“effortlessness” is lost on the ordinary mind; on the other hand, these concepts gain the most profound significance for the mind trained in conventional Buddhist attitudes and practices. By guiding the reader in the cultivation of such attitudes, the book provides a strong foundation for an authentic understanding of dzogchen.


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The aim of the Kyoto School has been to “introduce Japanese philosophy into world philosophy while at the same time using western philosophy for a second look at Japanese thought trapped in fascination with its own uniqueness” (p. 270). Heisig’s stated goal is to introduce the thought of three principal philosophers of the School: Nishida’s foundational ideas about nothingness, Tanabe’s philosophy as their counterfoil, and the creative enlargements of Nishitani (p. 7).

Heisig’s claim (p. ix) that his book is the first general overview of the Kyoto School and that there has yet been no study of it in the context of world philosophy (p. 279) is debatable—Heisig himself mentions a few precedents. But _Philosophers of Nothingness_ may well be the most comprehensive presentation to date focused on the three main figures of the School. Heisig proposes to pursue two somewhat disparate goals: on the one hand, to let Nishida, Tanabe, and Nishitani speak with their own, Eastern and Buddhist, voices; on the other, to present them in a global intellectual context. By reaching these goals, Heisig promises to demonstrate the original contribution of the Kyoto School to world philosophy. He is well prepared to deliver on the promise. Intimate familiarity with both traditions allows him to recognize both the cultural uniqueness of the Kyoto School and the instances where he believes its three philosophers do not live up to their claim of creating world-class ideas. The book is well balanced, supplementing philosophical analysis with biographical and cultural background information from diaries, letters, and second-source commentaries, and offering critical evaluation of the reception of Kyoto-School ideas in Japan and abroad. The information is multi-faceted, impartial, well researched, and comprehensive.
Heisig’s focus on three principal figures of the Kyoto School scales the topic down to manageable proportions. Absolute nothingness, the core concept shared by the three, provides a unifying thread. It is absolute nothingness, rather than a higher being, that functions as the ground for all things, “at once embracing and penetrating the inherent contradictions and relative nothingness at the limits of being” (p. 129). Heisig’s attention to this foundational concept is particularly appreciated given the obscurities of thought and expression characteristic of his three subjects; it systematizes the book into a guide through what for many readers would otherwise remain a forbidding maze. Heisig offers a wealth of pointers to further sources of information on the Kyoto School, and steers the reader away from the poor Western translations. The material is organized around the logic of ideas. Heisig follows ideas “without paying too much attention to their dating or the development of their interlocking” (p. 49), and where helpful, “overlays earlier ideas with later ones” (p. 112). For Nishida and Tanabe, his strategy is to “avoid dividing their career into stages,” and “instead to concentrate on recurrent themes” (p. 190). For Nishitani, it is to “focus on specific motifs. . . with a minimum attention to their dating or locating them in the development of his ideas” (p. 190). These disclaimers notwithstanding, Heisig does trace the rough lines of the evolution of thought in each of the three philosophers as well as the influences between them, and carefully distinguishes the particular contributions of each to the ideas they share; he also supplies basic chronologies.

The central segment of the book contains three sections, one on each of the thinkers. It is preceded by a single “Orientation,” where Heisig describes the emergence of the Kyoto School in parallel with the development of Western philosophy in modern Japan. He describes the core assumptions of the School as inward-directedness (interest in the transformation of consciousness and preference for the direct experience unencumbered by critical logic or religious doctrine), the unity of awareness and reality, the latter taken “simply as it is,” and an uncritical attitude toward Japan. A sketch of the history of the studies on the Kyoto School in the West is included.

The three sections forming the central part of the book are divided into chapters that are short (2–4 pages) and manageable, with the seamless transitions between them helping eliminate potential choppiness. The last section is followed by “Notes,” a seventy-page appendix serving as a commentary to the main text and a valuable resource of background data. It is to this section that Heisig relegates more detailed observations about the parallels between his three thinkers and Western philosophy. A disadvantage of this approach is the inconvenience of having to match multiple quotations dispersed throughout a particular chapter with their credits strung at the end of the corresponding section of “Notes.” On the other hand, the reader may find it handy to have comments and notes in an
aggregate, rather than as footnotes disrupting the flow of the main text. A bibliography concentrates on the Western translations of primary sources and the Western secondary literature, but also includes a number of Japanese publications. Although not exhaustive, it is quite extensive and up-to-date, including some obscure but valuable items that an average reader would be otherwise unlikely to unearth.

The section on Nishida, like the two that follow it, opens with a good biographical introduction to its subject and an evaluation of his philosophical and literary style. At the outset, Heisig paints a picture of Nishida as something of a dilettante jumping from one idea to another, drawing his inspiration from quickly-read and half-understood Western texts; a man limited to a handful of ideas on which he rings the changes tirelessly throughout his life; and a hasty writer using an obscure style, who at times cannot understand his own texts when pressed for clarifications by the critics. Heisig sums up Nishida’s first book, *An Inquiry into the Good*, as unfocused, awkward, and “wobbling,” albeit with “daring and giant strides” (p. 40). All the flaws, Heisig assures us, are offset by Nishida’s originality. The section tries to prove the point.

