

THE HISTORICAL ORIGINS OF THE PHILOSOPHIES OF NISHIDA AND TANABE

OZAKI, Makoto
JAPONYA/JAPAN/ЯПОНИЯ

ABSTRACT

The historical origins of the Kyoto School of Philosophy of modern Japan, represented by Kitaro Nishida and Hajime Tanabe, may be derived from both the ancient Chinese idea of Change and the ancient Indian Upanishadic idea of the mutual identity of Brahman and Atman. The ancient Chinese idea of Change signifies change as well as non-change, and even their dialectical unification. Both origins are structured by the self-identity of the opposed in logic, and these historical prototypes have been developed into the various forms of Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist philosophy. The notion of Nothingness or Emptiness rather than Being has been set up as the fundamental principle. The principle of Nothingness as ultimate reality has been connected with the logic of self-identity of the opposed, and this is evident in Nishida's concept of the self-identity in absolute contradistinction that is equivalent to the Place of Absolute Nothingness. Even though Nishida's idea of Place is directly and explicitly influenced by the ancient Greek idea of *Topos*, it has indirectly and implicitly been affected by the traditional agricultural society as well, in which the land is regarded as the self-identical substratum despite the cyclic time of the four-seasons change. The ancient Chinese idea of Change also reflects the agricultural society in which the cyclic time plays an important role on the basis of the unchanging self-identical land as the underlying substratum. Nishida succeeds in establishing the new logical expression of Eastern traditional thought, deeply hidden in consciousness, in relation to Western philosophy. The uniqueness of Nishida's idea of Place may have its main source in the traditional agricultural background, and in this sense his way of thinking may be rural in character. On the other hand, Tanabe, though following Nishida at first, turns to making criticism of the mentor with the establishment of the triadic logic of species as the dialectic, which is characterized by the perpetual self-negating conversion in action. In contrast to Nishida, Tanabe represents the urban type of thinking, which is in pursuit of transforming in life. While Nishida's idea of Absolute

Nothingness has affinity with the ancient Chinese philosopher Lao-tzu's idea of Nothingness from and into which every entity comes and goes, Tanabe's concept of Absolute Nothingness as the principle of conversion is more closed to the Buddhist idea of sunyata, i.e., Emptiness, which is devoid of any substance in itself. As regards evil, the difference between them is obvious in that for Nishida evil and time or history disappear into the ultimate horizon or place of Nothingness with the tendency toward a kind of monism of goodness, whereas for Tanabe evil copes with goodness and retains its own status throughout, never being reduced into the opposed. Even if so, both of them, however, fail to construct a philosophy of history from the epochal or durational viewpoint, compared to Heidegger and Jaspers.

Key Words: Nishida, Tanabe, change, nothingness, place, self-identity, evil, history.

The historical origins of the Kyoto School of Philosophy of modern Japan, represented by Kitaro Nishida and Hajime Tanabe, may be derived from both the ancient Chinese idea of Change and the ancient Indian *Upanishadic* idea of the mutual identity of Brahman and Atman. The ancient Chinese idea of Change signifies change as well as non-change, and even their dialectical unification. Both origins are structured by the self-identity of the opposed in logic, and these historical prototypes have been developed into the various forms of Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist philosophy. The notion of Nothingness or Emptiness rather than Being has been set up as the fundamental principle. The principle of Nothingness as ultimate reality has been connected with the logic of self-identity of the opposed, and this is evident in Nishida's concept of the self-identity in absolute contradistinction that is equivalent to the Place of Absolute Nothingness. Even though Nishida's idea of Place is directly and explicitly influenced by the ancient Greek idea of *Topos*, it has indirectly and implicitly been affected by the traditional agricultural society as well, in which the land is regarded as the self-identical substratum despite the cyclic time of the four-seasons change. The ancient Chinese idea of Change also reflects the agricultural society in which the cyclic time plays an important role on the basis of the unchanging self-identical land as the underlying substratum. Nishida succeeds in establishing the new logical expression of Eastern traditional thought, deeply hidden in consciousness, in relation to Western philosophy. The uniqueness of Nishida's idea of Place may have its main source in the traditional agricultural background, and in this sense his way

