

TANABE Hajime, *Philosophy as Metanoetics*. TAKEUCHI Yoshinori, transl., with Valdo Viglielmo and James W. Heisig. Foreword by James W. Heisig. Berkeley: University California Press, 1986. lxii + 316 pp., with an index.

*Philosophy as Metanoetics* (*Zangedō to shite no tetsugaku* 懺悔道としての哲学) by Tanabe Hajime is one of the most original, creative, and important philosophical texts to have emerged from what has become known as the “Kyoto School” of Japanese Buddhism. The superb translation of this work by Takeuchi Yoshinori, along with Valdo Viglielmo and James W. Heisig, is accompanied by an illuminating Foreword and Introduction. In short, this is a landmark work published through the Nanzan Studies in Religion and Culture series.

Throughout this work Tanabe elaborates a philosophy of religion with an existential basis which combines the Pure Land Buddhist teachings of Shinran (1173–1262) with a critical analysis of the thought of Eckhart, Kant, Schelling, Hegel, Pascal, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and Heidegger, as well as the always present yet never mentioned Nishida Kitarō. His discussion of these various thinkers, elaborated in the course of formulating his own highly original thought matrix, is so rich and mult nuanced that there is simply no way to do it any justice in the space of a brief review. Yet, I would like to highlight just a few of the salient moments in Tanabe’s remarkable text.

At the outset of his work, Tanabe introduces “metanoetics” (*zangedō* 懺悔道), or “metanoesis” (*zange*), as the master concept of his philosophical system. By the term “metanoesis” Tanabe essentially means the salvific experience of repentance, conversion, awakening, and transformation through the grace of absolute “Other-power” (*tariki* 他力). Influenced by the teachings of Jesus on the one side and Shinran on the other, Tanabe underscores the literal meaning of metanoesis as an act of “repentance” whereby a full confession of one’s prior sins is accompanied by an attitude of sincere penitence. He writes: “Metanoesis (*zange*) signifies repentance for the wrongs I had

done, with the accompanying torment of knowing that there is no way to repent for my sins" (p. li).

However, for Tanabe, "repentance" as the painful recollection of one's past sins accompanied by a feeling of deep remorse itself signifies only the negative aspect of *zange* or metanoesis, in that the experience of metanoia also involves a positive aspect: namely, that of conversion or transformation. In Tanabe's words: "This affirmative aspect of *zange*, as opposed to its negative aspect, is conversion (transformation). Hence the term 'metanoia' can, as I have stated before, imply both conversion and repentance" (p. 6). By the act of metanoesis one therefore undergoes at once both negation and affirmation through absolute transformation, such that the pain of *zange* in its negative aspect as repentance, and the joy of *zange* in its positive aspect as conversion or awakening, mutually interpenetrate each other (pp. 5–7). In this way repentance is the negative aspect of *zange* which signifies the moment of death or self-negation while conversion is the positive aspect of *zange* which designates the moment of resurrection or self-affirmation. In other words, the repentance of *zange* involves an existential encounter with the radical evil and sin which negates the ego's right to exist at its very core, leading to metanoia as a discipline of death that lets go of the self. Yet, this experience of complete self-negation or self-abandonment which arises in the negative aspect of *zange* as repentance is itself followed by its positive aspect as conversion or awakening, wherein the ego is brought by the transformative grace of absolute Other-power to undergo total death-and-resurrection in order to be restored to its real yet non-substantial existence as "being-*qua*-nothingness" or "empty being" (*kū-u* 空有).

Tanabe continuously emphasizes the moral dimensions of metanoetics as underscored by his use of the two Pure Land Buddhist categories of *ōsō* 往相, or "going toward" the Pure Land, and *gensō* 還相, or "returning to" this world from the Pure Land. While Zen Buddhism, Nishida-*tetsugaku*, and other forms of "ordinary mysticism" based on contemplation or intellectual intuition emphasize the aspect of "going toward" the Pure Land, Tanabe's philosophy of metanoetics follows the True Pure Land Buddhism of Shinran in focussing upon the aspect of *gensō*, "returning to" this world from the Pure Land. In Tanabe's words:

If I may introduce at this point two key concepts characteristic of the teachings of the Pure Land sect of Shin Buddhism — *ōsō* or "going toward" the Pure Land, and *gensō* or "returning to" this world from the Pure Land — metanoetics may be described as a philosophy of action following the path of *gensō*, while ordinary mysticism may be described as contemplative speculation following the path of *ōsō*. The doctrine of *gensō* is thus of special significance in enabling metanoetics to bring about a revival of philosophy (p. 3).

It is precisely this doctrine of *gensō* which establishes the profound social and historical directions of ethical transformation in Tanabe's philosophy of metanoetics. This moral dimension is further highlighted when Tanabe speaks of a "self-consciousness of the Great *Nay-qua*-Great Compassion, or of Nothingness-*qua*-Love, as the core of metanoetics" (p. 256).

