

# **Nothingness in Nishida and Aquinas: Mu as Disjointed Human Person and as Unnoticed *Ipsum Esse Subsistens*<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract:**

In this paper, I examine Japanese Kyoto School philosopher Nishida Kitarō's use of *mu* (nothingness) in comparison with the philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas to show where, and how, Nishida equivocates on *mu* on Thomistic grounds, conflating it sometimes with the human person as principle of knowledge and at other times with the Catholic God as *ipsum esse subsistens*. I conclude by bringing in St. Thomas Aquinas' works in response to some of Nishida's speculations about "nothingness," suggesting how a reading of Nishida alongside St. Thomas can shed new light on the problems of being and nothingness.

**Keywords:** Nishida Kitarō; nothingness (*mu*); St. Thomas Aquinas; *ipsum esse subsistens*; *esse commune*

## **Introduction**

Nishida Kitarō (1870-1945) is the representative philosopher of the Kyoto School, a loose grouping of thinkers centered on Kyoto University who have theorized a Japanese engagement with mainly Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thinkers from the West. Nishida is perhaps best known for his early work, *Zen no kenkyū* (An inquiry into the good) (1911), but in his later work he returned with increasing frequency to the concept of nothingness, *mu* (無). (Nishida 2012; Rigsby 2014, 470) In this paper, I examine Nishida's use of *mu* in various places in his philosophical works and compare those uses with St. Thomas' philosophy to show where, and how, Nishida equivocates on *mu*, conflating it sometimes with the human person as principle of knowledge and at other times with the Catholic understanding of God as *ipsum esse subsistens*. (cf. Goto-Jones 2013, 136-137) I conclude by bringing in St. Thomas' works to help respond in part to some of Nishida's misunderstandings of and about so-called "nothingness," suggesting how a reading of Nishida alongside St. Thomas can shed new light on the problems of being and nothingness with which Nishida grappled.

## **Terminological Clarifications and Equivocations**

Comparative philosophical investigations are always fraught with terminological difficulties,

and this is perhaps nowhere more daunting a hurdle to clear than in comparative ontological investigations between Nishida, a Zen Buddhist, and St. Thomas, an Aristotelian-influenced Roman Catholic. At the center of these difficulties lie being and nothingness. On both of these terms the Buddhist and the Catholic are bound to disagree. The general Western understanding of “nothingness,” for example, is generally of a negative de-presencing, a withering absence, a truly sterile void generative of nothing besides more nothing. It is not just that there is nothing there, but that there is no there in which there could be nothing. Many conjure up images of outer space when trying to conceive of nothing, but even this will not do. The vacuum of space, scientists tell us, is actually crisscrossed with particles and radiation. Nothing is something even nothing-er than empty space. Better to imagine, if we can (and we can’t), the nothing that there was (not) before there was any empty space at all. As Fr. Robert Spitzer argues in *New Proofs for the Existence of God*, our best scientific indication is that, prior to the Big Bang, there was not an infinitely dense point, there was (not) simply, nothing. (Spitzer 2010) How to explain how the universe apparently came from nothing flummoxes many cosmologists, but this consternation seems only further to confirm that, in the West, nothing means just that: nothing.<sup>2</sup> (Delfino and Fradd 2018)

Nishida’s use of the term “nothing” was very different from this. Drawing heavily on Buddhism, and in particular Zen Buddhism, Nishida deployed the term “nothing” to mean, not a total absence of anything, but the ground of ontological and epistemological arising, the field of co-dependent origination akin to the “nothing” argued by much earlier Japanese Buddhist philosophers Kūkai (774-835) and Dōgen (1200-1253). (Kasulis 2019, 134) For those medieval Buddhist philosophers, and for the Buddhist and later Zen tradition generally, “nothing” as understood in the West is not a possible category. There is no nothing, there is only nothingness, a kind of gerundive contingency which drains phenomena of permanence but does not reduce down to the total absence of any kind of being. Nothingness, *mu*, is not prior to somethingness, but is rather the inevitable consequence of there being anything at all and anyone around to be sentient of (no)things. Nothingness takes somethingness for granted.<sup>3</sup> *Mu* is the instability of the taken-for-granted world, the ineluctability of dharma and karma, akin perhaps to what Heraclitus means by the functional non-category οὐδὲν when he says that “nothing” (οὐδὲν) remains the same, and not “nothing” as conveyed by the Latin *nihil*.

