

Ontological Homelessness as a Phenomenology of Belonging: Comparing the Nihilisms of Martin Heidegger and Keiji Nishitani

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Abstract

This analysis investigates how Kyoto School philosopher Keiji Nishitani utilizes the phenomenological framework of Martin Heidegger to express a Zen philosophical perspective on modern nihilism. An articulation of this framework, called the Structure of Being, summarizes the relationship between ontology, nihilism, and German-Japanese inter-philosophy. Nihilism is explored as a form of ontological homelessness, an experience that affects humanity as a whole in response to modernity. Further, this investigation emphasizes the spatial approaches to ontology which Zen serves to enhance, contrasting with overly temporal approaches often upheld by existentialists.

Introduction

The Meiji Restoration in Japan, bolstered by a group of influential samurai beginning in 1868, rapidly appropriated Western principles of civilization and progress.¹ The subsequent overhaul of government and societal structure deteriorated previously flourished aspects of Japanese culture, notably Buddhism. And yet, the Western supremacy responded with “colonialism and the racist ideology that accompanied it,” hesitant to “allow an ‘upstart,’ nonwhite nation to enter the race [for international power] as an equal.”² Japan ravaged its identity only to be rejected by its competitors.³ Keiji Nishitani, a Zen Kyoto School philosopher, recognized a critical loss of ontological belonging, which afflicted the Western and Eastern spheres following their modernization. His investigation of groundlessness offers a critique of

1. Fred G. Notehelfer, “The Meiji Restoration,” in *Sources of East Asian Tradition*, vol. 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 476.

2. Asia for Educators, Columbia University, “The Meiji Restoration and Modernization,” Asia for Educators: An Initiative of the Weatherhead East Asian Institute at Columbia University, 2009, http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/special/japan_1750_meiji.htm.

3. To be clear, this transformation was not initially fostered by compassion. In the beginning stages, most central figures to the Meiji initiative “harbored strong antiforeign biases that emerged from the combination of loyalism and xenophobia.”

Western modernity reflective of his Japanese context, while ultimately providing a universal evaluation of modern nihilism compatible with Heideggerian phenomenology.

My research on Nishitani enquires into how spatiality affects his philosophy of nihility. Existentialist analyses of Nishitani often adopt temporal approaches to human finitude and impermanence. Consequently, a lack of inquiry remains regarding his substantially spatial explanations for nihilism, grounded on immanent issues of being-in-the-world. Spatial ontologies are particularly instrumental concerning Japanese confrontations with modernity and Westernization.

Martin Heidegger first compared nihility to a sort of *homelessness* in his *Being in Time*⁴ before clarifying this concept in “Letter on Humanism,”⁵ a rendering of nihilism parallel to Nishitani’s term, *groundlessness*. Pieter Tijmes expounds the collision of technological modernity and ontological belonging to place in his 1998 article. Tijmes denotes the Heideggerian stipulation that, amid the “dominance of technique... humans threaten to give up meditative thinking and their *raison d’être*.”⁶ This, too, is in congruence with what is widely considered Nishitani’s affinity for combining philosophy and meditative praxis. Yet Tijmes’ analysis, focused on continental philosophies, does not account for the East Asian perspective provided in Nishitani’s writings.

In *Religion and Nothingness*, Nishitani utilizes Heideggerian structures of nihility in his

4. Heidegger describes nihilism as *anxiety*, which can in turn be compared to an experience of homelessness: “Being-in... brings tranquilized self-assurance--‘Being-at-home’, with all its obviousness [as the] average everydayness of Dasein. On the other hand, as Dasein falls, anxiety brings it back from its absorption in the ‘world’. Everyday familiarity collapses... Being-in enters into the existential ‘mode’ of the ‘not-at-home’.” Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Harper Perennial Modern Thought (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., 1962), 233.

5. A definition: “Homelessness... consists in the abandonment of beings by beings.” Martin Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” in *Basic Writings* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993), 242; And later, an assertion that divinity (or rather, ultimate understanding) “comes to radiate only when Being itself beforehand and after extensive preparation... is experienced in its truth. Only thus does the overcoming of homelessness begin from Being, a homelessness in which now only man but the essence of man stumbles aimlessly about.” Ibid, 242.

6. Pieter Tijmes, “Home and Homelessness: Heidegger and Levinas on Dwelling,” *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology* 2, no. 3 (1998): 205.

critique of modernity. Nihilism, though well-exemplified in the Japanese context, concerns both Eastern and Western manners of being in a modernizing world. Furthermore, Nishitani's explanation of *śūnyatā* creates a place for Eastern thought in within the growing dialogue on modern nihilism. The resulting insights are grounded in Japanese Buddhist traditions, yet truly universal in their appeal to human experience. As such, Nishitani's nihilism synthesizes place and identity as an ontological issue of homelessness, providing a spatial perspective on the nature of nihilistic experience. Analysis of Heidegger's philosophy will establish homelessness as an experience of nihilism and underscore Nishitani's Western influences despite his Japanese Buddhist foundations. But first, an intimate understanding of Meiji Japan must come to fruition.

