

# Ethics of Emptiness East and West: Examining Nishitani, Watsuji, and Berdyaev

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## **Abstract**

This paper hopes to contribute to the contemporary East-West and Buddhist-Christian dialogues through a comparative examination of how ethics is founded upon the notion of emptiness and its analogues in the thought of two Japanese thinkers, Nishitani Keiji (1900–1990) of the Kyoto School of Philosophy, Watsuji Tetsurō (1889–1960), and the Russian Christian existentialist Nikolai Berdyaev (1874–1948). By comparing and contrasting Nishitani's notion of double-negation (from the standpoint of being to the standpoint of nihilism and to the standpoint of emptiness) and how it forms a basis for an ethics of circum-insessional interpenetration, with Watsuji's notion of the double-negation of the individual and society in ethics, and with Berdyaev's double-negation in his three forms of ethics (ethics of law, ethics of redemption, ethics of creativeness) we shall examine the structural similarities and points of non-exclusion of «Eastern» Buddhist philosophy and «Western» Christian philosophy.

## **Introduction**

In this globalized age, what is the basis for saying what is right and what is wrong? Is there such thing as a trans-cultural ethical foundation? The question of the ground of ethics becomes crucial in light of our borderless society. Different cultures place different levels of importance on various ethical grounds. Some take reason to be the foremost ground of ethics. Others base ethics on their view of human nature or human dignity. Others base ethics on what they perceive to be the call of god, or a particular set of scriptures. But when different cultures meet, there is bound to be some collision. And if that collision comes from a difference not merely in what they do but in the why that governs their actions, the collision can be catastrophic. However, sometimes the challenge is not as gargantuan as that of adjusting our foundations in order to have a sense of global uniformity, but simply to probe deeply enough into our ethical bases to find a ground of commonality. It is precisely such a 'subterranean' ground that I wish to explore here.

In this essay, I will explore the ethical thought of three different thinkers: Nishitani Keiji (1900–1990), Watsuji Tetsurō (1889–1960), and Nikolai Berdyaev (1874–1948). Nishitani and Watsuji are both Japanese and both heavily influenced by Buddhism. Nishitani's thought is clearly Zen Buddhist, but Watsuji's

thought while Buddhist is also heavily influenced by Confucianism (and Shintoism as well). On the other hand, Berdyaev is a Russian Orthodox Christian, whose philosophy is as Christian as it is existentialist. Yet despite their differences, all three thinkers offer an ethical philosophy that is primarily grounded in the notion of emptiness that is expressed through a movement of double-negation. By exploring this ground of similarity, I hope to find harmony amidst the differences of ethics, be they Buddhist, Confucian, or Christian, be they Eastern or Western.

However, an understanding of their similarity can never be a reduction of their tensional differences in favor of flattened uniformity. While all three thinkers base their ethics on emptiness, they approach the notion of emptiness in very different ways. In this difference, we find the depth of the concept of emptiness as well as the complexity of culture. But most importantly, we find in this difference a ground for creative tension and mutual enrichment in dialogue.

In the first section, I will begin with a discussion of Nishitani's religious ethics of awakening to the standpoint of *śūnyatā* (emptiness) and how this connects to social ethics and compassionate behavior. Then, I will proceed to Watsuji's social ethics of the negative dual-structure of individuality and communality. Having discussed the two Japanese thinkers, I will proceed to Berdyaev's notion of creative ethics that occurs within the tension of being and nothingness. Having seen an overview of these three thinkers, I will examine their structural similarities as well as their points of difference and mutual contribution of the three ethical systems. I will conclude with a general notion of ethics of emptiness, as is foundational for these three thinkers.

### **I. Nishitani: Realizing Reality through the Standpoint of Emptiness**

Nishitani Keiji 西谷啓治 was a Japanese religious philosopher and a key member of the Kyoto School of Philosophy. One of his most important works was 『宗教とは何か』 which was translated to English and entitled "Religion and Nothingness." In this book, we find an ethics founded on the notion of emptiness, which while influenced heavily by Buddhist thought (especially that of Zen Master Dōgen) sought to approach the question of religion in a non-sectarian and multidisciplinary manner.

As the original title of the book suggests, the main concern of the book is the question, "What is religion?" For Nishitani, this question can only be genuinely approached from the ground of our personal experience of the limits our existence. That is, we can only raise the question of religion when we come face to face with an experience of nihilism (J. *kyomu* 虚無), through a deep experience of sin, meaninglessness, or death.

Nihilism challenges a person with the problem of the realness of reality: "Are you real? Is anything real?" It is in light of this challenge that one can make sense of Nishitani's approach to religion as "the self-awareness of reality, or, more correctly, the real self-awareness of reality" (Nishitani 5). For Nishitani, religion is the path through which one attempts to realize reality in response to the challenge of nihilism. "Realization" implies first, coming to manifest awareness (epistemological and practical realization) of reality in its

suchness; second, by so doing let reality be real; and third, to become real as well in one's participation in reality's self-realization.

The entire book can be described as an attempt to face the problem of nihilism squarely, and resolve it by realizing reality through the standpoint of emptiness. This movement describes a path of self-cultivation, a personal religious ethics so to speak; and this task will have far reaching implications not only for how we think but for how we stand before the world and participate in it. In the following subsections, I shall first briefly describe this ethical path as a series of two negations leading from the standpoint of being to the standpoint of nihilism and finally to the standpoint of emptiness. Then, I shall discuss the social aspects and implications of Nishitani's religious ethics, and hopefully clarify the full breadth of ethics of emptiness in Nishitani's thought.

### **1. Awakening as Double-Negation**

"The self of contemporary man is an ego of the Cartesian type, constituted self-consciously as something standing over against the world and all the things that are in it" (Nishitani Religion 13). For Nishitani, the religious quest takes its departure from a standpoint that may be called the standpoint of being or the standpoint of ego. In this standpoint, the human subject looks at the world through the lens of objectification. In the subject's attempt to find, create, and impose meaning upon reality, reality is reduced to a world of objects and stripped of its richness and depth. This prevents the ego from getting in touch with the reality of things, and fundamentally divorces the subject from the pre-objective abundance of reality. Nishitani writes:

To look at things from the standpoint of the self is always to see things merely as objects, that is, to look at things *without* from a field *within* the self. It means assuming a position vis-a-vis things from which self and things remain fundamentally separated from one another. (9)

This objectification of and separation from reality result in the fundamental self-estrangement of the subject on two levels. First, objectification is not only done to things outside the self, but to the self's inner world as well. The ego objectifies its own feelings, values, personality, its own existence, and as such is constantly facing merely shallow reifications of itself instead of the original abundance of its own existence. Second, the estrangement of the ego from the reality of the world around it closes it up upon itself in a self-attached manner and prevents it from authentically taking part in the realization of reality (10). Thus, as fundamentally incapable of being itself, the self in the standpoint of being exists with a constant though often covered-over anguish at the root of its existence.

The religious quest begins in earnest as the standpoint of being or ego-consciousness is overturned by the standpoint of nihilism. This occurs as the ego begins to face the discrepancies between its objectifications and the reality of things, between itself as it is and itself as it authentically manifests on its own homeground.

This occurs as the self faces all of the traces that negate the self and its world of objects: sin, absurdity, uncertainty, death. As reality reveals its own ungraspability, “self-being and the being of all things combine to make one question; all being becomes a single great question mark” (Nishitani 17). This is what is referred to in Zen as the self-presentation of the Great Doubt, a doubt wherein there is no separation between doubter and doubted, no ego-subject befuddled by objects, but where the entire project of trying to grasp the meaning of things, the very meaning of objectified reality, and the very existence of the objectifying ego itself is thrust into darkness (16–18).