However, Nishida’s *mu* was not completely identical with the Dōgen and Kūkai conceptions of the same term. By reading Nishida in the light of the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas, it is possible to see that Nishida equivocated on *mu* in at least two ways, even at times within the Zen tradition. Nishida uses *mu* as a disjointed stand-in for God. (See generally Nishida 2012, 250-258) Nishida does this oftentimes explicitly, seeking to rectify the Christian, or Judeo-Christian, God with the Zen Buddhist understanding of ultimate reality, namely, *mu*. Although Nishida uses the word “God” (*kami* 神) in the Judeo-Christian sense in his writings and even refers to *mu* as “God” in some passages, Nishida blurs the distinction between the Catholic God and the Buddha, granting God a kind of buried transcendence or transcendent immanence and thereby rendering quite difficult any clarification, on a Thomistic reading at least, of Nishida’s thought on this score. (Leonardi 2014,

449, 451, 453) In many places, Nishida's *mu* does, indeed, hew close to, if not restate, classical understandings of the Buddha within the Zen Buddhist tradition. However, in other places, what Nishida seems to mean by *mu* is not Buddha, and not even God in the abstract, but *ipsum esse subsistens* as set forth by St. Thomas in *De ente et essentia* and elsewhere. This is the root of the troubles in comparative Nishida-Catholic philosophy, and a cross-reading with St. Thomas' writings will make this clear and also point the way to solutions. As a consequence of this misunderstanding of being and apparent ignorance of St. Thomas' teachings on *ipsum esse subsistens*, Nishida also uses *mu* as a disjointed stand-in for what St. Thomas understood as the human person as a principle of knowledge.<sup>4</sup>

Some further clarification of terminology is in order. Nishida's use of *mu*, while heavily dependent on Nishida's Zen Buddhist background (before becoming a professional philosopher Nishida spent ten years as a lay Zen practitioner (*koji* 居士)), often does not retain, or even reflect, the specificity of terminology that other Buddhist philosophers have developed. (Waldenfels 1966, 361) When Nishida writes *mu*, he sometimes appears to mean *kū*, or emptiness. (Leaman 2001, 304-305, 393-394) Tibetan Madhyamaka philosophers in particular, for example Tsongkhapa and Shakya Chokden, refined the earlier Indian concept of *śūnyatā* (emptiness) to indicate the ultimate ontological and epistemological truth. (Leaman 2001, 181) What Nishida seems most often to mean by *mu* is closer to Nāgārjuna's *pratītyasamutpāda*, "dependent arising," a concept central to Zen philosophy and especially prevalent in the works of Dōgen. (Leaman 2001, 367) Speaking strictly within a Buddhist context, Nishida seems in his philosophy to be attempting to combine, in a creative way, the esoteric Buddhism of Kūkai, who thought that the "World Buddha," the compassionate body of the universe, presented no obstacles to the enlightenment of any sentient being (thus, the universe was "empty," that is, free from obstruction to the seeker after enlightenment), (Leaman 2001, 81; Heisig, et al. 2011, 59-61) and Dōgen, whose "existential moment" (*uji* 有時) was premised upon the codependent origination of all forms and, in turn, the emptiness of all phenomena. (Heisig et al. 2011, 148-151) Nishida wants his *mu* to be generatively empty but also not a hindrance to ultimate enlightenment. He therefore does not mean by *mu* what Westerners would probably think of upon hearing the term "emptiness" or "nothingness".