While many thinkers in the so-called "Kyoto School" such as Nishida

Kitarō, Nishitani Keiji, Hisamatsu Shin'ichi, Ueda Shizuteru, and Abe Masao are essentially based in the "self-power" (*jiriki* 自力) tradition of Zen Buddhism, Tanabe and Takeuchi are based more in the "Other-power" (*tariki*) tradition of Jōdo Shinshū, the "True Pure Land sect" of Buddhism, founded by Shinran. In particular, Tanabe states that his encounter with Shinran's *Kyōgyōshinshō* 教行信証 was central to the development of his *Philosophy as Metanoetics* (p. lviii). Tanabe follows traditional Japanese Buddhism as well as the modern Japanese philosophy of Nishida Kitarō and the Kyoto School in articulating ultimate reality as "absolute nothingness." However, against Zen Buddhism and Nishida-*tetsugaku*, Tanabe argues that absolute nothingness can never be immediately grasped through the *jiriki* or "self-power" activity of intellectual intuition based on reason, and instead asserts that true absolute nothingness is the transcendent ground of a transformative grace that breaks in upon the self from without as *tariki* or "Other-power." Tanabe's polemic here is that the self-power activity of intellectual intuition grasps only absolute being, whereas true absolute nothingness only appears in an act of metanoesis through the mediation of Other-power. Accordingly, for Tanabe, a primary meaning of metanoetics is precisely in the sense that it transcends the self-power activity of contemplation or intellectual intuition which characterizes "ordinary mysticism," and instead is based on the transformative grace of absolute Other-power. In Tanabe's words:

"Metanoetics" carries the sense of "meta-noetics," denoting philologically a transcending of noetics, or in other words, a transcending of metaphysical philosophy based on contemplation or intellectual intuition achieved by the use of reason. . . . Here we have a very important characteristic by which metanoetics is distinguished from ordinary mysticism or philosophies of intellectual intuition: it is not a philosophy founded on the intuitive reason (self-power), but rather a philosophy founded on action-faith-witness mediated by the transformative power of *tariki* (Other-power) (p. 2-3).

Hence, metanoetics in its sense as meta-noetics represents a transition from the standpoint of self-power in Zen Buddhism and other forms of ordinary mysticism based on intellectual intuition, to that of Other-power as espoused by Shinran's Pure Land sect of Shin Buddhism. As Tanabe writes: "In short, my metanoesis—my conversion—consists in a shift from *jiriki* to *tariki*. Put in positive terms, metanoetics represents the philosophy of Other-power" (p. 11). Yet, at the same time Tanabe's position is far more subtle than this, insofar as metanoetics represents a dialectic of "absolute mediation" which functions to correlate both *jiriki* and *tariki*, self-power and Other-power, or relative being and absolute nothingness, in each and every act of *zange*. He describes this convergence of self-power and Other-power in the act of *zange* or metanoesis as follows:

Metanoesis is action performed by the self, but at the same time it is the practice of abandoning the self. Hence it originates in the Great Compassion of Other-power. Nevertheless, it is actually the self that submits

itself voluntarily to Other-power and performs this action. Paradoxically, metanoesis both is and is not the action of the self. As mediated by absolute nothingness, it is action without an acting self (pp. 170–171).

It is precisely this correlation of self-power and Other-power in the act of metanoesis which Tanabe elsewhere refers to as *jiriki-qua-tariki* and *tariki-qua-jiriki*. In his own words:

Only the dialectic of reciprocal mediation can bring about self-consciousness of the fact that the real grace of Other-power is activated through the spontaneous freedom of self-power, and conversely, that the realization of human freedom in self-power becomes possible only through the assistance of Other-power. By means of this dialectic we are able to understand *jiriki-qua-tariki* and *tariki-qua-jiriki* (p. 184).

According to Tanabe, then, the radical self-negation of metanoesis is prompted from without by the Other-power of absolute nothingness which transcends the self: the self thereby acts while being acted upon. On the one side the grace of Other-power is manifested only in and through a free act of self-power, while on the other side a free act of self-power brings forth, as well as depends upon, the inflowing grace of absolute Other-power.

