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Abstract:

In this article I consider the relevance of Friedrich Nietzsche's notion of *amor fati* for interpreting central aspects of the Kyoto school philosopher Keiji Nishitani's position in his magnum opus, *Religion and Nothingness*. In particular, I argue for the importance of the problem of loving fate as a background for understanding the second chapter of the text, 'The Personal and the Impersonal in Religion.' With reference to the 'death's head' method of contemplation, I consider Nishitani's linking of the problem of nihilism with the Zen Buddhist attempt to address human finitude through direct experience of one's own existential status as 'the skull in pampas grass.' I thereby shed further light on the nature of Nishitani's existential project by means of his relationship to central aspects of Nietzsche's thinking, particularly with reference to the theme of death and its place in life affirmation.

Affirming Fate and Incorporating Death: The Role of *Amor*

Fati in Nishitani's *Religion and Nothingness*

I want to learn more and more to see as beautiful what is necessary in things; then I shall be one of those who make things beautiful. *Amor fati*: let that be my love henceforth!

(Nietzsche, *GS*, 276)¹

Death. The certain prospect of death could sweeten every life with a precious and fragrant drop of levity...

(Nietzsche, *WS*, 322)

Recent scholarship has provided a useful framework for interpreting the work of the Japanese Kyoto school philosopher, Keiji Nishitani, through the comparative framework his critical relationship to Friedrich Nietzsche.² No doubt Nishitani's life-

¹ When referencing Nietzsche's texts, I have made use of the now standardized system for abbreviation as used, for example, in *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies*.

² For a fuller account of recent developments in this area see the following: Bret W. Davis, "Zen After Zarathustra: The Problem of the Will in the Confrontation Between Nietzsche and Buddhism," *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies* Autumn, no. 28 (2004): 89-138 and "Nishitani After Nietzsche: From the Death of God to the Great Death of the Will," in *Japanese and Continental Philosophy: Conversations with the Kyoto School*, ed. Jason M. Wirth, Bret W. Davis, and Brian Schroeder (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2011); Graham Parkes, "Open Letter to Bret Davis: Letter on Egoism: Will to Power as Interpretation," *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 46, no. 1 (2015): 42-61; Sarah Flavel, "Nishitani's Nietzsche: Will to Power and the Moment," *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 46, no. 1 (2015): 12-24. See also Bret W. Davis, "Reply to Graham Parkes: Nietzsche as Zebra: With Both Egoistic Antibuddha and Nonegoistic Bodhisattva Stripes," *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 46, no. 1 (2015): 62-81.

long attention to Nietzsche's writings had a substantial impact on the development of his thought. However, mapping the contours of this relationship is somewhat complicated by the fact that Nishitani was present at the first cycle of Martin Heidegger's lecture series on Nietzsche at The University of Freiburg between 1936 and 1938.³ Nishitani's approach to Nietzsche, especially in the context of his magnum opus, *Religion and Nothingness* (*RN* hereafter), emerges against the backdrop of Heidegger's critical appropriation of Nietzsche, as well as Heidegger's somewhat unsympathetic characterizations of Nietzsche as 'the last metaphysician,' and as the unwitting but ultimate propagator of the Cartesian worldview.⁴ For Heidegger, the justification for this interpretation is evidenced in Nietzsche's expression of the fundamental structure of existence in general, through the idea of

³ Martin Heidegger. *Nietzsche*. Volumes 1 & 2. Translated by David Farrell Krell, (San Francisco ; London: Harper & Row, 1979.) The first two Volumes were originally published as Heidegger, *Nietzsche, Erster Band*, (Verlag Gunther Neske, Pfullingen, 1961.)

⁴ Heidegger, 'The Word of Nietzsche: God is Dead,' in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, 84. It has been pointed out by Tracy Colony that the first cycle of Heidegger's original lecture series (available in the *Gesamtausgabe*) is decidedly more sympathetic to Nietzsche than the version of these lectures that were retroactively edited by Heidegger for the *Neske* version (as above, see Tracy Colony, "Heidegger's Early Nietzsche Lecture Courses and the Question of Resistance," *Studia Phaenomenologica* 4, no. 1–2 (2004): 151–72.) According to Bret Davis Nishitani was present in Freiburg from 1936–1939 (see Davis, *Heidegger: Key Concepts*, Chronology: 263.) No doubt although Nishitani had long been reading Nietzsche prior to his trip to Germany his approach suggests the influence of contact with Heidegger on his reading of Nietzsche in both *SN* and *RN*. (see Parkes, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*. Translated by Graham Parkes and Setsuko Aihara, (New York: SUNY Press, 1990), Introduction, III, xx–xxii) Further investigation of the extent of Heidegger's role in mediating Nishitani's relationship to Nietzsche, as well as the direct influence of Heidegger on the formulation of Nishitani's project in *RN* more generally would be advantageous, although for the sake of focus, I will not address this here.

will to power, as given for example, in Nietzsche's suggestion that 'the world is will to power and nothing besides' (*WP*, §1067). Yet despite the palpably Heideggarian bent of a number of key passages in *RN*, Nishitani's manner of interpreting Nietzsche can still be seen as distinct from Heidegger's, in some important ways. As Bret Davis has noted, the element of Nishitani's reading that allows him to formulate what amounts to a 'more nuanced and sympathetic' treatment of Nietzsche, lies in his acknowledgement of the crucial role played by *amor fati* (love of fate) in Nietzsche's mature philosophy.⁵ This is an important point, since Nishitani's emphasis on *amor fati*, when taken along with his acknowledgement of the depths of Nietzsche's dissatisfaction with traditional conceptions of subjectivity,⁶ are what make Nishitani's interpretation a more sympathetic and

⁵ Davis, 'Nishitani After Nietzsche,' 84. I would venture the thinking behind this statement, is that Nietzsche's focus on the task of loving fate, and, perhaps more importantly, his corresponding conception of the subject's position within fated existence, plays a key role in defending him from the accusation that the idea of will to power amounts to a subject-centered or anthropomorphic perspective, as Heidegger's reading may be taken to imply. Such defense of Nietzsche would therefore rest on a reassessment of what the term "will" is intended to designate when used in the context of will to power. I do not wish to enter into detailed discussion of Heidegger's reading here. Suffice it to say that Nietzsche's critique of traditional conceptions of subjectivity, when understood in relation to his critical reinterpreting of existence in general through the idea will to power, serves as a vital tool for getting to grips with his peculiar brand of voluntarism.⁵ If this is the case, one would be in a position to defend the claim that Nietzsche's conception of will to power, however counter intuitive, is neither subject-oriented nor anthropomorphic as per Heidegger's intimation.

⁶ See Parkes, 'Open Letter to Bret Davis: Letter on Egoism: Will to Power as Interpretation,' *passim*.

coherent way of reading Nietzsche than perhaps Heidegger's interpretation can allow.

In this article I expand on this line of thinking with the suggestion that the problem of loving fate is not only crucial for understanding Nishitani's approach to Nietzsche (and its unique merits), but that the problem of formulating an affirmative response to fate forms a central concern for Nishitani's work more generally, as evidenced in his discussion of 'the personal and the impersonal' in Chapter 2 of *RN*.