Despite the seeming negativity of the standpoint of nihility, this standpoint is very important for Nishitani and for Zen Buddhism as a whole. Nishitani writes, “This opening up of nihility is one of the elemental realizations of subjectivity. . . . The self-presentation of nihility is . . . a real presentation of what is actually concealed at the ground of the self and of everything in the world” (17). The standpoint of nihility is a step toward self-authenticity, by which people become aware of their limitations, both as knowing subjects and as acting subjects, and the bottomless depth of truth begins to show itself from beneath the veneer of our conceptual and moral objectifications. However, despite the importance of the standpoint of nihility, it is still not the complete realization of reality. While reality is fundamentally empty, that is, bottomless and beyond our grasp, in this standpoint emptiness is still seen as separate from the self, an affront to the self, instead of the very ground of the self’s reality. Hence, there is a need to negate the standpoint of nihility and return to a deeper, more primordial standpoint: the standpoint of emptiness (Skt. *sūnyatā*, J. *kū*, 空). For Nishitani, the standpoint of emptiness is the original and the ultimate standpoint, and it is through this standpoint that reality is realized and the problem of nihility is not merely covered over or confronted, but thoroughly overcome. This standpoint is not a merely intellectual idea. Nishitani writes, “Absolute nothingness . . . is not possible as a nothingness that is thought but only as a nothingness that is lived. . . . [The shift to the standpoint of emptiness] requires an existential conversion, a change of heart within man himself” (70). In this existential conversion, emptiness, the ungraspability and infinite depth of reality, is no longer seen as something outside the self that the self tries to grasp and fails. Instead, it is realized as the very ground of the being of the person, as the very mystery that the self lives out in its own existence.

Structurally, the standpoint exists as a double-negation of both the standpoints of being and nihility. Nishitani elaborates:

Ordinarily, of course, we occupy a standpoint shackled to being, from which being is viewed solely as being. Should such a standpoint be broken through and denied, nihility appears. But this standpoint of nihility in turn becomes a standpoint shackled to nothingness, from which nothingness is viewed solely as nothingness, so that it, too, needs to be negated. It is here that emptiness, as a standpoint of absolute non-attachment liberated from this double confinement, comes to the fore. (97)

With this double-negation, the standpoint of emptiness is not a standpoint of being as opposed to

nothingness, nor a standpoint of nothingness as opposed to being, but a standpoint wherein being and nihil-ity are seen from the point of view of their fundamental unity. In being-*soku*-nothingness, the standpoint of emptiness lies in taking the stance of the very *soku* (即, also translated as *sive*, referring to the non-dual unity of two elements) that reconciles the false opposition between being and nothingness that is instituted by the attachment of the self-attached self.

This double-negation manifests itself as a radical shift in the way that we know reality. As was mentioned, reality is ordinarily known in an objective manner. X is X. Nihilism destroys this representation, in what might be seen as a realization that X is not X. But do X and not-X really need to be separated from each other? In the standpoint of emptiness, both that which is graspable and that which is ungraspable, both the meaningfulness and the absurdity, the being and the nothingness, the life and the death within reality are viewed to be inseparable from each other in the paradoxical realization of things. Nishitani writes, “The selfness of a thing cannot be expressed simply in terms of its ‘being one thing or another.’ . . . Should we be forced to put it into words all the same, we can only express it in terms of a paradox, such as: ‘It is not this thing or that, therefore it is this thing or that’” (124). In the unity of X and not-X, the reality is realized as it originally is, prior to the desiccating gaze of the subject, in the infinite abundance of its samadhi-being.

However, this capacity to see the unity of the graspable and the ungraspable in reality indicates a fundamental shift not only in how we know reality but in how we relate with reality as a whole. In the standpoint of being, one says that this is this and not that precisely because one is trying to grasp reality, as if one was separate from it. And on the standpoint of nihilism, one is frustrated by the realization that this is not this precisely because the fundamental relationship of grasping still remains. In the standpoint of emptiness, the capacity to take the stance of *soku* in being-*soku*-nihilism indicates that one has fully transcended the grasping of the self-attached self. But the transcendence of the grasping of the self-attached self is only possible not because one has hopelessly given up on the capacity to grasp, but because grasping reality is no longer necessary if one is able to genuinely awaken to one’s original unity with all reality.

The unity between self and reality is most clearly manifest in Nishitani’s teaching on circuminsessional interpenetration (J. *egoteki sōnyū* 回互的相入). In the standpoint of emptiness, we realize that all things in the world are circuminsessionally related, means that each thing is simultaneously servant of all other things and master of all other things. To be servant of all other things means “that it lies at the ground of all other things, that it is a constitutive element in the being of every other thing, making it to be what it is and thus to be situated in a position of autonomy as master of itself” (148). On the other hand, to be master of itself means to be autonomous, but at the same time for this autonomy to be grounded on being constituted by every other being which exists as servant to the thing itself. To realize the circuminsessional relationship of all things means to realize that one is *self*, autonomous and confirmed by all beings, but at the same time one is *not-self*; is subservient to and essential for the self-realization of all other beings. It is to stand at the *soku* of self-*soku*-not-self, in a way made possible only within the standpoint of emptiness, and see the unity of all reality in an infinite circle where every point is the center, and each and every reality while absolutely unified

remains the irreplaceable being that it is.

## 2. Social Implications of the Religious Path

The realization of the standpoint of emptiness is the result of the double-negation of the standpoints of being and nothingness. On the ground of this standpoint of emptiness, reality is realized in its true form. And on this ground, the self realizes itself in a true way, not as a subject imposing itself upon objects, but as a master-servant, learning of the self and forgetting the self by taking part in the mutual realization of all reality. This path to the standpoint of emptiness is the path of religious ethics, wherein one transforms in an essential way in order to fully resolve the challenge of nihilism and suffering and take part in the self-realization of reality. But what does this religious ethics have to do with social ethics? How does the path toward great wisdom relate with the path to great compassion?

While Nishitani primarily focuses on the religious, existential, and epistemological facets of the ethical path, there are key social implications to this path, which are found in the notions of karma and compassion. Let us begin with the Buddhist Verse of Repentance:

All the evil karma wrought by me from long ago stems from a greed, anger, and folly without beginning. It is all born of my body, mouth, and mind. I now repent of it. (237)

In Nishitani's interpretation, the notion of karma reveals a socio-historical aspect to one's self-entanglement of ego. Our experience of life as *samskṛta* (being-at-doing or conditioned existence, J. *ui* 有為) is one of being infinitely driven to chase after things, while mired in self-attached greed, anger, and folly. But this attachment is not merely finite or personal, but socio-historical. Nishitani writes:

All we are engaged in doing in time without beginning or end, that being-at-doing (*samskṛta*) of each moment seen as the becoming of time itself, comes down in the last analysis to the intersection of two movements: *vertically*, it grows out of the whole nexus of relationships present "since time past without beginning" at the background of our own being in the world and time; and *horizontally*, it occurs in connection with all things existing simultaneously with us. (238)

While Theravada Buddhism focuses on the mineness of *tanha* (desire, attachment) and *dukkha* (suffering), there is a clear socio-historical aspect to this existential phenomenon. Many of the attachments that cause people suffering—desire to possess and consume, rejection of otherness, and so on—are given names like consumerism and cultural xenophobia precisely because they are not merely individual attachments but attachments manifest by an entire group of people or even an entire era in history. Therefore when one tries to uproot one's attachment toward superficial materiality, one is not merely dealing with one's own attachment but the attachment of the entire culture of materialism, a culture manifest by many people in the

present and many others in ages past. The resistance to uprooting this attachment as well will not be one's own inner inertia alone, but the inertial pressures of society as well.

