**The Originary *Wherein*: Heidegger and Nishida on “the Sacred” and “the Religious”:**

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**Abstract:**

In this paper, I explore a possible convergence between two great twentieth century thinkers, Nishida Kitarō of Japan and Martin Heidegger of Germany. The focus is on the quasi-religious language they employ in discussing the grounding of human existence in terms of an encompassing *wherein* for our being. Heidegger speaks of “the sacred” and “the passing of the last god” that mark an empty clearing wherein all metaphysical absolutes or gods have withdrawn but simultaneously indicative of an opening wherein beings are given. Nishida speaks of “the religious” dimension in the depths of one’s being, that he calls “place, and which somehow envelops the world through its kenotic self-negation. In both we find reference to a kind of originary space ⎯ the open or place ⎯ associated with quasi-religious themes. I also point to their distinct approaches to metaphysical language in their attempts to give voice to that abysmal thought.

**Key words:**

Heidegger

Nishida

sacred

place

god

Despite great regional, cultural, and intellectual distance between two preeminent thinkers of the East and the West, Nishida Kitarō and Martin Heidegger, their respective philosophies seem to suggest a space for grounding ⎯ even if silent and abysmal ⎯ that may permit a dialogue between them.[[1]](#endnote-0) In characterizing the grounding of human existence, both thinkers employ quasi-religious terms while pointing to its withdrawn or *other* nature that suggest an encompassing *wherein* for our being. From his works from the 1930s and after, Heidegger, inspired by Hölderlin, speaks of “the sacred” (*das Heilige*) and “the passing of the last god” that mark an empty clearing whence all metaphysical absolutes or gods have withdrawn. This exhaustion of absolutes ⎯ Nietzsche’s “death of god” and Hölderlin’s “flight of the gods” ⎯ that characterizes modernity simultaneously discloses the overwhelming excess of an openness wherein beings are given, hinting at the *Es* (“it”) of “*es gibt…*(x)” (“There is…”). Heidegger finds the sacred in Hölderlin’s poetry to refer to this open clearing of concealment-unconcealment wherein beings appear and disappear ⎯ a chaos that engulfs the ordering of beings. Nishida from the inception of his theory of place (*basho*) in 1926 speaks on the other hand of “the religious” (*shūkyōteki*) dimension that one intuits in the depths of one’s being, a place wherein one encounters the existential nullity, death, that finitizes one’s being. In the 1940s, making use of both Christian and Buddhist concepts, he relates that dimension ⎯ which he now calls, “place of absolute nothing” (*zettai mu no basho*) ⎯ to the absolute (*zettai*) or god that envelops the world as its place through its own *kenotic* self-negation. In both thinkers we thus find reference to a kind of originary space ⎯ the open or place ⎯ that becomes associated with quasi-religious motifs/themes. Both characterize this primal space as abysmal or *other* than what we can comprehend with ordinary conceptual means. For Nishida it is an undeterminable “nothing” (*mu*) behind any delimitable being, making room for such beings as their place; and for Heidegger it is the “*Es*” of “*es gibt….*” that withdraws to clear a space for the giving of beings.[[2]](#endnote-1) For both that primal abyss is withdrawn from the human grasp and yet is gracious in the provision of our being and giving of what is to be comprehended. Both thinkers thus advocate an acknowledgment of finitude on the part of humanity vis-à-vis that graciousness in a call that is heard from those abysmal depths of one’s being, a call that is *other* and yet resonating within as one’s *own*. This call — alterior yet intrinsic to us — sunders subjectivity from its claim to autonomy and tears the subject-object dichotomy and the inner-outer divide to realize a non-duality that is a-symmetrical. It is that a-symmetrical non-duality of one’s self with the originary *wherein* that Nishida conceives in terms of inverse correspondence and that Heidegger conceives in terms of the turning of the en-owning of be-ing. We notice, however, an important difference in their ways of giving voice to that abysmal thought, i.e., Nishida’s seemingly unabashed appropriation of Western metaphysical terminology and Heidegger’s explicit rejection of that onto-theological conceptual framework.[[3]](#endnote-2)

In what follows I shall first discuss Nishida’s concepts of place, the religious, and god; and Heidegger’s notions of the open clearing, the sacred, and the last god.[[4]](#endnote-3) I shall then discuss the mode of human comportment each thinker prescribes vis-à-vis that originary *wherein*, which in both cases seem to suggest an a-symmetrical non-duality. Then I will provide some concluding remarks by comparing and contrasting their theories.[[5]](#endnote-4)

**Nishida: the religious and the place of nothing:**

With the premise that Nishida Kitarō[[6]](#endnote-5) probably is not as familiar to the reader of this journal, in comparison to Heidegger, let me provide a brief introduction to Nishida the thinker. Nishida lived in a period when Japan, through her incorporation Western influences, was straining to position itself in a world heading towards globalization. That synthesis of West and East is mirrored in Nishida’s thought, and he is today recognized as one of the important fathers of modern Japanese philosophy, that is, “philosophy” in the Western sense of the term, imported from the West during the last decades of the 1800s. But in addition he is known as the founder of what has come to be called the Kyoto school of philosophy, the first originally “Japanese” school of “Western” philosophy, i.e., a school of thought that is more than a regurgitation of what was learnt from the West.

Throughout his career Nishida was especially interested in the issue of subject-object dualism in modern epistemology, along with its concomitant objectification of every theme it touches. In his oeuvre, Nishida proposes a series of solutions to the question of what supports or holds together that duality, and each solution involves a *turning away* from the object of epistemic focus in order to bring to light what is more originary. This initially leads him to turn inward in introspection to plumb the depths of the mind that engages in objectification. Therein he finds the deepest self-awareness to lie at the point where the self-contradiction of existence is made explicit, that is, where one faces the alterity of one’s own being, where life qua being confronts death qua non-being. What this opens up is an originary abyss of non-differentiation, which he calls “absolute nothing” (*zettai mu*), that encompasses and releases opposites such as being and non-being, life and death, self and other. This breakthrough in his thinking during the mid-1920s serves to inaugurate his theory of *basho* or “place,” the inception of what has come to be called “Nishida philosophy” (*Nishida tetsugaku*).[[7]](#endnote-6)

We can trace that inception of Nishida philosophy to Nishida’s 1926 essay, “*Basho*.” From the very start of his theory of place Nishida makes a connection between what he calls “the religious” (*shūkyōteki*) and his unique notion of “place.” The two ideas ultimately converge in the deepest dimension of human existence, where the self is in immediate contact with the source of the real. Self-awareness opens the vista to those depths through a penetrating introspection into the very self-contradiction of existence. Nishida characterizes that most concrete level of human existence as the place wherein life meets death and we find ourselves environed by nothing (*mu*). Therein, at this place Nishida calls “the place of generation-and-extinction” (*shōmetsu no basho*) (Z3 423)[[8]](#endnote-7), one obtains an intuitive understanding of the contradiction of one’s own being vis-à-vis its non-substantiality, a direct awareness of the finitude of one’s being vis-à-vis death, the abysmal nothing from out of which one’s self is constituted in the face of the world via self-differentiation. That nothingness, for Nishida, is the primal sphere — prior to the dichotomization between ideal and real, experience and reality, subjective and objective — from out of which the world and our experiencing of the world unfold through the play of opposites and dualities. Nishida here cites Plato’s notion of the *chōra* (χώρα) (from the *Timaeus*), in its ambiguity as a place that eludes positive description that nevertheless must be assumed for the in-formation of things, as a source of inspiration. (See Z3 415) I think this is a significant point to keep in mind in comparing Nishida with Heidegger as Heidegger himself develops his idea of the region (or “that-which-regions”) on the basis of a certain reading of that Platonic notion.[[9]](#endnote-8)