According to Nishida, individual consciousness can reflect on the absolute principle rationally, but at the same time, since it is itself a manifestation of that principle, it can also intuit it directly. This is not just speculation, but rather Nishida’s philosophical reconstruction of the “pure experience” of Zen awakening. His central idea is that reality has a single principle: awareness. Originally a unity, awareness unfolds in time (p. 42), producing the seemingly disparate “I” and “world.” That “I” is ordinary self-awareness, which is a secondary, undesirable formation that needs to be dismantled. With this accomplished, the objective world, the corollary opposite of “I,” is also gone, leaving one to enjoy—within the now “true” self—reality in its pristine state, “simply as it is.” In this condition, with both an identifiable knower and his/her object suppressed or transcended, the activity of knowing becomes identical to its content—“a seeing without the seer or the seen.” Reality simply as it is represents the ultimately affirmative view of the world. Technically speaking, it emerges through a double negation, where the negation of the subject and the object is in turn negated. More precisely, the target of that second, absolute negation is the relativity of the first. The first negation does not completely efface the subject and the object, leaving behind their negative shadow, so to speak. It takes the second negation to eliminate this shadow and so to bridge the remaining gap to the absolute. The affirmation built upon this double negation is that of the absolute nothingness. Absolute nothingness is the source of reality, the ground of both the individual consciousness and the historical world. It replaces Nishida’s first major philosophical idea, “pure experience,” and its later reincarnations as absolute will and (self-)awareness. Nishida, Heisig says, takes the idea of pure experience from William
James and then extends it into ontology, making it into the metaphysical principle based on the identification of reality with consciousness.

In Nishida’s later philosophy, “absolute nothingness” itself recedes into the background while the thinker toys with new angles on his central insight, producing one ultimate principle after another: active intuition, body, self-identity of absolute contradictories, knowing by becoming, eternal now, and locus. Heisig demonstrates indirectly that virtually all Nishida’s principles can be distilled to the unity of reality and consciousness, the unity made possible through the suppression of the subject and the ensuing disappearance of the object, which—as we saw earlier—results in the identity of the activity and the content of consciousness. Locus is actually not so much another version of this principle as the super-principle, the ultimate framework or ground for all the others. The self-identity of absolute contradictories (the logic of soku, or affirmation-in-negation), too, has a somewhat special status as a formal pattern at the base of Nishida’s thought. The meaning of soku is close to “i.e.,” “at the same time,” or “and also” (p. 66). Heisig warns that “A soku not-A” should not be understood as “A is not-A” in a strict logical sense, for that would be “talking nonsense.” Instead, it should be taken to mean “something like ‘A-in-not-A is A’.” We could perhaps also phrase it as “A is A in not being A.” The intended meaning, Heisig says, is that a thing is truly itself only at a level beyond that of ordinary, dichotomizing perception, and that it maintains its identity not by virtue of its own substantiality, which would pit it squarely against the epistemological subject, but through relativity grounded in absolute nothingness.

To bring the elusive sense of Nishida’s formula closer to the reader, Heisig attempts to elucidate it in the framework of Western logic. Are “A” and “not-A” (or, “A” and “A-in-not-A”) contradictories, contraries, or correlatives—or do they simply coincide? Now, generally, the law of contradiction states that a thing cannot be A and not-A at the same time. Two propositions are defined as contrary when both can be false but not true. They are correlative if they are reciprocally related so that each implies the existence of the other. They coincide when they occupy the same place in space or time, or correspond or agree in nature, character, or function. Heisig initially suggests that “what Nishida calls ‘contradictories’ are often closer to what we might call ‘contraries’ or ‘correlatives’” (ibid.). He does not specify the sense in which they may be regarded as contraries. But he does explain that the terms “A” and “not-A” can be thought of as identical in the sense of correlatives that, according to dialectical logic, “require one another and a common medium (or universal) to be understood” (ibid.). One correlative term entails the other, such as in the pairs self-other, life-death, and past-future. On the other hand, understood as the identity of strict contradictories, Nishida’s formula would “offend the rules of logical discourse”—it would be nonsensical (ibid.).
And yet, Heisig reports that “surprisingly enough, [Nishida] seems to have been [intending his formula as a contradiction].” He believes that Nishida’s purpose is, first, to refute “the subject-object dichotomy” and second, to “point to the basic contradiction between being and nothingness” (p. 67). As Heisig observes, Nishida fails in his first objective, the refutation, because the formula “A soku not-A,” when interpreted as referring to subject and object, expresses but a simple identity in which one opposite is equated with the other. Rather than effectively refuting the difference, such an identity turns out to be “no better than, say, poetic or artistic expression in which things are allowed to run together.” But, according to Heisig, Nishida succeeds in his second objective. If we understand the formula as a way of stating that each thing is a coincidence of the relative and the absolute, then the self-identity of the two terms that make up a thing expresses “the location of the relative world of being in an absolute of nothingness” (ibid.).

In summary: Although the two terms, A and not-A, are closer to being contraries or correlatives, Nishida insists on calling them contradictories; and his claim is legitimate insofar as one term coincides with the other, which is the case if one stands for the relativity of a thing, and the other for its absolute nihility. Now, if the reader finds that keeping up with the distinctions between contrariness, contradictoriness, correlativity, and coincidence has been no easy matter, our confusion may be compounded by finding that “we see contradictories and contraries coinciding in the world of being” (ibid.). Further, we will likely have trouble following the train of the argument unless we have grasped Nishida’s understanding of the relationship between relativity and absolute nothingness. But in a circular way, the argument is unfolded in order to clarify that relationship. The definition of the relationship as collocation or “the location of the relative world of being in an absolute of nothingness” is helpful but vague. At the end, we seem to have little choice but resignedly to agree with Heisig’s conclusion that Nishida’s concept of self-identity of absolute contradictories reflects the difficulty consciousness and language have with capturing reality.