In his efforts to uncover the limitations inherent in the *jiriki* self-power function of intellectual intuition achieved by the use of reason, Tanabe develops a logic of metanoetics, in terms of what he calls his “absolute critique,” based on Kant’s critique of pure reason together with the Hegelian counter-critique (pp. 36–57). According to Tanabe, the Kantian critique of pure reason is incomplete, insofar as it endeavors to expose the self-contradictions or “antinomies” of pure reason, while at the same time trying to justify reason by establishing its relative competence through critique (p. 43). Although Hegel agreed with Kant that pure reason generates self-contradictions, he went on to try to overcome these antinomies of pure reason through a dialectic of synthesis based on the self-identity of contradictions. However, in refutation of Kant’s position, Tanabe argues that pure reason is not qualified to criticize itself, such that the reason which performs the critique must itself be subjected to a thoroughgoing criticism. Moreover, against Hegel, he argues that pure reason cannot overcome antinomies through the sublation (*Aufhebung*) of opposites using a dialectic of synthesis based on the self-identity of contradictions. Tanabe demonstrates that both Kantian criticism and Hegelian dialectic are based on the *jiriki* or self-power function of pure reason. Through an absolute critique, however, pure reason based on *jiriki* must “die” by yielding to its self-contradiction, so that it can be reborn as a new philosophy of metanoetics realized through the transformative grace of absolute nothingness or Other-power. Through the death or self-negation of pure reason achieved by means of an absolute critique, philosophy as metanoetics discovers a transcendent ground beyond itself in the Other-power of absolute nothingness. The self-power of pure reason can thus find itself only in and through Other-power. That is to say, only through the grace of Other-power can pure reason criticize itself and understand its true nature. The death-and-resurrection of pure reason thereby results in the realization of *jiriki-qua-tariki* and *tariki-qua-jiriki* as expressed by the dialectic of absolute mediation. Hence, Tanabe writes:

Viewed as the capacity for death-and-resurrection, reason is a function of *jiriki-qua-tariki*, established in the transformation and mediation of obedience to absolute Other-power and arriving at a manifestation of absolute nothingness (p. 107).

Throughout *Philosophy as Metanoetics* it is evident that Tanabe's dialectic of absolute mediation has been profoundly influenced by Hegel's dialectic, insofar as it repudiates any idea of an "unmediated" absolute which is thought to exist independent of or transcendent to the relative events of history. Yet, at the same time, Tanabe's work represents a sustained critique of Hegel's abstract logic of "self-identity" based on the principle of "both/and" from the standpoint of Kierkegaard's existential logic of "absolute paradox" based on the principle of "neither/nor." Moreover, it is clear from Tanabe's writings that he associates Zen Buddhism, Nishida-*tetsugaku*, and other forms of ordinary mysticism relying on the self-power of intellectual intuition, with the abstract Hegelian logic of self-identity based on the principle of both/and. In contrast to this, Tanabe asserts that the logic of absolute critique governing his own philosophy of metanoetics is essentially related to Kierkegaard's dialectic of absolute paradox based on the principle of neither/nor. According to Tanabe, while the Hegelian logic of self-identity attempts to reconcile all contradictions and thereby to eliminate the paradoxical nature of reality, in his own logic of absolute paradox as influenced by Kierkegaard, contradictory opposites are never abrogated or sublated, but are left just as they are. Moreover, while the Hegelian logic of self-identity endeavors to synthesize all contradictions with pure speculative reason, Tanabe follows Kierkegaard's dialectic of absolute paradox which is based on the standpoint of faith. He therefore writes:

This is why Kierkegaard sets up his own practical and paradoxical dialectic in opposition to Hegel's speculative and intellectual one. As the logic of my metanoetics, absolute critique follows precisely the same course as that of Kierkegaard's practical and paradoxical dialectic; and as a self-consciousness in action-faith, it is similar to his standpoint of faith (p. 57).

Tanabe further argues that it is ultimately this logic of absolute paradox, based on the principle of neither/nor, which can alone express the dynamics of inwardly subjective faith operative in Christianity as well as in Shinran's Pure Land sect of Shin Buddhism.

However, Tanabe elsewhere argues that his logic of absolute paradox expresses more than the dynamics of faith in Pure Land Buddhism; it also articulates the structure of true Zen Buddhism. His polemic here is that only a logic of absolute paradox can grasp the contradictory nature of reality expressed by the Zen Buddhist *kōans*, including both the paradoxical (unsolvable antinomies) of Rinzai Zen as well as Dōgen's idea that we can "realize reality as a *kōan*" (*genjō-kōan* 現成公案) in the Sōtō sect of Zen Buddhism (pp. 126–128). Metanoetics is therefore a "total *kōan*" rooted in the paradoxical nature of ultimate reality itself (p. 128). Insofar as Tanabe's logic of absolute paradox expresses the contradictory structure of reality as realized

through both Zen and Pure Land Buddhism, he characterizes his philosophy of metanoetics as "Nenbutsu-Zen." He writes: "In essence, metanoetics is a synthesis of the standpoints of *nenbutsu* and Zen Buddhism, a sort of 'Nenbutsu-Zen' " (p. 222).