 In his later works, e.g., “Logic and Life” (*Ronri to seimei*) of 1936, Nishida extends that understanding of place in an outward direction, more explicitly in terms of the environing world as a dialectical matrix from where we are born and into where we perish. (Z8 19) Here Nishida views the world (*sekai*) as involving a dialectical play amongst individuals and between individuals and their environment, or between parts and whole. The whole unfolds in the dialectical interactions of individuals, which in turn inversely determine (*gyaku-gentei*) the whole. But in his final essays from the 1940s, e.g., “Toward a Philosophy of Religion with Pre-established Harmony as Guide” (*Yoteichōwa o tebiki to shite shūkyōtetsugaku e*) from 1944 and “The Logic of Place and the Religious Worldview” (*Bashoteki ronri to shūkyōteki sekaikan*) from 1945, Nishida re-connects that dialectic of place to his understanding of “the religious,” with direct references to religious notions borrowed from both Western and Eastern sources. In these latter two essays Nishida strives to discern the essence of religion (*shūkyō*) while focusing upon the earlier themes of death and finitude in the contradiction of human existence. In both the early and later works, Nishida’s usage of the term “religion” or “religious” invokes an existential sense of self-contradiction in the very tension of life-and-death or the impermanence of existence. But the essays from the 1940s connects this more explicitly to the theistic notion of “god” or the metaphysical idea of the “absolute” (*zettai*) as that which the finite self immediately faces in those depths of self-awareness, the transcendent *other* as the source of being. Nishida immediately associates that alterity, however, with his notion of place, as that *wherein* we find ourselves *always already*, in other words as the environing place immanent to us and yet transcending us with its *excess* to our attempt to grasp it, whether conceptually or instrumentally. Nishida designates this primal *wherein* as the place delimited by absolutely nothing. Accordingly what the religions call “god,” in its true form, is no longer objectifiable as something standing-opposed to oneself and merely transcendent to the world. For the absolute by definition cannot stand opposed to anything that would then relativize it. Standing unopposed, the true absolute is beyond all opposition (*zetsu-tai*), ab-solved, cut-off (*zetsu*) from all opposition (*tai*). As an “immanent transcendence” (*naizaiteki chōetsu*) (See Z10 317), Nishida conceives god, the absolute, rather as the place of the world *wherein* we are implaced. The religious sense of being embraced by the compassion of god or buddha is thus a sectarian expression making explicit, or acknowledging, that existential implacement. According to this dialectic, Nishida thus finds the absolute, qua place, to be *in* the relative and the sacred *in* the everyday and ordinary.

 The dialectic of this immanent transcendence qua place involves a specific kind of relationship between god and human self for Nishida. It involves self-negation on both ends. God’s absoluteness is such that it involves self-inversion as relative. In being opposed by nothing, it is absolute being (*yū*) and yet in being un-delimited by anything, it is nothing (*mu*) determined. The absolute possesses the contradictory self-identity (*mujunteki jikodōitsu*) of being and nothing. (See Z10 315-16) Its absolute being is simultaneously absolute nothing. Undelimited by anything else, it becomes determined only through its self-negations. The Nishidan absolute here is then a self-negating nothing, “the absolutely contradictory self-identity that contains its absolute negation within itself.” (Z10 321) In terms of place, this means that the absolute is perpetually negating itself to make-room for co-relative and finite beings. Its nothingness environs beings and beings are implaced in it. On the basis of its self-negation we are implaced and thus supported in being. For Nishida had already made the point at the initiation of his theory of place in 1926 that “to be is to be implaced...” (Z3 415) God’s creative act is thus viewed to be an act of self-inversion, and in its self-emptying the absolute is the primal place that implaces the world. Such self-negation of the absolute ⎯ its nothingness into being and its being into nothing ⎯ translates in Christian terms into the notion of *agape*, god’s self-giving love, and *kenosis*, the self-emptying of god’s *logos*, operative in both the creation and the redemption of the world. And in Pure Land Buddhism, Nishida discovers this motif in the notion of Amida’s infinite compassion to save all, including the most sinful. (See Z10 317, 321, 345) All of this is predicated upon ontological non-substantiality. Nishida also makes a connection here to the general themes of Mahāyāna Buddhism — traceable to the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtras* and what Nishida’s friend D.T. Suzuki called its “logic of is/is-not” (*soku-hi no ronri*)[[10]](#endnote-9) (See e.g., Z10 333) — of the non-duality between *samsāra* and *nirvāna* and the emptiness of emptiness (*śūnyatā śūnyatā*), that is, “the true emptiness of Buddhism” (*bukkyō no shinkū*) (Z10 157), which Nishida in turn associates with what the Western mystics called *Gottheit* (“godhood”)[[11]](#endnote-10). (Z10 104) Nishida’s unique contribution however is to connect this non-substantiality to the thematic of place. In these works of the 1940s Nishida thus construes “religion” (*shūkyō*) according to this paradoxical form whereby the absolute is manifest in the ordinary and everyday world involving the relationship of implacement.

That implacement, however, of the implaced in place, involves the self-negation not only of the part of the absolute qua place but also on the part of the finite self qua implaced. It involves their mutual self-negation or what Nishida also calls the inverse correspondence (*gyakutaiō*) between god and man, absolute and relative. The absolute’s self-negation qua place that implaces the world, making-room for the many inter-active individuals, brings us full circle to what Nishida in his earlier works had called the “religious” dimension found in the depths of the self. For the self itself meets the absolute only in facing in its interior depths, its abysmal nothing that (un)grounds any claim to a substantial egoity. This is the sense behind Nishida’s proclamation that man as finite confronts and touches god only in death. While man is supported via the absolute’s self-negation, man meets the absolute in his own self-negation. God meets man in the *kenotic* grace symbolized in the figure of Christ, e.g., god’s incarnation in, and death as, man; and man meets god in his own death (and thus resurrection), symbolized by baptism. The two are thus in inverse correspondence. (Z10 325) And their encounter via mutual self-negation is predicated upon the absolute’s own placial nature as a de-substantializing, *an*-ontological[[12]](#endnote-11) nothing that provides its locus. And this placial dialectic — involving the mutual “fit” between enveloping and enveloped, place and implaced — is what Nishida in 1938 had taken to be the essence of “religion.” (Z8 365)

**Heidegger: the sacred and the clearing of being:**

If “the religious” in Nishida suggests a primal place wherein the finite self finds itself implaced within the *an*ontological depths of a world-enveloping place, “the sacred” in Heidegger invokes the sense of an open clearing wherein one first encounters with amazement and wonder the fact of being. Only on the basis of its broad expanse, via our situatedness and earth-boundedness, can a horizon be established for the unfolding of meaning and the erection of, and orientation to, the world. This sense of the sacred would prefigure any positing of boundaries within its expanse that would subsequently differentiate it from the profane. (See GA3 258-59)[[13]](#endnote-12) Heidegger explores this sense of an open clearing of being during the same decade (the 1930s) when Nishida is extending his conception of place to the world of history. The term *Heilige*, for “sacred” or “holy,” that Heidegger appropriates from the poet Hölderlin suggests the meanings of vivacity or health but also home, wholeness, or wholesomeness.[[14]](#endnote-13) Heidegger takes this to refer also to a *chaos* that gushes-forth in its omni-presencing. In turn he understands *chaos* in its etymological sense as an initial gaping and abysmal chasm that swallows up everything while granting each being its delimited presence in time and space. This chaos is itself the sacred.[[15]](#endnote-14)[[16]](#endnote-15) (GA4 63/EH 85)