The next topic is art and morality, which Nishida considers to be two distinct self-expressions of the single absolute principle, the self-effacement of ego. Neither claims much of the philosopher’s attention. The same is true for religion and God, and then again for the historical world, Nishida’s theory of which Heisig assesses as one of the weakest points of his thought. Since the philosopher is interested mainly in history’s place in the system of metaphysics, rather than in the analysis of historical processes as they unfold in time, he leaves a “gap . . . between the metaphysical ground of the historical world in absolute nothingness and the actual events that make up that world as we live in it” (p. 70). That gap is profound, extending from the question of history deep into the core of
Nishida’s philosophy. For example, Nishida believes that things can be made to appear “just as they are” as soon as the operation of the ordinary self and its representation of the world as its object are suppressed. What gets eliminated in the process is the “I” as the “organizational, central ‘point’ in consciousness” that “grasps [the world] in perception and judgment” (p. 73). Taken as a recommendation to function in the world without organizing, perceiving, and judging, the idea is astonishing but consistent with Nishida’s inattention to historical reality. But if the philosopher is trying to say that it is absolute consciousness that takes over the organizational activity, perception, and judgment of the individual—that the perceptual and other activities automatically restart on the absolute level—he leaves us in the dark as to the precise nature of this development. The doubt raised by this point is of a kind with the uneasy feeling one has about the tenability of Nishida’s “pure experience.” Again, on p. 76, Heisig describes Nishida’s attempt to resolve the dualisms such as that between the individual and the universal or that between the historical and the absolute by structuring reality as a series of progressively more inclusive classes or universals, each embracing and determining its predecessor, with the ultimate universal, absolute nothingness, at the end. In effect, instead of the initial two worlds (historical and absolute), Nishida now offers us a multi-layered hierarchy. What Heisig does not mention is that this alleged solution only pushes the problem of dualism a step back. Structuring reality into multiple layers does not remedy the original dichotomy unless we assume that the degree of absoluteness increases stepwise from one universal to the next. But such an assumption would be equivalent to identifying universality with absoluteness, where a higher universal (or a larger class) is considered to be more absolute. Such identification seems to be unwarranted. Once we reject it, the idea of gradual absolutization becomes untenable. Instead, all the universals (classes) except absolute nothingness—which is the “universal of universals” or the “class of all classes”—must be seen as belonging wholly to the historical world. Absolute nothingness, on the other hand, remains absolute, an isolated, suprahistorical entity in itself. The chasm between the two worlds, although camouflaged by the hierarchization of one of them, runs as deep and distinct as before; the mechanism through which the absolute determines the relative remains unexplained. Other examples of Nishida’s indifference toward historical reality are his lack of interest in social questions, the dependence of his conception of culture on the metaphysics of nothingness (p. 87), and his unfortunate support of Japan’s militaristic ideology during the war period. (Heisig’s general observation here is that out of the three figures, only Tanabe’s endorsement of Japan’s war effort is formally built into the philosophy itself, while in case of Nishida and Nishitani, that endorsement represents little more than a “flirtation with Japanism” [p. 262]).
The next section of the book is devoted to Tanabe’s “Gothic philosophical cathedral” (p. 112). Heisig organizes his discussion of Nishida’s younger colleague around three points. The first is the dialectic of absolute mediation as applied to “Tanabe’s crowning idea” (ibid.), the logic of the specific or species. The second consists in his political philosophy. The third is the philosophy of repentance and absolute critique of reason. Heisig’s overall plan is “to show that [despite this diversity, Tanabe’s] thought does present a total structure from beginning to end” (p. 112–113). The first few chapters trace the young Tanabe’s interest in Kant, neo-Kantianism, scientific positivism, and phenomenology, and sketch his early ideas about natural sciences, morality, freedom, and teleology. Later, building upon the Hegelian model of reality, Tanabe develops a theory of absolute mediation, where “each thing and individual consciousness is at one and the same time its own self and an other to every other thing with which it interacts, and apart from this interaction nothing exists” (p. 117). Tanabe asserts that a thing is not simply itself but rather itself-in-other; that is, it represents affirmation-in-negation, for there is no pure affirmation or pure negation without its opposite (p. 118). According to Heisig, the crucial point in Tanabe’s philosophy of mediation is not that “things are what they are because they are not other things, or that things are related to one another by not being one another,” but rather that “these very relationships are always and ever mediated by other relationships. Nothing on its own relates to anything else directly, but always through the agency of other relationships” (p. 118). This not entirely lucid point becomes somewhat clearer in the subsequent discussion of the logic of the specific. Tanabe builds that logic upon the category of species, understood as a sociocultural substratum of a particular race, a mode of thought of an “ethnic society” that gives it its identity but also makes it a specific and, consequently, closed society. Only the category of the state, an absolute relativized through interaction with other states, can counteract the isolation of the species. In the period preceding the Second World War, Tanabe increasingly tailors his view of the role of the state to the taste of the national propaganda. Arguing that Tanabe’s “political deviation resulted from a failure to examine his own premises and to heed his own warnings” (pp. 112–113), Heisig nevertheless tries to show the consistency of Tanabe’s political thought within his philosophical corpus. One fourth of the section—a proportion similar to that in the section on Nishitani but larger than the one-sixth in the case of Nishida—is devoted to Tanabe’s political involvement during the war. That includes a summary of several contemporary critiques leveled at Tanabe and a discussion of the moderate degree of the philosopher’s ensuing “repentance.”