Nishitani's Japanese Context

In order to understand the context of Nishitani's philosophy on nihilism, we will first examine his Japanese context. Nishitani was born in 1900, encountering chaos early in his life amidst the death of his father and the Meiji period of Japan.⁷ This period was characterized by rapid modernization, as the Western paradigm pressured Japan into the arena of global economic and bureaucratic rivalry. In a matter of about forty years, Japan transformed from a largely agricultural society with feudal governments to a haphazardly Westernized state. The military, education, and transport systems conformed to Western standards, discarding the Edo Japanese identity for one of European contention.

In his analysis of the Meiji era, James Ketelaar notes how "in constructing a new definition of public social performance, Meiji leaders deliberately destroyed previous forms of social praxis."⁸ Aspects of Japanese cultural identity (i.e., Buddhist syncretisms, *bushido* 武士道,⁹

7. Masao Abe, "Nishitani Keiji 1900-1990," *The Eastern Buddhist* 24, no. 2 (1991): 149.

8. James Edward Ketelaar, *Of Heretics and Martyrs in Meiji Japan: Buddhism and Its Persecution*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 44.

9. The samurai warrior system of ethics.

and feudal communities) were outmoded, some actively purged from society. Conformity to Western means of progress and its episteme of scientific Enlightenment were deemed vital to the emerge of Japan as a world power. Indeed, Japan's developing nihilism, though similar to that experienced by Western society, was characterized by an overt power struggle. While nihilists in the West suffered at the reasserting hands of Nature, an emerging wave of Japanese nihilists did so out of *assimilation*.

Nishitani denotes the Japanese transition from spiritual groundedness to nihilistic homelessness in his 1990 work *The Self Overcoming of Nihilism*:

“Up until the middle of the Meiji period a spiritual basis and highly-developed tradition was alive in the hearts and minds of the people...people then were possessed of true ability born of spiritual substance. However, as Europeanization (and Americanization) proceeded, this spiritual core began to decay... it is now a vast, gaping void in our ground.”¹⁰

According to Nishitani, the loss of traditional culture in Japan deeply reflected in the religiosity of the people. He contrasts the pre-Meiji era of ontological ‘home’, partly centered on spirituality, with the post-Meiji era of spiritual negation.

Yet, two central factors contributed to Japanese ontological homelessness following these transformations. Firstly, westernization emptied the *Japanese identity in the Japanese space*. Nishitani noted later in his 1960 article on Japanese modernity that “the inner structure of [modern Japanese] life... is different both from that of modern Westerners and [past Japanese] ... We think that we lead a normal life [but] from a broad viewpoint... there is some fundamental defect in ourselves.”¹¹ Nishitani attributes this essential “defect” to a dissolution of religion,

10. Keiji Nishitani, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 175.

11. Keiji Nishitani, “The Religious Situation in Present-Day Japan,” *Contemporary Religions in Japan* 1, no. 1 (March 1960): 18.

provoked by the appropriation of Western thought. In so doing, Japan succeeded in adopting a Western life without adopting the fundamentally Christian values behind this ontology; the religious ontology which had formally supported Japanese society-- consisting of Shinto, Buddhism, and Confucianism-- rapidly nullified in the face of modernity. Thus, Japan as an *ontic* location survived while its *ontological* significance was rendered meaningless. The ontological flattening of spiritual and intuitive practice rendered *being* in the Japanese space as *being according to self-uncertainty*. In finding what Nishitani referred to as their “ground of being” (and what we will describe as their “home”) Japan was utterly lost.

In addition to emptying the Japanese space of its Japanese identity, Japanese homelessness was spurred by the development of scientific Enlightenment values. Cartesian thought oriented the collective ontology of Japan away from spiritual intuition toward objective certainty. Cartesian rationalism presupposes that certainty can only be found in the reasoning of the subject, as experience, perceived through our senses, can deceive us.¹² Reason emerged as a universal standard of being defined by the West and imposed upon other epistemes. This Enlightenment-era perspective negated the ontological import of subjective, experience-oriented meaning-making. For both Eastern and Western contexts of modernity, upholding Cartesian objectivity ontologically severed the subject from their home in the world.