Considering this, we see that the entire standpoint of being or ego which the religious path tries to overcome is a standpoint that is adhered to by society as a whole, as a part of the destining of being. "The prehension of the self by the self is forever an act that we ourselves perform. . . . It is not a mere act of will that we can arbitrarily cease any time we so desire. The fore of destiny is at work here, impelling us to be and to act in this manner" (103). As such, one can say that the standpoint of being is merely an individual cross-section of the standpoint of karma. The world of objectification, dualism, and attachment is the manifestation of the ignorance (J. *mumyō* 無明) of an individual drawn by the current of an *entire* society bent on control and conquest, and as a whole forgetful of the standpoint of emptiness.

But if the standpoint of being must be situated within the socio-historical context of the standpoint of karma, how could the standpoint of emptiness be a merely individual standpoint? The socio-historical side of awakening to the standpoint of emptiness is simply compassion. As one awakens to the standpoint of emptiness, one overcomes the distinction between self and other and takes the standpoint of the *soku* in self-*soku*-not-self by seeing oneself as at once servant of all things, taking part in their self-realization, and master of all things, as realized and confirmed by all existence. From such a standpoint, the awareness of the nihilism in which others are mired inevitably comes to the fore, and compassion must naturally follow. This compassion can be seen in the Four Great Bodhisattva Vows:

However innumerable the sentient beings, I vow to save them all.

However inexhaustible the worldly passion, I vow to extinguish them all.

However immeasurable the dharma-gates, I vow to master them all.

However incomparable the Way of the Buddha, I vow to attain it. (270)

What Nishitani stresses here is the inseparability of the self-directed vows (the second, third, and fourth) with the other-directed vow (the first). It is important to note that the vow to save all other beings who are faced with nihilism comes first. It is not that one extinguishes attachment, learns the dharma, and attains the way first, then one attempts to save others from suffering. But the very awareness of the infinity of socio-historical karma and the need to save not only myself but others as well are what drive the other vows to extinguish attachment, learn the dharma, and attain the way. In other words, the struggle to break past the standpoint of being, face the standpoint of nihilism, and awaken to the standpoint of nothingness, are inseparable from the need of my fellow sentient beings to be able to realize reality as well.

What we see here is a radical shift from the interrelation of people in the standpoint of karma. In the standpoint of karma, people are related on the ground of ignorance (*mumyō*) and suffering. And as such, one's karmic relationship with others is felt as a fateful burden one must bear, a pressure one must withstand, in an entire destining that in its avaricious self-attachment draws further from the realization of reality. But

in the standpoint of emptiness, “Dasein can be said to change from something imposed as *fate* to something accepted as vocation” (259). No longer does one destined by fate to bear the karmic burden of the other, but one *responds* in compassion to freely bear and expiate the infinite karma of the ignorance of the world. “This [free shouldering of debt] implies a responsibility to every neighbor and every other; and, as we shall mention further ahead, it is something that has taken upon itself an infinite task. It is a doing on the standpoint of non-ego, of the ‘non-duality of self and other’” (255).

This self that does not see itself as separate from other selves, that feels with the suffering of others and freely responds to the suffering of others in shouldering their karmic burden, is non other than the self of Great Compassion (Skt. *mahā-karuna*). Love, justice, generosity, and all the other social virtues are necessarily transformed when they are grounded not on shared ignorance but on the non-duality and infinite responsibility of the standpoint of emptiness.

As we have seen above, Nishitani presents both a religious and a social ethics of emptiness. In the religious path, one is tasked to realize reality by breaking past the standpoints of being and nihility and awakening to the standpoint of emptiness, where self and other, being and nothingness, life and death, are seen as one. This is the Great Wisdom (Skt. *mahā-prajñā*) of the religious path. But this wisdom is inseparable from Great Compassion, for the standpoint of emptiness opens oneself to the most intimate ground of relationship with and responsibility for other beings. And in the face of the suffering and nihility of other beings, one cannot but find a sense of compassion that yearns for the freedom of others as well.

## II. Watsuji: The Self-Negation and Self-Return of Emptiness

Let us proceed to the next thinker, Watsuji Tetsurō 和辻哲郎. He was an important cultural phenomenologist and ethicist who operated peripherally to the Kyoto School of Philosophy. His magnum opus was a book simply entitled *Rinrigaku* 『倫理学』. In this book, he attempted to present ethics as the study of social relations, that is, as a study of the principles of human existence (J. *ningen sonzai* 人間存在) that is both individual, social, spatial, and temporal at the same time.

Watsuji’s notion of ethics is grounded on his idea of absolute negativity as it is expressed through the negative dual-structure of *ningen sonzai*. In the following section, we will explore this negative dual-structure both on the levels of the is and the ought. From there we will proceed to his notion of fundamental ethics, and last we will proceed to his notion of goodness as a truthful response to trust.

### 1. Dual Structure: Individuality and Community

Watsuji’s understanding of ethics is grounded on what he perceives humans actually are. His attempt to see ethics as a study of the principles of social existence is grounded in an understanding that fundamentally, human existence is not merely individual, but is also inescapably communal as well. The relationship between individuality-community is explored and expressed in his discussion of the negative dual-structure of human existence.

For Watsuji, many thinkers in Western ethics have a tendency to begin with the individual and from there progress to build a notion of society. But in what way does individuality exist; is there such thing as individuality without community? As he examines various phenomena such as a writer writing, people attending a lecture, conversations, and so on, he finds that actions and expressions do not occur from the point of view of an isolated agent, but always takes place in the *betweenness* between the agent and those he/she relates to through the action. It is not that first there is a self that expresses itself then it adjusts its expression to those it relates with, but the very act has its genesis in a space that is always and already shaped by the other. The way we speak (and language itself), the way we comport ourselves, our gestures and facial expressions, and even the way we think are all fundamentally shaped by the role and position we have vis-a-vis the other people we are facing. Perhaps even the very identity of the self that expresses itself is in itself an act that is born in the betweenness between the inseparable self and other. Watsuji writes, “We take our departure not from the intentional consciousness of ‘I’ but from ‘betweenness.’ The essential feature of *betweenness* lies in this, that the intentionality of the I is from the outset prescribed by its counterpart, which is also conversely prescribed by the former” (*Rinrigaku* 51). An individual’s acts, even the act of being, fundamentally occurs in a relational context, in light of a whole wherein the individual has roles and relationships. Can we even begin to speak of an individual that exists prior to any sense of a whole that situates it and forms it?

In the search for the existence of the individual, the whole (be it small wholes like a friendship between two people or a family, or large like a nation) perpetually manifests itself as that which situates, contextualizes, and forms the individual, from the individual’s physicality to its epistemology, emotional life, and consciousness as a whole. Hence what we see here is that the existence of the individual cannot stand on its own. It is something that is inseparably tied to and dependent on the wholes that it is a part of. In Buddhist terms, the individual is *empty* (J. *kū* 空) of self-existence.

However, that is not to say that the individual is dependent on the whole and the whole is primary—Watsuji does not espouse a social reductionism or collectivism. For if we examine communities, we find that the community cannot stand on its own as well. Watsuji takes the example of a family. While the family clearly exists as a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts and can shape its members, magnify their capacities, and bind them within their roles, and while the family as a whole has its own agency, will, history, and honor, the family cannot exist without its members. For all its going beyond its members, a family without surviving members simply cannot survive on its own. But the existence of the whole is even more tenuous than that, for even if all the family members exist, “If parents stop behaving as parents, children as children, wives as wives, and husbands as husbands, the family will be dissolved” (89).