To be clear from the outset, for both thinkers the problem of fate or fatalism arises from the assumption that all that happens is determined by causal necessity, that we therefore have no control over the trajectory our lives, and furthermore that life lacks any form of meaningful teleological narrative through which such individual impotence might be justified. Therefore the fact that life is subject to pervasive and unavoidable causal determination, should not to be misconstrued (at least in any simplistic sense) as being associated with more grandiose representations of "fate" in the form of heroic destiny through which our lives could be deemed ultimately meaningful. In this sense fatalism becomes a philosophical problem precisely in its connection with nihilism: the view that life lacks meaning, aim or purpose.

Nishitani and Nietzsche both formulate the difficulty of affirming fate in existential terms. By this, I mean that they are

not merely interested in the ability to affirm fate in a notional or abstract sense, but in our being able to personally incorporate such affirmation. For both thinkers there is also a clear connection between the task of loving fate, and the ever-present reality of death (or of transience) which is given to us as an unavoidable fact of life. The point is that it is not just fatedness itself, but particularly the necessity of ill-fatedness and of mortality that should concern us.

For both Nishitani and Nietzsche then, death is a problem that presents itself to us not only at the moment of death, but also within life itself, in a variety of forms, including in the deaths of others; in the finitude of whatever we might come to know and love; in our being always and already conditioned by our finite form; and thus also, in our being capable of suffering, or our mutability in general. But not all of this is necessarily sad and gloomy. Of course, such mutability is also a condition for much, if not all, of what can be affirmed or celebrated in life, and in fact conditions the very value of whatever it is that we might affirm about life. On the basis of this recognition, the role that confrontation with death plays in an affirmative attitude to existence appears as an issue of concern for both philosophers. For Nishitani, the theme is closely associated with the Buddhist notion of *the great death* as a condition for enlightened

(affirmative) existence and thus for the overcoming nihilism in its modern historical form.⁷

In connection with the themes of death—or transience—and of nihilism, the problem of affirming fate draws together a number of the central philosophical motifs revisited throughout the works of both thinkers. In the later chapters of *RN* Nishitani develops the idea that human existence involves a constant process of ‘being-at-doing’⁸ (*skt. samskrta*), wherein we exist as humans burdened by the fated necessity of having always to be doing something, whatever that might be, and without respite. Due to the necessity of our way of existing in being-at-doing, the incorporation of philosophical insight—in learning to love fate for example—would have profound ramifications for the day-to-day activity of our being in the world as humans. Because of this point of focus, it could be argued that Nishitani places greater emphasis than Nietzsche does on the question of what the affirmation of fate would look like at the everyday level. In contrast, it might seem that the form of higher wisdom represented in Nietzsche’s idea of *amor fati* is incommensurate with the discriminating demands of everyday existence.⁹

⁷ *RN*, 16

⁸ *RN*, 220

⁹ I disagree with the assumption that Nietzsche’s *amor fati* must be incommensurate with the everyday perspective for reasons that would go beyond the scope of this discussion, but also confess that it is not a wholly implausible way of reading Nietzsche; that is, to conceive *amor fati* as a rare moment of the highest affirmation that would be irreconcilable with everyday life.

Nonetheless, at certain points both philosophers point to the ability to affirm fate as perhaps the primary measure of human wisdom. As Nietzsche writes, the love of fate is ‘the formula for greatness in a human being’ (*EH*, 258) and, a fortiori, is ‘the highest state a philosopher can attain’ (*WP*, 1041).

Simply stated, the problem of fate arises when we come to acknowledge the dominance of objective necessity over our subjective constitution. In this realization, the potency of fate, when conceived as an all-encompassing force, undermines our belief in the authority of the self and thus also challenges the sense we have of our own meaning, purpose and potency in relation to the external world. This destabilization, which takes place at the level of the self/subject’s relationship to the world, is the reason why both Nishitani and Nietzsche formulate the problem of loving fate in personal or existential terms; it is insofar as fatalism presents us with a problem at the immediate existential level, that it constitutes a problem for us at all. Nishitani is therefore also right to focus his reflections on the ontological core of the problem of fate, which is constituted by a problem in the way we conceive of the self, and of its potency in relation to the purportedly objective existence in which it exists. The pervasive view of fatality intimates a collapse of the ordinary distinction between the subjective and objective aspects of existence. The question then emerges as to whether this “self” that each of us

identifies with, is fatedly governed by a force outside of itself, or instead, whether such fatedness is in fact that which constitutes us as selves. Thus the problem of loving fate is not just about fate *per se*, abstractly construed, but should also be understood in relation to Nietzsche's claim that each of us *is a piece of fate* (TI, 'The Four Great Errors,' 8). In this way, the problem of fate is inextricably connected to our very conception of the self and its relationship to whatever is not the self.

To the extent that one's acceptance of fate as an all-pervading reality undermines one's sense of personal power or agency in relation to the outside world, the problem of fate also provokes a crisis of meaning. In this sense, the issue of fate, taken to its logical conclusion, entails a personal confrontation with nihilism and with the possibility that what we "do" as individual agents, is not only bereft of meaning but is also an illusion of our own causal efficacy. Nishitani therefore interprets the notion of *amor fati* as the highest expression of Nietzsche's attempt to overcome the nihilistic implications of a fatalist worldview.

I will now proceed to outline Nishitani's approach to *amor fati* in *SN* and then continue to expand on his discussion of the issues of the 'personal' and 'impersonal' in *RN*. In the context of the latter I focus on the Buddhist 'death's head contemplation' and its significance for Nishitani's approach to fate, our subjective existence in the context of fate and our ability to affirm it.

I. *Amor Fati* in *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*

In *SN*, Nishitani sees love of fate as the crowning achievement of Nietzsche's attempt to offer a life-affirming alternative to the life-negating values of transcendent metaphysics. Nishitani emphasizes the connection between Nietzsche's discussions of fate and his connected critique of the historically dominant religious perspective, where that perspective had provided the intellectual underpinnings for a dualist worldview.

Formerly, our dualist conception of the world provided us with a solid basis for interpreting the network of causal relations in nature as the product of a metaphysically free divinity. From this perspective, we also conceived of natural necessity in complementary opposition to ourselves as metaphysical subjects who are capable of free creative action in a coherently ordered world. Nature was thus positioned in subordinate relation to the creative and active capacities of both humans and God. Seemingly indifferent natural events and catastrophes could therefore be narrated within a broader context of personal meaning, and natural existence could be explained in terms of its mediating role in the relationship between God and human beings. We can think, for example, of the personal God who evidences himself through the principles of natural order, or who sends messages to his people in the form of floods and hailstones.

Furthermore, this viewpoint provided the basis for a theodicean justification of the cruelty of nature as a necessary feature of the possibility of human freedom.