After the war, Tanabe makes a constructive use of what bad conscience he has developed over his political behavior. The result is his *Philosophy as Metanoetics*. Negatively, the new thinking expressed in that book takes
Western philosophy systematically to task for its espousal of rationality. Having attempted to demonstrate the ultimate impotence of Western thought, Heisig continues, Tanabe proposes a positive alternative consisting in reason’s submission to religion. Since one cannot expect reason to destroy itself, this must be accomplished through recourse to the Other-power. Embodied in Amida, the Other-power takes over from reason the burden of critiquing rationality. This point ties in with a subsequent chapter where Heisig expounds on the origins of Tanabe’s divergence from Nishida and offers an interesting comparison between the two thinkers. The “true self” proposed by Tanabe, says Heisig (p. 171), is not Nishida’s original state of awareness successfully undoing the damage wrought by discriminating consciousness, but rather one that, unable to escape its core delusions and finitude, rejects the self-power and gives itself over to the Other-power of Amida. Truth is attained at the point where the self realizes it can never attain it by itself. Regrettably, Heisig moves through this difficult but important point rather quickly, making do with a comment that although the awakening “does not dispose of the self’s finiteness,” yet “somehow” it reaffirms its existence (ibid.). Tanabe also differs from Nishida in their respective conceptions of pure experience. While the latter defines pure experience in predominantly subjective terms, Tanabe is unwilling to exclude from it the element of objective knowledge. This qualifies his philosophy as “objective idealism” in contrast to Nishida’s “subjective” one (p. 113). Tanabe further criticizes Nishida for ignoring mediation as the dynamic basis of reality, and for slipping instead into contemplation of the “self-identity of absolute contradictories” which Tanabe sees as the static, Plotinean ONE in disguise (p. 315). Finally, there is a difference in the way the two thinkers approach absolute nothingness. While Nishida considers it—in the context of the true self—to be “seeing without the seer or seen,” for Tanabe absolute nothingness expresses the non-substantial and non-mediated principle of mediation that constitutes the historical world, “almost a kind of Élan vital, a dynamic that keeps the dialectic of interrelatedness going” (pp. 121–122). Later in Tanabe’s philosophy, absolute nothingness becomes “enriched by the idea of Other-power in Pure Land Buddhism” as discussed earlier. This transformation reflects the shift in Tanabe’s philosophical interest between the earlier and later stages of his career. But if the Tanabe section abounds in such transformations and shifts, some at least can be accounted for simply by inconsistent or misleading terminology employed. One example is offered by the use of the term “culturism.” On p. 123, Heisig defines Tanabe’s understanding of it as worship and emulation of high culture from abroad. But two pages later, he speaks about “the closed mentality of contemporary [Taishō-era] Japan that showed up in its culturism.” And on p. 194, we read that culturism is “the culture of autonomy” that characterizes the modern world, negatively infecting religious consciousness. Now, emulation of
foreign culture, closed mentality, and autonomy are at best unrelated, and 
at worst inconsistent, terms. Closed mentality can be associated with 
emulation of foreign culture and autonomy, respectively, only under the 
negative interpretation of emulation as concomitant with diffidence or 
obtuseness, and of autonomy as disregard for others. This interpretation 
seems to be substantiated on p. 147, where the specificity of the sociocul-
tural substratum is said to “close the will to moral action in the name of 
ideals from outside” and oppose all mediation, and on p. 148, where the 
specific is nevertheless credited with offering a possibility of redemption 
from ignorance and “self-will” (which presumably are characteristics of 
culturism). We seem to advance a little in “Notes” on p. 316, where a 
distinction is made between the positive, metaphysical culturism and “the 
crude antipolitical and antisocial culturism that Tanabe saw as distinctive 
of Taisho thinkers.” What seems to be relatively clear throughout these 
references is that “culturism” is related to specificity. But this does not help 
determine whether culturism is characterized by openness or closeness, for 
the terms “specific” and “species” are themselves multivalent and can 
carry either meaning. Heisig uses “specific” interchangeably with “a 
people,” “society” or “ethnic society,” “species” (e.g., p. 126), and “race.” 
Confusingly, he keeps switching between the terms “nation” and “state”; 
on p. 320 we also read about “the specificity of society and nation.” On p. 
132, Heisig says that from Tanabe’s very first essay on the logic of the 
specific, “it is clear that Tanabe saw nation as the necessary condition for 
salvation from the irrationality of the specific.” But on p. 147, he observes 
that “Tanabe had never denied his initial position that the nation shares 
with the ethnic closed society that essential and permanent presence of nonrationality that is the mark of the specific,” and he seems to use 
“nation” and “species” synonymously. For example, the context suggests 
that “nation” in the statement “nation loses the character of simple imme-
diacy...” (p. 149, last line) is synonymous with “species.” Yet, passages 
such as “nation as the salvation of the realm of the specific (a people)” (p. 
147) show that the two are quite distinct. While it is possible that the 
variation in Heisig’s usage of terms simply reflects the metamorphoses of 
Tanabe’s thought, the book does not furnish sufficient evidence for such 
conclusion. The Tanabe section closes with a discussion of the philosopher’s 
dialectic of death (the “death” of everyday self as a condition of awakening 
to true self) and a survey of his late publications on literature and aesthetics.
The following section of the book is devoted to Nishitani. Heisig 
credits this “first-rate philosophical mind” (p. 255) with bringing the Kyoto 
School to prominence, and applies to his output expressions such as 
“masterpiece,” “splendid but demanding,” and “a giant step in the ad-
vance of Japanese philosophy and religious thinking onto the stage of 
world intellectual history.” Nishitani’s thought can be reduced to a few 
basic ideas. As Heisig says, the Japanese thinker was not interested in
developing a philosophical system, but rather in finding a unifying standpoint vis-à-vis reality and then in deepening it so as to overcome obstacles to “seeing things as they are.” Nishitani’s motivation is overtly religious. His goal in seeing things as they are is to overcome nihilism born out of the upheavals of modernity. To achieve this, Nishitani believes, nonrational insight is required into the fact that reality extends below the subject-object dichotomy, to the level of bottomlessness that is common to both. That common bottomlessness or non-substantiality is the standpoint of absolute nothingness—neither objective fact nor subjective theory, but a level of awareness at which the two interpenetrate. Nothingness is a standpoint; although it makes a separate self (the subject) disappear, its concept is based on the model of self-awareness that serves as a paradigm of all reality. Nishitani labels this standpoint “true self” or “no-self.” In true self, we act out of our naturalness, and things are as they really are. Breaking through to deeper awareness opens a new dimension in reality, where things and problems obsolete themselves in their ordinariness and open in their suchness. With this in mind, Nishitani talks about “overcoming nihilism by passing through it.” Nothingness is rediscovered in the world of being without destroying that world (p. 244), but instead deepening it; the salvific “other shore” is this very world (p. 195), and the process of spiritual ascent is achieved through descent into radical finitude (p. 219).