Though most Japanese conformed to Western standards of wealth, power, and progress, the nihilism accompanying modernity permeated Japanese art and literature. Nishitani spent his formative years engrossed in the literature of Japanese novelist Natsume Sōseki, which conveys a pessimistic attitude toward Japanese Westernization.¹³ Sōseki lived, witnessed, and chronicled

12. Thus, Cartesian rationalism values subjective reason that separates itself from the world as the best guide for belief and action. According to this philosophy, the world consists of mechanical systems occupied by objects, projected upon by individual subjects. René Descartes and Translated by John Veitch, *Discourse on Method* (Chicago: Paquin Printers, 1962), 36.

13. Abe, “Nishitani Keiji,” 129.

the Japanese experience of ontological homelessness, writing that the “Japanese nation was being forced into the collective equivalent of a nervous breakdown by having to assimilate several centuries of Western civilization in the course of a few short decades.”¹⁴ Sōseki’s distaste for Japan’s transformation translates into literary themes of isolation, egoism, and a call for non-attachment.¹⁵ He portrayed the egotistical quest for gain as both ethically wounding and existentially foolish. Sōseki’s evaluations closely resemble Zen teachings of *śūnyatā*, a central aspect of Nishitani’s philosophy.

Ten Nights’ Dreams, written by Sōseki in 1908, indicates a sense of homelessness at the hands of Western dominance. The series of ten magical-realist dream descriptions inquire into themes of purpose, progress, and Zen moral conduct. “The Seventh Night” portrays Sōseki as a passenger on a large ship bound for the West. The vessel pours black smoke into the sky, barreling heedlessly toward the western horizon. Sōseki experiences a radical groundlessness in response to the journey, noting “I felt completely lost. I thought of jumping into the sea to my death rather than staying on this ship.”¹⁶ The impending doom fosters overwhelming doubt, enough for Sōseki to question his purpose. This reflects angst experienced by Japanese society at the time, with the ship representing a Meiji-era Japan thrust toward the Western horizon of modernization. *Ontological* homelessness resonates with this metaphor, as—much like a wayward ship—the foundation of being becomes a state of doubt. On the black ship of modernity, Japan loses its home of being. Without a foundation, Japan must ground itself on nihilism, vulnerable to the whirlpool of modernist egoism.

These were the cultural influences present to Nishitani when he experienced nihilism as a

14. Damian Flanagan, “The Hidden Heart of Natsume Sōseki,” *The Japan Times*, November 26, 2016, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2016/11/26/books/hidden-heart-natsume-oseki/#.Xr7tBWhKg2x>.

15. In reference to the Buddhist practice of non-attachment, in which the perceived subject ceases clinging to perceived objects.

16. Natsume Sōseki, *Ten Nights’ Dreams* (London: Sōseki Museum in London, 2000), 28.

young man. Detailed by James W. Heisig in *Philosophers of Nothingness*, Nishitani “seemed to have constellated in his person the anxieties of the age”, experiencing a fog of nihilistic groundlessness throughout his formative years.¹⁷ Nishitani’s study of Western philosophers threw him into deeper crisis by challenging his sense of ontological belonging. Evidently, Nishitani’s insights into the East-West encounter of nihility originate in his personal experience. Nishitani saved his life from nihility by studying philosophy, a decision later enriched by his practice in Buddhist Zen.¹⁸ Breaking through groundlessness provoked Nishitani to identify nihility as the starting point of “conversion” from life negation to reaffirmation.¹⁹

Furthermore, Nishitani utilizes distinctly spatial language in his personal accounts of nihility. Rather than describing his nihilism as an existential crisis focused on finitude, he refers to nihility as “a great void inside [himself].”²⁰ This appeals to the nature of the ontic self “with which we are most familiar”, the self-centered self of the ego.²¹ The home of the self that Nishitani knew most intimately was negated by nihilistic doubt. By the negation of his ego and in the absence of any notion of self-affirmation, Nishitani became homeless in this sense. This context of personal and societal nihilism is imperative to comprehensively studying of Nishitani’s philosophy.

Encountering Heidegger’s Philosophy

Nishitani first encountered Martin Heidegger while researching in Germany in 1938,

17. James W. Heisig, “Nishitani Keiji (1900-1990),” in *Philosophers of Nothingness: An Essay on the Kyoto School* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001), 191.

18. Ibid.

19. “Nothingness becomes the locus of conversion... It is the moment of conversion from birth to death, the moment wherein absolute negation and absolute affirmation are one.” Keiji Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 29.