Once the dualist conception of existence is denied, the external world takes on the character of total and indiscriminate fatedness, and this fated system of relationships is newly understood as the sole existing reality. However, with this shift in perspective one loses the ability to affirm as metaphysically meaningful those natural events that are indifferent or opposed to our personal existence. The world therefore appears to us as a process unfolding through meaningless, aimless necessity, in the form that Nietzsche describes as the ‘in vain’ (*WP*, 12): a valueless process that is indifferent to human concerns and within which we possess no individual or collective power of transformation. Importantly, fate in this sense is not understood as purpose-giving or directed and sanctioned by God, as it once might have been, but rather as fundamentally indifferent to human interests—a base and often callous necessity that is as inescapable as it is insurmountable. Such is the view of the world arising from the death of God, and which, for both Nishitani and Nietzsche, closely correlates with the rising dominance of the scientific ideal and its mechanical view of existence.

Nevertheless, Nietzsche extends his account of fate beyond the restricted context of mechanical determinism and this refinement

to his fatalism is essential for his reflections on the possibility of loving fate. As Nishitani sees it, the issue here is that the ascendant mechanical interpretation of existence remains tethered to its own prehistory in teleological religious thinking. Nishitani states:

In the present “godless” era the divine providence of Christianity has ceased to be believed in and fatalism has stepped in to take its place. While Nietzsche says that fatalism is “the contemporary form of philosophical sensitivity” [WP, 243], it is clear that his “love of fate” is not fatalism in the ordinary sense. It rather pushes the fatalistic viewpoint to the extreme purifying it and imparting a profound *turn* to the meaning of fate. (SN, 49) ¹⁰

Nishitani continues to quote from a passage from the unpublished notes in which Nietzsche identifies residual traces of the idea of divine providence within modern fatalism, and clearly associates the previous providential interpretation with the progress narrative in evolutionary theory.¹¹

For Nietzsche, our wholehearted endorsement of the scientific worldview is problematic to the extent that such a perspective eliminates the significance of the individual creative self in the

¹⁰ Ulfers and Cohen have made this same point regarding the importance of distinguishing Nietzsche’s conception of fate from nominal fatalism in their paper, ‘Nietzsche’s Amor Fati: The Embracing of an Undecided Fate,’ *The Nietzsche Circle*, June 2007.

¹¹ See Nietzsche, WP, 243. Nietzsche’s misinterpretation of Darwin as a progress-oriented or teleological theorist of evolution is no truer now than it was when Nietzsche first wrote about it. Nevertheless, it should be noted that there are instances in which Darwin mentions the likelihood that humans will continue to evolve towards a state of moral perfection. It is precisely this kind of supposition—evolution construed as having a *moral goal*—that Nietzsche criticizes in his dealings with both Darwin and Spencer (the latter being the notorious advocate of Social Darwinism). For further discussion of Nietzsche’s relationship to Darwin see ‘Nietzsche Contra Darwin’ in Keith Ansell-Pearson, *Virroid Life: Perspectives on Nietzsche and the Transhuman Condition* (London: Routledge, 1997) 85-122.

context of fate, and it does so by conceiving evolution through the teleological model of an overarching goal towards which all things are directed, such as the perfection of species. But, for both Nietzsche and Nishitani, this modern understanding of fate in the form of progress stems from a failure to perceive the broader ramifications of the undermining of religious metaphysics. In other words, ordinary fatalism fails to pursue the consequences of its own perspective to their furthest conclusions.

In ordinary fatalism every individual is framed as the particular expression of a singular, absolute, and resolutely directed process, and as such the individual is rendered both powerless and meaningless. To quote Nishitani: ‘It is, Nietzsche adds, as if the course of all things were being conducted “independently of us.” ’(*SN*, 49)¹²

This impression of our own powerlessness in the face of fated existence stems from a continued attachment to our former, erroneous assumptions about what it would mean to be able to act in a significant or valuable way; that is, to act outside of, or somehow in defiance of the wider context of natural necessity in which we exist. When taking up the ordinary understanding of fatalism, the denial of metaphysical freedom renders our position as individuals a hopeless one, where the inner desire for freedom directly conflicts with the insurmountable force of necessity in

¹² See also *TI*, ‘Four Great Errors’ 8.

which we are imprisoned. The most hopeful view of our place in the world that could emerge from such a perspective is that of the prisoner who learns to love his confinement. But love of fate, in Nietzsche's estimation, is clearly something more substantial than this.

In differentiating his unique brand of fatalism, Nietzsche points out that fate should not to be understood as a fixed and unalterable orientation of events toward a necessary outcome. This is to say that fate does not represent the promise of an eventual achievement in the process as a whole, one that extends from some source capable of guaranteeing a final state, for oneself, humanity at large, or for the world. Rather, for Nietzsche, the process that constitutes the world is an incessantly self-differentiating one. Furthermore, the unfolding of this process takes place within the protracted progression of time, and in this sense the actual determination of future events remains as yet undecided.¹³ Therefore, for Nietzsche, the 'ordinary' view of fate in the form of complete predestination—a view that is closely associated with the modern scientific worldview—is one that fails to account for the real unfolding of the world and our lives within it from the point of view of time. Thus on Nishitani's account, Nietzsche's motivation to move beyond ordinary fatalism is that

¹³ Nietzsche: 'We are, all of us, growing volcanoes that approach the hour of their eruption; but how near or distant that is, nobody knows—not even God.' (*GS*, I:9)

once the providential or teleological interpretation of natural processes has been fully expunged, a more thoroughgoing form of affirmative fatalism can and should step in to take its place. In this way fatalism is revealed as being ‘identical with chance and the creative.’¹⁴ To put this differently, once the God hypothesis—or the idea of an external force that compels nature’s progress from the outside—has been discarded, the creative activity of the individual comes to be seen no longer as impotent, but rather as infinitely significant, and infinitely effective in relation to all other things. Although it could be claimed that this amounts to little more than the other side of the same nihilistic coin, Nishitani sees this perspectival shift as key to understanding the logic behind Nietzsche’s transition from passive to active nihilism. He also claims that this is the essential importance of Nietzsche’s assertion that each person is a piece of fate, again quoting from the unpublished notes in order to explain Nietzsche’s view of the causal interaction between the world-process and the self when conceived from this perspective:

...*from this* it follows that *every* action has an *infinitely* great influence on everything that is to come. The same reverence which, looking back, one gives to the entirety of fate, one must at the same time give to one’s own self. (Nietzsche, KGW, VII, 2:25, 158)¹⁵

¹⁴ Quoted by Nishitani in *SN*, 49.

¹⁵ Quoted by Nishitani in *SN*, 50.

Of course, this is not to say that the self is wholly responsible for creating the world from a position outside of and distinct from it, but that as a piece of the fate of all that is, the self itself becomes infinitely necessary along with all things. Since the two (the necessity of the self and the world) are intimately related, *amor fati* then entails both loving fate as the character of nature more generally, as well as loving fate as the innermost nature of the self.

