

Departing from and Returning to Nothingness

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*This review highlights this book's focus on "departures from nothingness." These departures are seen in four themes: the definition of *tetsugaku* (philosophy), interpersonal relationships, culture, and the socio-political sphere. In the first theme, I examine the dialogical character of nothingness (formlessness) and how it might relate with being (form). In the second, I show how this engagement with being connects to how we relate with the Thou, and examine its particulars in a unique spiritual form of Japanese feminism. In the third, I examine how this relational nothingness connects to society, social imaginaries, and aesthetics. And in the fourth, I delve into the complex interrelationship of nothingness and politics. I end with a note on the philosophical relevance of Yusa's ordering of these chapters, and the potential of both departing from and returning to nothingness.*

Key words: Japanese philosophy; applied philosophy; relationality; *tetsugaku*; meontology

In the past decade, Japanese philosophy has truly established itself as a fruitful field in the dialogue between world philosophies. Several sourcebooks, readers, introductions, and collected volumes have introduced the main figures of Japanese philosophy, with a strong emphasis on the members of the Kyoto School of philosophy. Previous works often highlighted the “philosophies of nothingness”¹ presented by these thinkers, as well as the religious, ontological, and epistemological aspects of this unique approach. There has also been considerable discussion on the controversy surrounding the Kyoto School’s supposed support of Japan’s imperial war.

In this book, Yusa and her co-authors build on these philosophies of nothingness, but develop it in a novel direction, focusing on the *departures* from this discourse on nothingness into more relational and socio-cultural domains. There is also a healthy coverage of philosophers beyond the Kyoto School—their students, colleagues, foreign interlocutors. The result is a vision of Japanese philosophy that, while very much relatable to those who study the philosophers of nothingness, shows novel ways in which they can be brought to life.

In my interpretation, there are four key themes in this book that I want to read through the lens of “departures from nothingness.” They are: the definition of *tetsugaku*, interpersonal relationships, culture, and the socio-political sphere.

The first theme concerns the very idea of *tetsugaku* (the Japanese word for philosophy) itself, and the complex relationship between being and nothingness found therein. I find these themes in Yusa’s introduction (1-20) as well as her final chapter (333-64). Yusa takes up various definitions of “*tetsugaku*” developed in the massive *Japanese Philosophy: A Sourcebook*²—*tetsugaku* as a purely western discipline, as something methodologically and thematically trans-cultural, or as a discipline with a uniquely Japanese character (3). However, she argues that these definitions are still inadequate, because “[their] observations, as nuanced and sensitive to interculturality as they may be, are made

from the vantage point of ‘outside Japan’ in their efforts to recognize the ‘modes of critical thinking, and self-understanding’ that may be found in Japanese thinking” (4).

In order to provide a less culturally objectifying definition of *tetsugaku*, Yusa draws on Nishida Kitarô and suggests a view of philosophy that is at once rooted in culture—as the self-aware analysis that emerges from a particular historical life (7)—but is at the same time in relation to other cultures, capable of changing cultures, and capable of striving beyond the cultural toward the universal. I consider this *dialogical* view of *tetsugaku* to be the key contribution to this volume. While the philosophy of nothingness lies at the core of Japanese philosophy as it first arose in modern Japan, this core was in constant dialogue with the west (and its tradition of “being”) and other traditions. We see this dialogical character highlighted in the next three themes I discuss as well.

This “linguistic” definition deepens into one of ontological/meontological significance with Yusa’s last chapter. Through an examination of the *kenshō* (spiritual awakening) experiences of Hiratsuka Raichō, D.T. Suzuki, and Nishida, and their subsequent considerations of desire and lay life, she argues that Zen and the philosophy of nothingness are not merely *via negativa* but have a positive aspect that embraces desire and life. Perhaps one might say that if the philosophy of nothingness were purely negation (of self, desire, and life) then it would have no interaction with the *sahā* world (the everyday world of suffering), with gender or culture or politics. There would thus be no point of dialogue with anything in the west (with the exception, perhaps, of negative theology or mysticism). What makes *tetsugaku* dialogical then is the fact that even a philosophy of nothingness is fundamentally related to being, and thus to the world of experiential, cultural, and historical particularity.