As might be expected, this ado about *mu* is precisely where Nishida's philosophy has been met by confusion and criticism. It hardly clarified things that Nishida brought into his philosophy a great deal of Western philosophy on top of his rich readings in Buddhism. Nishida was a teacher of German by trade, and he read widely in Kant, Fichte, Hegel, and Husserl. He also knew Plato and other non-German philosophers well. However, despite this broad familiarity with Western sources, Nishida seems not to have read widely in the Scholastic philosophers, and in particular seems not to have incorporated the teachings of St. Thomas Aquinas into his work. Comparing Nishida's use of *mu* with Aquinas' understanding of God as *ipsum esse subsistens*, existence itself, we can see that what Nishida was groping towards in his writings was often, it seems, what Aquinas clarified some seven centuries before Nishida wrote. The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

entry for Nishida argues that, “For Nishida, the final level that holds differences or contradictions together is ultimately unanalyzable absolute nothingness.” (Maraldo 2019) But Nishida actually seemed to mean something closer to Aquinas’ *ipsum esse subsistens*, not unanalyzable nothingness, but the very ground of being—or, as the Zen practitioner Nishida might have said, becoming—*itself*. (See Jacinto 1994, 142-144) Further, by *zettai mu*, “absolute nothingness,” Nishida seemed to mean, not a total and utter non-existence, a nothing, a complete void, but, rather, a mystical dialectic, the unapproachability of the creature to the Creator on the creature’s terms, an apophatic reading of the Godhead which is Zenlike only to a point but then becomes very much like what St. John of the Cross meant by “*nada*”.<sup>5</sup> (Nobuhara 2008, 53; Kopf 2002, 237)

### **Mu and God**

For scholar of the Kyoto School Hans Waldenfels, Nishida’s attempt to render in human language the ineffability of human existence springs from Nishida’s “spirit of nonattachment to both being and nonbeing, which since Nāgārjuna was handed on through China to Japan, especially in Zen Buddhism”. (Waldenfels 1966, 360) It seems more accurate to agree, however, with Noda Matao, whom Waldenfels cites earlier in the same paragraph, who held that Nishida “accepts, from the first, the position of a mystic. His metaphysics has its characteristic motif in his mystic religiosity.” (Waldenfels 1966, 360) This mysticism seems to be a product of Nishida’s ontological position. Nishida rejects most notions of God found in the West, but at the same time realizes that it is impossible to proceed any farther philosophically, in the light of the new knowledge and stimuli from the West, using only the Zen tradition. Nishida writes, in a Hegelian-Dōgenian vein:

Something like the self-consciousness of God which develops in world history is nothing but empty time which could be imagined on the grounds of nature. The true God is not the creating God. It must be something like—what the scholar in the field of mysticism call—*Gotttheit* (divinity). (Waldenfels 1966, 366)

As Waldenfels notes, “We realize here again that the insufficient notion of creation is one of the real stumbling blocks on the way to some kind of understanding of what people in the West mean when they speak of God.” (Waldenfels 1966, 366)

Nishida must have realized that his attempts to speak of ontology equivocally across both Western and Buddhist traditions were unsatisfactory, because he ranged widely across Western philosophy in an attempt to put into non-Buddhist terms the idea he had of *mu*. Nishida was thorough, at least as far as non-Scholastics go, but for all that it is doubtful whether he himself ever hit on the right mode of discourse for the ideas he was trying to convey. As Waldenfels notes of Nishida’s reading and responses:

In a book of Max Stirner, Nishida finds a saying about God, ‘*Namen nennen Dich nicht*’ (names do not express you), which he applies to the ‘Ego’ (II, 272).<sup>6</sup> He searches for other analogies in the West and quotes