In this way, Nietzsche understands the revelation of ubiquitous necessity or of fate—like nihilism—both as a devastating moment of abyssal disclosure and as that which opens us up to the promise of new meaning. Furthermore, for Nietzsche, it is by learning to love oneself as a piece of fate that one can achieve the perspective of *becoming what one is*—a phrase designed to articulate the irreducible relationship between the potentiality and actuality of the self—and thus to reaffirm life as pervasively meaningful. In this sense, Nietzsche's identification of fate with chance and the creative suggests a compatibilist framework in which gradations of freedom are possible, and the extent of one's freedom is dependent on the extent to which one can actively incorporate necessity, or make it one's own, so to speak. This taking up of necessity means an active yes-saying (*ja-sagen*) toward the necessity of all things, from the perspective of their unity. Love of fate then expresses the higher form of freedom

manifested in the case of the wisest individual. Goethe stands as an exemplar for Nietzsche in this formulation:

Such a spirit who has *become free* stands amidst all with joyous and trusting fatalism, in the faith that only the single is loathsome, and that all is redeemed and affirmed in the whole—he does not negate any more. (*TI*, ‘Skirmishes of an Untimely Man,’ 49)

II. *Amor Fati* in *Religion and Nothingness*

In *SN*, Nishitani emphasized that the meaning of Nietzsche’s love of fate cannot be understood apart from the confrontation between modern scientific naturalism and the pre-modern religious worldview. In the context of *RN*, he goes on to describe the apparent tension between religious and scientific models of thinking as the ‘most fundamental problem facing contemporary man’ (*RN*, 46). For Nishitani, the confrontation between religion and science is not just a crude battle of ideologies. Instead, the task of mapping the relationship between religion and science is the most prescient form of reflection on the meaning of human existence in the modern world.

However, given that the scientific ideal has gained dominance in recent history and, according to some, has therefore provided a framework for us to move past the naivety of the religious worldview, we might ask what need there is for Nishitani to further expand on the ‘religious’ implications of this confrontation. This question, being intimately connected to the

overall project of *RN*, has to be answered with reference to Nishitani's minimalist determination of the 'religious' mode of being as—that sphere of personal reality in which humans are confronted with the question of the meaning of their own existence.¹⁶ In a sense, what he calls 'religion' might therefore more straightforwardly be translated as 'philosophy.' At least it must be understood that his definition of the religious mode of existence is far removed from the mainstream Western understanding of the term, particularly with reference to the assumption that religiosity is necessarily connected to *faith*.¹⁷

In contrast with the relatively recent emergence of the standpoint of scientific objectivism, religion, for Nishitani, signifies the enduring framework of our confrontation with the external world from the standpoint of subjective experience. That we are embedded in an existentially significant reality therefore means that the religious mode of existence (thus defined) is not a choice for us, but is in fact an elementary aspect of our way of being. In this sense, while human existence that can experience itself personally as present in the world remains, religion will continue to play a necessary role in human life.¹⁸ Nishitani

¹⁶ See *RN* Chapter 1, 'What is Religion?' The chapter title serves also as a more literal translation of the title of the text as a whole: *Shukyo toha nanika*.

¹⁷ This is further complicated by erroneous associations that arise from translating the Japanese term, *shukyo*, (literally: the lineage of teachings), with 'religion'.

¹⁸ For this reason James Heisig characterizes Nishitani as an existentialist thinker. I find it necessary to also underline the radical difference between Japanese existentialism and its European counterpart; the

therefore insists that the encounter between scientific and religious thinking continues to be an important avenue for philosophical development: firstly, because the sphere of subjective concern signified by the term ‘religion’ remains a perennial aspect of human existence, and secondly, because the advance of scientific objectivism has played such a central role in the development of modern nihilism. As Nishitani explains at the outset of Chapter 2,

Science is not something separate from the people who engage in it, and that engagement, in turn, represents only one aspect of human knowledge. Even the scientist, as an individual human being, may come face to face with nihility. He may feel well up within him doubts about the meaning of the very existence of the self, and the very existence of all things. The horizon on which such doubt occurs—and on which a response to it is made possible—extends far beyond the reaches of the scientific enterprise. It is a horizon opening up to the ground of human existence itself.

One may reply that all the efforts of man ultimately come to naught, and that things cannot be otherwise, so that everything, including science, becomes fundamentally meaningless. And yet even here, in the reply of so-called pessimistic nihilism along with its accompanying doubt, we find ourselves outside the horizon of science and in the realm of philosophy and religion, where nihilism is but one possible response. Indeed, the overcoming of this pessimistic nihilism represents the single greatest issue facing philosophy and religion in our times. (*RN*, 46)

Against the background of his broader concern with the (self-)overcoming of nihilism, in Chapter 2 of *RN*, Nishitani considers

Japanese tradition is distinguished by its critical stance towards the idea of the self as a substantial entity, as well as towards the identity between subjectivity and consciousness (particularly in Nishitani’s case). Whereas, both of these associations could be said to form the mainstay of dominant trends in European existentialism. Interestingly, Nietzsche, if he is to be identified with the existentialist tradition, represents a notable exception to this. See Heisig, *Philosophers of Nothingness: An Essay on the Kyoto School* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1996), Ch. 4.

the problems arising from our confronting a natural world that is indifferent to human concerns. The magnified form of this confrontation can be explained as an upshot of the transition to enlightenment thinking in 18th and 19th century Europe, which has led to a newfound sense that nature stands in hostile opposition to personal human existence. On the basis of this discussion, Nishitani argues for the need to fundamentally revise our conception of personhood more generally in response to the depersonalization of the natural world after the death of God. This revision demands that we reconceive the relationship between man and God from a de-anthropomorphized viewpoint, which entails both the de-anthropomorphizing of our previously ‘personal’—that is, subject-centered—understanding of the self, and similarly, a depersonalizing of our conception of the divine.

Where Nishitani refers to ‘God’ at this stage, we must bear in mind that the notion of divinity he is working with at this stage is much closer to the immanent ‘God/Nature’ of Spinoza than anything that would resemble the traditional Christian conception of God as standing above or outside the immediate world. The Japanese character he uses here (*kami* 神)¹⁹ has a much closer association with the nature-based tradition stemming from Shinto, than it does with monotheistic or transcendent faith traditions.

¹⁹ Associated with natural divinities.

However, one may still struggle to see why Nishitani chooses to use the loaded term ‘God’ as opposed to readily available terms that would translate as ‘nature.’ There seem to be three possible and interrelated motivations for this choice. The first lies in Nishitani’s desire to emphasize the historical lineage between religion and science and thereby to stimulate a historically sensitive engagement in thinking through the tensions between scientific and religious world-interpretations. The second lies in his desire to establish a clear distinction between the nihilistic conception of nature as an irresolvable problem for mankind, and nature understood as a facet of the potential resolution of that very problem. Put more simply, his use of ‘God’ functions to differentiate between a pessimistic, and an affirmative, conception of nature. He therefore uses the term as a means of expressing the soteriological function of the world/nature in this context, where nature is identified with God insofar as it is considered capable of redeeming us—or, (to use a more Nietzschean turn of phrase) of being redeemed by us. The third motivation is that by retaining the term ‘God,’ Nishitani specifies that the ‘impersonal’ perspective on the self and the divine in nature, a perspective that he subsequently goes on to advocate, is not the same as a complete dissolution of personality. Instead, it is intended to represent an overcoming of the opposition between

both the personal (theological) and anti-personal (nihilistic) conceptions of existence.

