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Nishitani's Philosophy of Emptiness in "Emptiness and Immediacy"

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This paper explores Nishitani Keiji's interpretation of emptiness found in his essay "Emptiness and Immediacy," dating from the last period of his life. The paper first points out that Nishitani focused on the notion of emptiness in his *Religion and Nothingness*, his representative work from his middle years, in relation to the problem of nihilism. However, in "Emptiness and Immediacy," Nishitani takes up the notion of emptiness in relation to human sentiment and the problem of imagination. He argues that emptiness is reflected in human sentiment in a process he terms the "imaging of emptiness." The paper discusses this concept, as well as the related concepts of "making things transparent" and "fundamental imagination," all of which are of central importance in Nishitani's philosophy during his last years.

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There is a marked transition in Nishitani Keiji's 西谷啓治 philosophy of emptiness from his middle to his late period. In this paper, I would like to consider their difference in order to elucidate the development of Nishitani's thought.

The representative expression of the middle phase of Nishitani's philosophy is found in his collection of essays entitled *Religion and Nothingness* (original Japanese title: *Shūkyō to wa nanika* 宗教とは何か, or "What is Religion?"). In this work, emptiness is discussed in relation to nihilism. However, in his later period, emptiness is taken up in relation to "sentiment" (*jōi* 情意), and the problem of "imagination" (*kōsōryoku* 構想力) becomes the central topic of his thought. This change in emphasis is clearly indicated in Nishitani's last essay, "Emptiness and Immediacy" (*Kū to soku* 空と即). Before considering the significance of this transition in Nishitani's thought, let me first consider what he means by "emptiness in sentiment" (*jōi ni okeru kū* 情意における空).

The transition in Nishitani's philosophy of emptiness from his middle to late periods can be expressed by using the following metaphor. In his middle period,

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Nishitani understood emptiness (*kū* 空) as, so to speak, the “empty sky” (*kū* 空, literally “sky”) spreading out above the human world and transcending it. However, in his late period, emptiness is, so to speak, brought down from the heavens to the human world, and was transferred to (*utsuru* 移る) and reflected in (*utsuru* 映る) the world of the sentiment. How are we to understand this change?

The reason why Nishitani, in his middle period, likened emptiness to the all-transcending empty sky is because he sought to understand emptiness in relation to the problem of how to overcome nihilism. Nihilism is not prior to religion. Rather it is an event in history that comes after the age of religion – one which, moreover, denies any possibility of gaining salvation through religion. It nullifies all the various philosophical endeavors (of which religion is the supreme example) that humans have engaged in to overcome the nihility confronting them. Nihilism was born from the midst of religion, and has the same sublime loftiness as religion. At the same time, it can be likened to a new virus that burst forth into the world, bearing the power to invalidate all previous religions and incapable of being cured by any religion. It is characterized by a complete negativity and self-enclosure (*heisasei* 閉鎖性) that no human-centered religion preaching the quest for inner meaning can resolve. There is no way to deal with nihilism from the outside.

Nishitani focused on the philosophy of emptiness because he believed that only it can overcome nihilism. This is because the philosophy of emptiness is even more radical than nihilism, since there lies at its core an absolute negation that breaks through everything intrinsic to humans. In emptiness, there is no place where we can place our hands and feet, no place where we can lay our heads. But complete lack of emotions and thorough disregard for personal gain, both rooted in emptiness, are said to characterize the Buddhas. This is the standpoint of emptiness. Emptiness appeared in Buddhism as something which breaks through the complete self-centeredness which is expressed in the Buddhist tradition most succinctly through the philosophy of karma and transmigration. Similarly, only the absolute negation of emptiness can break through the negativity and self-centeredness of nihilism from the inside. Emptiness gains its philosophical power to break through nihilism from the inside of the Buddhist tradition.

If nihilism can be likened to a mountain range rising above the clouds of the human world, then emptiness can be compared to the empty sky spreading out even further above. It is an infinite clearing beyond the clouds. It is, moreover, a barren wasteland where no traveler goes, an arctic realm where no birds fly, furnishing nothing to which human sentiments can cling. However, such unfeeling arctic world can also become a refreshing world of freedom and liberation. By having such emptiness in the depths of our hearts, we can break out of the self-enclosure of nihilism and stand free. Through the absolute negation of emptiness – a negation that goes beyond the negativity of nihilism, described in the Zen saying that “one still has to go a step beyond a hundred feet or the tip of

an oar (to achieve enlightenment)" (*hyakushaku kantō nao ippo* 百尺竿頭なお一步) – we can score an end run over nihilism. Nihilism is then emptied and nullified. The self-enclosure of nihilism is, so to speak, permeated from the inside by emptiness. This is what Nishitani means when he speaks of "the overcoming of nihilism through nihilism."