The sacred as this ontological opening is not only the heart of beings but also the very possibility of the divine. It provides the space both for our dwelling as mortals and for what we look up to as the divine — an openness wherein humanity encounters god/s, a temporary configuration in the co-respondence between ontological excess and the finite responsiveness of man. The “gods” for Heidegger mark horizonal de-limitations of possibilities from the past and for the future, and the sacred is the very expanse wherein such horizons are constructed and deconstructed. It points to an abysmal anonymity that environs and (un)grounds any personal god or claim to the absolute: the gaping chaos unfolding and enfolding beings, mortals, and gods. In its gushing forth, the sacred overwhelms us and invokes awe (*Scheu*). Dis-lodging us from the familiar patterns and comforts of everyday life and into the uncanny, it calls us “home” to the primal clearing of being.

Modernity enables us to acutely sense the forgetting of that sacred. For Heidegger it is a time suggestive of what Hölderlin called the “flight of the gods” (*die Flucht der Götter*) (e.g., GA39 80f) — the disestablishment of supersensory absolutes. In the modern world, thus de-sacralized (*heillos*), technological “enframing” (*Gestell*) reduces all to the quantifiable and the calculable. Being becomes reduced to the objective presence of entities belonging to a “standing-reserve” or “stock” (*Bestand*) for representation and manipulation. As everything becomes decided in advance, the truly questionable becomes obscured. (See GA65 125/CP 87) But in that prevailing mood of nihilism, we are thrown, despite our will, into an empty space where grounding is no longer self-evident. We experience the world for what it is, abandoned by being (*Seinsverlassenheit*), in its utter meaninglessness: a deep groundless abyss (*Ab-ground*). Hence the abyss enacts an opening: “…originary emptiness opens itself, originary *clearing* occurs… the first clearing of the open as the ‘empty’ [*Leere*].” (GA65 380/CP 265)[[17]](#endnote-16) What Heidegger calls “be-ing” (*Seyn*) in *Beiträge* is no new ground or any being or thingly character but this very opening entailing an all-pervading *not* (*Nichthafte*) that refuses any ontologically identifiable presence.[[18]](#endnote-17) But simultaneously as a clearing (*Lichtung*) for beings it is that which permits the fullness of being, a nothing (*Nichts*) that enables everything and wherein our being-(t)here stands. (See GA65 246-47/CP 173-74. GA65 266-68/CP 187-89, GA65286/CP 201) On this point Nishida’s charge,[[19]](#endnote-18) based on his reading of *Sein und Zeit*, that Heidegger fails to get to the standpoint of nothing (*mu*) upon which objectification is predicated (Z5 129, 132ff), shows a lack of awareness of Heidegger’s works from the 1930s.[[20]](#endnote-19) Nietzsche’s philosophizing about “the death of god” and Hölderlin’s poetizing about “the flight of the gods” give voice to this yawning abyss wherein we always are, made manifest in modernity.[[21]](#endnote-20)

The originary openness that nihilism clears is the space wherein the question of god/s first arises. As a contextual space that permits the affirmation or denial of god/s it marks the regional-epochal configuration of unconcealing-concealing.[[22]](#endnote-21) Both theism and atheism are thus relativized to that economy of being. But the flight of the gods in modernity makes explicit the very withdrawal of being that conditions that economy, the clearing that shapes its open space wherein meaning is possible. In this sense the experience of the flight of the gods becomes the experience of the origin of “freedom” in the Heideggerian sense — the very possibility of the openness of our being-(t)here (*Dasein*).[[23]](#endnote-22) On the part of humanity it is an openness to that which is *not* at one’s disposal, the alterity that addresses man as it withdraws into silence, escaping our grasp even as it *gives* being, always in *excess* to our projections or comprehensions. The sacred then is this clearing of the economy of unconcealment-concealment, from whence the world arises and history begins. Freed therein, shaken by awe, one no longer asks the metaphysical question of *What grounds beings?*, to instead question *How can beings be without ground?* — a shift from the metaphysical question of the beingness of beings (*die Seiendheit des Seienden*) to the more basic question about “the *truth* (clearing and sheltering) of be-ing itself” (*die Wahrheit (Lichtung und Verbergung) des Seyns selbst*).[[24]](#endnote-23) (GA65 75-76/CP 52-53) For Heidegger what the thinker thinks of as “being” here, even as it withdraws from his conceptualizations, the poet calls “the sacred.” The poet is the one who responds to the sacred with wonder as it *opens* the very question of being, hence the *truth* of be-ing.

The god of metaphysics had been killed by modernity and nihilism reigns in its place. But for Heidegger Hölderlin’s sense of the sacred escapes that demise by refusing the grasp of onto-theological categories. Hence in 1957 Heidegger will remark that “the godless thinking which must abandon the god of philosophy, god as *causa sui*, is… perhaps closest to the divine god [*göttlichen Gott*].”[[25]](#endnote-24) (ID 141g/72e) And in his 1966 *Der Spiegel* interview, after his mention of how “only a god can still save us,” Heidegger adds that “…the only possibility for salvation… is to prepare readiness, in thinking and poetry, for the appearance of god or for the absence of god during the decline, so that… when we decline, we decline *in the face of the absent god*.” (GA16 671/MNS 57) Who or what is this “divine god” that godless thinking approaches and this “absent god” in the face of which we may decline? In his turn to poetic thinking, inspired by Hölderlin, Heidegger here walks a path alternative to both traditions of theology and ontology.

The “flight of the gods,” the withdrawal of absolute principles, dis-lodging us from the familiar, frees us to view the world in its empty clearing. This freeing and clearing is marked by the phrase Heidegger, under the inspiration of Hölderlin, repeats throughout his *Beiträge zur Philosophie* — “the passing-by of the last god” (*der Vorbeigang des lezten Gottes*; *das Vorbeigehen des lezten Gottes*). Heidegger proclaims that the “greatest nearness of the last god” is “self-refusal.” (GA65 411/CP 289) Its passage is distinct from the simple disappearance or appearance of previous gods. It occurs as a self-refusal that is a hinting from out of the withdrawal of be-ing. As a “god beyond god/s” it radically surpasses any determinate configuration of divinity. As the radical negation of anything determinable, utterly alien to human perspectives, escaping from our projections and concerns, it is “wholly other [*ganz Andere*] than those that have been [*die Gewesenen*], especially over against the Christian [*den christlichen*].” (GA65 403/CP 283) We acknowledge it in the experience of the abandonment of being (*Seinsverlassenheit*), whereby we face its silent refusal yet sense its overwhelming power.[[26]](#endnote-25) “Last” here refers to the *utmost* refusal of presence, the originary no-thing of be-ing. (See GA65 416/CP 293) While on the one hand it marks the nihilistic condition of modernity that acknowledges the absence of absolutes, it simultaneously also marks the clearing open of a space wherein the wonder that raises the question “why?” can occur in its full power.