20. Heisig, “Nishitani Keiji,” 191.

21. “The heart and mind of this shadowy man/ At all occasions is to me most familiar,” a verse by the late Zen master Gasan Jōseki, whom Nishitani quotes to expound the radically empty nature of the self, “this shadowy man.” Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, 72-73.

during which they cross-culturally engaged theories and philosophical processes.²² Heidegger critiqued modernity in Europe with phenomenological analyses, with his early work *Being in Time* prioritizing temporality in relation to nihilism. In his *Religion and Nothingness*, Nishitani employs a more spatial Zen perspective of nihility using Heidegger's phenomenological framework. These parallel frameworks suggest that modernization, though perhaps originated in Europe, had a ubiquitous effect on the phenomenological experience of belonging. Furthermore, the pervasive homelessness wreaked by modernity, when analyzed from a perspective of phenomenology, may have a common philosophical solution across all beings.

The Ground of Being

This phenomenological framework, henceforth termed the Structure of Being, begins by *determining a ground of Being*. Heidegger first analyzes the question of Being: Why do we exist? Inquiring into the nature of Being requires a vital precondition, that the questioner presently exists. According to Heidegger, “the question of the meaning of Being must be *formulated*... Every inquiry is a seeking. Every seeking gets guided beforehand by what is sought.”²³ Rather, the sought (Being) guides the seeking (question) to fruition. As such, the question of Being must be posed from the *locus* of Being itself. This conceptualizes Being as a space within which we operate, ask questions, and doubt. Consequently, nihilism—that which doubts Being—is, in fact, *born* from Being.

While Heidegger determines a ground of Being with the question of existence, Nishitani does so with the question of religiosity. In Nishitani's context of Japan, the loss of religiosity catalyzed homelessness. Similar to Heidegger's question of Being, Nishitani posits “we cannot

22. Graham Parkes, *Heidegger and Asian Thought* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990), 10.

23. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Harper Perennial Modern Thought (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 24.

understand religion from the outside”, as the “religious quest alone is the key to understanding it.”²⁴ With the term “outside,” Nishitani implies that we function on the ground of religiosity, *inside* of it. Once more, a spatial *locus* is identified from which nihilism must depart. Inquiry and skepticism do not alienate religiosity; rather, inquiry is where the religious quest begins and grows. Furthermore, to question religion is to question the self; according to Nishitani, religiosity is concurrent with our being.²⁵ When questioning religion, the presuppositions at hand cause us to simultaneously question existence and the nature of the subjective self.

Determining the Subject

Accordingly, what follows in the *Structure of Being* is a determination of the subject. Heidegger refers to the self as *Dasein*, with *Da* referring to “there” and *Sein* to “Being”. Thus, the self is a *place* within the world, imbued with existence. Here arises the distinction between Being and beings; *Being* refers to nonobjectifiable existence, while *beings* are ontic and therefore objectifiable.²⁶ Accordingly, Being (existence) discloses itself through beings (objects). Like the objects of the world, *Dasein* is a being, but it is constituted by two characteristics: 1) that *Dasein*’s essence is Being,²⁷ and 2) *Dasein understands* its Being.²⁸ *Dasein* exists *and* enquires about the meaning of its existence in confrontation with the world. As such, the determination of the subject is underscored by the *multiplicity of beings* which, though seemingly distinctive, is ultimately united by the nonobjectifiable disclosure of Being. *Dasein*, as it experiences its existence, cares about this ongoing tension between its singularity and

24. Keiji Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 2.

25. Religiosity in this context is defined by the quest for meaning-making and spiritual grounding in the world, rather than conformity to doctrinal standards.

26. Existence cannot be objectified, only experienced. Though existence is often objectified for theoretical purposes, the existence spoken of in this context cannot be true existence. If this were the case, there would be a determinable boundary of existence one could step “out” of to examine; Heidegger and Nishitani have already refuted this possibility.

27. Heidegger, *Being in Time*, 67-68.

28. *Ibid*, 32.

multiplicity.

Nishitani likewise determines the self by inquiring into the nature of reality. Ultimate reality is a nonobjectifiable unity that realizes itself ubiquitously, but everyday apprehensions of reality are various and often contradictory.²⁹ This creates an epistemic discord amongst beings regarding the meaning of reality; indeed, how could such divergent phenomena operate as a single essence, dogma, or theory?³⁰ Nishitani attributes paradoxical distinctions in reality to the field of consciousness. Consciousness constitutes a “field of relationships between those entities characterized as self and things,” thereby maintaining a distinction between a unique, isolated self and the objects of the world.³¹ According to this dual structure, ultimate reality (Being) unifies the contradictory aspects of consciousness (beings). Meanwhile, consciousness acts as a veil to the unified experience of the ultimate, clouding deeper intuitions of *Being* with a hypersensitivity to *beings*. Nevertheless, as in Heidegger’s *Structure of Being*, Nishitani posits that the “doubting self” can “break through” the field of consciousness and realize nihility.³² In other words, the self is capable of doubting itself.