from J. [Jacob] Boehme (*Ungrund*, ‘the reality is the bottom of an ocean which cannot be reached ... if it could be reached, it were not reality’ (II, 274f)), Dionysius Areopagita (‘While God is everything, He is not anything’ (II, 275, 283)), Scotus Eriugena, whom he knows most probably only indirectly through J. [Johann Nepomuk] Huber’s book *Scotus Eriugena* (II, 278).<sup>7</sup> Nishida repeatedly refers to Eriugena in this work. ‘If you make God being, it does not fit, if you make Him nothingness, it does not fit; if you call Him motion, it does not fit, if you call Him stillness, it does not fit; He is what is said’—and here Nishida uses a frequently used Zen phrase—“if you are able to say it,—thirty strokes; if you are not able to say it,—thirty strokes”. (II, 279) God is at the same time—what Eriugena calls—*Natura creans et non creata* and *Natura nec creata nec creans* (II, 279; cf. 287, 301). He is *natura superessentialis*, which means that all categories are denied (II, 277, 283). Nishida even refers to Gnostics like Basileides (‘ὁ οὐκ ὄν θεός’, which Nishida translates ‘the God who is not (yet?)’, ‘*mizai no kami*’) and Valentinus (βυθος, depth) (II, 319). One might, therefore, say that Nishida looks in the direction of God in order to clarify his own understanding of the ultimate reality. On the other hand, he is somewhat attracted by the word ‘nothingness’ and states several times that the ‘Ego comes from creative nothingness and returns to creative nothingness’; he thinks that this expression is able to reveal the true state of the will (II, 272f; also 275, 281; again in later works, cf. especially IV, 238f). It is evident that this kind of nothingness does not refer to God (cf. II, 281); however, it is also not clearly related to the *creatio ex nihilo*. It rather seems that the ‘creative nothingness’ is suggested by Bergson’s *élan vital*. (Waldenfels 1966, 364)

In addition to this tour of the apophatic thinkers and mystics, Nishida also refers often to Nicholas Cusa to help explain Nishida’s conception, or non-conception, of God. As Waldenfels quotes Nishida:

a God who is the creator or superintendent of a universe and who stands outside the universe cannot truly be said to be an absolute, infinite God. I think that the Hindu religion in the remote past and the mystical school which flourished during the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries in Europe were seeking God by intuition in the human heart, and this is the most profound knowledge of God. In what form does God exist? From one viewpoint, God, as such men as Nicholas Cusa have said, is found by negation, for that which one specifies or must affirm, i.e., that which much [sic: “must”] be seized, is not God, for if He is that which is specific and must be seized, He is already finite, and is unable to perform the infinite function of unifying the universe (*De docta ignorantia*, Cap. 24). (Waldenfels 1966, 357-358)

With Cusa even more than with the Western apophatic thinkers, Nishida can be seen to depart from the Catholic, Thomistic understanding of God. For it is not the same thing, on the Thomistic understanding, to say that one cannot speak of God, and to say that God and nothingness, *mu*, are identical. The shift Nishida makes in this passage illustrates the difficulty, perhaps the impossibility, of fusing Buddhist and Catholic conceptions of either divinity or nothingness at a fundamental level. “Seen from this point,” Nishida continues, building on his citation of Nicholas of Cusa:

God is absolute nothingness (*mattaku mu*). [A better translation might be: “nothing but nothing”.] However, if one says that God is merely nothingness (*tan ni mu*), this is certainly not so. At the base

of the establishment of reality there is a unifying function which clearly cannot be moved... God... is the basis of reality, and only because He is able to be nothingness, is there no place whatsoever where He is not and does not operate. (Waldenfels 1966, 357-358)

Nishida thus understood God to have a kind of Keatsian negative capability which was His “unifying function”. (See, e.g., Castellano 2010) At the basis of reality’s “establishment,” Nishida argues, God is there, an omnipotent cipher, the anode of all existence but by that measure only the universe’s only omnipresent force, a presence of non-presencing which is also the confluence, for Nishida, of the Buddhist and Christian understandings of divinity and nothingness.

### **St. Thomas Aquinas on Being and Nothingness**

St. Thomas Aquinas offers a stark, positive contrast to Nishida’s insistence on a somehow-all-fecund, -all-encompassing *via negativa*. St. Thomas was working with his own set of philosophical forebears, and, like Nishida, Aquinas was also heavily influenced by two imperfectly blended religious and philosophical traditions—St. Thomas’ Christianity can be compared in this sense to Nishida’s Buddhism, both being world religions with various universal claims, and, by extension, the pagan forerunners to Christianity, such as Greek philosophy, can be compared to the various strains of Indian philosophy which later Buddhist thinkers in Tibet, China, Japan, and elsewhere were to appropriate and refine. St. Thomas’ encounter with Aristotle, however, unlike the Buddhists’ encounters with the Indian tradition, were made in the light of Christian Revelation, and so St. Thomas was predisposed to penetrate beyond the various forms and appearances to the *ipsum esse subsistens*, God Himself. Where Nishida reached back into his cultural and experiential field of understanding and found the doctrine of *mu*, St. Thomas, building on Aristotle, fixed on the transcendence what might be called “*yū* (有),” or being (or *Dasein*, in a better translation of *yū*, emphasizing the “in-place-ness” or “being-there-ness” of Nishida’s ontology). From this insight St. Thomas was able to penetrate to an understanding of God, not as nothing, but as the ground of everything, as being itself.