That Heisig makes these few pivotal ideas reappear in various guises throughout the Nishitani section is a faithful reflection of the actual spiral, recursive development of the philosopher’s thought. As Heisig rightly observes, “Nishitani was always looking for the same thing, and once he found it, he went out to look for it again.” The first name by which Nishitani called that thing was “elemental subjectivity.” An early synonym of absolute nothingness, “elemental subjectivity” is achieved in Zen meditation at the point when one lets “the bottom drop out” from under one’s ordinary consciousness based on the idea of a solid self. This is the leading idea of Nishitani’s mystically tinged first book, A Philosophy of Elemental Subjectivity (1940); it continues to occupy the philosopher’s attention, with variations of terminology, throughout his career. Proceeding to examine Nishitani’s ideological contributions during the war period, Heisig believes that the politically engaged thinker was—just like Nishida—out of his philosophical element (p. 262). Nishitani’s “abstract sermons,” as one critic put it, were out of touch with the concrete historical situation they were supposed to grasp, a situation symptomatic of Nishitani’s general difficulty in applying his theories to the problems of the actual world (p. 210). At the same time, Heisig cautions that “to dismiss Nishitani summarily for the statements made during the war, with no consideration of how he got through that position, is a far greater prejudice than Nishitani’s own prejudices had been” (pp. 213–214).
Next, Heisig examines Nishitani’s idea of nihilism developed in the book *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*. The philosopher differentiates the European and Japanese nihilism, but blames both on the irreligious worldview fostered by the scientific progress. In Heisig’s paraphrase of Nishitani, nihilism is overcome through recovering a will towards the future grounded in the past. This is to be achieved through plumbing one’s spiritual depths, aided by the exploration of Buddhist nothingness and emptiness. Apart from this rather general recommendation, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism* does not present a working proposal for how to actually go about the task. Such proposal does not come until Nishitani’s next major work, *Religion and Nothingness*, the discussion of which extends over three chapters in Heisig. Since “any genuinely philosophical problem needs to emerge from within oneself” (p. 217), *Religion and Nothingness* develops the problematic of nihilism in more pronouncedly psychological terms. According to Nishitani, the nihilistic process develops in stages. After realizing, in Great Doubt, the nihility of being, a nihilist on the way to enlightenment proceeds to nullify even that nihility, thereby arriving at absolute nothingness or emptiness. The double negation brings an affirmation of self and world. But now, seen in the perspective of absolute nothingness and true suchness, the former has been transformed into no-self and the latter, into things the way they really are.

Nishitani’s approach is not without problems. As Heisig notes (p. 221), “that [Nishitani’s final stage of no-self] is a higher and more real state is not self-evident from the start. By the same token, not every insight that Nishitani records along the way—including the reformulation of a great many western philosophical and theological ideas—is necessarily justified by his own passage, or even by the fact that it has a long tradition in the east standing behind it.” Similarly difficult to justify is Nishitani’s claim that from the standpoint of emptiness everything shows itself for what it is, but at the same unites itself with its opposite—fact with theory, the phenomenal with the noumenal, reality with mind. While Nishitani accounts for that unification on the ground that all oppositions are illusory, Heisig draws attention to the opacity of Nishitani’s argument and its annoying circularity (pp. 223–224), which, as he notes, make this point one of the weakest in Nishitani’s philosophy. Further, according to Nishitani, emptiness (associated with *samādhi*, a state of being mentally settled) allows one to act naturally, i.e., “in accord with the self-nature of oneself and all things. . . . This means that whatever is done in *samādhi* is done spontaneously, and not tailored to the form of one’s personal wishes or even of one’s ideals. . . . Behavior on this homeground of emptiness. . . . is the spontaneous observance of a self no longer attached to itself so that it can ‘realize’ its surroundings” (p. 225). Although Heisig lets this passage go without a comment, we may disagree with the view implied here, that egolessness is our natural or spontaneous state.
Nishitani’s essay published in 1962 under the title “Western Thought and Buddhism” may represent “Nishitani’s way of thinking at its finest” as Heisig describes it, but it seems to bring little new to the idea of bottomlessness of absolute nothingness achieved in the state of non-self or true self. In the areas of ethics and history, again, Nishitani uses the same workhorse paradigm as a carrier of his solutions to concrete problems. Heisig is impatient with Nishitani’s ethical remoteness (pp. 235, 236–237) and with his “ambiguity toward the ethical dimension of religion” (p. 238). Ethics is reduced to acting in accord with the self-awareness of non-ego (pp. 234–235). Reason, together with its application to concrete ethical problems such as social reform, is cast aside as an impediment to self-awareness (p. 237). In such view, “thou” or the “other” are reduced to a dimension of oneself (“no-self,” in Nishitani’s terminology); the I-Thou encounter is authentic only on the ground of nothingness (p. 234), and absolute enmity is absolute harmony. As Heisig is right to recognize, this borders on the nonsensical (p. 234). Similarly, “for many, if not most, of Nishitani’s western readers, the chapters on time and history in Religion and Nothingness are the most dissatisfying because of their irrelevance to lived history” (p. 242). Nishitani believes that the problem of nihilism, embedded in the modern view of history, can only be overcome by a return to the origin of history itself, which is the “eternal now.” There, “directly underfoot of the present,” past and present are both transcended and made simultaneous—without destroying the temporal sequence just as it is. Nishitani blames nihilism equally on science, which he demonizes through oversimplification and clichés (p. 238). The solution Nishitani proposes is worn-out and disappointing: the scientific mode of thought is to be brought within the mind as a problem to be solved through an intrapsychic break to naturalness, which—as we have seen before—is the quality of something “as it is and of itself.”