However, as stated above, in the later Nishitani, emptiness descends to the human world from the all-transcending empty sky. Emptiness is now reflected in and moved to the human sentiment, and is grasped as "emptiness in the sentiment." When emptiness is reflected in human sentiment in this way, it provides a certain rich tone to sentiment, and sentiment becomes imbued with the fragrance of emptiness. Emptiness then becomes something that humans can "breathe." When such emptiness comes down to, and is reflected in, the world of the human sentiment and taken into the self, Nishitani calls this the "imaging" of emptiness (*kū ni okeru imēji-ka* 空におけるイメージ化).

The "imaging of emptiness" becomes a central topic of Nishitani's later philosophy. But what does this mean? Let us consider this problem first.

The concept of emptiness holds a central place in Mahāyāna Buddhism. However, according to Nishitani, before it was worked out logically and given precise doctrinal formulation, emptiness (*kū* 空, the Chinese character means "sky") was understood literally, as the sky perceptible to our sight. In other words, Nishitani argues that the sky which we can see with our eyes is the image of emptiness that is spoken of in Buddhism. We cannot see eternity or infinity directly. However, we are in fact seeing eternity and infinity in the empty sky. Strictly speaking, we cannot actually see the empty sky. However, inasmuch as it appears to our sight, Nishitani holds that the empty sky serves as a perceptible appearance of eternity and infinity. What is important here is that the relationship between eternity/infinity and the sky is not merely analogical or metaphorical. It is a more direct relationship. It is "imaging." The empty sky is the image of eternity and infinity. The concept of "imaging" has an extremely wide application to human thought. That which is indicated by the Buddhist notion of "the Buddha-nature of all beings" (*shitsu'u busshō* 悉有佛性) or the Christian "Son of God" is, fundamentally speaking, the image of emptiness. Through such perceptible things, we come into contact with the transcendent, which is beyond perception. Therefore it can be said that, through images, we live paradox and absurdity as "immediacy" (*soku* 即).

Emptiness is not only to be found in the empty sky opening up above our heads; it also descends to the world in which we live and is reflected in the ambiance surrounding us. When we sense the tranquil atmosphere in the landscape and objects around us, when we experience a feeling of inner freedom and peace, or when a lucid and quiet joy wells up in us, emptiness is reflected in our sentiment, embellishing it. Nihilism, I mentioned above, deprives us of all place where we can put our hands and feet, all place at which we can lay our heads. However, by being

reflected in our sentiment, emptiness give us a place to live, a place to breathe and a place to dwell. Such emptiness in sentiment is, in its most original meaning, the essence of the world of “faith.”

What is important in the imaging of emptiness is the metaphor used to describe it. Since this metaphor can also be used to explain another important concept, that of “making things transparent” (*u no tōmei-ka* 有の透明化), which Nishitani uses to supplement the notion of the imaging of emptiness, I would like to discuss it here. The metaphor is that of the relationship between two rooms, rooms A and B, that are separated by a wall made of a single board. The wall of room A that faces room B, as the boundary of room B, indicates room A. In this case, room A is indicated, not as room A, but as a part of room B. In this way, A reflects itself and moves into something different by changing its form. This is what Nishitani calls “the imaging of A.” The relationship between humans and the transcendent, as well as that between self and others, is explained through this metaphor. In more general terms, this explains the relationship between disparate individual things that are incommensurate with each other. In other words, this metaphor indicates the mutual relationship between all things occupying a specific localized “space” (*tokoro* ところ) in the world.

Due to their individuality (*kakko-sei* 各個性) and distinct natures (*kakuji-sei* 各自性), all things in the world occupy a place that is incommensurate with each other. In other words, they are self-enclosed (*heigō-sei* 閉合性) entities. In this sense, it can be said that all things are estranged from each other and are non-circuminsessional (*fu-ego* 不回互). The metaphor above, however, focuses on the relationship that unfolds in the space between individual non-circuminsessional things that are self-enclosed within themselves. This indicates a relationship in which mutually estranged and non-circuminsessional things can, while remaining mutually non-circuminsessional, enter into a circuminsessional relationship with one another. Nishitani calls this relationship “making things transparent.” To return to the metaphor of the rooms, this is a relation that unfolds, not by breaking down the wall, but by making the wall transparent while leaving it (i.e., the wall) in place. This notion of making things transparent is central to the later Nishitani’s theory of image. Hence it is important to understand correctly what Nishitani has in mind when using this concept.