In St. Thomas’ writings on being and nothingness we find that what Nishida grasped for language to describe was probably what St. Thomas understood as *ens commune*, which is a preliminary to the deeper understanding of being and nothingness which Nishida sought but was apparently never able to attain on Thomistic grounds. As Thomist scholar and philosopher Fran O’Rourke explains:

The primary metaphysical signification of ‘being’ is *ipsum esse commune creaturae*. It is the datum from which all other notions are derived. Even *ens commune*, the logical concept of the entity of things, which provides the formal object of ontology, stands at the threshold of metaphysical reflection and does not penetrate to the inner principle sought by a deeper reflection upon reality. [...] Our concept of *esse commune* (the perfection common to all particular beings), resides only within the intellect—a characteristic of all concepts. But it is grounded in concrete being. Just as the perfection of humanity

exists in reality at the level of the individual, the perfection of *esse* is the primary perfection of each being. This act of *ipsum esse commune* is what the concept refers to. (O'Rourke 2005, 149)

Nishida was trying to understand God apophatically, and trying to reconcile Christian apophatic thinkers and mysticism with Buddhist *mu*-thinking, but he seems to have been stuck at the level of the conceptual, what St. Thomas saw as *ipsum esse commune creaturae*. By foregrounding *mu*, nothingness, Nishida made it difficult to make the further conceptual leap beyond what he saw, being a Zen Buddhist, as the emptiness of the self, the non-self, to the absolute Being which in Thomistic thought gives existence—not non-existence—to everything and everyone else.

Indeed, the more Nishida attempted to use *mu* as the framework or paradigm for his philosophical ecumenism, the more this ecumenism seemed to elude him. The problem seems to be fundamental, for, at least on the Thomistic reading, God is not *mu*, but Being pure and absolute. The human person, who possesses this being in a particular and finite way, is the principle of knowing, or approaching, the font of the individual's existence. (cf. Kopf 2002, 226-229; Abe 2008, 90-93) For St. Thomas, finitude does not lead to nothingness. Finitude instead points to Being, not non-being. O'Rourke continues:

*Esse commune* is the act of existing inherent in finite beings, in which being does not as such subsist in its fullness. Reflection upon these beings reveals the value of being as a perfection in itself. [...] While we attribute *esse* to God, the *esse* signified transcends the mode of signification, which is proper to the *esse commune* of beings. We necessarily acquire our notion of God as absolute and infinite subsisting Being through the mediation and transformation of our concept of *esse commune*, the being common to his created analogues. The idea of God, however, infinitely transcends *esse commune* and refers beyond finite being to absolute and infinite subsisting Being which exists necessarily in itself as the plenitude of perfection. (O'Rourke 2005, 149-150)

This is the leap that Nishida did not make. Once the concept of an absolute God is introduced, then the predication of *mu* as ground of being instantly disappears. Nishida's conception of "God" seems to have precluded transcendence, clearing the ground for *mu* but only by prescinding from the Catholic, especially Thomistic understanding of the deity. (Shimomura 1966a, 336-337; Berthrong 2003, 175; Nakata 1997, 190-193) Nishida strove to draw the infinite down into the primordially contingent, the dark, feltlike, mossy *mu* from which, Buddhists hold, phenomena and observer both codependently arise and back into which both return, dharma and karma cancelling out in the long run.