With advancing years, Nishitani is increasingly taken with Zen: “Zen examples fall into his texts fresh off the tree” (p. 249). But he tempers Zen’s anti-rationalism by devising the concept of “imaging” through which the world appears in reason but without the substantiality of words and concepts and beyond the subject-object dichotomy. By creating an image of an object “on the field of emptiness,” the subject senses the object in its immediacy; the image is both just an image and the object itself. Heisig makes it clear that “imaging” represents no revolutionary turn in Nishitani’s thinking: “[T]he function of the image [was] never formally organized by Nishitani, nor did he go beyond these intimations to an interpretation of imagery that would have required some kind of symbolic theory. . . . One has to suppose that, as an old man who had found a position that basically sufficed for his inquiry into ultimate questions, he faced the twilight of his life with the almost ascetical refusal to distract himself in novelty” (p. 252). Here as throughout the book, Heisig’s way of putting things is delightful.
Toward the end of the section, Heisig discusses Nishitani’s views on organized religion and God. Nishitani’s sees Western Christianity as intolerant, Japanese Christianity as not assimilated into the Japanese soil, and Buddhism as provincial, doctrinally and institutionally rigid, passive, and lacking a clear ethic (pp. 253–254). Nishitani believes that the Christian, personal God is an anthropomorphic projection of human attachment to self and being. It should be overcome by the true, impersonal God who embodies absolute nothingness and who opens in the enlightened awareness of no-self. Heisig is skeptical about “whether or not this method always works; one has the sense that the assumption of its applicability is more tacit than examined at times” (p. 245).

The pattern Heisig employs throughout the Nishitani section is to open a chapter with high praise for the philosopher and to close it with usually gentle but pointed criticism. In effect, Heisig presents the reader with a range of arguments as well as the opportunity to form a final opinion. Nevertheless, there are issues on which one may wish for a more decisive stand in the book. One such issue is Nishitani’s psychologism, or turning of ontological problems into the material to be solved through a breakthrough to no-self. Heisig explains Nishitani’s use of the Buddhist term samādhi as the common ground of mind and reality (p. 225) by the fact that “for Nishitani the structure of self-awareness is a paradigm of how all of reality is constructed,” so “samādhi is not just a state of settled mind, … but the true form of all things as well” (p. 225). To justify this, Heisig suggests we accept Nishitani’s invitation “to betake ourselves to the dimension where things become manifest in their suchness, to attune ourselves to the selfness of the pine tree and the selfness of the bamboo…” (p. 226). One may or may not follow Heisig in finding this poetics “moving,” but it is bound to be of little help as a key to the mechanics of Nishitani’s idea of self-awareness serving as a bridge to the world of objects. And because such mechanics seems to be altogether missing, it is not easy to agree with Heisig that “the standpoint of emptiness entails an ontology and yet is not itself any philosophical position” (p. 226). On the contrary, it seems that Nishitani’s standpoint is very much a position that does not add up to a coherent ontology. In fact, in his more critical moments Heisig recognizes this quite unequivocally. He characterizes Nishitani’s effort “to delineate a conversion to the world in its ‘true suchness,’ a world that is neither subjective nor substantial but a ‘middle way’ that affirms itself in negating them both” as a struggle (p. 228). A few pages later, he also notes that “Nishitani’s descriptions of the liberation of the self, or the encountering of true selfhood, are more mystical in tone than philosophical. . . . In this sense, Nishitani does not give philosophy an epistemology or ontology of the self so much as a permanent critique of all such ways of thinking” (p. 232). Heisig repeats this point later in relation to the Kyoto School as a whole. But
one regrets that these scattered observations do not evolve into a more systematic critique.

In the next section entitled “Prospectus,” Heisig puts the central part of the book in perspective. We find here in a summary format much of the critical argumentation that was often only intimated before. The material is excellent, making one wish Heisig had used it earlier where he could have developed it in more detail. “Prospectus” opens with an outstanding review of the Kyoto School from several different angles. Heisig ranks the originality of the School fairly as below the greatest Western thinkers such as Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, James, and Heidegger. He also observes that compared with their contemporaries such as Whitehead, Wittgenstein, Foucault, Derrida, Habermas, and Gadamer, the Kyoto School “looks like something of an anachronism. What is more, a great many ideas in the philosophical tradition out of which Nishida, Tanabe, and Nishitani worked have been rejected” (p. 264; that last statement is tantalizing, for Heisig does not enlarge upon it anywhere in the book). Similarly, their contribution to the traditional Buddhist studies has been negligible. Their originality lies rather in “the appropriation of eastern ideas into western philosophy” (p. 260). Heisig notes that:

Nishida, Tanabe, and Nishitani do not really belong to the history of philosophy as we know it and under the assumptions that have dominated it up until now. Unless one is prepared to dismiss out of hand the idea of opening up western philosophy to the standpoint of world philosophy, there is literally no place to locate the Kyoto School properly. They have positioned themselves in a place as unfamiliar to the eastern mind as it is to the western. The question of locating them in effect questions the way we have located philosophies east and west. In this context, theirs is not a derivative contribution but something original and revolutionary (ibid.).

Heisig offers three good, although perhaps arbitrarily selected, suggestions for further research on the Kyoto School, by the same token pointing to the weaker spots of his own book: the relation between the three philosophers, the connection between them and the historical transformations of the day, and the central role of individual experience that the School holds up as the standard of truth and the foundation of philosophy. The last two points are particularly important since the disastrous engagement of the three thinkers in wartime events shows “the limits of a philosophy oriented to the contemplative” (p. 263). Heisig then singles out three topics as the suitable criteria for evaluating the place of the Kyoto School in the world philosophy (pp. 265–266). The first is their polyvalent notion of no-self, combining the soteriological, moral, and metaphysical
aspects, of which the moral one is distinctly underdeveloped. The second topic concerns the anthropocentric and subjectivist consequences of using the concept of self-awareness as a paradigm for the structure of reality, whereby the Kyoto School becomes the first culprit in what they criticize as the anthropocentrism of Western philosophy. The third topic has to do with the ambiguity of the notion “God,” in which the School’s critique of the Christian God intersects their own idea of God as a no-self approaching absolute nothingness.

In the course of the book, Heisig touches upon a few interesting, general questions. For example, to what extent should the Japanese philosophers be judged on their own terms rather than according to universal standards? In other words, is there an Oriental logic or only universal logic? Heisig endorses (pp. 36–37, 288) Nishida’s view that there is “concrete” logic, or “a general sense of the principles of discourse” (meaning a Japanese logic), as separate from “methodological rules that distinguish a good argument from a bad one” (universal logic). Heisig never tries to prove the point directly. But indirectly he does a lot toward substantiating it, and his book is likely to convince the undecided readers that the “logic” of Zen and Pure Land mysticism does in fact constitute an alternative way to see the world.