III. The Personal and the Impersonal: Nature, Fate and Death

Nishitani takes reactions to the 1755 Lisbon earthquake (which provoked significant philosophical debate in 18th century Europe) to exemplify the emergent conception of natural existence as being fundamentally indifferent to human concerns. Such was the position taken by Voltaire in his *Poem on the Lisbon Disaster*,²⁰ in which he identified the earthquake as evidence against Leibniz's theological (and ontological) optimism. Voltaire writes,

I am a puny part of the great whole.
Yes; but all animals condemned to live,
All sentient things, born by the same stern law,
Suffer like me, and like me also die.
[...]
But how conceive a God supremely good,
Who heaps his favours on the sons he loves,
Yet scatters evil with as large a hand?
[...]
From Leibnitz learn we not by what unseen
Bonds, in this best of all imagined worlds,
Endless disorder, chaos of distress,
Must mix our little pleasures thus with pain;
Nor why the guiltless suffer all this woe
In common with the most abhorrent guilt.
'T is mockery to tell me all is well.

²⁰ Voltaire, *Poem on the Lisbon Disaster; Or an Examination of the Axiom, "All is Well"* in Voltaire. *Treatise on Toleration and Other Essays*. Amherst, N.Y: Prometheus Books, 1994. His more famous novella *Candide* was likewise a reaction to (and satire of) Leibniz's belief that ours is the 'best of all possible worlds'.

(Voltaire, from *Poem on the Lisbon Disaster; Or an Examination of the Axiom, "All is Well"*²¹)

Voltaire's portrayal of the earthquake provoked strong reactions from both Rousseau and other contemporaries²² due to his pessimistic characterization of the human condition and to the heretical implications of his account for the moral status of God. By pointing to the fundamental indifference of nature to human concerns, as expressed in natural disaster, Voltaire had reprised the problem of natural evil in such a way as to leave it open whether or not a supernatural justification for the brutality of nature could ever be plausibly constructed.

Of course, it was not so much the event itself, but rather Voltaire's expression of sentiments regarding the problematic relationship between natural, human and divine existence in response to it, that provoked a vehement reaction from his contemporaries. Clearly he had given voice to fears that were

²¹ Kant also favored Leibnizean optimism: 'Since God chose this world and this world alone of all the possible worlds of which He had cognition, He must for that very reason, have regarded it as the best. And since God's judgment never errs, it follows that this world is also in fact the best. Even if it had been possible for the Supreme Being to have been able to choose according to the fictitious notion of freedom which some have put into circulation, and to have preferred the worse to much that was better as a result of I know not what absolute whim, he would never have acted in that fashion.' Taken from 'An Attempt at Some Reflections on Optimism', in *Theoretical Philosophy 1755-1770* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 75.

²² See Rousseau to Voltaire, 18 August 1756, from *Correspondence complète de Jean Jacques Rousseau*, vol. 4, ed. J.A. Leigh (Geneva, 1967), 37-50: 'If the problem of the origin of evil drives you to challenge God's perfection, why uphold His powerfulness at the cost of His goodness? If one is an error, I prefer it to be the first.'

already brewing beneath the surface of European intellectual life at the time.

For Nishitani, the consequences of the earthquake (and of others disasters like it) force us to relate more directly to the ever-present reality of death. It is with this in mind, that he formulates the problem of fate in terms of nature's apparent indifference to human existence, where the brutal expression of such indifference—given in indiscriminate mortality—is the most problematic consequence of our ill-fated existence. On Nishitani's view, the most extreme implications of natural hostility to human life are brought forth in the encounter with our own mortality. In this case, the problem of mortality or finitude is not to be understood in its more general sense, as the problem of the transience of all things, but rather as a dilemma that emerges for us on the existential level, when we are brought into closer proximity with the inevitability of our own deaths.²³

Nishitani draws on one of Bashō's poems in order to further explicate the intimate relationship between fate and death. In the poem in question Bashō refers to the Buddhist 'death's head'

²³ Nishitani therefore suggests that we cannot adequately deal with the problems of fate, nor of nature's indifference towards us, without an earnest confrontation with the implications of such brutal facts of life, given in their most potent form as mortality. This also highlights the medieval etymological association between the idea of fate and of fatality or 'one's fate,' as referring to inevitable death. The etymological connection does not appear to originate in the original Latin root. These associations began to emerge during 15th/16th century usage. See *OED*, Fate, n. 4.b. 'Death, Destruction, Ruin'.

method of meditation and its associated image of the skull lying in pampas grass. Bashō's haiku reads:

Lightning flashes—
Close by my face,
The pampas grass.
(Quoted in *RN*, 51)

Nishitani relates Bashō's inspiration for the haiku: a night spent sleeping in the wild where he is awoken by lightning only to see himself as a skull asleep in a meadow. For Nishitani, the haiku describes Bashō's experience of a confrontation with his own death, being an experience in which 'a living man experiences himself, *as living*, in the image of the skull on the pampas grass' (*RN*, 51, my italics).

Nishitani's comments on the haiku resonate strongly with Nietzsche's thinking in 278 of *The Gay Science*, an aphorism entitled 'The Thought of Death.' In this passage, Nietzsche juxtaposes his experience of watching over loud, busy streets of people with a contemplation of the undeniable relationship between living and dying, where 'it will soon be so still for all these shouting, lively, loving people' and wherein 'death and the stillness of death are the only things common to all' (*GS*, 278). He then ends the aphorism by describing the great happiness he derives from bearing witness to the willful ignorance of death amongst the people.

Nietzsche's reflections in this aphorism raise the question of whether there is a fundamental tension between acknowledging death as a necessary part of life, on the one hand, and the possibility of attaining life-affirming wisdom, on the other. Here, the affirmation of life through love of fate could well be thought impossible if we were to look too closely at the fact of our mortality. The question therefore, is whether Nietzsche is fundamentally in disagreement with Nishitani here, by suggesting that a flourishing life that is able to affirm itself necessarily requires a covering over of death, rather than its incorporation. Or, in other words, we might query the extent to which Nietzsche is recommending that we greet the issue of living and dying in accordance with Spinoza's Epicurean adage that '[a] free man thinks of death least of all things; and his wisdom is a meditation not of death but of life.'²⁴

Interestingly, when at the end of the same aphorism Nietzsche expresses his wish to inspire people to attend instead to the thought of 'life' which, he hopes, would be 'a hundred times more worthy of their contemplation,' he thereby also implicitly suggests that the ignorance of death amongst such people is not been sufficient to amount to a meditation on living. What, then, if any, is the meaning or value of the contemplation of death from

²⁴ 'Ethics,' *A Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and Other Works* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994) IV.67.

the perspective of life? And therefore, what role might the thought of death play in life affirmation?

For Nishitani, the value of the death's head contemplation lies not in what the image of the skull can tell us about death itself—which in the abstract sense is meaningless for us—but rather what it says about life; namely that life, properly construed, can only be figured as '*death-sive-life*' (death-as-life). He therefore suggests that to affirm life to its fullest extent requires that we undergo an encounter with the deathlike quality (or in Nishitani's terms, the nihility) that exists at the basis of each of us as living beings.