St. Thomas taught something radically different. For there to be an *actus essendi*, an act of existing, for human beings, there must be an ungerunded verb, a pure and total Existence, an Aristotelian Unmoved Mover but with plenary power of *creatio ex nihilo*. This is God, *Ipsum Esse Subsistens*:

The fundamental difference between *esse*, the *actus essendi* of finite beings, and *Ipsum Esse Subsistens*

is that the act of esse does not itself subsist but is the act through which a being exists: *esse significat aliquid completum et simplex sed non subsistens*. [citing *De Potentia* 1, 1] *Esse commune* cannot subsist by itself, precisely because it is *commune* and not *unum*, diversified as it is by the substances which receive it [citing *De Potentia* 7, 2 ad 5] and distinguished, therefore, from *Ipsum Esse per se subsistens*. [...] Being as such is unique: *esse inquantum est esse, non potest esse diversum*. [citing *Summa Contra Gentiles* 2, 52, 1274] At the level of finite reality, however, in the immediate objects of our knowledge, the perfection of being is diversified throughout the multiplicity of concrete substances: *esse est diversum in diversis*. [citing *De Ente et Essentia*, V] By analogy, however, it is common to all. [citing *Summa Theologiae*, I, 4, 3: *Secundum aliqualem analogiam, esse est commune omnibus*] In finite reality being does not present itself as subsistent, but as inherent in beings, interior to all yet distinct in each. (O'Rourke 2005, 151-152)

There is, in a sense, a *mu* lurking in finite existence. Creatures do not exist of their own accord, an understanding of the contingency of being which is central to Buddhist philosophy and especially prominent in Zen, and also central to Catholic theology and philosophy (in particular the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas). However, while how anything comes out of nothing is a paradox for the Buddhist, for St. Thomas this seeming paradox was the window waiting to be opened to the glory of God.

This unresolved, “un-Thomased” paradox of existence in the face of non-existence is at the heart of what Nishida seems to mean by *mu*, nothingness, and even more so by “*zettai mu*,” or “absolute nothingness”. Nishida never quite gets beyond the dialectics of the Buddhist *mu*, and cannot absolutize the relativism at the bottom of his concept of the so-called “absolute”. There may be a linguistic reason for this, at least in part. As Waldenfels points out, “*zettai*” in Japanese does not mean precisely “absolute,” although that is probably the only feasible English translation of “*zettai*”. (Nakata 1997, 196-197) Inherent in the term, Waldenfels notes, is a relation, a negation of something already there. It is a kind of Buddhist “absolute,” the absolutism of codependent origination. “Unlike the western terms ‘absolute-relative’,” Waldenfels notes:

the Japanese terms *zettai* 絶対 (absolute) and *sōtai* 相對 (relative) imply each other etymologically. Etymologically *zettai* is said with regard to *sōtai* and is determined as being free, separated, cut off from *tai* (that which stands opposite). This object *tai* is not expressed in the western term ‘absolute’. (Waldenfels 1966, 369 fn 56)

This is a paradox that is more than merely etymological, however. It is the very nature of Nishida’s work. As the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry puts it:

Equally paradoxical are the positive descriptions Nishida gives it [i.e., *zettai mu*], in spite of the implicit claim that it defies description. Rather than a mere absence of being, meaning, or function, absolute nothingness is active and creative in forming the actual world; and it manifests or awakens to itself through self-awareness. It is the foundation of the world and of the self which is a focal point of the

world; but it is an uncommon kind of foundation in that it functions through self-negation. It cannot be called ‘absolute’ unless it negates any particular determination of it and simultaneously enfoldes them all. It is the universal of universals. (Maraldo 2019)

Thus, the problem of Nishida’s apotheosizing of nothingness goes far, indeed infinitely, beyond the problem of etymological stickiness of terminology for “absolutism” and “relativism” in Japanese.

Nishida faced directly the problem of nothingness, *mu*, and made perhaps the most sustained attempt in the history of philosophy to reconcile the Buddhist, in particular Zen, understanding of “nothing” with the Western, in particular Christian, understanding of God. In the end, however, Nishida had no way to resolve the problem of *mu* other than by approximating it to Western apophatic thinkers’ and mystics’ conception of God. Nishida held that:

Nothingness separated from being is not true nothingness; the one separated from the all is not the true one; equality separated from distinction is not true equality. In the same way that if there is not God there is no world, if there is no world there is no God. (Waldenfels 1966, 358)

The topsy-turvy “God” who is both creator and creature of the world of forms ends up causing more philosophical problems than “he” (or “it”) explains. This tangle remains tangled sans intervention by St. Thomas Aquinas and his concept of *ipsum esse subsistens*.