What exactly then is the ontological status of this “last god” that passes-by, wholly other and abysmally silent? Without providing any easy answer, rejecting reduction to either theism or atheism, Heidegger’s a/theology retains the tension of that ambiguity by pointing instead to the “truth of being” (*Wahrheit des Seins*). (GA9 351-52/PM 267) In *Beiträge* he remarks that the “last god” “…stands outside the calculating determinations meant by titles such as ‘mono-theism,’ ‘pan-theism,’ and ‘a-theism.’” (GA65 411/CP 289) They all assume a metaphysic that thinks in terms of entities. While “gods” in the plural names the uncertainty or undecidability concerning their being (GA65 437/CP 308), as the manifold ways in which be-ing can unfold — and this has nothing to do with polytheism —, the “last god” gathers that manifold undecidability, hinting at an inner richness (*Reichtum*) of potential grounds and abysses (*Gründe und Abgründe*) to which that plurality is subjected. (GA65 411/CP 289) This is understood not in the sense of an abstract general concept but as the momentary time-space for decision concerning the flight and arrival of gods (*Zeit-Raum der Entscheidung über die Flucht und Ankunft der Götter*), their domain of decision (*Entscheidungsbereich*) that discloses the meaning of the divine (GA65 405/CP 285). The last god as such, in its passing-by, is reducible to “…neither flight nor arrival, nor both flight and arrival, but [is] something originary, the fullness of the granting of be-ing in refusal.” (GA65 405/CP 285) As refusal, it is no present being, it *is* not (agod, a being)*.*  As *other* it appears solely in/as the abysmal “space” of be-ing itself (*dem abgründigen “Raum” des Seyns selbst*). (GA65 416/CP 293) It marks the very clearing for the question of god. Therein, in the face of the utter absence of any preferential guide, what is decisive takes its origin in a de-cision (*Ent-scheidung*) that separates and differentiates beings, distinguishing each into its own,[[27]](#endnote-26) within the open clearing that in itself remains un-decided. (See GA65 87f/CP 60-61f) The “last god,” rather than referring to a being, refers to the “truth of be-ing,” i.e., the openness which in its utter givenness allows for the gift of being and wherein are constellated the world and horizons for the meaning of being. In all of its ambiguity, its passing marks the open wherein gods come and go. The “flight of the gods” that empties the space of absolutes, as the withdrawal of being, leads to be-ing as “…the stillness of the passing of the last god” (*die Stille des Vorbeigangs des lezten Gottes*). (GA65 406/CP 285) And the last god, as the “highest form of withdrawal” (GA65 416/CP 293), in the “stillness of its passing,” is then “…the truth of be-ing…” (GA65 412/CP290), “the time-space of decision concerning the flight and the arrival of the gods” (GA65 405/CP 285) As such it refers to neither the god of the Christians nor of the philosophers, but the sacred of the poet, the domain of poetizing wonder as the common origin of both religious and philosophical experience.[[28]](#endnote-27)

In “What are Poets for?” (*Wozu Dichter?*) as well as in his “Letter on Humanism” (*Brief über den ‘Humanismus’*) Heidegger makes use of the three-fold scheme of gods, godhood, and sacred: gods are to be understood only in light of the dimension of the godhood (*Gottheit*) but godhood can be present only in the domain of the sacred (GA5 272/OBT 202) — the “essential space of the godhood” (*Wesensraum der Gottheit*) that in turn is the “dimension for gods and god” (*Dimension für die Götter und den Gott*). (GA9 339/PM 258) And this means the truth of be-ing as the clearing, making room for beings from the far side of being. The exhaustion of absolutes makes this clearing explicit; and to experience it as the sacred, its negativity must be retained. “Godliness” (*Göttlichkeit*) is to be found precisely in that negativity.[[29]](#endnote-28) (GA39 95) That mystery (*Geheimnis*) of *das Heilige*, with its uncanniness, is precisely our “home,” where “the world’s night is… the sacred night [*heilige Nacht*].” (GA5 272/OBT 202)

The spatialization of the dynamism of unconcealedness becomes especially pronounced in Heidegger’s conception of the “that-which-regions” (*die Gegnet*) that he develops from the mid-1930s to the 1950s.[[30]](#endnote-29) With it he captures the sense of a surrounding open that gathers and holds together within its space a plurality of places, and distinguishes it from the phenomenological concept of “horizon.” But what is significant for our comparative analysis here — considering how Nishida referred to Plato’s *chōra* as an inspiration for his concept of *basho* — is that Heidegger’s idea of “that-which-regions” is an extension of his reading from the mid-1930s of Plato’s *chōra* as that which withdraws to make-room for the presencing of things.[[31]](#endnote-30)

Like Nishida Heidegger thus makes a case, in his own way, for a primal *wherein*, a spacing that implaces being and dwelling, including human religiosity (along with a-religiosity). Both thinkers look to some sort of a quasi-religious or sacred dimension as indicative of an originary domain *wherein* human existence is grounded. In the next section I would like to examine the approaches Heidegger and Nishida prescribe as appropriate in our encounter with that originary *wherein*, in its excess, alterity, and nothingness.

**Nishida: self-negation and inverse correspondence:**

Nishida regards the environment wherein we are born and we perish, i.e., the world, to be wherein we find the “concrete reality of life” (*seimei no gutaiteki jitsuzaisei*). (Z8 19) Approaching it would mean self-awareness of one’s finitude, our mortality and our worldly implacement. Nishida develops this sense of finitude in the 1940s essays, while appropriating various religious themes, e.g., the Christian language of *kenosis* and *gratia* and the Mahāyāna dialectic of emptiness (e.g., see Z10 317), in terms of what he calls the “inverse correspondence” (*gyakutaiō*) between the absolute and the finite self. Nishida here views the unfolding of the self-determining absolute, encompassing individual persons, thoughts, and events, in light of its self-negation qua world-place. Via self-negation, the absolute determines and transforms itself within itself into the activities of the many individuals, and makes-room for them. This is also a development of Nishida’s idea from the 1930s of inverse determination (*gyaku gentei*) whereby the self-determination of the universal qua world that determines individuals is conversely the individuals’ self-determinations and co-determinations and further their determination of the universal itself. But in the 1940s Nishida explicitly translates this dialectical matrix of the world in terms of the interrelationship between god and man and further in light of humanity’s existential concern vis-à-vis death. Just as god meets man in his self-negation, or in Christian terms via *gratia* and *agape*, symbolically portrayed by Christ — god’s incarnation in, and death as, man — man meets god in death. Man’s confrontation with god requires the utter denial of all that is human; it requires utter self-negation, the death of one’s ego.[[32]](#endnote-31) (See Z10 315; Z13 235) As one grows in self-awareness, one becomes increasingly aware of an internal contradiction, the existential sorrow (*hiai*) or tragic condition of human existence, until one reaches that abysmal “vanishing point” (*shōshitsuten*) of the self (Z10 356), which marks a religious turning of the mind (*shūkyōteki kaishin*). (Z10 111; see Z10 312-13) Thus dying to one’s ego in confronting one’s “eternal death” (*eien no shi*), i.e., impermanence, the true self is authenticated in its finite existence, what Zen calls “seeing into one’s nature” (*kenshō*). (Z10 352-53) And in this self-awareness of self-lessness, one faces one’s ultimate *other*, the absolute. (See Z10 314-15) In other words one realizes one’s true nature as the self-negation of the absolute, a mirror image of god. “Salvation” then is an event that happens through a co-respondence of self-negation on both sides: self-doubt and ego-death on the part of the saved and self-sacrifice on the part of the savior. Only to the extent that the self becomes nothing in the will’s self-abnegation does one touch the absolute. Nishida appropriates Dōgen’s famous lines to make his point: “To study the buddha’s way is to study the self, and to study the self is to forget the self.” (Z8 512, 514; Z10 336) God and man via mutual self-negation are thus in inverse correspondence. (Z10 325) According to Nishida it is therein that one enters into the dimension of religiosity (Z10 312-13), whereby the self is affirmed in self-negation.