Despite his emphasis on the idiosyncratic character of the Kyoto School philosophy, however, Heisig generally believes that its ideas are transferable across languages (p. 281). Perhaps this is why he discusses linguistic matters sparingly, to the certain disappointment of the readers interested in the Japanese equivalents of the key terms discussed. There is no substantial index of Japanese terms; only selected kanji appear, scattered across “Notes.” For example, while explaining the meaning of the characters kyô, gyô, shin, and shô in Shinran’s Kyôgyôshinshô (p. 322), Heisig does not show the characters themselves. In the Nishida section, one looks in vain for the original Japanese for the English “self-awareness” and “active intuition.” And commenting on Nishitani’s play on the polyvalence of the Chinese character for samâdhi (p. 224), Heisig simply, and rather unkindly, advises the reader to consult the glossary in the English translation of Religion and Nothingness. Another cause for mild irritation is Heisig’s occasional use of German and Latin expressions without translation. For example, “a gewordener Buddhist” (p. 254; literally meaning “someone who became a Buddhist,” but here used apparently in the sense of “a past Buddhist”) is an English-German neologism, the meaning of which can with some effort be deduced from the context, but which would otherwise be difficult to trace by someone unfamiliar with German and the Kyoto School scholarship. However, the language of the book is one of its strong points. Heisig writes in a lively style that increases our enjoyment of reading without detracting from the incisiveness of the argument. The book is free from heavy and potentially misleading philosophical termi-
nology; Heisig uses terms such as existence, essence, phenomenal, noetic, etc., only when referring to Western philosophy or when reporting on a Kyoto School thinker as himself using the term. Nevertheless, Philosophers of Nothingness requires patient, close reading. Some passages are not clear, and the argument can get convoluted, becoming more understandable only from the perspective of a later discussion. This, I believe, is due mostly to the abstruseness of the ideas discussed. Heisig’s interpretations are usually remarkably clear, and—as far as I can say—almost always justified and trustworthy, if occasionally tendentious.

Heisig writes authoritatively, despite being self-critical at times. Overt references to secondary literature are infrequent, except in “Notes.” He approaches his subjects with critical appreciation. He anticipates reader’s objections, shows implications of the arguments he presents, and shores up the weaker points of the ideas under discussion by elucidating the unspoken or unconscious assumptions of their authors. Heisig defends the three philosophers when he fears their work may suffer from misunderstanding, for example, expressly refuting the reportedly common perception of Nishida’s logic of absolute contradictoriness as “oriental mumbo-jumbo.” Another case in point is Heisig’s sensitive analysis of the three thinkers’ political involvement during the war era, which he considers from the standpoint of the integrity of their philosophical thought and without a trace of moralizing. He carefully reconstructs the interplay between various strains of their motivations, and does not justify or condemn their collaboration with the military regime; he simply tries to understand it. But when appropriate, he is mercilessly critical—of their “fair share of commonplace and ordinary ideas” (p. 261), convoluted style, unclear and inconsistent thinking, and superficial understanding of Western sources.

With respect to Western philosophy, Heisig’s presentation is generally accurate and apposite. But occasionally, he stereotypes and oversimplifies. For example on pp. 66–67, while correctly drawing attention to Nishida’s dependence on Hegel, Heisig reduces the latter’s central notion of negation unfairly to the “idea that a negation clarifies the meaning of an affirmation” and concludes sweepingly that for Hegel “all [the emphasis is Heisig’s] contradiction, whether in categories of thought or in social movement, is simply the manifestation of a deeper unity that gives them their reality.” On pp. 117–118, Heisig mentions “Nishida’s concern that philosophical logic reach beyond grammatical form and rules of thinking to keep us in mind of the fact that there is, after all, an actual experiential world we are trying to explain, and that the mind that is trying to explain it is part of it.” This concern is occasioned by “Hegel’s model” of reality as absolute relationality. By implication, this suggests that it is Hegel whose philosophical logic does not reach beyond grammatical form and rules of thinking into the actual experiential world. If this passage refers to the speculative rather than empirical nature of Hegel’s thought, the opinion is
warranted. But it is a biased interpretation of Hegel to say that the philosopher gave no consideration to the experiential world in his philosophical logic. Heisig does not state this directly, and he does not report Nishida as doing so, either. But the misleading implication is strongly present. On p. 120, while discussing Tanabe’s attitude towards Hegel and Marx, Heisig characterizes—presumably their—dialectic of history as “an ultimately meaningless hydraulics of energy flowing back and forth between self and other to give each its identity by negating the other.” The qualification “ultimately meaningless” in this caricature betrays a very curious understanding of the Hegelian or Marxist view of history. There are also ideas and passages (admittedly infrequent) that introduce new concepts without explaining them, and those that contain inconsistencies that appear to result from oversight. On pp. 44–45, Heisig suggests that at the time the 40-year-old Nishida published his first book, “[he] simply did not know Hegel that well . . ., and much of what he knew he got indirectly from the neo-Hegelian Thomas Green.” But on p. 313, he reports that “from early on, Nishida was . . . swept up in the imaginative power of the Hegelian system and its aftermath.” Of course, Nishida could have been swept by Hegel without knowing him that well, but I suspect this is not what was meant. On p. 108, Heisig says: “Tanabe made a clean break from what he saw as . . . the abstract dogmatism of German Idealism. Soon thereafter, in the course of two years of lectures on Fichte and Schelling his interest in Hegel was piqued.” Given the fact that Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel, alongside Kant, are considered to be the chief representatives of German Idealism and are often characterized as abstract and dogmatic, it must be from them that Tanabe has made a clean break. So how could he have lectured on Fichte and Schelling afterwards? And even if we concede that one does not necessarily exclude the other, how are we to explain Tanabe’s positive attitude toward Hegel after the break? Heisig’s intention here is difficult to understand. The book also contains quite a few proofreading errors.