This is by no means to say that Nishitani considers the death's head image to be one that supersedes the living character of life. In fact, Bashō's commentary on the haiku refers to an image of skeletons that nonetheless continue to play flute and hand drums. With regard to such compound images of death in life, Nishitani states, 'it is not as if one of the representations were true, so that all the others can be reduced to it' (*RN*, 52).²⁵ Rather, the point for Nishitani is that the death's head contemplation gives us access to a view of our more elementary mode of existing: one that manifests the irreducible duality of perspectives in which the living character of life is also already a form of dying. We are, so

²⁵ An image that is nicely reminiscent of Nietzsche's observation that Schopenhauer cannot have been a true pessimist, since he still played the flute. *BGE*, §186

to speak, always on the way to our own finitude. In the death's head contemplation, the confrontation with mortality is not depicted as a paradox that pits life against death, or which reveals the proper priority of death over life, but is rather an experience in which the mutual entailment of living and dying—which in ordinary consciousness is often covered over—is understood to be (and indeed is *experienced as*) the elementary form of our lived existence.

IV. Affirming Death in Life

The question that still remains for Nishitani is how or why affirming the deathlike character of lived-existence can be framed in terms of love. In what way does the death's head contemplation permit us to acknowledge death from a perspective that is foremost life-affirmative? Or, from yet another angle, how can the indifferent and impersonal conception of nature, that the bare fact of mortality provides us with, be reconciled with our profoundly personal and subjective association with the activity of love?

For Nishitani, the question of how the death's head contemplation realizes a *love* of fated existence turns on the extent to which the necessity of nature more generally is acknowledged as common to, rather than in tension with, the existence of the self. In this way, the death's head comes to

represent a moment in which fate, as such and as a whole, is identified with our subjective constitution. We can therefore say that, for Nishitani as for Nietzsche, it is in learning to see oneself as a piece of fate (from the side of '*death-sive-life*') that one comes to reaffirm oneself as a necessary part in relation to the whole. Moreover, it is in the revelation and affirmation of the fundamentally empty character of that partial perspective (its deathly aspect) that the whole is also affirmed.

The potential deficiency of this Zen-inspired attitude of part-whole identification stems from the almost trivial character of the revelation here. In the context of the death's head contemplation, we are not able to talk grandiosely about the resolution of our subjective insufficiency in relation to external necessity by means of the unification of a personal self with a personal God or nature. In this regard, we might want to ask the broader question of what the death's head is intended to offer us in response to the seemingly nihilistic implications of our inevitably ill-fated existence. However, the point which can be used to defend Nishitani's appraisal of Zen against the charges of either nihilism or triviality is that the perspective reached here is one in which the emptiness of nature—seen here from the side of its impersonality in the form of death—is recognized as the same empty constitution that grounds the self. It is therefore a substantial insight into the shared emptiness operating at the

ground level of both nature/God and of the self that allows us to affirm that which had previously been represented as an image of death in tension with or apart from the self—as its negation—from a position prior to the emergence of such a division. Thus the death's head offers us a way to contemplate the formative role that emptiness plays in constituting both the self and the world. It thereby allows us to face the facts of our own existence by acknowledging the necessity of death as crucial both for understanding, and for affirming, life more generally.

At this point we must ask what Nishitani believes Zen can offer in response to the problem of fate to which the Western tradition has shown less attention. For Nishitani, this unique contribution rests in the difference between, on the one hand, a reflection on the conception of nature as indifferent, when posed in opposition to the personal concerns of human existence—as offered by Voltaire—and, on the other, a reflection on the meaning of such impersonal nature as the grounding of human subjectivity. In simple terms this difference is between a subject that faces out onto a non-subjective reality, and a subject that incorporates that mode of exterior impersonal existence in the form of a middle voice between the personal and the impersonal, a notion given in Zen terminology as 'no-self.'

Nishitani keenly applies the same mediopassive (or *trans*-subjective) form to the relationship between the personal and non-personal modes of existence in general, when he claims that:

If the activity of love has a personal character to it—as I think it does—then there is no way around the conclusion that the perfection of God and love in the sense of that perfection point to something elemental, more basic than the “personal,” and it is as the embodiment or imitation of this perfection that the “personal” first comes into being. A quality is implied here of *transpersonality*, or *impersonality*. (RN, 60)

Nishitani is quick to preempt resistance to this view by insisting that ‘the term “impersonal” is not to be taken as the opposite of the “personal,” but as the “personally impersonal”’ (RN, 60).

Nishitani associates the impersonally-personal perspective with the indifferent or non-discriminating vision of love as *agape*, that comes to us in the Christian idea of a God that ‘makes the sun rise on the evil as well as the good, and the rain fall on the just and the unjust alike.’²⁶ Interestingly, it is here that he also identifies a lesser acknowledged strand of Christian thinking in which God’s perfection has been formulated, not in terms of a wealth of personal love towards a personal humanity, but in supra-moral terms as ‘a non-differentiating love that transcends the distinctions men make between good and evil, justice and

²⁶ Matthew 5:45, as quoted in SN, 60.

injustice' (*RN*, 58). Nishitani singles out Meister Eckhart as one of the few thinkers in the Christian tradition to have offered a developed understanding of the divine in similarly impersonal terms.²⁷

However, Nishitani still identifies a feature that is unique to Buddhist philosophy insofar as it resists conceiving the identity of the self with the emptiness of nature/God as a form of dialectical reconciliation between the human and divine perspectives that could occur only after death and/or in a world beyond (as in dominant forms of Christianity). Instead, for Buddhism—or at least for the Mahāyāna schools (and for Zen in particular)—our experience of the impersonal in nature reveals the more immediate reality of the emptiness of the self and, crucially, this revelation/reconciliation is one that can be realized within this life, and without recourse to the fiction of a life beyond.

In the final passages of Chapter 2, Nishitani once more refers to a recapitulation of the death's head contemplation, this time as described in the death note of Gasan Joseki. The note reads:

It is ninety one years
Since my skin and bones were put together;
This midnight, as always,
I lay myself down in the yellow springs.

²⁷ In doing so he emphasizes the importance of Eckhart's formulation of the absolute identity of the impersonal divine (as a form of nothingness) with the self or soul.

(Quoted in *RN*, 75)

For Nishitani, the significance of Joseki's deathbed testimony appears in his description of dying 'This midnight, as always'. With this phrase Joseki expresses an anamnestic recognition of his transition from life to death in its immediate connection with the manner of living that preceded it. From the perspective of Joseki's dying wisdom, the dying of final death is experienced as continuous with the dying involved in daily life. Therefore, so Nishitani states, 'viewed from the standpoint of absolute selfhood, there is no change in life at death' (*RN*, 75).

Nishitani perceives the same manner of reflection on self-overcoming in Nietzsche; it is particularly telling that in his conclusion he associates the 'double exposure' perspective on the mutual implication of life and death with Zarathustra's experience of midnight and noon being one.

Do you not smell it? Just now my world became perfect,
midnight is also midday—

Pain is also a joy, curse is also a blessing, night is also a sun—
be gone! Or you will learn a wiseman is also a fool.

(*Z*:IV, 'The Drunken Song')

The same interpretation has been offered by Keith Ansell-Pearson with reference to *Zarathustra* when he suggests that, for Nietzsche, 'what matters is not the death that 'comes' at the end of life but the modes of one's dying in this life.'²⁸

²⁸ *Viroid Life*, 58.