Although the notions of “imaging of emptiness” and “making things transparent” point in opposite directions, Nishitani understands them to be complementary. Unfortunately, Nishitani is not always clear about what he means by “making things transparent.” But simple put, Nishitani wants to indicate by this concept, “knowing that is im-mediately associated with (*soku* 即) things.” “Knowing that is im-mediately associated with things” is to know things and facts just as they are, in their true forms. It indicates the same type of knowing that Nishida Kitarō tried to express using the terms “direct experience” (*chokusetsu keiken* 直接経験) and

“pure experience” (*junsui keiken* 純粹經驗). It means to know things and facts, not from the outside (objectively), but from the inside. To take the example of pain, it is to feel pain. It is to know pain from the inside, in such a way that it is transparent to oneself. This is what is meant by making things transparent. To know things and facts, and indeed the world itself, from the inside is to be one with the world, i.e., to be in immediate relation with the world. It opens up the world, bringing the world to light, and opens up a world of realization (*jikaku* 自覺).

What, then, makes possible such knowledge of things from the inside? Although he does not explain this point in detail, Nishitani claims that it is through image. What does this mean?

To understand the way in which images originally function, we must go back to “sensation” (*kankaku* 感覺), which is the primordial form of knowing. There is a saying, “Coolness and warmth are known naturally” (*reidan jichi* 冷暖自知). As this saying indicates, the “knowledge” of “cool” and “warm” is inherently provided in the direct experience (or pure experience) of coolness and warmth. This is the salient characteristic of sensation. In sensation, the thing that is sensed is known directly, in immediate relation with the thing. To use a different example, in the sensation of sight, the act of “seeing” a thing and the fact that a thing is “being seen” is one. In my very act of seeing an apple (or at the very place I see an apple), an apple is seen; in my very act of hearing a bell, the sound of a bell is heard. Or when I see the ocean, the view of the ocean is opened up to my eyes.

Here, the following point must be noted. We are able to see things only because our sensation that occurs from one instant to the next is simultaneously imbued with a distinctive type of knowledge that can illuminate things from the inside. While inherent in each and every instant of sensation, this type of knowledge is not identical with the particular sensation. It is something that transcends sensation. At the same time, this knowledge cannot be identified with human reason or conceptualization, but is associated with the object of sensation and is inherent in them. It is a type of knowledge which is identical with its objects. Nishitani calls this type of knowledge an “image.” Such an image is contained in all things as, so to speak, a seed or sprout. Through sensation, the image in things awakens as image in our sensation. As the image unfolds, the thing is, as it were, known from within and is brought to light. This means that, in the very act of seeing, “all the abilities inherent in a human being become one” and emerge in the workings of sensation.

Nishitani explains this in greater detail as follows. “When we hear the sound of a cicada, the image of the cicada is given to us along with its sound.” (NKC XIII: 127; cf. Nishitani 1999: 192) Therefore, in the “sound” of the cicada, we are in fact also hearing the “image” of the cicada. The image of the cicada is not its sound. While the image is within the specific sensation of hearing the sound of the cicada, this image possesses “an unqualified universality” (*mugen-tei na fuben-sei* 無限定な普遍性) transcending the specific sensation. It is a kind of awareness or logos working

within sensation. This image, i.e., the logos which is inseparable from a thing, unfolds as image through our sensation. It is in such way that things are brought to light from the inside. Hence, to repeat what I mentioned above, it is in sensation that the primeval form of “making things transparent” is to be found.

Things are made transparent not only at the level of sensation. They are made transparent at all levels of human knowing, from ordinary sensation to the perfect realization that characterizes Śākyamuni’s awakening (*shōgaku* 正覺). Its consummate expression is Śākyamuni’s awakening. Although it was expressed by Śākyamuni as emptiness, the “knowledge” which “brings things to light” may be called a primordial awareness, as it were. It forms the basis of all knowing and all realization.