A more general problem—despite Heisig’s objective and critical stance—lies in his reluctance to take his analysis of the Kyoto School philosophy beyond a rather general level. In all fairness, the book is called Philosophers of Nothingness rather than Philosophies of Nothingness. Besides, Heisig seems to be intent on making the text accessible to a broad range of readers. But the price to pay, as he himself modestly acknowledges, is that the general reader may find the book a tight fit, while a reader already familiar with the subject will find it too loose (p. x). The occasional casualness of Heisig’s philosophical scrutiny is part of this “looseness” of the book. For example, when observing that Nishida inversed the “logic of self-consciousness that he met in western thought” (p. 52), Heisig does not specify which Western thought he means. In his discussion of Nishida’s philosophy of the Absolute as pure awareness, Heisig does suggest that
Hegel’s notion of “Absolute Mind” and William James’ Essays in Radical Empiricism exerted an influence on the Japanese philosopher. But although Heisig offers a good summary of James in this context, he leaves us in the dark regarding Hegel and his idea of Absolute—an idea without an understanding of which we will not be able to put Nishida in the right perspective. That is, we learn about the Hegelian parentage of Nishida’s thought, but we are not adequately informed about what Hegelianism means (and it can mean a very broad range of things), either for Nishida or for Heisig. In another instance, when discussing Nishida’s idea of will in reality and consciousness, Heisig writes: “[Nishida says] that ‘It is not so much that I give birth to my desires, but that the motivation of reality is me’; and later on: ‘The will is a fundamental unifying activity of consciousness, . . . a power of the self.’ In the years ahead he will take these ideas further to see will, in this broad sense of a fundamental life force, as an absolute principle more fundamental than consciousness, in fact almost a rethinking of the idea of pure experience” (p. 46). This point in the book would significantly benefit from a comparison with Schopenhauer, whether Nishida consciously drew on his ideas or not. Yet, Heisig’s reference to Schopenhauer, while not entirely absent, is limited to a single paragraph in “Notes” (p. 292). Without an adequate comparative analysis, we will not be in a position to know what new ideas, if any, Nishida’s theory of absolute will has to offer the post-Schopenhauerian audience. Similarly, Heisig’s discussion of Nishida’s and Tanabe’s conception of identity through opposition (pp. 81, 103, 117)—the more pronounced the opposition, the stronger the identity—is incomplete without a reference to Spinoza’s insight that every determination is a negation, an idea that has influenced generations of European philosophers including the German Idealists who exerted such an enormous influence on the Kyoto School. Heisig’s procedure may satisfy readers well versed in Western philosophy, those who can fill in the gaps for themselves. Others may walk away from the book without having understood some of its crucial passages. In the end, the scarcity of adequate comparative analyses makes it difficult for Heisig to keep his promise of showing the place of the Kyoto School thought in the world philosophy. Incidentally, Heisig points to that promise as the reason for “eliminating nearly all excursions into Buddhist thought.” (On the occasions where he does mention the Buddhist roots of the Kyoto School, he refers to them for the most part en bloc as “Zen, Pure Land, Kegon, and Tendai Buddhist ideas” [pp. 25, 219, et passim], or “Eastern metaphysics” [p. 58].) Heisig justifies this “glaring omission,” which indeed it is, by his wish to remain within the framework of traditional philosophy. But by committing it, he deprives us of a view on a major facet of his topic.

On the back cover of the book, Jan Van Bragt is quoted to say that Heisig’s intellectual stature allows him to relive the ideas of the Kyoto School and place them in the wider history of philosophy. I fully agree with
the point about the intellectual stature. But, although I also acknowledge
that Heisig has succeeded in placing the Kyoto School in the wider history
of philosophy, I am not certain whether he did enough to make us
understand where exactly that place falls. It is one thing to generate
creative ideas, but quite another for those ideas to be world-class. Heisig
shows the former to be true for Nishida, Tanabe, and Nishitani, but he does
not conclusively prove the latter. For example (and I have already given
analogous examples earlier), what new ideas does Tanabe’s theory of
absolute mediation add to the post-Hegelian world philosophy? What
does his religious and ethical thought teach us beyond what we already
know from Pure Land Buddhism and Kierkegaard? Heisig does not tell us,
but, to his credit, he often graciously acknowledges the omissions when
they occur. For example, Tanabe’s *Philosophy as Metanoetics*, Heisig says,
is a “dense book that defies abbreviation.” If what Tanabe proposes
appears to be an ordinary Christian theology, it is only because Heisig’s
abbreviation of his ideas has “eliminated both the full range and rigor of
Tanabe’s argument” (p. 159). Similarly in the section on Nishitani, p. 216,
when relating the philosopher’s analysis of the differential resolution of
nihilism in Europe and Japan—an analysis essentially correct but appar-
ently not particularly profound—he exonerates Nishitani on the latter
count on the grounds that the philosopher has arrived at his conclusions
“by a process of argument far too intricate to reproduce here.” And again
on pp. 221–222, we read: “So much is sacrificed here in the telling, not only
of the careful way Buddhist and western philosophical ideas are interwov-
ened but also of the existential feel of Nishitani’s prose, that I am tempted to
run page after page of quotation from the book into the text at this point.
But even that, I fear, would not breathe the soul into the bare bones of this
summary that Nishitani has inspired.” Heisig may be right in principle,
but I feel he is also being excessively diffident. I take the liberty of
understanding this passage to mean that he finds the nature of Nishitani’s
excellence or originality difficult to determine. Such capitulation is disap-
pointing given Heisig’s facility with language and his superb command of
the subject. In any case, the question of originality is to a large extent a
matter of opinion, and besides, perhaps not all the readers will share the
degree of my concern about it. Whatever their final verdict on this point
may be, most should agree that overall, *Philosophers of Nothingness* is an
outstanding commentary on the Kyoto School and a remarkable achieve-
ment of philosophical criticism.