 Nishida here raises the further significant point that the event of this turn into “religiosity” occurs not from one’s own effort but is founded upon the calling voice (*yobigoe*) of the saving *other* in the depths of one’s self, whether understood as god or buddha. (Z10 325) Nishida notices a parallel in this regard between the Christian concepts of sin and grace and the True Pure Land Buddhist sect’s rejection of self-power (*jiriki*), each exemplifying the alterity in the event of salvation and the human incapacity for self-salvation. Nishida thus interprets the arising of salvific self-awareness in both religions in terms of a *prāxis* of self-negation whereby the mutual self-negation between absolute and human, their inverse correspondence, is also a-symmetrical. God’s working is expressed in man’s working and man’s working is supported by god’s working. Man’s working is supported by the grace of god, the other-power (*tariki*) of Amida buddha. But the absolute’s operation behind man’s selfless self-negation is in turn its *own* self-negation. The mutual encounter is not between self-affirming substances but an a-symmetrical reciprocity involving the mutual fit between place and implaced.

**Heidegger: letting and turning:**

For Heidegger, the world-projecting act of human being-(t)here is predicated upon its turning towards that openness that displaces and summons us, overriding and exceeding our self-resolution or will. The flight of the gods dislodges us from familiar patterns and frees us from entanglement with the self-evident.[[33]](#endnote-32)The refusal of grounds forces us to face the irreducible excess of be-ing and we hear the unsettling call (*Zuruf*) of “the last god” in its “passing-by.” In such dis-placement, we are re-implaced, called back home more intrinsically. Its experience in the negative refusal of the last god frees us into the open wherein we are open to wonder and questioning. Confronted with its silent yet overwhelming power, in ultimate exposure to its empty clearing, whereby being is revealed as a gracious giving — a gift that makes possible our dwelling on earth — we respond with amazement, in awe (*Scheu*). But our turn to that alterity occurs not on the basis of our volition but rather *as* an originary turning of be-ing itself. Heidegger calls this “the turning” (*die Kehre*), re-turning us to a new questioning of the divine and of being. What is underscored here is the human belonging to be-ing, as thrown *into* and implaced *within* its opening.[[34]](#endnote-33)

The asymmetry in this turning-relationship between man and being is attested to by the finitude of man vis-à-vis the graciousness of ontological giving and the fact that no magic invocation on our part can provoke the gods to appear or the securing of grounds. For the clearing that the sacred names is the very domain wherein gods may be absent as much as present regardless of human wants. The attunement of being-(t)here, its openness, is itself predicated upon the open that *turns* being-(t)here to open it up. The passing of the last god moves within an abyss, calling being-(t)here not to ground but to let-go of grounds, turning it to its ownmost openness whereby human existence is first de-cided *as* being-(t)here — a decision that cannot be represented, chosen, or willed by man. Instead it is enacted in the unfolding swaying (*Wesung*) of be-ing. It moves within its turning. Our “letting” (*lassen*) vis-à-vis the ontological excess is thus *extra*-human in origin — the releasement (*Gelassenheit*) of beings into the cleared expanse of unconcealment. Thereby the event of be-ing commissions human being-(t)here to serve as the place for its truth, i.e., its openness, to experience “…the essence of being as the domain in which a decision about the gods or the absence of the gods [*Götterlosigkeit und Göttertum*] can first be prepared.” (GA54 167/P 113)[[35]](#endnote-34)

**Heidegger and Nishida compared:**

In Heidegger’s “Aus einem Gespräch von der Sprache” (“A Dialogue on Language”) (1953/54), the suggestion arises that despite the vast distance between distinct “houses of being” — Japan and the West — the graciousness flowing from the openness of an “empty sky”[[36]](#endnote-35) is experienced not only by the West but by the Japanese as well.[[37]](#endnote-36) (GA12 129, 136**/**OWL 41, 46ff) As we have been hinting the ideas of both thinkers are suggestive of an abysmal opening that environs and implaces us — Nishida’s place vis-à-vis absolutely nothing and Heidegger’s clearing openness of unconcealment-concealment. Heidegger himself was not adverse to thinking the open in terms of place and recognized the very significance of the place of human dwelling — together with the things belonging there and the bonds between people, things, and landscape — as indicative of the sacred. Any experience of the sacred is to be accompanied by man’s cultivation of the place (*Ort*) of dwelling.[[38]](#endnote-37) Years later in a 1969 seminar Heidegger thus reflects upon his own path of thinking as having traversed three stages: 1. The question of the meaning of being as formulated in *Sein und Zeit*; 2. The question of the truth of being initiated in the 1930s; and finally, 3. The question of the place or locality (*Ortschaft*, *Örtlichkeit*) of being, or the *Topologie des Seins*. (GA15 335/FS 41) For both thinkers that place for human existence is an *ab*-ground, an abyss, (*Abgrund*) that undermines as well as erects, providing the space, in Buddhist terms, for generation-and-extinction or, in phenomenological terms, for presencing-and-absencing. Human existence is grounded in its implacement within that space while also contributing to its determinations or formations within. In underscoring this interrelationality between place and implaced, opening and opened, both thinkers seek to overcome any dichotomizing tendencies that would reduce it to a dualistic subject-object structure. Neither place nor clearing can be objectified as we are caught up and implicated within its unfolding event. And that primal occurrence in both thinkers becomes characterized through religious or quasi-religious thematics. In Heidegger’s case the sacred implies the open, wherein we are both partakers and receptors — projecting but thrown — of the event of clearing or opening occurring in and through beings. In Nishida’s case “religiosity” is discovered by plumbing the depths of our implacement, both within and without, where we encounter the place that is transcendent and yet immanent to us as it both envelops us and expresses itself through us. The conceptions of both thinkers are indicative, or at least suggestive, of a paradoxically inconceivable space that we can call the originary *wherein* of our being, *that wherein* we always already find ourselves even before we begin the process of thought. While implacing and environing us, it escapes our conceptual — as well as instrumental — grasp, as concealed, dark, nothing. In comparing Heidegger and Nishida we thus find closeness along with distance in the many aspects relatable to this sense of an originary *wherein*.[[39]](#endnote-38)

In relation to this originary *wherein* however the two thinkers diverge in their discussions of “god.” Each uses the designation “god” in a way that immediately points away from any personalistic and theistic conception. Heidegger in his figure of “the passing of the last god” is more intentional in referencing a “god” that is *other* than the traditional Abrahamic and theistic understanding, a figure that is ambiguous enough to allow for both presence and absence of the divine, both theistic and atheistic interpretations. For it marks the clearing space wherein the very question of god and subsequent conceptualizations of god are possible. On the other hand Nishida plumbs the depths of the religions to seek what they assume, whether they recognize it or not. While Heidegger in the 1930s looks away from the Judeo-Christian tradition for an alternative religiosity, Nishida looks to the religious traditions of both East and West, i.e., Buddhism and Christianity, to appropriate both in terms of — or to shed them under the light of — his own particular understanding of religiosity. Despite their divergence, however, both uses of “god” point to an abysmal place or clearing. The notion of “god” or “absolute” in Nishida marks that abysmal place delimited by nothing that undermines traditional monotheistic conceptions of god even if presupposed by them. In different ways, “god” marks for both thinkers a space wherein god the person may make an appearance (or not).