of thinking may be rural in character. On the other hand, Tanabe, though following Nishida at first, turns to making criticism of the mentor with the establishment of the triadic logic of species as the dialectic, which is characterized by the perpetual self-negating conversion in action. In contrast to Nishida, Tanabe represents the urban type of thinking, which is in pursuit of transforming in life. While Nishida's idea of Absolute Nothingness has an affinity with the ancient Chinese philosopher *Lao-tzu's* idea of Nothingness from and into which every entity comes and goes, Tanabe's concept of Absolute Nothingness as the principle of conversion is more closed to the Buddhist idea of *sunyata*, i.e., Emptiness, which is devoid of any substance in itself. As regards evil, the difference between them is obvious in that for Nishida evil and time or history disappear into the ultimate horizon or place of Nothingness with the tendency toward a kind of monism of goodness, whereas for Tanabe evil copes with goodness and retains its own status throughout, never being reduced to the opposed. Even if so, both of them, however, fail to construct a philosophy of history from the epochal or durational viewpoint, compared to Heidegger and Jaspers.

Nishida's concept of Place is supposed to be directly influenced by ancient Greek philosophy and Neo-Platonism. For Nishida the concept of Place occupies ultimacy in his system of thought as the last place in which everything arises and perishes, while Tanabe is very critical of Plotinus' idea of the One as ultimate reality and his theory of emanation which presupposes the preexistent entity prior to appearance. Whereas Nishida is inclined to be akin to the ancient Chinese philosopher, Lao-tzu's idea of Nothingness from and into which everything in the world comes and goes, Tanabe's concept of Absolute Nothingness has the resemblance to the Buddhist notion of *sunyata*, i.e., Emptiness, which is devoid of self-existence as such. Tanabe precludes any preexistent entity such as the One, or *Brahman* as the ultimate cause of the universe, from which actual entities are to be emanated. On the one hand, the historical background of Nishida's idea of Place might be regarded as being influenced in general by his socio-civilizational circumstances, i.e., the traditional agricultural society, in which the land is conceived of as the substratum on which agriculture arises. On the other hand, Tanabe was born in the urban city, i.e., Tokyo, where agriculture plays no important role but rather industry occurs. This socio-circumstantial difference between them may indirectly and implicitly influence on the formation of their ways of thinking; one relies upon the substratum entity as the last resort, and the other is engaged

in the ever critical and self-negating activity of reformation in the urban society.

Nishida starts his thinking from the concept of pure experience in which subject and object are not yet separated, and finally arrives at the ultimate Place or *Topos* through the concept of the absolute self-identity of the opposed, or the self-identity of the absolute contrary. This may be another expression of the relationship between duality and non-duality, and historically we can find out the similar idea of the self-identity of Brahman and Atman in ancient India as well as the resemble idea of Change in ancient China. Furthermore, the Buddhist notion of non-duality of matter and spirit prevails in China, in particular, in Tendai Buddhism as the most systematic and integral interpretation of the Lotus Sutra, including all other sutras, and almost all types of Japanese Buddhism are variously developed forms of this system of thought. In India non-duality is more emphasized rather than duality, e.g., Nagarjuna's view of *sunyata* as the middle way and Shankara's non-dual monism, in which appearances are regarded as being on the lower level than, or even negated by, ultimate reality. Even if so, however, in China the stress is placed on actuality rather than pure principle or truth, and Buddhism has also been much influenced by this tendency toward actuality.