Our realization arises from the depths of the being of our selves occupying a specific place in the world (specifically from the depths of our physical bodies which is the source of our five senses) when the image unfolds as image, and the being of my own self becomes transparent to its very depths. It refers to the activation of imagination (*kōsōryoku* 構想力). Religious realization refers to the experience in which things become transparent through the activity of elemental imagination (*kongenteki kōsōryoku* 根源的構想力) which wells up from the depths of things. It is the highest of things, and it is similar to sensation in that it is a knowledge that has been opened up from within.

In this way, Nishitani declares that image is “the path to concrete things” (*jibutsu e no tsūro* 事物への通路), inasmuch as it makes possible the knowledge of things from within the things themselves. He says,

(The thing itself which is simply given to us) rejects all light external to itself. External light, whether it be light of the senses or light of intellect, is only reflected back when it touches its surface. A thing exists in its “brute facticity,” as it were. When they manifest themselves – that is to say, at the primal site where they are “given” – all things are given to us in their “brute facticity.” Therefore, in order to approach them, there is no way to experience them other than from the inside. (NKC XIII: 140; cf. Nishitani 1999: 202)

To return to the origin of things and to experience them from within means that “the inner landscape hidden within things unfolds.” Having made this point, Nishitani then continues,

There is a fundamental change in status here. ... (This change refers to) a transformation from the thing itself to its image. Or rather, the image, which lies within, and is identical with, things, reveals its own specific form as an image. Moreover, it means that the power of *sensus communis* that is found within, and is identical with, each of the five senses, appears as imagination. (NKC XIII 141; cf. Nishitani 1999: 203)

I stated above that emptiness breaks through the self-enclosure of nihilism from

within, making it transparent. The brute facticity of things above correspond to the self-enclosure of nihilism. Furthermore, the power of emptiness to break through self-enclosure has here changed its form and is understood as image. The image turns things transparent from the inside and reveals things to be things. Emptiness, by turning into image, breaks through the self-enclosure of "brute facticity" from within. It can be said that, in Nishitani's later philosophy, emptiness is considered to be one such brute fact. In this way, Nishitani attempts to advance one step beyond the "noēsis-noēseōs" paradigm governing Western philosophical thought and present "knowing that is one with things" (*mono to hitotsu no chi* ものと一つの知) found in religion and the arts as a distinct type of knowledge that stands in contrast to ordinary knowledge based on the distinction between the knower and the known. It is this distinct type of knowledge (i.e., "knowing that is one with things") that Nishitani wants to express when he uses terms like "pre-philosophic," "post-philosophic," "the knowing of non-knowing," "sophia," and "the Dharma-realm in which all things interpenetrate each other" (*jiji muge hokkai* 事々無碍法界). This is what he hopes to elucidate by examining how things are made transparent in "emptiness in sentiment." In this way, the problem of how to overcome nihilism is taken up anew in a broader context, and is discussed in terms of the question of how to overcome the "noēsis-noēseōs" paradigm that underlies Western philosophical thinking.

It is important to note that Nishitani uses his theory of image to reconsider the fundamental standpoint of Nishida's philosophy and to formulate it anew from his own perspective. As stated above, the reason why Nishida employed concepts like "direct experience," "pure experience" and "locus" (*basho* 場所) was because he hoped to grasp things directly, just as they are. However, what does it mean to grasp things just as they are? Nishida calls this way of knowing "direct experience" or "the state before the distinction between host and guest arises" (*shukyaku mibun* 主客未分). But Nishitani believed that Nishida's fundamental insight cannot be fully expressed in these terms. Nishitani thought that it was only by supplementing it with his theory of image, making use of the notion of "making things transparent" (a way of knowing things from the inside), that Nishida's insight can be fully expressed. For this reason, Nishitani's theory of image is directly related to Nishida's theory of locus. In this theory, Nishida sought to examine the "knower," but it is important to recall that this knower is a person "who knows by becoming one with things," i.e., one who illuminates things from the inside.¹ Hence, it can be said that the driving

1. Nishitani's thought concerning image and imagination, however, did not appear suddenly in his late essay, "Emptiness and Immediacy." It was, in fact, Nishitani's central concern since his youth. Its outline is already found in his *Studies on Aristotle* (*Arisutoteresu ronkō* アリストテレス論攷), found in volume 5 of NKC. Although the focus of this thought subsequently moved to the problem of nihilism, his concern with image and imagination remained an important undercurrent in his thinking.

force behind the later Nishitani's theory of image was his desire to reconsider Nishida's philosophical problems from the standpoint of his own philosophy.

Abbreviation

NKC = *Nishitani Keiji Chosakushū* 西谷啓治著作集 (Nishitani Keiji's Works).

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