One of the most stimulating aspects of this volume is Tanabe's sustained criticism of the philosophy of Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945). Although he never mentions Nishida directly by name, throughout his work Tanabe is clearly referring to Nishida's key philosophical notions as marked by their distinctive technical vocabulary. At the deepest level of his critique, Tanabe opposes Nishida's logic of the "self-identity of absolute contradictories" (*zettai mujunteki jiko dōitsu*) with his own "logic of species" (*shu no ronri*) as based on a dialectic of "absolute mediation." As indicated previously, Tanabe insists that his own philosophy of metanoetics follows Kierkegaard's logic of paradox as based on the principle of neither/nor, while Nishida-*tetsugaku* follows Hegel's logic of self-identity based on the principle of both/and. From this standpoint, Tanabe argues that what Nishida regards as a "Zen" logic is actually not a Zen logic at all, since a true Zen logic has the form of neither/nor as founded on the notion of absolute paradox. In what is clearly a reference to Nishida, he therefore writes: "In an attempt to clarify the logic of Zen, one authority of Zen Buddhism has characterized it as the 'discrimination of nondiscrimination' " (p. 56). He continues:

What at first seems close to the logic of Zen in fact deviates greatly from it. For the "discrimination of nondiscrimination" characteristic of Zen is neither/nor. . . . In contrast, the sense of self-identity spoken of in the "self-identity of absolute contradictories" sets up a "nondiscrimination of discrimination" in the form of both/and. Were this not the case, the self-identity could not be stated in positive terms. Even though the term "absolute contradiction" is used, insofar as it is also considered self-identical, it is this latter that is meant, however vaguely it is hinted at, and the absolute contradiction in question ceases to be a neither/nor (p. 56).

According to Tanabe then, even though Nishida's logic is referred to as the "self-identity of absolute contradictions," in fact, it is closer to a Hegelian logic of "self-identity" which endeavors to sublimate or reconcile contradictions, rather than a true logic of "absolute paradox" which leaves contradictions to stand just like they are, such as is expounded in the philosophy of metanoetics under the influence of Kierkegaard. Consequently, insofar as Nishida-*tetsugaku* is founded on a logic of self-identity, it is incapable of articulating the paradoxical structure of reality grasped by Zen as well as Pure Land Buddhism.

Tanabe also criticizes Nishida's celebrated notion of *basho* 場所 or "locus," comprehended as the "place" of absolute nothingness in its sense as the *topos* of the self-identity of absolute contradictories. As Tanabe writes: "It is not as if there were some 'locus' capable of comprehending contradictories in a greater synthesis" (p. 133). Moreover, Tanabe makes critical references to Nishida's idea of the "eternal now" or absolute present as a "locus" which can somehow be directly apprehended by an act of intuition. In Tanabe's words: ". . . the 'eternal now' is not an integral locus to be grasped

by intuition but something infinite to be realized only through one's actions" (p. 132). In this context, Tanabe continually attacks Nishida's idea of "intuition," or "action-intuition," regarding it as a form of "ordinary mysticism" based on self-power, as opposed to a the "action-faith" of metanoesis which relies upon the transformative grace of absolute Other-power.

Correlate with his criticism of Nishida's intuitionism is Tanabe's critique of the former's doctrine of "immediacy" or "immediate experience" in its sense as a "direct" apprehension of absolute nothingness prior to the bifurcation of subject and object. He writes: "Not even the *topos* of absolute nothingness exists immediately" (p. 19). And elsewhere: "Nothingness is not something to which immediate experience can attest; whatever can be experienced immediately, or intuited in objective terms, belongs to being, not to nothingness" (p. 188). Hence, for Tanabe, the immediate experience of reality as a "locus" through the self-power activity of intellectual intuition can itself grasp only absolute being, not absolute nothingness. In this context he further argues that the direct intuition accorded to immediate experience is analogous to the aesthetic contemplation of a self-identical One as described in the mysticism of Plotinus; it is not the realization of true nothingness through the radical death-and-resurrection experience of *zange*. By this view, the self-power functioning of intellectual intuition which operates at the level of immediate experience always has self-identical Being as its content, whereas the ultimate paradox of Absolute Nothingness appears only in an act of metanoesis through faith in the grace of Other-power.

Although it can be argued that Tanabe often overemphasizes his differences with Nishida-*tetsugaku*, nonetheless, his philosophy of metanoetics clearly presents a major challenge to Nishida. Moreover, insofar as Tanabe has succeeded in exposing the tacit presuppositions underlying Nishida's philosophical system while at the same time submitting them to the scrutiny of his own "absolute critique," he has provided readers with a standpoint from which to appropriate the thought of Nishida at a new level of critical understanding.

In conclusion, Tanabe's *Philosophy as Metanoetics* can only be described as a monumental work in the philosophy of religion. Along with the writings of Nishida Kitarō and Nishitani Keiji, Tanabe's thought is another major achievement to arise from the tradition of modern Japanese philosophy.

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