The distinctive feature of Tanabe's thinking lies in the returning activity from eternity to history. Many speak of the going aspect toward the transcendental realm of eternity from the historical dimension, but neglect or forget the other side of returning to the historical field from the attained eternity. In as much as Plato emphasizes the returning activity of politics to construct the ideal state in the actual world by the philosophers who have already contemplated the eternal Ideas, Tanabe also aims at building up the ideal political state as the second order. This is no other than the Buddhist notion of Bodhisattva who strives to attain ideality. The main thought of the Lotus Sutra is concerned with the saving activity of the numerous Bodhisattvas who have already attained enlightenment in the far past as the mission in the actual human world. Even though Tanabe himself, however, is not always explicitly aware of the thought of the Lotus Sutra, he might be implicitly and indirectly influenced by such Buddhist thought. In fact, he mentions the concept of Bodhisattva in his last stage of thought. By contrast, Nishida is much influenced by Zen Buddhism as well as Lao-tzu's idea of Nothingness. In Zen Buddhism the social activity of saving human beings lacks, or is attenuated, but on the contrary, an

individualistic pursuit of enlightenment is rather emphasized. This is the point on which the Chinese neo-Confucianism attacks and even Tanabe himself makes criticism. In both Zen Buddhism and Nishida contemplation or intuition rather than social practice prevails. On the contrary, Tanabe's way of thinking is characterized by the social practice, including political one, in terms of the triadic logic of species mediating between the genus and the individual as the dialectical movement. The difference between Nishida and Tanabe may be parallel to the contrast between Zen and the Lotus Sutra Buddhism. As even within the Buddhist circle the rival types are divergent, so in modern times the ways of thinking of Nishida and Tanabe reflect the underlying streams of thought in the intellectual history of Japan.

As a matter of fact, there is the Japanese Buddhist Shinran's idea of returning to our world from the far distant pure land behind Tanabe's idea of returning. But this has a symbolic mythological connotation. The ideal pure land is the other world far from reaching us. What is really implied in this idea should be referred to our actual world. The Amida Buddha in the pure land is not a historical person like Jesus Christ, but only a metaphor. This may also be a shadow of the eternal Buddha hidden in the other sutras than the Lotus Sutra in which the historical Buddha Sakyamuni reveals his own eternal saving activity fully. Only in the Lotus Sutra the dialectical mutual relationship of the historical and eternal Buddha is revealed, according to the Tendai system of thought. In short, the Amida is still imperfect but perfect only interpreted in terms of the Lotus Sutra in which all Buddhist figures historical as well as mythological are integrated.

Consequently, Tanabe later on criticizes of Shin Buddhism as still non-historical, and devotes his demonstration to Christianity as a historical religion. Even if so, however, according to the Lotus Sutra, there are two kinds of principles: one is the contemplation of truth, and the other is the social practice of reformation of the given actual world toward the ideal one. Whereas Nishida stands by contemplation of truth, Tanabe takes the position of action in order to reform the actual world by following the later Plato's dialectic. Tanabe's active standpoint may be indirectly and implicitly influenced by the Buddhist, specifically the Lotus Sutra's implications, and in fact refers to the important role of the Bodhisattva comparable to the Christ. There are two types of the Bodhisattvas: one is characterized by the direction of the cause to the effect, and the other by the reverse direction from the effect to the cause. The latter signifies

that the enlightenment attained one should return to the actual world for the purpose of edifying for the not yet attained ones, and this may be parallel to Plato's king philosopher as mentioned above. Apart from the historical background of Japanese Buddhist thought may we not duly appreciate both Nishida's and Tanabe's way of thinking, which are deeply and in the hidden form influenced by the underlying stream of thought in the long intellectual historical process. According to the Lotus Sutra, the eternal original Buddha whom the historical Buddha Sakyamuni revealed ceaselessly continues to save all kinds of living beings in the entire universe, and from this may Tanabe's concept of the practice of the Bodhisattva be derived. Hence Tanabe's distinguished idea of returning activity from the transcendent eternity once attained to the historical world in attainment might be deeply rooted in the Buddhist thought particularly revealed in the Lotus Sutra. Even if so, however, for Tanabe the idea of the eschatological time, i.e., the end of history is devoid, in which a new era is to begin, as Heidegger's concept of the other beginning for a new history.