Both thinkers also make use of eschatological themes, whether explicitly or implicitly, traceable to the Christian worldview. Heidegger’s discussions of the sacred and clearing appear within the context of his post-1930 being-historical thinking, whereby divinity arises through the destining or sending (*Geschick*) of being (or be-ing). As we already saw, the figure of the passing of the last god for Heidegger marks both the margins of modernity that bring it to a close and the incubation of further possibilities that can open up the transition to an “other beginning” (*der andere Anfang*). Its quality of “lastness” is not the end but has to do with the “…other beginning of the immeasurable possibilities of our history.” (GA65 411/CP 289) It calls for a decision in the face of an estranging and incalculable undecidability. The clearing-open it marks then is not simply spatial but temporal in its future-orientedness. The passing hints towards a yet-to-come, still to be comprehended, future in the unfolding of being, a future excess of surprise and refusal. There is here in his *Beiträge* an urgent sense of eschatological anticipation vis-à-vis the immanent closure of modernity and an open-ended future even though that urgency mellows somewhat in his later emphases on letting-be.

Nishida’s approach to time, on the other hand, is not so much future-oriented as Heidegger’s approach. Nishida throughout his career consistently looks to the present as the primal dimension of time. In the 1930s he takes the “absolute present” (*zettai genzai*) as sustaining the world at each moment, giving birth to it anew. And in the 1940s he stresses that the individual self is the self-expression of the world at *each moment*, a unique self-determination of the absolute present. (Z10 114) It is under the light of the present that the eternal past and the eternal future unfold in each moment of our acting. In that moment of the present, we *are* in inverse correspondence with the absolute. The concrete is that present saturated with religious significance and existential meaning for it is therein that one dies and is reborn — *at each moment* — as the absolute’s reflection. Nishida characterizes this absolute present, in its self-determination, borrowing Christian terminology, as *eschatologisch* (eschatological, *shūmatsuronteki*). (Z10 354, see also 337) But rather than conceiving “eschatological” here teleologically, he thinks of it in terms of the absolute’s immanent transcendence (*naizaiteki chōetsu*) within ourselves, whereby we accord with the absolute via our own self-transcendence (Z10 355), i.e., the individual’s self-negation that co-responds to the self-negation of the absolute. In this way, the self as an historical individual, facing the absolute in self-negation, is “eschatological.” And the absolute present as the very matrix of that realization (our realization of the absolute and the absolute’s self-realization in us) is thus also eschatological. Eschatological urgency here is not in light of a distant future; rather the *eschaton*, the “end,” is now at *every moment*. In thus re-interpreting the sense of “eschatology,” Nishida also draws a connection with the Zen sense of the “ordinary and everyday” (*byōjōtei*) as manifest in the present moment. (See Z10 356, 358) In Zen terminology, the present is the locus of the everyday. But it is therein that the self-determination of the absolute is manifest. Each moment is its creative point. (Z10 101) The immeasurable depth of the absolute’s non-substantiality (*mukitei*) qua self-negating place is thus available at the very surface of the utterly ordinary. The most primordial is the utterly routine. The present that one lives *here and now* possesses an immeasurable depth and yet is ordinary. Nishida discovers the eschatological in this ordinariness as that wherein we are always in touch with *both* the inception *and* the termination of history; we eschatologically stand upon the beginning and the end of the world *at each moment*. (Z10 105) There, in the present moment, we are in contact with the *alpha* and the *omega* of the self, its birth-and-death, whereby the eternal past and the eternal future meet in the absolute present. (Z10 357) Synthesizing Zen and Christian terminology, Nishida calls this idea, “the eschatology of the everyday” or “eschatological ordinariness” (*shūmatsuronteki byōjōtei*). While Heidegger’s future-oriented or anticipatory “eschatology” shapes the temporal contours of the open clearing, Nishida’s “eschatology of the everyday” anchors the temporal shape of place in the present moment that envelops past and future in its placiality.

One ought not to regard the “eschatological” in Heidegger, however, as simply blind to the present. The urgency in Heidegger’s anticipation of the closure of modernity is not simply future-oriented but *also* of the here and the now. That is, the word “last” in “last god” is not simply the final outcome of a time span but is indicative of an *instant* marking an epoch; its passage gathers together in the *now* the quintessence of the epoch.[[40]](#endnote-39) The *eschaton*, meaning “last,” then cannot be reduced to futural expectation.

The most obvious contrast distinguishing the two thinkers, in the periods that we have been considering — i.e., Heidegger post-1930 and Nishida post-1926 — is in their language or mode of articulating their thoughts. Heidegger seems more cautious in his attempt to avoid what he perceives as a metaphysical mode of speaking that would suggest the philosopher’s version of theism. Inspired by Hölderlin’s poetry, he makes use instead of a poetic language that attempts to steer clear of the onto-theological confines of the Western tradition. His discussions of “the sacred” or “the passing of the last god” in reference to the open or clearing rather than speaking of god qua supreme being is indicative of this concern. Especially in regard to metaphysical postulates, Heidegger intentionally tries to avoid the language of ground and substance. Heidegger when asked by D.T. Suzuki in 1953 what he thought of Nishida’s philosophy, responded, “Nishida is Western.”[[41]](#endnote-40) It is unlikely that Heidegger was too familiar with Nishida’s thought[[42]](#endnote-41) but even a cursory look at Nishida’s writing style might reveal what he might have had in mind. In contrast to Heidegger’s vigilance, Nishida unabashedly employs the terminology of Western metaphysics. He does so seemingly without reflection upon the limits that the conceptual or terminological framework may impose upon one’s thinking process, even as he articulates a critical attitude toward much of the content of Western philosophy in the attempt to construct an alternative “metaphysics” of the East. One notices Nishida making much use of designations like “eternal” or “absolute,” terms that seem to incline towards a metaphysic of presence that he would however want to avoid. The apparent metaphysics especially stands out in his use of expressions borrowed from Western philosophy in general and from nineteenth century German philosophy in particular (e.g., the Neo-Kantians and Hegel), e.g., in the conceptual schemata of the universal-individual relationship or in the language of an absolute dialectic.[[43]](#endnote-42) The awkwardness of how he employs these borrowed concepts to express unique ideas, raises the question of whether his mode of locution does justice to his matter of thought. I question, for example, whether even the language of a *logic* of contradiction — the sense of “logic” (*Logik*) that he borrows from German thinkers like Hegel and Lotze[[44]](#endnote-43) — is truly appropriate for what he wants to express.