But what really constitutes the difference between death figured in opposition to life and the experience of their irreducible non-duality within life? Anticipating the later chapters of *RN*, for Nishitani this transition is inextricably tied to a change in our perspective on temporal existence. He formulates the basic difference between death as opposed to life and death as an aspect of life in terms of a transition from thinking of death in the form of an abstract future to which one is opposed, or a completed past over which one has no personal control, to the form of death experienced as an immediate presence at the ground of the self from the perspective of the moment.

One finds a complementary account of Nietzsche's approach to fate in Béatrice Han-Pile's reflections on *amor fati* in the mode of agapic love.²⁹ Of particular interest from the perspective of Nishitani's philosophy is Han-Pile's explication of the mediopassive modality of loving fate, as well as her suggestion that for Nietzsche *amor fati* entails a change in our relationship to time.³⁰ Discussions of the middle and/or mediopassive voice, when comparing Nietzsche with Nishitani, are especially enlightening given the central role the form plays in the grammar of the Japanese language. Indeed, according to Rolf Elberfeld, the aim of further explicating the philosophical significance of the

²⁹ Béatrice Han-Pile, 'Nietzsche and Amor Fati,' *European Journal of Philosophy* 19 (2011): 224–61.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 242.

middle voice is a significant motif in the works of both Nishitani, and that of his teacher, Kitaro Nishida.³¹ Despite the fact that neither thinker makes this intention explicit, this point serves to highlight a notable difference from European thinking, especially with respect to the place of the subject, in Kyoto school thinking more generally.

In connection with the themes of history, temporality and the moment, Han-Pile's temporal account of Nietzsche's approach to life-affirmation can be used to highlight significant resonances in the project of Nishitani's text as a whole. The affinity between the two thinkers becomes particularly resonant where Han-Pile identifies the temporal locus of *amor fati* in Nietzsche, not as a transfiguration in relation to the past,³² but as a transformation of 'our ability to live in the *present*.'³³ For Nishitani likewise, the shift to a present-centered framework for life affirmation is a vital ambition.

Similar references to what Nishitani refers to as the 'double exposure of death and life' also appear in instances where Nietzsche questions the straightforward distinction between organic and inorganic existence—for example, where he warns

³¹ 'The thinking of Nishida and Nishitani can be read in a certain respect as a thoughtful development of the middle voice, even though neither thinker speaks explicitly about this grammatical form.' See Elberfeld, 'The Middle Voice of Emptiness: Nishida and Nishitani' in *Japanese and Continental Philosophy: Conversations with the Kyoto School*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 275.

³² As might be supposed from Zarathustra's creative response to the immutability of the 'it was': ... 'and thus I willed it!' (Z, II, 20)

³³ Han-Pile, 'Nietzsche and Amor Fati,' 242.

us in *The Gay Science*, '[l]et us beware of saying that death is opposed to life. The living is merely a type of what is dead, and a very rare type.' (GS, 109)

Refusal to accept an essential distinction between sentient and insentient being, or between living and dead nature, has a long history in the Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition, where we find the foundations for the Zen understanding of selfhood as a form of existence that encompasses death within life. The same idea appears, for example, in Zen Master Dōgen's extension of the category of sentient being to all of nature, and his reference, in *Mountains and Waters as Sūtras*, to the saying of Priest Daokai that 'the green mountains are always walking; a stone woman gives birth to a child at night'.³⁴ Dōgen's subsequent emphasis in this essay, on the 'walking,' (moving), or perhaps the *living* capacity of mountains, which he says is 'just like human walking,'³⁵ is intended to indicate not only the fact that insentient or dead nature is capable of giving rise to the living without contradiction—as in the seemingly contradictory image of the pregnancy of a stone woman—but also that the living retains within it, its basis in the non-living: that human walking is of the same *kind* as the walking of insentient nature. As Dōgen continues:

³⁴ 'Mountains and Waters as Sūtras,' 3-4 in William Edelglass and Jay L. Garfield, *Buddhist Philosophy: Essential Readings* (New York, NY; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3, 87.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

Green mountains are neither sentient nor insentient. You are neither sentient nor insentient. At this moment, you cannot doubt the green mountains' walking.³⁶

Dōgen's insistence on the simultaneous organic and inorganic character³⁷ of the mountains, forms a background for his rehearsal of the image of the 'stone woman,' intended as a metaphor for the subsistence of impersonal nature within the personal realm of human (and organic) life. In this sense, the fecundity of the stone woman also conversely fleshes out the meaning of the image of the dead skull that lies in living pampas grass that was given in Bashō's Haiku: namely, that the binary distinction between 'living' and 'dead' nature, that we so readily suppose in ordinary consciousness, is by no means a forgone conclusion, either in the case of human life, or in the life of nature itself.

More needs to be said about the way that Nishitani conceives affirmative love in the form of a transition to momentary temporality. From Nietzsche's viewpoint, an interesting point of contention would be what Nishitani's reflection on our attitude to time entails for the relationship between momentary existence and the circumscribing of human existence within a *historical* reality (See, for example, *UM*, II). Furthermore, the idea of affirming temporal existence from the standpoint of the moment

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 4, 87

³⁷ Or non-organic/non-inorganic to use the double-negative formulation Dōgen gives above.

is central to Nishitani's criticisms of the conception of time that Nietzsche presents in the idea of eternal recurrence, and is therefore a key interpretive issue for understanding the relationship between the two thinkers.³⁸

Suffice it to say that, for Nishitani, the transition to the moment-centered perspective is by no means a simplistic collapse into presentism, since he goes on to represent the 'now' of existential time as the locus for his account of the relationship between becoming in the present, and history (conceived as the formative basis for both the present and the future). In this way Nishitani's momentary view does not entail an undermining of the other aspects of time, or of historicity, but instead represents a new way of looking at them and, perhaps, of making them cohere.

V. The Shadowy Man

For Nishitani, revelation of the nihility that exists at the grounds of the self inspires a transition away from the person-centered mode of being a person (*RN*, 70). Interpreted in straightforwardly conceptual terms, Nishitani's understanding of the self as a being that is grounded in absolute

³⁸ See Flavel, Sarah. "Nishitani's Nietzsche: Will to Power and the Moment." *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 46, no. 1 (2015): 12–24.

nothingness/emptiness might raise a number of problems, specifically if thought through a framework that understands nothingness as merely the negation of being.³⁹ Instead, Nishitani frames this transformation as an existential one that takes place within the self and within the framework of the self's lived existence. Crucially therefore, the significance of the death's head cannot be properly understood if taken as a representational image of Bashō's skull. Rather, the image is meant to awaken us to the lived experience of our own head, directly understood and experienced in the form of the skull in the pampas grass. Thus Nishitani's notion of the personally-impersonal invites us to contemplate the meaning of our own existential self-awareness in terms of the emptiness at the basis of the self. Such emptiness, or *absolute nothingness* as opposed to mere nothingness, implies that the nihility existing at the base of the self is at one with the positive arising of our existential existence. But what is this *empty self*? How does it experience itself in its existence amongst things? Or rather, what would it mean for us to directly comprehend the death's head contemplation in its full existential significance? Nishitani describes the transition to this 'personally-impersonal' standpoint as a conversion out of our

³⁹ This is the same difficulty for which he criticizes Sartre earlier in the text.

ordinary ego-focused way of being. However, this conversion does not mean transcendence out of, or away from, the self. Instead, in comprehending death as *death-sive-emptiness* (death-as-emptiness), rather than as a mere negation of life, the shift to the perspective of the death's head contemplation constitutes a return to the more fundamental way of our existing in the world. Attainment of this 'impersonally-personal' perspective therefore signifies a conversion to the actualization of emptiness as the true face of the self (RN, 71). Nishitani describes the configuration of this conversion as follows,

In this kind of existential conversion, the self does not cease being a personal being. What is left behind is only the person-centered mode of grasping *person*, that is, the mode of being wherein the person is caught up in itself. In that very conversion the personal mode of being becomes more real, draws closer to the self, and appears in its true suchness. (RN, 71)

This also implies that the shift away from the ego-centered mode of existence does not mean a renunciation or obstruction of the aims and concerns of the self—of desire, drives, or the will—but instead constitutes its actualization in the immediate, real, and perhaps even the most everyday sense.