The World

The third part of the *Structure of Being* is therefore subject-ground relationality, that which constitutes the world. When approaching the “world” from a perspective of nihility, Heidegger focuses on *angst* (anxiety) and Nishitani on doubt. Anxiety is defined by Heidegger as an ontological “mood” that awakens Dasein to its *being-towards-death* and impacts its perceived ontological capacity. Here, death realizes itself over and against Dasein’s Being.

29. Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, 7.

30. Notably, is reality restricted to what can be perceived, or does reality transcend perception? While modern science defines reality within the confines of objectively perceptible truth, religion often negates these rules by affirming seemingly nonobjective truths.

31. *Ibid*, 16.

32. *Ibid*, 17.

According to Havi Carel, Heideggerian death “is only ever impending, but can never be made actual,” rendering “Dasein’s end...possible at every moment.”³³ Consequently, Dasein must engage its everyday existence with the ontological awareness that this everyday existence is transient. This renders Dasein’s Being at once uncanny and not-at home.³⁴ Oren Magid elaborates in his “Analysis of Anxiety in Being and Time” the “collapse of familiarity, significance, meaning, mattering, or the world” which arises with this ontological homelessness.³⁵ Anxiety reveals to Dasein that it does not belong anywhere; its essential identity and meaning, to the dismay of its ego, is homelessness.³⁶

Regarding this aspect of self-world relation, Nishitani embeds the self and the objects it perceives (the world) within the field of consciousness. To reiterate, Nishitani posits that the field of consciousness separates us from the authentic ground of Being, through which one must “break through” in a process of doubt. Nishitani identifies death as a central instigator of doubt,³⁷ but rather than classifying death as a “possibility”, he reframes it as an atemporal *presencing* at the ground of Being. Doubt, vis-à-vis nihilism, “assaults us... the existence of things and the self are both transformed into something utterly incomprehensible, of which we can no longer say ‘what’ it is.”³⁸ As such, doubting our own existence is expounded by the doubt of any existence at all. Nishitani’s definition of death differs significantly from Heidegger in its spatiality. Rather than the *possibility of impossibility*, death is the *Non-Being of Being*. The living self in which we have created a home most familiar is revealed as a dying one, empty of our most intimate familiarity. The world, in turn, is rendered equally empty of attachment or significance to this

33. Havi Carel, “Temporal Finitude and Finitude of Possibility: The Double Meaning of Death in *Being and Time*,” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 15, no. 4 (December 2007): 547.

34. Heidegger, *Being in Time*, 233.

35. Oren Magid, “The Ontological Import of Heidegger’s Analysis of Anxiety in Being and Time,” *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 54, no. 4 (December 2016): 441.

36. Hubert L. Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger’s Being and Time*, Division I (MIT Press, 1991), 180.

37. *Doubt* in this context is congruent with Heidegger’s *anxiety*.

38. Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, 136.

empty self. Thus, in analyzing Heidegger's notion of death, Nishitani elucidates Buddhist philosophical approaches to understanding homelessness and its ontological spatiality.

Nothingness

Homelessness, as such, is phenomenologically relational to nothingness; when the self experiences homelessness, it realizes the dependent relationship between its selfhood and nothingness. However, the final aspect of the Structure of Being identifies nothingness as the basis for awakening. While Heidegger and Nishitani certainly concur on this functional relationship between nihilism and awakening, their definitions of nothingness are relatively divisive. Heidegger's notions of nothingness in his *Being in Time* are highly elusive, related most closely to nihilism as *that which nihilates* or *a mode of the world which Dasein is anxious in the face of*.³⁹ One must consider his later writings to encounter an explicit definition. In his "What is Metaphysics?" Heidegger describes "the nothing" as that which Dasein is "being held out into... beyond beings as a whole." Further, the "original revelation of the nothing" provides for the relation of beings in the world; thus, "since existence in its essence relates itself to beings," without the nothing, there is "no selfhood and no freedom." In summation, Heidegger defines several criteria in his definition:

- 1) Nothingness itself nihilates; nihilation discloses beings as radically *other* than nothing.
- 2) Being is dependent on the nothing; Dasein *is* by virtue of being held out into the nothing.⁴⁰

In its everydayness, Dasein comports itself away from death, regardless of the fact that it is always being-towards-death. So far, we have established that anxiety discloses death as the

39. Heidegger, *Being in Time*, 231.

40. Martin Heidegger, "What Is Metaphysics?" in *Basic Writings* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993), 103.

possibility of impossibility and the nothing as the *mechanism which nihilates possibility*. Thus, nothingness, alighted with the phenomenon of anxiety, is the void upon which the *inauthentic* Dasein affixes its home and the *authentic* Dasein understands its being-towards-death.