On the other hand, I do see that Nishida was aware of that inadequacy to the extent that he spent over thirty years reformulating what he wanted to say. Yet his attempt was to construct what was to be a philosophical *system*. The very language he employed as building blocks for this system — necessitated perhaps by such system-building — were limiting vis-à-vis the very matter he hoped to express. His project was to systematize that which inevitably escapes systematization. My belief then is that Nishida’s mode of expression did not do justice to its content.[[45]](#endnote-44) How might Nishida answer Heidegger’s contention (from 1929/30) that “all dialectic in philosophy is only the expression of an embarrassment”?[[46]](#endnote-45) Yet if dialectic is derivative of tautology as what is more originary, as Heidegger later contends (in 1973) (GA 15 400/FS 81), perhaps the “self-seeing self-awareness” of the undelimitable nothing that Nishida repeatedly refers to throughout his career — its stillness amidst the dynamism of movement — would be his answer. In any case the unfolding complexity of what one might call the *chiasma*[[47]](#endnote-46) of its “dialectic,” which one notices particularly in his mid-1930s works, such as *Tetsugaku no konpon mondai* (Fundamental Problems of Philosophy), exceeds any mere triadic or bi-nomial structures. The *chiasma* of the *chōra* that Nishida seems to have in mind therefore exceeds, escapes reduction to, any German-inspired dialectical formulations. Nishida’s theme throughout his philosophical career was “that which cannot be made into a (grammatical) subject.” *Die* *Sache selbst* as such eluded his attempts to systematize.

The “metaphysical tendency” may have had something to do with him belonging to the early generation of Japanese intellectuals coming to terms with the importation of philosophy from the West. Perhaps there had not been sufficient time, at that point, to make reflections concerning the limitations a conceptual or terminological framework might impose.[[48]](#endnote-47) Nevertheless the very focal matter of Nishida’s thinking that examines what had been passed over in much of Western metaphysics paradoxically undermines his own attempts to build a metaphysical systematic that is to ground knowledge, ethics, and religion. At first sight Nishida’s “god” may appear analogous to what Heidegger calls “the god of philosophy” that one could not pray or sacrifice to. (ID 140g/72e) And yet it also refers to an abysmal place that would engulf any god of metaphysics or any grounding principle for that matter. Delimited by nothing, its alterity to the human grasp cannot be overcome. In both thinkers the nominalizing of that originary *wherein* is countered — in the last stages of Nishida’s thought with the notion of place in its perpetual self-negation and in Heidegger’s thinking with the self-withdrawing in the concealing-unconcealing movement of the clearing. In both the abyss as no-thing means grounding-ungrounding as verbal rather than the postulation of a substantialized ground qua thing; it points to an (un)grounding abyss behind grounds, the *an-archē* permitting but without securing *archai* (ἀρχή).

Each in his own way, employing different modes of articulation, then strove to approach that which ultimately escapes conceptual articulation but which nevertheless must be presupposed for our thinking and speaking and even being. Heidegger and Nishida, seminal philosophers of the West and the East, independent of each other, walked along alternate paths of thinking, while employing religious or quasi-religious motifs, in their attempts to come to terms with that *wherein* we already find ourselves, the environing grounding of human existence. Despite their mutual cultural distance they approach one another in their attempts to approximate that inconceivable *spatiality* — the open or clearing for Heidegger, place for Nishida. And they do so in ways that undercut or unsettle the traditional monotheistic or onto-theological conceptions of god. In Heidegger’s case it is the figure of “the passing of the last god,” an event that marks the clearing open wherein any theistic or metaphysical god can only come and go. In Nishida’s case it is the place delimited by absolutely nothing. The proper response on the part of man thrown into that originary *wherein*, for both then involves a kind of existential acknowledgment of one’s finitude vis-à-vis its excess or graciousness that issues from it — in both cases an a-symmetrical relationship that Heidegger characterizes in terms of the turning and Nishida conceptualizes in terms of inverse correspondence.

What may we learn from this juxtaposition of their attempts to say the unsayable in different ways, especially today when we face the nihilistic cloud of globalized modernity? Despite differences in “houses of being” between Eastern-Buddhist and Greco-Western modes of discourse, may a dialogue between these two thinkers prove fruitful somehow in pointing at somewhere ⎯ even if nowhere? The vista to, *and in*, our originary *wherein* permits the question of “where *are* we?” to arise in the face of distinct identities — a question we ought to ponder with today’s globalization of the world.

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1. At the start of this paper I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for *Research in Phenomenology* who provided helpful comments. [↑](#endnote-ref-0)
2. It is precisely in this regard that I do not think that “*es gibt*” in Heidegger can simply be reduced to its temporal aspect. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
3. The intent of my project here thus ought to be distinguished from the aims of Reinhard May in his *Heidegger’s Hidden Sources* (London: Routledge, 1996) and of Graham Parkes in his essay, “Rising Sun Over Black Forest: Heidegger’s Japanese Connections” included in that volume, both of which I find quite informative in regard to possible Far Eastern influences on Heideggerian concepts. My purpose is to look at the philosophical content of their thinking, which certainly may contain historical connections in their root sources, not only Eastern but Western as well. But the point is to phenomenologically unpack, where both philosophies overlap, what they show in regard to human existence. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
4. The question of capitalization in regard to god/God is a difficult issue when juxtaposing Nishida and Heidegger. To attempt to resolve the issue based on whether the term refers to the Christian monotheistic or pagan god would be too difficult with these two thinkers. The problem does not come up in German where all nouns are capitalized nor in Japanese. To simplify the matter, I decided to leave the word uncapitalized in all instances. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
5. There have been a small but significant number of comparative studies involving Nishida and Heidegger. I would like to mention here a few of these noteworthy studies that I have found insightful. Some have focused upon *Sein und Zeit* era Heidegger when comparing him to Nishida, and others have focused on the later Heidegger. Of the former, in Japan, there is a piece by Ōhashi Ryōsuke, “*Nishida tetsugaku to haidegā*” [“Nishida Philosophy and Heidegger”] in Ueda Shizuteru (ed.), *Nishidatetsugaku* [Nishida Philosophy] (Tokyo, Sōbunsha, 1994), 239-61. Ōhashi notices a certain similarity in their use of spatial metaphors (e.g., *da* and *ba*) in their respective monumental works, *Sein und Zeit* and “*Basho*,” both appearing around the same time. (“*Basho*” was first published in a journal in 1926, one year before *Sein und Zeit*.**)** What he has in mind is the *da* (“t/here”) of *Dasein* as the place or cite for the occurrence of being in Heidegger — which then in the 1930s becomes the place for the en-owning of being — and the *ba* (“field,” “site”) of *basho* (“place”) in Nishida as the place for the dynamism of nothing, taking both thinkers beyond the narrow confines of subjectivism. (See especially 256.**)** In the US Andrew Feenberg, in his article “Experience and Culture: Nishida’s Path ‘to the Things Themselves’” (*Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 49, No. 1 (1999), 28-44), has noticed parallel developments in the evolution from phenomenology to existential ontology in Heidegger and from the focus on experience to the theory of place in Nishida, both taking their non-substantialist turn further away from the objectifiable, to eventually result, in Heidegger’s case in his notion of “clearing” and in Nishida’s case in his notion of the “place of nothing.”