Echoing Nietzsche, Nishitani connects this conversion to the original meaning of 'personality' as *persona*, in the sense of a mask with which an actor indicates the role that he/she plays on stage. But here, as Nishitani states, we can 'call it a "mask" in the ordinary sense of a face that has been taken on temporarily, provided that we do not imply that there is some other "true" or

“real” thing that it cloaks’ (*RN*, 71). The mask that is the self in earnest, is just a mask, rather than a masking-of or masking-over some underlying substantial entity which the self also might be. Therefore Nishitani’s use of the term ‘temporarily’ here, though intended to signal the partial and transient nature of our existential existence, does not connote (as it usually does) an artificial way of being. Instead, understanding the self as a mask represents a more authentic way of being: as a self that is united with its own emptiness, death or, from the relative perspective of the individual self, its nihility. On this basis, although we can portray this manner of being as illusory due to its insubstantial and provisional character, existence as *persona* is nevertheless, Nishitani claims, ‘through and through real...the most real of realities. It comes into being only as a real form of human being that contains not the slightest bit of deception or artificiality’ (*RN*, 71).

Nishitani explicitly associates the reality of the *persona* with Nietzsche’s assertion in *BGE* that the mask is a constant companion of ‘every profound spirit.’ In line with Nietzsche’s description, the mask represents not an artificial construction but a more elementary and indeed authentic expression of our way of being. Furthermore, so Nishitani claims, this conception of the self as *persona* is not restricted to a limited side of human subjectivity, but is one that encompasses ‘the whole self ranging

from personality to the bodily flesh' (*RN*, 73). This very real manifestation of the bodily and lived character of the self also outwardly resists a merely conceptual or abstract representation, thus further explaining the form of nothingness that underlies our existential existence. As Nishitani puts it: 'were nothingness to be thought of apart from its mask it would become an idea. Were we to deal with the mask apart from nothingness, [a] person could not avoid becoming self-centered.' (*RN*, 72)

With reference to a description from Joseki's reflections on a self-portrait, Nishitani explains the manner in which the self as persona is illusory. Joseki's words, inscribed above the portrait, read as follows,

The heart and mind of this shadowy man, At all occasions is to
me most familiar— From long ago mysteriously wondrous, It is
neither I nor other.

(Quoted in *RN*, 72).

In response to Joseki's description of himself as this 'shadowy man' that is 'neither I nor other,' Nishitani emphasizes that the lived self always remains somehow opaque to itself, and that this opacity is most evidently expressed in our various attempts to represent the self to ourselves. For Nishitani, Joseki's description of viewing his self-portrait, alludes to the fact that self-obscuring is an essential feature of the mask of the self; the point being that this 'shadowy man'—which each of us is—never lends itself to full self-identification, but is no less real on that account. Although differently framed, Nishitani's reflection on the opacity

of the self to itself clearly echoes a number of Nietzsche's reflections on the difficulty of self-knowledge and self-observation—for example, on the self-obscuring feature of subjectivity in *Human All too Human* where Nietzsche writes,

Self-observation. – Man is very well defended against himself, against being reconnoitered and besieged by himself, he is usually able to perceive of himself only his outer walls. The actual fortress is inaccessible, even invisible to him, unless his friends and enemies play the traitor and conduct him in by a secret path. (*HH*, 1)

It might be said that Nietzsche tends to frame the opacity of the self as a problem, whereas for Nishitani this opacity is formulated as a positive aspect of the nature of subjectivity, when viewed in its most real and elemental form. However, on this issue the two thinkers at least share suspicions regarding the possibility of direct self-knowledge of the manner supposed and sought by numerous thinkers in the Western tradition.⁴⁰ For Nishitani, even the desire to attain such a form of self-knowledge is suspect insofar as it manifests a continued striving for and attachment to a thoroughly questionable understanding of the substance of subjective existence. On this basis, such a desire also repeats a problematic tendency to approach subjectivity from the side of ostensibly objective enquiry.

⁴⁰ At times Nietzsche is also dismissive of the quest for self knowledge. For example, "Will a self."— Active, successful natures act, not according to the maxim, "Know thyself," but as if always confronted with the command, "Will a self, so you will become a self." (*HH*, II, § 366)

Drawing back to Nishitani's overall dealings with the topics of fate and death, there is an important sense in which his analysis in the second chapter of *RN* remains closely tied to his more general concern for thinking through the nihilistic consequences of our encounter with the facts of fatedness and, relatedly, of mortality. Thus, although at first sight Nishitani's foray into analysis of the 'The Personal and the Impersonal in Religion' might initially appear removed from the general trajectory of the text, read properly, his discussion in this chapter can be seen to directly cohere with the focus on nihilism that is so central to the text as a whole.

From what has been said, it ought to be clear that the background of his encounter with Nietzsche on the possibility of loving fate is an important impetus for Nishitani's discussion in the second chapter of *RN* and that resonances with Nietzsche are also present—both explicitly and implicitly—throughout his engagement with the history of Zen thinking therein. The question of how to approach fate in an affirmative way through non-discriminating love therefore serves a key interpretive role in illuminating the relationship between the two thinkers. Examination of Nishitani's direct associating of the question of fate with that of death has allowed for a more detailed consideration of his account of the role of mortality (and our confrontation with it) in life affirmation. This has also served as

a basis both for thinking through how Nishitani frames his understanding of emptiness (*śūnyatā*), in relation to the self, at this stage of the text, as well as providing the opportunity to highlight some of the resonances between Nishitani and Nietzsche with regards to the illusory (mask-like) and the opaque (self-obscuring) character of the self. A key feature of Nishitani's analysis seems to lie in his emphasizing that neither of these features of subjectivity should be thought to undermine the *realness* of the existential self, a point that is vital to his arguing for an affirmative position on subjective existence, despite the nihilistic consequences of the fact of our mortality.

The conclusions of the present discussion stress the cohering significance of the background provided by Nietzsche's thinking on the topic of fate for Nishitani's thinking in Ch2 of *RN*, particularly with respect to the problem of nihilism, and thereby also show that gaining an understanding of this crucial influence is pre-eminently useful for grappling with Nishitani's project in *RN* as a whole.

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