

... no longer comes from a weltanschauung of decadence nor from a metaphysical radicality born of the death of God and all the consequences that must be taken from this death.

According to Baudrillard, the nihilism of today is a nihilism of "transparency." This transparency is the transparency of the "system." Rather than destruction, nihilism is now fulfilled "through simulation and deterrence." There is no radicality in this form of nihilism, no pathos, only melancholia and fascination. Melancholia, Baudrillard bitterly explains "is the brutal disaffection that characterizes our saturated systems." In this era of involuntary transparency and media saturation, the "freezing over of meaning" brings only indifference.

From the standpoint of this melancholic nihilism, buttressed as it is by the saturation of systems and the "infinite growth of the masses," death, suicide, and self, can have no meaning. Even *apocalypse* has no

²³See C. Norris' book entitled *Uncritical theory: postmodernism, intellectuals and the Gulf War* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1992).

meaning. "When God died," Baudrillard avers, "there was still Nietzsche to say so — the great nihilist before the Eternal and the cadaver of the Eternal." Before the "simulated transparency of all things," "God is not dead, he has become hyper-real." In this nihilism there is no romanticism, no absurdism, no existentialism, no surrealism, no terrorism, and no dandyism. There is only a melancholic fascination with "all forms of disappearance."

Although we may well commend Baudrillard for the apt poignancy of his depiction of the "postmodern condition," his critique of hyper-reality is especially uncanny in that it is itself hyper-real in its own melancholic refusal of meaning. Critique, fascination, obsession, and melancholia all seem to implode in the desensitizing apathy of virtual nihilism. Implosion is a sort of "leveling" brought on by the saturation of systems and the "infinite growth of the masses." If for Kierkegaard we are all in despair though we deceive ourselves by hiding out in "the crowd," for Baudrillard "we are all melancholic." Baudrillardian melancholia, however, is an encoded response to the programming of hegemonic systems. For Kierkegaard we hover like flies in the crowd to keep despair at bay. For Baudrillard the crowd works in complicity with our saturated systems to "pour everything into indifference." Hyper-reality is not a strategy of diversion to avoid an existential confrontation with dread; it is a strategy for coping with media-generated information overload.

Baudrillard denies that this melancholia is constituted by any "passion of resentment." However, it is clearly in resentment toward the hegemony of "the system" that this denial is formulated. From this standpoint, the saturated systems have defeated us and there is no recourse but dissolution in virtual nihilism. There is no *real* pathos, no radicalized subjectivization, no existential anguish of penetrating self-doubt, in this virtual nihilism. There is only a sort of bottomless basket of *simulacra* perversely clung to. Here one is holed up inside the demon's cavern of an unconscious ego that has televisual nihility at its ground. The subject here is no Dostoyevskian "underground" dweller. This subject is not even a Turgenev, just a pathetic, melancholic "couch potato." Holed up inside a cavern of simulacral spectacle, even death and apocalypse are hyper-real. Viewed in this hole, the "Great Death" — and even the apocalyptic "Great Kalpa Fire" discussed above — are only so much media hype.

According to Baudrillard (1994:160), in the abyss of simulacra “we are fascinated by all forms of disappearance.” Fascination, he says, is “a nihilistic passion par excellence.” It seems that we are reduced to this attitude of fascination by the impossibility of any form of radicality in the face of our saturated systems that “pour everything into indifference.” Hence, it is clear enough that from the vantagepoint of this virtual nihilism, there can be no radical subjectivization, since it is only the imposition of our “saturated systems” that is problematized. Even this is not *really* problematized, because victory goes to the system by which we are neutralized, terrorized, and nihilated. Here a vacuous attachment to the self has become a form of frustrated revolt that is paralyzed by its own disenchantment. In this hole, there can be no Zen investigation of the self. It is never suggested here that our preoccupied helplessness before the saturated systems — before the meaningless immortality of appearances — might be an indulgent *self*-preoccupation. What is assumed to be *real* here, is a putative chasm between the saturation of systems and our endless self-indulgences in *simulacral* diversion. This becomes a twisted sort of subjectivism-in-denial, as it were. Apropos of this, we may recall from above how Nishitani (1984:2) warns us that to “investigate the self itself” requires a standpoint entirely freed of subjectivism, or any form of “self-fascination or self-aversion, narcissism or self-torment.”

It is as though, in the freezing over of meaning, we realize the mortality of meaning, but hold on tenaciously to appearances. Hence, Baudrillard (1994:164) says that “appearances are immortal” and “invulnerable to the nihilism of meaning.” Consider how this proposition disfigures the Zen aphorism such that it would read: “First there is a mountain, then there is no mountain, then there is an eternal simulacral mountain.” In not dropping appearances and dying the “Great Death,” we remain at the standpoint of a mere relative nothingness, an emptiness that is not emptied itself. As Nishitani (1983:98-99) puts it, the bottomless basket of *sunyata* is an “an abyss for the abyss of nihility.” We might Baudrillard’s postmodern hyper-reality as an “abyss of nihility” that maintains a hyper-fixation on images, simulacra, and representations. Death and nothingness are mere simulacra. Rather than a personal God whom we have killed, God too has become hyper-real. Buddhist *sunyata*, on the other hand, does not concur with either a postmodern nihilism construed as a resentful affirmation of a hyper-

real God or with an existentialist nihilism construed as a resentful denial of a personal God. We may recall from above that Nishitani sees Meister Eckhart as transgressing the customary division of theism and atheism through his distinction between God and godhead. He explains that Eckhart

... refers to the “essence” of God that is free of all form — the complete “image-free” (*bildlos*) godhead-as-“nothingness,” and considers the soul to return to itself and acquire absolute freedom only when it becomes totally one with the “nothingness” of godhead. This is not mere theism, but neither, of course, is it mere atheism.

The absolute nothingness of the godhead is entirely “image-free” (*bildlos*). From the standpoint of *sunyata*, what Baudrillard calls “disappearance” is no food for idle fascination. Disappearance pertains to *anicca* (the impermanence of all things), one of the “three marks of reality” in Buddhism. There is nothing “hyper-real” about *anicca*. *Anicca* is the vanishing way of all life. If it strikes us as *too* real, the apparent increase is nothing “hyper,” supplementary or “extra.” The *sur*-reality of impermanence is the great “swelling” of *sunya*. To find this great “swelling” fascinatingly *virtual* is to be perversely hypnotized by the fading of images. *Anicca* is not merely the “illusory appearance” essential to all existing things, it is the absolute nothingness “at the base of all things.” Nishitani (1983:122-123) explains that

When all things return to nihility, they leave not a trace behind. From ancient times people have spoken of the *impermanence* of things. The nihility that permits not a trace to be left behind lies at the base of all things from the very start: that is the meaning of impermanence.

Baudrillard’s nihilistic “passion” is a gratuitous fascination with *traces*. If we drop the simulacral abyss of simulacra, it completely *disappears* in *sunyata* without a hyper-real *trace* left behind. In terms of the three-fold dialectical structure of *sunyata* logic described above, every trace of negation must be negated. With the absolute dissolution of the surveying self, everything is seen in full relief in its “suchness,” just as it is. From this standpoint, one can see an orchid in the garden *as* an orchid in the garden. That is, one can see an orchid in the garden *as* an-orchid-

in-a-garden-in-this-universe-of-interrelationships. One can even see a simulacral orchid *as* a simulacral orchid. Like other forms of pessimistic nihilism, Baudrilliardian virtual nihilism indicates a fundamental failure to push through to the standpoint of *sunyata* wherein “emptiness empties itself” and all phenomena are affirmed just as they are in their positive suchness (*Tathata*). ≡