The second theme in the book is how this dialogical nothingness is manifest in the encounter between I and Thou—interpersonal emptiness, so to speak. Here, I draw from Bret W. Davis’ chapter (231-254) on Nishitani Keiji and Erin A. McCarthy’s chapter (309-331) on Japanese feminism. Nishitani’s philosophy can serve as a theoretical foundation for interpersonal emptiness. He suggests that when two people meet on the level of emptiness (rather than on the level of the mutual assertion of ego), what we have is a paradox between the absoluteness of the subject and the absolute relativity of these subjects to each other (237). This means that the awakening to emptiness does not reduce all people to a bland unity, but a vibrant unity where the alterity of the other is maintained (244). This departure from a closed nothingness to a relational emptiness that embraces alterity is made much more concrete in the Japanese feminisms of Hiratsuka Raichō and Yosano Akiko, where women’s liberation is broadened beyond the political to *spiritual freedom* (319). But like Nishitani, this freedom does not merely flatten out difference but includes the specificity of gender, motherhood, caring relationships (324), and desires (as in Yusa’s chapter).

The third theme of this book is the broad realm of shared expressions—culture—which bridges more spontaneous, face-to-face relationships with the more structured (and imaginary) nation-state. First, I examine the chapters of Steve Bein (207-29) and John W. M. Krummel (255-84). In Bein’s discussion of the philosophy of Watsuji Tetsurō, he presents a case of an (accidentally?) Buddhist idea of emptiness and double-negation unfolding from a very personal (*jinkakuteki*) sense of awakening to its interpersonal sense (between one *jinkaku* and another, 214), to its cultural sense in *Fūdo (Climate and Culture)*, and to its socio-political sense in *Rinrigaku (Ethics)*. (Whether or not this is “accidentally” Buddhist is open to dispute.)³ In Krummel’s discussion of Miki Kiyoshi’s idea of creative imagination, we see a possible engine for this unfolding—imagination, as rooted in the formless but creating and expressing itself as form (262). These forms then go on to shape actions, social imaginaries, even institutions. However, this leaves us with the question of how we can

critique these forms of “common sense,” a question Krummel takes up via Nakamura Yûjirô (269). Thus in both Bein and Krummel’s chapters, we see emptiness/nothingness taken up in a much more practical way, and on a much larger social scale—connecting to problems like social cohesion and critique, which are key issues for us in an age of rampant populism and political conflict.

As a specific instance of the cultural expression of nothingness, I examine the cohesive set of chapters on aesthetics by Enrico Fongaro (167-86), Michael F. Marra (153-66), and Raquel Bouso García (187-204). According to Fongaro, a close analysis of Nishida’s philosophy reveals that art and philosophy were always intertwined for him. (This is well supported in two short essays by Nishida—on calligraphy and short poetry—that are translated in this book.) But Marra suggests that this “aesthetics of nothingness” must not be seen as something “essentially Japanese.” Instead, aesthetic ideas like *yûgen* and the emphasis on the poetry written by recluses (the poetics of impermanence) is a twentieth-century creation, created in response to western modern aesthetics (156). García builds on Marra, arguing that that not only is this aesthetics of nothingness dialogical, it is a two-way dialogue. Two “non-Japanese” thinkers—Giangiorgio Pasqualotto (Italian) and Amador Vega (Spanish)—develop an idea of art that is experienced and created in a meditative connection with emptiness, an emptiness that overflows into being (197). This brings us back to the first theme: what constitutes “Japanese” philosophy? Can non-Japanese do *tetsugaku*? In García’s examples, these two thinkers can be said to be fully participating in the tradition of Japanese philosophy, without themselves being Japanese. This “dialogic” vision of *tetsugaku* frees Japanese philosophy from the confines of “exoticization” and allows it to include other people who might transform that very tradition.