Inherent in these criteria is the position that nothingness is an *other* which beings transcend and differentiate from, and yet differentiate themselves *through*. This is a flawed evaluation according to Nishitani's analysis of nothingness, deteriorated the subject-object duality posed in Heidegger's model. If the subject is "held out into the nothing" as Heidegger claims, "Nothing [seems] to be a negation of being, but... as an object of consciousness in representative form... it remains a kind of being, a kind object."⁴¹ Placing nothingness at the ground of the subject is not enough. *Śūnyatā* employs a far more radical approach; rather than *depending* on nothingness, Being *is* nothingness. In this view, ultimate reality occurs at the locus of death-as-life and being-as-nothingness. "transcend[ing] all duality emerging from logical analysis." Thus *śūnyatā*, or absolute emptiness, in radical rejection of any distinctions, employs complete detachment from the dual bondages of suchness and nothingness.

Homelessness, as a radical experience of ontological self and world nihilating, is a necessarily painful precursor to awakening. Nishitani posits that when the subjective self experiences homelessness,⁴² "nothingness becomes the locus of conversion" in opposition to a hyper-egotistical world.⁴³ The subjective self nihilates itself and the world until there is nothing. In a process similar to Heidegger's *authenticity*,⁴⁴ nothingness is emptied, resulting in *absolute nothingness*. This is *śūnyatā*, the nonobjectifiable emptying as affirmation. By way of *śūnyatā*,

41. Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, 33.

42. Or in his terms, groundlessness.

43. See *footnote 19*.

44. "Rather than wrestling with who we are and what it means to be, we would prefer to concentrate on manipulating and measuring present beings. [This] leads to a metaphysics of presence, which only encourages the self-deception... the difference between this everyday state of oblivion and a state in which we genuinely face up to our condition [is] the difference between inauthenticity and authenticity." Richard F. H. Polt, *Heidegger: An Introduction* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999), 5-6.

the individual can return to their true home of being with a transformed consciousness, free from subject-object duality and awakened to the empty nature of worldly perceptions. Thus, the Structure of Being concludes; by determining an ontological ground, nihilating the self, and nihilating the world, Heidegger and Nishitani then theorize how to break through this modern issue of nihility from a locus of nothingness. We will further reflect on the Buddhist perspectives of homelessness, belonging, and more specifically the mysterious process of “breaking through,” in the next section.

Elaborating a Buddhist Perspective on Homelessness and Belonging

The analysis offered in Nishitani’s *Religion and Nothingness*, embedded in the Zen Buddhist tradition, contests two arguments from Heidegger’s *Being in Time*: the metaphysically separate nature of Dasein to the nothing, and his stipulation that Dasein is an *essentially temporal being*. These arguments, introduced in Heidegger’s early work but certainly revisited throughout his philosophical tenure, deemphasize the spatial approach to nihility posited by his term *homelessness*. Nishitani compliments the spatial discrepancies in *Being in Time* by analyzing the roles of spatiality and historicity in relation to homelessness. As discussed, adopting *śūnyatā* is imperative to breaking through homelessness. Accordingly, temporality and historicity themselves must be humiliated in order to retrieve an egalitarian status with space.

Let us first define the experience of ontological homelessness, especially in respect to its counterpart, ontological belonging. Our discussion thus far has synonymized homelessness with spatial nihility, that which shifts ontological comfort to that of discomfort. The homeless Dasein is confronted with a *doubt* as to whether *Dasein belongs where it is* as an operating thing in the world. In other words, the self is unsettled, and the world is alien. Belonging, thusly, constitutes the *opposite* characteristics; the self must be *settled* in the world in order to belong. Ontologically *settling* requires an understanding of *circuminsessional interpenetration* and its relationship to

samādhi. It is by realizing these dynamics through meditative praxis that Nishitani believes an individual can awaken themselves to belonging.

Though quite a mouthful in its English translation, *circuminsessional interpenetration* is perhaps more comprehensively understood by its Japanese term *egoteki sōnyū* (回互の相入), comprised of 回互的 (reciprocal) and 相入 (mutual-entering). I believe the philosophical implications of using reciprocity and mutuality are deeply purposeful here. “Reciprocal” and “mutual” are synonymous terms, together creating a dynamic of twice-giving-and-receiving. Thus, in this context, *giving being is at once the essence of receiving being*.⁴⁵ The ontological implication of this derivative requires that *to be the self is exactly to be the other*, and vice-versa. I will illustrate a phenomenological example of this using the kanji symbol “相” from 回互的相入.