There appears to be no way around this paradox as Nishida has framed it. On a Thomistic reading, the nothing and the everything, the one and the many, are hopelessly jumbled. For that reason, perhaps, Nishida tried two other methods for reconciling the apparently irreconcilable. When not nibbling at the edges of mysticism or engaging in the kind of ecumenical apophaticism to which his erudition in post-Enlightenment European philosophers seemed naturally to lead him, Nishida tried resolving the paradox described above, the apparent tension between existing individuals and the ground of being itself, by privileging on the one hand experience, and, on the other, place. In his earliest works, especially in *Zen no kenkyū*, Nishida attempts to ground being-in-the-world in, or even to identify it as, “pure experience”. (Nishida 2012, 17-27; Fujita 2007, 40-42) “Pure Experience” is the title of both Part I and Chapter 1 of *Zen no kenkyū*, and Nishida attempts to say that “unity of consciousness” is the organizer of pure experience. However, facing criticism from his students and peers, Nishida later refined his doctrine on “pure experience” into what he called “place” (*basho*). (Nakata 1996, 169-170; Nakata 1997, 161-164; Tao 2005, 453) Thus, as Nishida wrote in “The Logic of Place”:

The opposition and relationship between form and matter emerge in the *place* of experience, as does the subject-object opposition in which the self, as a true ‘I’, reflects itself infinitely within itself, making itself nothing in order to contain the infinity of being. (Heisig, et al., 2011, 652)<sup>8</sup>

Neither pure experience nor place allowed Nishida to overcome his philosophical

difficulties in attempting to lead *mu* into co-(non)existence with God, but this is not to say that Nishida's efforts were wasted. He probably did not realize it, but he did, in fact, brush up very close against the Thomistic position which, if but pursued, would perhaps have helped Nishida see clear of his longstanding difficulties and beyond the strictures of *mu*.

### Place and Personhood

It was also in "The Logic of Place" that Nishida came close to arriving at the true crux of *esse commune* and *ipsum esse subsistens*, namely in Nishida's conception of the human person. Influenced by the non-self or no-self (*muga*, *anatman*, *anattā*) tradition of Buddhist philosophy, Nishida rejects the human person as the principle of knowing. (Shimomura 1965b, 9; Nakamasa 2015, 185; Carter 2009, 13) "We may think of the self," Nishida writes:

as a kind of unifying point that sets up within the 'consciousness of the self' an opposition between the knower and the known, that is, between subject and object, form and matter. This unifying point is not the knower but merely that which has already been objectified and known. (Heisig, et al., 2011, 653)

A Thomistic understanding of personhood, however, might have allowed Nishida to rectify the apparent contradictions between the mind and the world that Buddhism resolves only by appealing to doctrines of emptiness, nothingness, and impermanence. Nishida approaches also, again seemingly unwittingly, to the Thomistic position in "Pure Experience," a later work on an earlier theme, when he writes that "Over time I came to realize that it is not that experience exists because there is an individual, but that an individual exists because there is experience." (Heisig, et al., 2011, 647) This is a simple inversion of what St. Thomas taught about the human person. When Nishida later transitioned from "pure experience" to "place," he came closer:

The true self is the self at work, and true reality must be considered the object of this acting self. We are born in this world and realize our selves by acting in it. (Heisig, et al., 2011, 648)

However, even here we find that Nishida still apparently did not have the Thomistic mental furniture on *ens* or *esse* to overcome the discrepancies in his thought or in his encounters with the Buddhist philosophical tradition.