The whole is dependent not only on the existence of its members but on the *commitment* of the individuals that are part of it. What we see here is in seeking for the existence of the whole we find that individuals are constantly present as those which *participatively* sustain the whole. Hence, just as the individual is empty of self-existence and is situated and formed by the whole, the whole is *empty* of self-existence as well, and is constantly dependent on the existence and commitment of its constituent individuals.

This mutual dependence exists in the level of fact. Any individual, be he a belligerent egotist, an ordinary salary man, or a bodhisattva, will exist in a manner that is formed and contextualized by the wholes he is a part of. For Watsuji, there is no such thing as totally independent individual existence. But also, any whole be it a very tight-knit group of siblings, a loose association of criminals united by a common self-interest, or a dysfunctional and estranged family, will exist in a manner that is shaped by and participatively sustained by its members. There is no such thing as a collective that stands alone. What we see here is that individual existence and collective existence are both empty and are mutually dependent on each other as a matter of *fact*.

But this mutual dependence is present in its full form on the level of authenticity and “dwelling in emptiness” (see Nagami). Because the individual is perpetually formed and situated by the wholes it is a part of, the only way it can have any sense of individuality and self-realization is if it actively *negates* the whole. In order to have a sense of its own thinking or willing, it has to negate the way the collective thinks and wills. In the highest ethical sense of authenticity, in order to have a sense of its own agency, rationality, its own transformative capacity in the world, it must be able to differentiate from the confines of the wholes that situate and form it, and find itself by going beyond the values and pressures of the collective. “The essence of individuality lies in the negation of communal characteristics” (80).

In the same way, because the whole is perpetually dependent on the existence and commitment of its members, the only way there can be a genuine sense of wholeness, a realization of the collective, is if the whole actively *negates* the separateness of individuals by calling the members to re-commit to it in and through their own moral autonomy.

What we see here is that this dual-structure is a negative structure. On the level of fact, the whole situates and forms individuals, and individuals participatively sustain the whole. On the level of self-realization and authenticity, the individuals negate the whole by individualizing and coming to their own self-awareness, and the whole recalls individuals to let go of their separateness and recommit to their roles within the collective. Individuals cannot exist by themselves, they are dependent on the whole and they can only have a sense of existence by negating the unity of the whole. The whole cannot exist by itself either, it is dependent on its members and can only have a sense of existence by negating the separateness of its members. Individuality and communality are related in a negative fashion with both mutually dependent on and mutually negating each other.

## 2. Emptiness and Fundamental Ethics

In Watsuji's ethics, the proposition that can be said to bridge his phenomenological description of the dual-structure of *ningen* with his notion of ethics is this: An authentic group must be composed of authentic individuals (117–118). This means that an authentic group must on one hand hold its members together in commitment (realized whole), but on the other hand, these committed members must not cease to be free individuals (realized individuals). The authentic group thereby becomes the locus in which the mutual negation of the self-realization of individuals and the whole can take place.

The authentic group is an absolute whole, one that not merely pulls together its individual members, but pulls them together in such a way that includes their very independence and individuality, allowing it to truly be an absolute (J. *zettai* 絶対) whole that is not merely relative or opposed (J. *tai* 対) to individuality. This absolute whole is therefore not merely a negation of individuality as it is separate from communality, but it is also a negation of communality as it is separate from individuality. It is an absolute negation. Watsuji writes, “Absolute wholeness is absolute negation and *absolute emptiness*” (99).

While absolute emptiness includes both individuality and communality within itself as existentially equiprimordial, developmentally it is the collective that comes first. This is something that is supported even by psychologist and philosopher Laurence Kohlberg who notes that in the moral development of a human being, after the pre-moral, pre-conventional stage, the first genuinely moral stage is that of conventional morality, which is the morality of social approval and social order. Hence, it is not without reason that Watsuji states that it is fundamental emptiness as unnegated society that comes first. Amidst this unnegated society, the individual attempts to gain a sense of self-awareness and autonomy by “negating emptiness as her own fundamental source. This is the self-negation of absolute negativity” (117). It is from this first negation that we have a genuine sense of the individual. But furthermore, if individuals proceed to negate even this autonomous separateness and try to reintegrate themselves creatively within relationships, we have the *self-return* of absolute negativity.

There are, developmentally, three stages therefore: First, unnegated collective existence; second, individual existence through the self-negation of absolute negativity; and third, the genuine socio-ethical whole through the self-return of absolute negativity.

With this, Watsuji has grounded his ethics in the very notion that grounds the existential transformations of the self in Nishitani’s thought. Ethics is about the self-fidelity of *ningen*. But *ningen* is not merely individuals nor the whole of humanity, it is both. Due to this dual-structure, the self-fidelity of authentic *ningen* has a dual-structure as well. On one hand, as individuals, *ningen* need to be true to themselves, to realize their unique agency in negation of society. But on the other hand, as fundamentally relational, *ningen* need to exist within relational wholes, to commit themselves to relationships in negation of their separate individuality. Authenticity is only possible through negation, that is, by manifesting absolute negativity and absolute emptiness through the double negation of both individuality and communality. Watsuji writes:

The negative structure of a human being is, as was said previously, the fundamental law that renders a human being capable of continuously forming itself. Were we to deviate from this law, we would cease to exist [as authentic *ningen*]. Therefore, this law is the basis of a human existence. At the outset, we prescribed the ground of human community, namely, the law of human being, as ethics. Therefore, we can assert that this fundamental law is basic ethics. . . . We can describe the basic principle of ethics in terms of ‘the movement in which absolute negativity returns back to itself through negation’. (119)

### 3. Concrete Responses in Truth to Trust

We can only exist as authentically human if we manifest absolute emptiness through the process of double negation. There are things we should note here: First of all, although emptiness is spoken as an absolute, emptiness can only be manifested in the finite, concrete realm, through finite and concrete negations. It only becomes real insofar as an actual individual comes to self-realization by individuating from a particular finite whole, and when an actual individual recommits himself to a particular finite relationship. Watsuji writes, “Apart from this finite negation, there is no place where absolute negativity manifests itself” (121). Second, there is no such thing as individuating oneself once and for all, from all wholes, but only partially from one collective or another. In the same way, there is no such thing as committing oneself once and for all to the entirety of humanity—one can only commit to finite and actual groups, and not to some ideal transcendent whole. Furthermore, every time one individualizes and comes to a realization of one’s moral agency and one’s reckoning with truth, this is experienced as a separation from others, from the way that they think and see the world, and hence awakens the need to reintegrate this self-realization with one’s community. But in the same way, when one reintegrates oneself to community through commitment, this is experienced as a dimming of one’s own personal self-realization, which necessitates a re-awakening to one’s individuality. “The self-return of the Absolute is realized endlessly, and has nothing to do with a static and absolute destination. . . . That is why the *movement* of the negation of absolute negativity is said to be the law of human beings; that is, it is ethics” (emphasis supplied, 121).

Emptiness is manifest finitely in the present moment of one’s ethical expression of negation. There is nothing otherworldly about it, hence it would be a mistake to think that an attempt to manifest absolute negativity is a response to a *transcendent* value. Instead, for Watsuji, manifesting emptiness through double negation is a truthful response to a this-worldly and concrete call of trust. Trust is an actual call that is manifest by every human being in every moment of relating with another. It is a relational call that is grounded in the capacity of the individual to come to self-realization, combined with the capacity of the whole to recall the individuals to commit to the whole. In other words, “the law of *ningen sonzai*, which develops spatio-temporally, renders trust capable of existing” (271). And what does it call *ningen* to? Trust calls *ningen* to be authentically the *ningen* that it is, by manifesting emptiness through the double-negation that realizes the two facets of its authenticity.