This kanji “相” is composed of a tree 木 and an eye 目. Its meaning is derived from the relationship between an eye and a tree it looks at. At first glance, the eye is actively dominant; it is the thing that *looks*, and the tree, for the sake of this explanation, is the passive *victim* of looking. In a proper phenomenological analysis, however, this distribution of agency is inaccurate. It is rather the eye and the tree that *engage with* each other, the eye looking and the tree showing. In the isolated microcosm of mutual being between the eye and the tree, the eye’s being is determined by its *looking* at the tree, while the tree’s being is determined by its *showing*. On a macrocosmic scale, this relationship resides between all perceived things as they are. As such, the determination of selfhood (being of the self as a thing that self-s) depends on the being of those things that are not-self; the eye depends on the non-eye (the tree) and the tree the non-tree (the eye).

45. Jan Van Bragt, in her translation of 回互的相入, denotes the theological implications of radical reciprocity “between the divine persons of the Trinity.” According to this observation, all beings engage in the same unobjectifiable interpenetration of existence as that of the Christian Father (God), Son (Christ), and Holy Spirit. Translation by Jan Van Bragt, *Religion and Nothingness*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 294-295.

Nishitani thus speaks of the *true self* as “the point of identity, at which ‘to be a self’ and ‘not be a self’ are one, is nothing other than the self itself... that which is *self in not being self*.”⁴⁶ This redefines what it means to be in the world in contrast to the ontic understanding of selfhood. *Śūnyatā* reaffirms the self as empty, bottomless, permeating and being permeated by all things. The *egocentric* view of the world places the illusory subject at the center of being. In contrast, the *true self*-centered view of *śūnyatā* places the center everywhere. Such is the concept of circuminsessional interpenetration as a spatial interpretation of *śūnyatā*; being-in-the-world on the field of *śūnyatā* is at once and already being-*as*-the-world. An emptied self is not obliged in attaching itself to an ontic ground or identity, for “on the field of *śūnyatā*, all things are at the home-ground of the self.”⁴⁷

As such, we are better able to comprehend *how* exactly *śūnyatā* combats homelessness by establishing a sense of spatial belonging. But what does this make of temporality, and Heidegger’s position that Dasein is essentially a temporal being? Nishitani posits that “the term ‘karma’ expresses an awareness of existence that sees being and time as infinite burdens for us and, at the same time, an awareness of the essence of time itself.” Karma is the driving force of dependent origination, known in Buddhist philosophy as the cosmological process of causation encapsulating all things. Reincarnation (*samsara*), in which beings are perpetually reborn after death, is perhaps the most obvious manifestation of dependent origination. Yet more intimately, however, *dependent origination is always engaging our consciousness in the present*, resulting in the infinite burden and infinite newness of Dasein within the net of causality.⁴⁸ Chen-kuo Lin

46. Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, 157.

47. *Ibid*, 158-159.

48. Even if a subject reflects on a past manifestation of their karma, this action is being *presently* performed by their consciousness. It is thus impossible to truly replicate being in respect to a past event. Being, consciousness, and self are always *being* in the present.

notes in his reading of Nishitani that, “time is not separable from consciousness.”⁴⁹ Indeed, time, as consciousness, *exists* by virtue of *śūnyatā*; it is empty of intrinsic nature, and thus completely unified with the self.⁵⁰ Thus, Dasein is only comprised of time in that Dasein and time share a fellowship in absolute emptiness—they are shadows of change floating on a stream of pure consciousness. Nevertheless, Dasein, time, and consciousness itself are unified on the ground of *śūnyatā*.

In addition to circuminsessional interpenetration, Nishitani provides a unique perspective on the Buddhist concept of *samādhi*. *Samādhi* is an Indian term for “settling” which the Zen tradition references as deep concentration, specifically for the cultivation of mindfulness. Nishitani draws upon this basic definition of *samādhi* as a connection between emptiness and being, thusly referring to it as “*samādhi*-being”. He posits that *samādhi* traditionally overturns a scattered and egocentric focus by relinquishing the ego and focusing on a central point. Likewise, *samādhi*-being allows a being to relinquish its illusory ego and centralize its scattered focus by returning to the home-ground of its being.