The following passage from St. Thomas' *De ente et essentia* helps resolve some of the tension in Nishida's philosophy between existence and non-existence, the human person and *mu*:

If each thing which receives something from another is in potency to it, and what is received in it is its act, the quiddity or form that is the intelligence is in potency to the existence it receives from God, and that received existence is in the mode of an act. Thus potency and act are found in intelligences, but not form and matter except equivocally. (Aquinas 1998, 43)

On the Thomistic view, the fact that there is an intelligence, a human knower, pondering

the apparent other facts of the existence of the world and of the concomitant non-permanence of the existence of either the knower or the known, points, if the sign is followed, to God. Not to nothingness, but to God. Not to a *mu*, but to a Thou. One wonders what a Thomistic Nishida might have written about the realization of the self acting in the world, past the fact of acting and to the deeper question of being. Nishida was guided in his attempts to understand being by his Buddhist training, and also by his familiarity with post-Enlightenment European philosophers. It is tantalizing to speculate on how a deep interaction with the Scholastics, in particular with the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas, might have prompted Nishida to refine his thought beyond the categories of *mu*, mere act, the apophatics of Nicholas of Cusa, and the quasi-nominalism of Duns Scotus.

### **Conclusion**

In the end, instead of following the personalistic lead of the St. Thomas whose writings he apparently did not know in detail, Nishida returned, after his long detour into considerations of the divine, into nothingness, explicating Zen master Kanemitsu Kogun's teaching of "regain[ing] the world and yourself in wonderful self-identity" by realizing that *satori*, enlightenment, is awareness that "the Universe has become nothing, and the Ego has become nothing," but that in this "same spark of Nothingness" lies the attainment of the true self. (Waldenfels 1966, 368) Nishida ends his philosophical statements by arguing for "absolute contradictory self-identity". (Waldenfels 1966, 369) This is apparently a restatement of Nicholas of Cusa's "*coincidentia oppositorum*," but put into final Buddhist terms by a lifetime devotee of Zen. (Waldenfels 1966, 369)

Nishida Kitarō is known as the "philosopher of nothingness," but in this paper I have attempted to show that Nishida did not engage with the Thomistic understanding of what "nothingness," *mu*, means comparatively, or, more pointedly, what *mu* really is and is not in the language of Catholic theology and philosophy. On a Thomistic reading, especially, if nothingness is not total and final, then it has no meaning. It cannot generate out of itself, as many contemporary atheistic physicists and cosmologists assert. It cannot do anything. It is nothing. Nishida, of course, rejects this view explicitly. (Shimomura 1965a, 117) Nishida knew very well what *mu* meant in the Buddhist philosophic tradition, and it was his life's project to find a common ground—of nothingness—for speaking about both Zen and non-Buddhist ontologies. That from Nishida's common ground has not sprung forth the transcendence he may have hoped for is attributable, I have argued here, to Nishida's unfamiliarity with the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas (Shimomura 1966b, 204), and in particular Aquinas' teachings about the human person, a creature who participates in the *ipsum esse subsistens*, the pure act of "to be" Who is God Himself. *Mu* has no generative or combinatory power in Aquinas' thought. A fortiori, *mu* cannot be transcendent, and cannot be God. God is not nothing—nothing is not God. That is the crucial difference about which Nishida and St. Thomas Aquinas appear bound always to disagree.

## Endnotes:

1. I wish to thank Professor Robert Delfino for his suggestions and critiques on an earlier draft of this paper. All errors and interpretations of course remain my own.
2. See also (Hawking and Mlodinow 2010; Hoyle 1982; Krauss 2012).
3. There is a correlative in prime matter and form in material substances. See (Robinson 1974, 168-188). (My thanks to Prof. Delfino for pointing out this analogy.) In fact, Nishida's first use of the term *mu* occurred in a treatment of Aristotle. (Nakata 1997, 178)
4. See, e.g., Nishida Kitarō, "Watashi to nanji [I and thou]" (Nishida 2002).
5. The comparison with St. John of the Cross' *nada* was suggested by Prof. Robert Delfino, personal communication, August, 2020.
6. These numbers refer to *Nishida Kitarō zenshū*, op. cit., volume number and page number(s).
7. But cf. (Aquinas 1998, 429-431)
8. Note here the similarities between the active and passive intellects in both Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas. I am grateful to Prof. Delfino for pointing this out. See also (Ri-zenfūba- 1987, 28).

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