It is this relational concrete call of the other that the human being responds to when one is good. Hence it is not merely an individual responding to individual values, but *ningen* that is both individual and communal, responding to a call that is both individual and communal, that calls both the individual and the whole to this dual-negation that manifests their authenticity. Truthfulness can be seen then from two angles. On one hand, and this Watsuji makes clear, in order to be true to itself, the individual must differentiate from the whole and move toward a genuine self-realization. But it must not stop there and it must negate this very self-realization in order to integrate it within society. This is something that other people, that society as a whole, and perhaps even our very selves, trustingly call us to do. But on the other hand, perhaps

it also follows that this trusting call also places a demand on the whole and all the individuals who are responsible for forming the character of the whole. The whole as well must make way for the individualizing movement by which the individual negates the very whole. But at the same time, the whole must call the individuals to recommit to the whole from the ground of their authentic self-realization. These are the two faces of the dual-negation that both individuals and society as a whole call us to within the space of ethics. This is true goodness—a truthful response to trust.

In his work *Rinrigaku*, Watsuji systematically develops an ethics on the ground of the dual-structure of human existence. Because human beings are both individual and communal, the task for authenticity becomes a twofold task of expressing emptiness, both by emptying one's communality to come to an authentic sense of individuality, and emptying one's individuality to come to an authentic sense of social commitment. This double negation manifests absolute negativity which is an absolute whole that by negating both individuality and communality absolutely, is able to pull *ningen* together in such a way that allows each individual to be an individual, while fully united within the whole. Absolute negativity becomes the foundation of ethics therefore, that through the concrete call of trust, calls human beings to respond truthfully, by being truthful to themselves and to their relationships, both as individuals and as humanity as a whole.

### III. Berdyaev: Creativity in the Womb of Emptiness

Let us proceed to our third thinker. Nikolai Alexandrovich Berdyaev (Никола́й Алекса́ндрович Бердя́ев) was a Russian religious and political philosopher, a prolific Christian existentialist writer who was one of the Russian philosophers in exile in France. One of his most beautifully developed works is *The Destiny of Man*. In this book, Berdyaev presents his view of ethics as creative ethics, a notion grounded in his views on the human being, philosophy, and religion, and his criticisms of other forms of ethics. In this section, I will briefly explain Berdyaev's approach to the human person, philosophy, and religion. I will then proceed to explain the three forms of ethics: ethics of law, ethics of redemption, and ethics of creativity.

#### 1. Berdyaev's Approach

The character of Berdyaev's religious, ethical, and political thought is grounded in his attempt to fully value the concrete reality of the human being, as expressed in his idea of *personality*. When Berdyaev refers to personality, there are four things that must be stressed. First, personality is the entirety of the human person—not merely reason, consciousness, conscience, or social role, but also the irrational aspects, emotions, history, existential comportment, embodiment, sexuality, and so on. If we merely look at one aspect of the human person and turn that into the basis of ethics or religion, there is a tendency to denigrate and to fail to integrate other aspects of his person. But more importantly, if we merely look at one aspect of the human person, it becomes easy to subsume the person underneath a totality. For instance, a rational being is only one rational being amongst others; a functionary in society is only one functionary amongst others, and so on. Which leads to the second point, taken in its entirety, personality refers to something that is a whole-

in-itself, that is unique, irreplaceable, and while part of certain collectives is never reducible to any totality. Third, as a unique and irreplaceable whole-in-itself, the entirety of personality can be seen as a breakthrough beyond the objective world (*Slavery* 21), an upsurge of the realm of the spirit. "Personality is not generated, it is created by God. It is God's idea, God's conception, which springs up in eternity. . . . Personality is the image and likeness of God in man and this is why it rises above the natural life" (*Destiny* 55). Berdyaev understands the spiritual realm not as an objective realm separate from ours, but as a world of freedom (*Christian* 37), as a realm that breathes possibility and transformation into the frozen objective world. And as a unique, irreplaceable being, the personality serves as a space for transformative encounter with reality. Fourth, personality is a task, to be true to the very personality one is, to courageously integrate one's whole personality and see it as a whole in itself, and to compassionately transcend oneself and open oneself to be a space for the transformative encounter with the other.

The very notions of philosophical knowledge, religion, and ethics are founded upon this notion of the human being as personality. For Berdyaev, philosophy is not the mere history of ideas, but is instead a genuine encounter with "first life," the fundamental, unobjectified manifestness of reality, prior to the separation between subject and object. Here we see a recognition of non-duality, similar to that of Nishitani, that forms a similar ground for their views of the original face of reality. In the face of first life, of primordial unobjectified reality, the kind of knowledge that comes to play is what Berdyaev calls "spiritual knowledge." For Berdyaev, knowledge is not a passive reception of objective reality, nor is it a mere subjective construction of the world. Instead, it creative activity, an event of mutual transformation of both the knower and the known, which takes place in "the spiritual world which is neither objective nor subjective but is pure activity and spiritual dynamics" (*Destiny* 9).

Just as knowledge of reality is mutually transformative and spiritual, so is moral knowledge. Berdyaev writes, "In moral knowledge we not merely receive moral truth into our minds, reflecting it as in a mirror—we also create it, building up the world of values" (14). Moral knowledge is itself a spiritual, creative activity in which the human being transforms and re-creates the axiological dimension as well. At this point, it is already clear that Berdyaev's view of ethics will be far from that of normative ethics, but will be one that holds creative transformation as essential.

This commitment to creative transformation that manifests in Berdyaev's view of knowledge is embedded deep into his very cosmology and his view of god. Berdyaev was very much in disagreement with the idea that of god as absolute and self-sufficient, a pure act incapable of change or enrichment. For him, such a static god would be impossible for human beings to relate with, but more importantly, would render creation meaningless. For Berdyaev, if god is changeless and incapable of enrichment, if god has no inner dynamic, then creation serves no purpose for it cannot enrich or make any real contribution to god. Creation would have no divine significance. And in the face of the problem of evil, this meaninglessness would be a dire humiliation for creation, for creation suffers and wrestles with evil in a fight that is ultimately of no real consequence.

It is in answer to these problems surrounding god that Berdyaev introduces the very metaphysical underpinnings that found his view of creative transformation in philosophy, religion, and ethics: nothingness. The notion of nothingness is tied to a constellation of terms: non-being, *Ungrund*, τὸ μὴ ὄν. For Berdyaev, god does not exist as a changeless, static perfection. Instead, god exists in constant tension with nothingness, trying to bring the light of being into where it is *not-yet*. And as being is born out of nothingness, god himself is made manifest. This is the ground of the importance of creation: “The creation of the world is creative development in God” (*Christian* 49).

The notions of creation (or creative transformation) and freedom are tied to this notion of nothingness. “*Creation means transition from non-being to being through a free act*” (*Destiny* 33). Because human beings are capable of venturing into the darkness of being, where there is evil and that which is not-yet of god, it is possible for human beings to take part in creation by bringing non-being into the light of being through their freedom. And with this, it is possible for human beings to take part in the creative development of the divine. It is in this religious metaphysical framework where Berdyaev situates the ethical demand placed upon human beings:

God created man in His own image and likeness, i.e. made him a creator too, calling him to free spontaneous activity and not to formal obedience to His power. Free creativeness is the creature’s answer to the call of its Creator. Man’s creative work is the fulfilment of the Creator’s secret will. But creativeness by its very nature is creation out of nothing, i.e. out of meonic freedom which is prior to the world itself. (32)

## 2. Three Forms of Ethics

In his desire to safeguard the human *personality* and its self-fidelity that responds to the deepest demand of its creator, Berdyaev strongly criticizes what he perceives to be widespread perversions of ethics, and suggests forms of ethics that he feels are more authentically rooted in the actual reality of the moral life of *personality*.