These chapters then bring us to a fourth theme, the socio-political sphere. As we see in the chapters of Cheung Ching-yuen (133-49) and Nobuo Kazashi (105-31), the philosophy of nothingness can come to life to address contemporary political concerns. Cheung writes with passion and heartfelt concern, suggesting that the 2011 earthquake and tsunami in Tohoku provides a great challenge for philosophy—how to think of disaster in general, or nuclear disasters in particular. Drawing from philosophers like Watsuji, Noe Keiichi, Matsuo Bashô, and Yanagita Kunio, we can have a sense of a philosophy of *pilgrimage*, a practical philosophy that reframes our relationship with time away from the numbness and forgetfulness of the everyday, toward the wakefulness of remembering (145). For the specifics of this wakefulness, we turn to Kazashi, who shows how Tanabe Hajime and his students Karaki Junzô and Moritaki Ichirô developed philosophies of life and death that criticized atomic weapons and atomic energy (113). Kazashi thus brings the philosophy of nothingness to bear on another continuing political issue of Japan’s (ambiguous) involvement in non-proliferation of nuclear weapons and nuclear energy.

However, not all politics is about nothingness. As a matter of fact, Kenn Nakata Steffensen (65-103) deliberately tries to show a side of the Kyoto School that is *not* reducible to “philosophers of nothingness.” He draws mostly from Tosaka Jun and Miki Kiyoshi—two Kyoto School thinkers who were heavily influenced by Marxism—to show the political philosophy and challenges of the Kyoto School, and to provide more nuanced ways of reading them in light of current research (83). Additionally, Takahiro Nakajima (43-63) gives a thorough summary of the history of Japanese Confucianism from the Tokugawa Shogunate until Inoue Tetsujirô and Wang Yangming Studies in pre-war Japan, introducing another influential tradition that is underrepresented when we take “philosophy of nothingness” as the definition of the Japanese-ness of *tetsugaku*.

However, the paired chapters by Cheung and Kazashi versus those by Steffensen and Nakajima give the impression of there being a gap, an either-or between those who take emptiness

as their ground and those who stick to more material/social concerns. I wish there had been another chapter to bridge these “non-nothingness traditions” with the philosophy of nothingness—Watsuji (Buddhist Confucian) and Seno’o Girô (Buddhist Marxist) come to mind. Through these, we might see that nothingness and being are not dualities, but partners in a dialogue. But perhaps this is a challenge left to the readers.

What I see in the themes above is a gradual expansion from the awakening to nothingness to its unfolding in interpersonal relationships, its expression in culture and art, and finally its often messy entanglement in socio-political concerns. It also shows how the philosophy of nothingness wrestles with various philosophies of form and being—subjectivity, desire, gender, family, economics, social order, et cetera. These departures from nothingness show how nothingness is never idle or self-complacent, but in its self-negation constantly unfolds into being.

However, intriguingly, the order I have presented above is almost the exact opposite of Yusa’s arrangement. She begins with phenomenology (Part I), continues to social and political themes (Part II), then aesthetics (Part III), some prominent twentieth-century thinkers (Part IV), and philosophical dialogue on gender and life (Part V). It was almost as if she is beginning with the “departures” and slowly spiraling back into the most fundamental encounter with nothingness. I wonder if this flow itself might be suggesting something that could radically contribute to the state of *tetsugaku* today. My order above shows the common approach of “applying” nothingness to progressively broader spheres. But perhaps Yusa is suggesting something beyond mere application—a two-way dialogue between being and nothingness, where the very application might radically reinvigorate and transform the philosophy of nothingness itself.

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¹ The term “philosophers of nothingness” and the research approach focusing on it were popularized in: James W. Heisig, *Philosophers of Nothingness: An Essay on the Kyoto School* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001).

² ed. James W. Heisig, Thomas P. Kasulis, John C. Maraldo, *Japanese Philosophy: A Sourcebook* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2011).

³ Anton Luis Sevilla, *Watsuji Tetsurô’s Global Ethics of Emptiness: A Contemporary Look at a Modern Japanese Philosopher* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).