But how does Nishitani’s *samādhi*-being function differently from his circuminsessional interpenetration? Circuminsessional interpenetration refers to a process which is always and already at work; things *are* reciprocally-mutually-entering one another, because all things *are* always empty. *Samādhi*, on the other hand, refers to a state in which one uncovers their buddha-nature. This occurs through radical, often taught, concentration. Thus, contemplative origins of *samādhi* must not be overlooked in Nishitani’s context nor that of the presently modernizing

49. Chen-kuo Lin, “Nishitani on Emptiness and Historical Consciousness,” *Dao* 13, no. 4 (December 2014): 449.

50. To perhaps clarify, Dōgen, the founder of Sōtō Zen in Japan (and whose philosophy Nishitani was well-versed in), posits in his writings on Time-Being: “Time is not separate from you, and as you are present, time does not [pass] away.” Eihei Dōgen and Translated by Kazuaki Tanahashi, *The Time-Being (Uji)* (New York: North Point Press, 1985), 77; His translator Kazuaki Tanahashi elaborates that, accordingly, “each moment carries all of time... In this respect, ‘now’ is eternal.” *Ibid*, 13.

world. According to Nishitani's argument, homelessness must be confronted with an ontological *samādhi*-being that builds upon the original *samādhi* praxis. This provides an embodied, practical approach to reestablishing home-ground in all things by way of concentration and mindfulness. *Understanding* that the true-self encounters belonging in the home-ground of all things must thusly be expounded by practical experience. It requires being *samādhi* in addition to conceptualizing it.

In Zen Buddhism, nondiscriminatory wisdom, which discloses Being as the home-ground upon which all things are center, distinguishes theoretical knowledge as secondary to the insight of experiential knowledge.⁵¹ Thus, meditation and contemplation are necessary means of embodying the philosophies of Zen. A disciple of Zen, Nishitani understood this distinction and developed his philosophy accordingly. As such, *Religion and Nothingness* must not be sealed off from the realm of practicality. In a world broken by nihilism, liberation and healing must arise; but healing of this scale is intentional. In our everyday mode of being, contemplation—a practice outmoded by the Enlightenment era—must become relevant again. Thus, Nishitani's *samādhi*-being can be realized in both its practical and ontological contexts. When we remain scattered in the homelessness of the world, we seal ourselves to the openness of home-ground. By settling our bodies and minds in concentration, we open ourselves to the insight of absolute oneness with all things.

Concluding Remarks

Our current state of technological advancement fosters a constantly-unfolding hunger for modernization. With it, the human concern for existence has dissipated into exponentially deeper

51. Shigenori Nagatomo, "Japanese Zen Buddhist Philosophy," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Spring 2020 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2020), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2020/entries/japanese-zen/>.

sentiments of nihilism. Significantly, the advances made to enhance human experience are, in many ways, crippling our being-in-the-world. This is a crisis experienced by Heidegger in Europe and Nishitani in Japan; it is not a phenomenon affecting a single nation or race, but one which infects human existence in its totality. Jean M. Twenge cites in her “Age of Anxiety” the heightened reports of anxiety and depression in the United States since the 1950s, predicting what some psychologists have deemed “a modern epidemic of depression.”⁵² Meanwhile, suicide rates in Japan have decreased since the 1990s, but the nation has seen an increased prevalence in phenomena like *karoshi*⁵³ and *hikikomori*.⁵⁴ With increased apathy and ruthlessness, humankind increasingly values material gain over life itself. Our residence in an age of homelessness is indisputable.

We have reached rock bottom and continue to dig a deeper hole for ourselves. But it is from this point of homelessness that Nishitani proposes we find our salvation. Nishitani’s analysis of *śūnyatā* suggests that breaking through nihilism to discover our emptiness is comparable to a homecoming. By recognizing our present motivations as those material cravings of the ego, we will have made the first step toward our true home, and therefore, our true selves. Further, by authentically understanding the emptiness that unites us with all things, we will be more inclined to view the world not as a resource meant for disposal, but with value and compassion. This will take a Great Learning, one that demands our theoretical understanding of being and experiential contemplation of such. In a world where busyness appears to render the

52. Jean M Twenge, “The Age of Anxiety? Birth Cohort Change in Anxiety and Neuroticism, 1952-1993” 26, no. 6 (2000): 1009.

53. Literally translates to “death by overwork”. *Karoshi* deaths are most commonly caused by heart failure, stroke, and suicide, spurred by a prominent societal pressure to work more than the body or mind is capable of. T Hiyama and M Yoshihara, “New Occupational Threats to Japanese Physicians: Karoshi (Death Due to Overwork) and Karojisatsu (Suicide Due to Overwork),” *Occupational and Environmental Medicine* 65, no. 6 (2008): 428–29.

54. Refers to a demographic of reclusive individuals who refuse to leave a room sometimes for months on end. *Hikikomori* often suffer from psychological distress and isolate themselves from society as a means of coping. Bruce Rosenthal and Donald L. Zimmerman, “Hikikomori: The Japanese Phenomenon, Policy, and Culture,” *International Journal of Mental Health* 41, no. 4 (2012): 82–95.

greatest rewards, we must sit and think deeply about our being. But this shouldn't be too difficult; by the looks of it, we all could really use a break.

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