For Berdyaev, the most widespread form of ethics is what he calls “Ethics of Law.” In ethics of law, the *idea* of the good is taken as primary, and the human being is seen as good or acceptable only in so far as it is able to adhere to this normative demand, and is otherwise condemned. While ethics of law maintains the orders and shared values of society, it rules by means of fear and heteronomy, and tends to overlook the inner life of unique personality in favor of the averageness of the herd. As such, while this form of ethics has its importance, it tends to result in tyranny:

The fatal consequence of the legalistic discrimination between good and evil is tyranny of the law which means tyranny of society over the person and of the universally binding idea over the personal, the particular, unique and individual. The hard-set crystallized forms of herd life in which the creative fire is almost extinct oppress like a nightmare the creative life of personality. (95)

Ethics of Law is moral objectification—it can see only goodness, it cannot see, nor accept, nor value the other aspects of personality that are outside the ambit of the social understanding of the good. As such, there is a need to transcend ethics of law positively (Berdyaeu 95).

This transcendence occurs through what Berdyaeu calls “Ethics of Redemption.” For Berdyaeu, the prime example of an ethics of redemption is Christianity. Within Christianity, we see a desire to move beyond the mere idea of goodness toward the concrete reality of the actual person.

Christianity in its original and virginal form not merely questioned the supremacy of the idea of the good, but sharply opposed its own morality based on it. Christianity is founded not upon the abstract and impotent idea of the good which, in relation to man, inevitably appears as a norm and a law, but upon a living Being, a Personality, and man’s personal relation to God and to his neighbours. Christianity has placed man above the idea of the good and thereby made the greatest revolution in history—a revolution which the Christians had not the strength to accept in its fullness (105).

In order to break past the idea of goodness to the actuality of personality, ethics of redemption must negate moral objectification and the duality of good and evil. Berdyaeu quotes scripture, writing “‘I am come to send fire on the earth.’ In this fire are burnt up all the old, habitual moral valuations, and new ones are formed” (109). Jesus’s life and activities negated all of the Judaistic notions of goodness. He was born in a manger as a carpenter’s son, negating the notion of royalty and glory. He rebuked the pharisees and kept company with the unclean, the infirmed, the tax collectors, and other outcasts of society, negating the value of purity in one’s association. The teaching of god as a master that serves his very people, a teaching punctuated by Jesus’s very death on the cross is a negation of the power and untouchable majesty that Judaism attributes to god.

Through this negation of conventional morality, ethics of redemption is able to penetrate into the innermost depths of the person, depths that are shunned by the idea of goodness. Ethics of redemption is able to face the suffering of people, their vulnerability, their folly, and see within that space a possibility for redemption and grace. Ethics of redemption is an “elemental realization” of *personality*, a return to the entire human person beyond the narrow optic of good-versus-evil.

For Berdyaeu, ethics of redemption paves the way for the highest form of ethics which he calls “Ethics of Creativeness.” On the ground of one’s acceptance of one’s entire personality and the non-dualistic receptivity to reality as first life prior to moral objectification it becomes possible for ethics to be creative. No longer is ethics a mere repetition of the values and solutions that have been pre-established by the herd. No longer does ethics shy from the darkness of what is not yet seen as good, or what may be evil. Instead, ethics is able to courageously face nihilism (that is a negation of goodness) and from there find new solutions, coin new values, and in freedom, win new ground for the light of goodness. “Creativeness can only spring from fathomless freedom, for such freedom alone can give rise to the new . . . Creativeness means breaking through from non-being, from freedom, to the world of being” (Berdyaeu 127).

As a *creative* ethics, ethics is grounded not on the impersonal idea of goodness but on the human

being's personal confrontation of first life and the light of good and the darkness of evil found therein. As such, creative ethics is intensely personal. It is dynamically grounded upon the entirety of personality, its uniqueness, and the transformativity of its spiritual encounter with first life. Berdyaev writes, "In the first place moral valuations and actions must proceed from concrete personality and be unique and individual in character. Each individual man must act as himself and not as another would have acted in his place, and his moral activity must spring from the depths of his own conscience" (134).

Furthermore, not only does creative ethics issue forth *from* personality, but it is directed toward personality. Berdyaev continues, "Secondly, the individual and the individuality [of personality] must be recognized as a moral value of the highest hierarchical order. The unique, concrete personality is the highest value and not a means for the triumph of the universal, even if that universal be a generally binding moral law" (134). Creative ethics is a witnessing to the integrality of personality, to its irreplaceability and its divine worth. And this applies not merely to one's own personality as one creatively carries out one's moral life, but also toward the personality of others as they too exist as a wholes-in-themselves that transformatively encounter reality. Externally, this third and highest form of ethics is at once a creative ethics and a consummately personal ethics. But these external characteristics reflect an internal transformation. The courage of creative ethics manifests an about-face in the standpoint of ethics. No longer is ethics about trying to preserve oneself, for the fear for one's existence keeps the self from the dark freedom that creativity requires. Nor is it about trying to perfect oneself morally, for any attachment to the idea of the good would make the foul realm of evil too repulsive for one to find new solutions within it. Nor is it about trying to redeem oneself either, for any focus on the self keeps the self from its creative radiance. Berdyaev writes:

Creative genius is bestowed on man for nothing and is not connected with his moral or religious efforts to attain perfection and become a new creature. It stands as it were outside the ethics of law and the ethics of redemption and presupposes a different kind of morality. . . . Creative genius is not concerned with salvation or perdition. In his creative work the artist forgets about himself, about his own personality, and renounces himself. Creative work is intensely personal and at the same time it means forgetfulness of self. (130)

Any form of self-attachment be it physical, emotional, moral, or existential, keeps the self from its courageous descent into darkness and its compassionate return to the world. Creative ethics is fundamentally selfless.

This selflessness also remarkably changes one's attitude toward evil. Berdyaev writes, "The ethics of creativeness takes a very different view of the struggle against evil than does the ethics of law. According to it, that struggle consists in the creative realization of the good and the transformation of evil into good, rather than in the mere destruction of evil" (133). Evil, the nihility for goodness, is no longer seen as something that is opposed to goodness nor as something that ought to be obliterated. Instead, this nihility is seen as

part of ethical life, and part of the situation that allows for the growth of goodness and the occurrence of theogony itself, i.e. the eternal birth of god from the *ungrund*. Hence, this nihilism is something we ought to accept and tolerate, but at the same time struggle nobly with in order for the birth of goodness to transpire.

Finally, with this notion of ethics, goodness is no longer something that is “achieved” or something that is “developed.” Creative ethics is not teleological or future-fixated. In his notion of creative ethics as an ethics of energy, Berdyaev stresses that goodness is a path, not a goal. It is not achieving nor securing goodness that is important, but constantly manifesting it in the present moment by courageously facing the entirety of one’s circumstance and manifesting the “creative energy of goodness” (144). In other words, it is the *movement* of courageously facing non-being, and freely and compassionately discovering new ground for goodness and being, that is good.

In *The Destiny of Man*, Nikolai Berdyaev presents a mode of ethics that is able to fully respond to the human being as personality, i.e. a spiritually transformative whole-in-itself. Creative ethics breaks past the idea of goodness, faces the nihilism of evil, and with creative energy finds new ways for the light of goodness to be born within the shadows of the world. Through this, personality is able to be authentically itself. In a true experience of paradise, the person is able to dynamically accept itself in its entirety, and take the entirety of the circumstance it faces as ingredients for the positive creation of goodness. In creative ethics, personality is closest to itself, to the first life it is immersed in, and to god in the divine self-unfolding in the free space of nothingness.

#### **IV. Comparative Ethics of Emptiness**

In the previous sections, we have discussed the religious ethics of Nishitani Keiji and its social implications, the social ethics of Watsuji Testurō, and the creative ethics of Nikolai Berdyaev. Examining these three thinkers, we see that they all base their ethical systems on the idea of emptiness.

##### **1. The Ground of Emptiness**

Nishitani founds his religious ethics on the idea of emptiness. It is only on the standpoint of emptiness wherein one can resolve the inescapable tension between the standpoint of being and the standpoint of nihilism, such that one can face the absurdity and ungraspability of reality, while still finding a sense of meaning in the finite ways that reality shows itself. In this way, it is only by awakening to emptiness that one is able to fulfill the religious demand to *realize reality* and so doing, realize oneself authentically as well. Furthermore, it is through emptiness that one awakens to the self-*soku*-other, and within the circuminsessional relationship, freely take up the karmic burden of the world in compassionate responsibility for other self-realizing selves.

Watsuji also founds his social ethics on the notion of emptiness as well. The self-fidelity of *ningen* is only possible through fidelity to absolute negativity. This absolute negativity is manifest concretely through the self-negation of emptiness as the individual attempts to come to its own realization of the absolute by

negating the collective, and through the self-return of emptiness as the individual reintegrates itself into the whole by negating its individual separateness. Only through the movement of negation that manifests absolute negativity/emptiness is *ningen* true to itself in response to the concrete call of trust.

While the discourse of “absolute nothingness” is clear within Buddhist and Daoist thought in the east, the same cannot be said for the western line of philosophy that issues from Greek and Christian thought, that is so often centered on the notion of being. Despite this, in Berdyaev, we find a notion of emptiness in the confrontation between being and non-being, between good and evil, and between god and meonic freedom. In the notion of the *ungrund*, the abyss of evil, and in uncreated freedom, we find parallels to Nishitani’s idea of nihility. And in the creative tensional union of god and meonic freedom, we have a parallel to the notion of *śūnyatā* or emptiness. While in Berdyaev, this creative and tensional union goes unnamed, needless to say its workings are clear within his ethics. For it is only through the acceptance and creative confrontation with nihility that the *movement* of creating new forms of goodness and taking part in the creative development of god become possible. In Nishitani’s phraseology, it is only by taking the standpoint of *soku* in being-*soku*-non-being or god-*soku*-uncreated-freedom that the self-fidelity of personality and the genuine response to god’s call are possible.

## 2. The Movement of Double-Negation

Aside from the presence of the central idea of emptiness, all three thinkers manifest this emptiness through the movement of double-negation. Nishitani begins with a negation of the standpoint of being with the realization of its limits as found in the standpoint of nihility. He then proceeds with a second negation, which is the negation of the standpoint of nihility and its opposition with the standpoint of being. This results in the standpoint of emptiness which is a double negation of both being and nihility, life and death, self and other, that sees these dualisms in their fundamental co-constitutive unity. Hence, the realization of reality and the realization of man are only possible through the movement of double-negation.

Watsuji brings the problem of society directly into the movement of double-negation. He begins with the notion of unnegated society as fundamental emptiness. This stage is negated through the individualization of the individual as it strives to awaken of itself to the absolute, and results in the stage of individual existence. But this stage must once again be negated through the reintegration of the individual into the whole, in order to manifest the authentic socio-ethical whole. As we see here, in Watsuji as well, the fidelity of *ningen* is only possible through the movement of double-negation. But an important thing to note is that unlike Nishitani, there is no final negation for Watsuji, but the process of double-negation must continue, in the back and forth movement of striving toward self-realization and compassionately returning to society.

Berdyaev contributes the notion of creativity as a central characteristic of the movement of double-negation, and reflexively and metaethically examines the very moral enterprise within the structure of double-negation. He begins with the notion of ethics of law, a herd morality similar to both Watsuji’s “unnegated whole” and Nishitani’s “standpoint of karmic society/ego-society.” This ethics is negated by ethics of redemp-

tion, which breaks past the idea of the good to face the darkness that is hidden within the human personality. But ethics of redemption is not sufficient, and requires that it be negated by creative ethics, wherein we not merely face darkness/evil nor passively remain within the non-duality of good and evil, but we positively engage evil as constitutive of the path of goodness. Only through the double negation of both static good and the evil beyond it that goodness can be freely created in fidelity to personality and god.

### 3. Focus on the Present Moment

While the full development of this point of commonality is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to note that Nishitani, Watsuji, and Berdyaev all see the focus of ethics not as what it attains (future-oriented or teleological) but what it manifests in the present moment.

In Nishitani, it is impossible to understand the standpoint of nihility or emptiness from the point of view of the standpoint of being; nor can one understand the standpoint of emptiness from the ground of nihility. Earlier stages are separated from the stages that follow by a gap that can only be leaped-over through the negation of each earlier stage. Despite this, the standpoint of emptiness is said to embrace both the standpoints of being and nihility. In Abe Masao's essay, "Zen is Not a Philosophy, but . . ." which can be seen as a summative synthesis of Nishitani's opus, Abe remarks that the third stage of True Self embraces both ego self and no-self, and the movement of negation that manifests the authenticity of True Self is already present within the movements of ego self and no-self. Hence, in line with Dōgen's teaching of the oneness of practice and attainment (J. *shushōittō*, 修証一等) it can be said of Nishitani that the standpoint of emptiness is not a *telos* that is attained in the future, but a foundation that is manifested in every moment of striving toward authenticity.

Similarly, in Watsuji, double-negation is seen as an *endless* process, and emptiness is seen not as a state of perfect equilibrium, but a constant emptying that has to be realized in the present moment of finite negation. And surprisingly, even Berdyaev who proposes a fundamentally creative standpoint (where creation contains a clear awareness of the future), says that ethics is an ethics of energy, where what matters is not what one achieves or creates, but the energy of goodness that is expressed in each moment of creativity. Furthermore, he says that the kingdom of god is not something that is attained in the future, but in the present moment. The present moment breaks past cosmic and historical time through the freedom of creativity and takes root within the qualitative infinity of eternity. As such, toward the end of the *Destiny of Man*, he even refers to his creative ethics as an apocalyptic ethics, that manifests the timeless within the present moment.

### 4. The Different Faces of Emptiness

While exploring the similarities of Nishitani, Watsuji, and Berdyaev in the foundation and movement of their ethics, it is becoming clear that there are essential differences within their systems as well. Perhaps it is on the ground of these differences that a genuine learning and mutual contribution between the three thinkers is possible. Let us briefly explore these differences and the questions those might suggest, as well as

the points of contribution that each author might have to bring to the overall view of ethics of emptiness.

Nishitani's religious ethics has a very deeply developed personal aspect. Not only does he speak about the general structure of how people face suffering and nihility, but he is able to relate this not merely to morality but to the whole spectrum of human experience. He is able to explore the effect of science and technology on how we find meaning in life, the problems of atheism, the problem of finitude, and so on, in connection with the self-authenticating movement of double-negation. This breadth is an important contribution to the discourse on ethics of emptiness.

Furthermore, Nishitani's close association to Zen Buddhist thought, including that of Dōgen, gives ethics of emptiness access to a *method* of self-cultivation that would allow us to consider the dynamics of *how* the first negation (from unnegated society to the individual standing before the absolute, or from ethics of law to ethics of redemption) might take place.

Yet despite this, Nishitani fails to structurally develop the *immediate* connection between religious and social ethics. Both Watsuji and Berdyaev see that the standpoint of Being is not at all a private phenomenon, but instead is a form of unnegated society or herd morality—it is a society formed on the ground of karma so to speak. While the former idea is present in Nishitani as well, it is not structurally developed. As such, it is not discussed how the standpoint of nihility is a fundamentally *individuating* standpoint, and the very confrontation with nihility is seen as a negation of the karmic society/herd morality that one is immersed in. Perhaps Nishitani scholars and others who are engaged in Zen studies would do well to consider this point.

If we turn to Berdyaev, one thing that comes to the fore is his well-developed understanding of the uniqueness and irreplaceability of the individual. While Nishitani's discussion takes the standpoint of the individual, it does not seem particularly rooted in the uniqueness of the individual, hence even the notion of knowledge is taken from the tenor of seeing things "as they are" instead of stressing a mutually transformative encounter of subject and reality. The same criticism can be said of Watsuji, who while stating the necessity of negating society to attain the standpoint of the individual, only vaguely suggests what the contribution of this movement might be (Sevilla "Communality").

The contribution of the movement of individuation is of course very clear for Berdyaev, as it is enshrined in the key notion of *creativity*. The uniqueness and irreplaceability of the individual results in a *creative* transformation in the encounter of the individual with socio-ethical reality. That means that while unnegated karmic society is trapped within its outdated sclerotic moral orders, it is only the individual who can bring himself to stand before the absolute, to face evil and the shrouded facets of moral life, and from their find more responsive expressions of social order and goodness. As such, the standpoint of the individual is essential for the *depth* that creatively enriches the breadth of society.

However, Berdyaev's perspective is limited as well, and this becomes clear as we examine the ethics of Watsuji. The strongest contribution of Watsuji to ethics of emptiness is that of the perspective of the whole. Watsuji himself states at the beginning of his book that the main significance of his system of ethics "consists in getting away from the misconception, prevalent in the modern world, that conceives of ethics

as a problem of individual consciousness *only*" (9). His discussions of the dual-structure, of spatio-temporal existence, trust, and truth, while pointing to both individuality and communality as essential, tend to focus on the latter, which Watsuji perceives to be neglected. Hence, in contradistinction to Berdyaev who while seeing the difference between ethics of redemption and creative ethics, doesn't seem to see the latter as a clear negation of the former, Watsuji is able to strongly stress the limits of a mere individualistic ethics and even mystical unity with the absolute, preferring instead to situate true authenticity as going by way of the socio-ethical whole.

Furthermore, in contradistinction to both Nishitani and Berdyaev, Watsuji is able to see both negations from the point of view of the whole, with the first negation as the self-negation of the whole (or the karmic whole's realization of its own karmic nature) through the individual, and the second negation as the self-return of the whole in which the whole recalls the individuals to compassionate commitment to the whole. Thus, Watsuji opens the door for ethics on the ground of the whole, for policy-makers and those engaged in pivotally transforming the very structure of community, its tolerance for individualization, and its capacity to recall members to commitment.

Because of this keen awareness of the whole, Watsuji presents a severe criticism to both Berdyaev and Nishitani. From the point of view of Watsuji, is Berdyaev's creative ethics communal enough? While Berdyaev stresses that creative ethics is a compassionate return to community, Berdyaev does not seem to entertain any notion of shared creativity. Would this not imply that the creative realization is merely foisted upon community that is seen as a mere passive receptacle for compassionate creativity? Perhaps it is essential for Berdyaev scholars to consider the notion of "communal creativity" that is able to see others as active co-creative agents within the process of moral imagination. (This point is discussed in full in Sevilla "Communality.")

Along the same lines, is Nishitani's true self truly the final stage? Nishitani himself speaks of "not dwelling in nirvana" as something that goes even further than the standpoint of emptiness, although he does not elaborate on this point. But in light of Watsuji, we clearly see that just as nihilism presents a negation of being and must be resolved through the through emptiness, the ignorance and suffering of others presents a negation of the very standpoint of the self standing in the standpoint of emptiness. Not dwelling in enlightenment is a *negation* of enlightenment, and a somber return to the karmic burdens and objectifications of society in order that one might sow the seed of liberation therein.

With this, Watsuji questions the fundamental structure of the double-negation. Is double-negation a linear process that begins with being (law), proceeds to nihilism (redemption), and culminates ultimately in emptiness (creativity)? Does not the very materialization of creativity require a return to law? This is something that Berdyaev sees as well, but he sees nothing positive within it, nor structurally develops it. Perhaps, instead of as a linear progression from being to nihilism to emptiness, we have a constant and unresolved tension between being and nihilism, and the free play between being and nihilism, between law and redemption, is precisely what constitutes the creative movement of emptiness within the authentic socio-ethical whole.

What we see here is that while the three thinkers have much in common, they are all markedly different, and this difference makes it possible for each field of study to contribute to the other.

#### **V. Conclusion: The Essential Contours of an Ethics of Emptiness**

What is an ethics of emptiness? An ethics of emptiness is not an ethics that aims at any transcendent or pre-established idea of goodness, nor is it an ethics grounded in any abstract rationality, scripture, or dogma. Instead, it is an ethics that is rooted in the actuality of human experience, especially in the human experience of our inescapable limitedness and the suffering we experience as we face the unshakable burden of our ignorance, sinfulness, and death. In the face of the nihility posed by this limitedness, we experience a deep anguish that existentially demands that we find a resolution to this nihility. In response to this existential demand, ethics of emptiness urges us to face this nihility with courage, to try to gain an acceptance of it instead of trying to escape it or conquer it. And through this acceptance, the self that secures itself against nihility is emptied of its self-attachment, and it becomes possible for the self to awaken to a standpoint that is able to positively engage being/goodness/life in unity with nihility/sinfulness/death, with a self-emptied heart full of compassion and creativity. Ethics of Emptiness is a way toward authenticity through the acceptance of “emptiness” and the expression of the true Emptiness of self.

I have argued that Nishitani, Watsuji, and Berdyaev all developed what were fundamentally the same ethics of emptiness. I cannot agree with Hisamatsu Shin'ichi when he writes, “What I should like to call Oriental Nothingness is, in my opinion, a Nothingness (‘Nothing,’ ‘Non-Being,’ or ‘Not’) peculiar to the Orient. It is, especially in contrast to Western culture, the fundamental moment of ‘Oriental’ culture” (Hisamatsu “Characteristics”). Emptiness knows not east or west—this much was clear in our discussion of the western-trained Berdyaev (who incidentally, did not even think highly of Buddhism). So long as there are people who suffer in their inability to face their fundamental limitedness, there will be a demand to face this limitedness, this nihility, and transform it as the positive ground of one's being. Emptiness is a universal human demand.

However, the spatio-temporal expression of emptiness is subject to the distinctions of east and west, and differences in culture and the traditions of thought alter the ways that human beings reckon with emptiness. But as we have seen above, these differences between east and west, between Christianity, Buddhism, and Confucianism, need not be barriers between us. Instead, seen as different faces of ethics of emptiness, these very differences can be seen as points of contribution through which different cultures and religious traditions can learn from each other. It is my fervent wish that scholars of religion and ethics might consider the possibility of this universal ground of emptiness, and taking emptiness as a space for dialogue, join hands in responding to the most essential human demand.

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