Concerning the later Heidegger, in an article on phenomenology in Japan, “Phenomenology and Japan” (in *Interkulturelle Philosophie und Phänomenologie in Japan*, ed. Tadashi Ogawa, Michael Lazarin, Guido Rappe (Munich: Iudicium Verlag, 1998), 241-64), Michael Lazarin compares — though only in passing — the dynamic nature of being and nothing in the two thinkers, i.e., Heidegger’s notion of being as presencing ( “coming to presence” as Lazarin has it) and Nishida’s notion of nothing as “the juxtaposition, opposition, and nihilation of manyness in oneness and oneness in manyness.” (247) David Dilworth, in his article, “Nishida Kitaro: Nothignness as the Negative Space of Experiential Immediacy” (*International Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (1973), 463-483), makes a brief comparison — though also in passing — of Heidegger’s “that-which regions” (*die Gegnet*) and Nishida’s concepts from the early-1930s concerning “regions” (*hōkō*) of self-awareness, which take off from the his notion of place (*basho*) developed in 1926/27. (See 475.fn.26) More recently Reinhard May (in the above mentioned *Heidegger’s Hidden Sources*, 32) has noted parallels between Heidegger’s *Lichtung* (clearing) and the East Asian concept of nothing (*mu*) that appears in Nishida and suggests the possibility of an East Asian influence on Heidegger.

The works that I have found most helpful in bringing together Heidegger and Nishida are those of Elmar Weinmayr, who juxtaposes passages concerning the open in Heidegger and the place of nothing in Nishida, both indicating a prior region of sorts that must be assumed for any encounter between subject and object. (See Elmar Weinmayr, “Denken im Übergang — Kitarō Nishida und Martin Heidegger” in *Japan und Heidegger*, ed. Hartmut Buchner (Sigmaringen: Jan Thorbecke Verlag, 1989), 39-61, especially 42; “Thinking in Transition: Nishida Kitarō and Martin Heidegger,” trans. John W.M. Krummel and Douglas Berger, *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 55, No. 2 (2005), 232-56, especially, 234; and also his “Nishida to Haidegā: hikakutetsugaku no kokoromi” [“Nishida and Heidegger: An Attempt at Comparative Philosophy”], *Shisō*, November (1995), 88-106, especially 89. See also Graham Parkes’ discussion of this in his “Rising Sun Over Black Forest” in May, 112.fn.47.) My present work is very much indebted to, and takes off from, Weinmayr’s analyses.

In addition I should also mention here as an interesting creative effort of a philosopher of the Kyoto school lineage, Ueda Shizuteru’s book *Basho* [Place] (Tokyo: Kōbundō, 1992). This work takes off from Heidegger’s being-in-the-world and the fourfold, and interprets these ideas in terms of Nishida’s concept of the place of nothing as a world-horizon and the abyss beyond. Along the way he makes references to, among others, Max Scheller’s environing world (*Umwelt*), Husserl’s life-world, and Eliade’s cosmos-chaos relation to develop a theory of the essential implacement of human existence. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
6. I am here following the Japanese convention of placing the family name first, followed by the individual’s personal name. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
7. The reality is though that this “Nishida philosophy” was never completed. Nishida continues to hone and develop this idea of place in a variety of directions throughout the 1930s and until his death in 1945. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
8. References to Nishida’s works will be identified by *Z* for *Zenshū* (Collected Works) followed by the volume number from the most recent editions: *Nishida Kitarō zenshū* (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 2003). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
9. Derrida’s analysis of this Platonic concept as an “irreplaceable and unplaceable place” also reminds one of how Nishida understands the place of absolute nothing as a place that is itself *without a place*. See Jacques Derrida, *On the Name* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 111. On this topic of Plato’s *chōra*, also see John Sallis, *Chorology* (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
10. The term *soku-hi* connotes the dialectical inseparability and bi-conditionality between absolute contradictories, i.e., affirmation or “is” and negation or “is-not” (*hi*) via mutual reference and interdependence, founded upon the Mahāyāna notion of emptiness (i.e., the absence of ontological independence; non-substantiality). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
11. *Gottheit* is commonly translated as “godhead” but “godhood” seems to be more accurate. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
12. I use “*an*-ontological” here to mean Nishida’s sense of nothing (*mu*) qua place (*basho*) that encompasses both being and its opposite, non-being, i.e., both the ontological and the meontological, the structure of place inclusive of both *on* () and *mēon* (). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
13. References to Heidegger’s works will be identified first by GA for *Gesamtausgabe* (Collected Works) followed by the volume number (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann) and then by the initials for the English translation: CP for *Contributions to Philosophy* (IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), EH for *Elucidations of Hölderlin’s Poetry* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2000), FS for *Four Seminars* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003), OBT for *Off the Beaten Track* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), OWL for *On the Way to Language* (NY: Harper Collins, 1971), P for *Parmenides* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992), and PM for *Pathmarks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). However *Identität und Differenz* and *Identity and Difference* will be identified as ID in reference to a single bilingual edition *g* following the page with the German and *e* following the page with the English (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
14. This goes back to the Greek sense of *hieros* (ἱερός). See C. Colpe, ed., *Die Diskussion um das “Heilige”* (Darmstadt, Wissenschaftlichen Buchgesellschaft, 1977), 180-97, 237-43. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
15. “Chaos” is derived from the Greek root *cha-* () which implies “yawning,” “gaping,” “opening,” “hollow.” It is also interesting to note here its etymological link to *chōra* (χώρα). See Max Jammer, *Concepts of Space* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1970), p. 9, and F.M. Cornford, *Principium Sapientiae* (NY: Harper & Row, 1965), 194 & fn.1. Also see Edward Casey, *Fate of Place* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), 345.n.13. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
16. This juxtaposition of the sacred with chaos differs from how Mircea Eliade understands the sacred vis-à-vis chaos. For Eliade, the irruption of a sacred space projects a fixed point *into* the chaos of profane space, making orientation possible. Through the fixing of limits and the establishment of order, this “*founds the world*.” In other words through the revelation of the sacred, chaos is organized into cosmos via structure, forms, norms. A world is thus established vis-à-vis the chaos threatening it from without. See Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace, 1987, 1957), 23, 30-31, 47, 63, 65. For Heidegger, on the other hand, the sacred prior to its derivative differentiation from the profane *is* chaos as the clearing that establishes a world. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
17. See also *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes* (“Origin of the Work of Art”) of the same period (1936) where Heidegger speaks of the open place that is a clearing encircling beings “…like the nothing we scarcely know…” granting us access to other beings and to our own being. (GA5 40/OBT 30) The refusal of ground in the abysmal clearing of be-ing is a crucial point in the *Beiträge*. Any claim to grounding presupposes that abysmal truth of be-ing as the space wherein it occurs. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
18. In Heidegger’s *Beiträge*, *Seyn* is the non-metaphysical or non-representational sense of being as the movement of presencing-absencing and abysmal clearing in distinction from the metaphysical sense indicated by *Sein*, representing constant presence or “beingness” (*Seiendheit*) that grounds beings. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
19. The charge appears in *Mu no jikakuteki gentei* (*The Determination of Nothing in Self-Awareness*), a work form 1931-32. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
20. And contrary to the later charge of some Japanese philosophers, Heidegger claims that this nothing (*Nichts*) is not simply negative or nihilistic qua *non*-being (*Nichtseiende*) but rather the “essential enquivering” (*wesentliche Erzitterung*) of be-ing itself that is *more-being* (*seiender*) than any being, a nothing beyond all “positivity” and “negativity.” (GA65 266/CP 187-88; See also GA5 40/OBT 30) But Heidegger also states in a letter of 1969 that his discussion of “nothing” in *Was ist Metaphysik?* (“What is Metaphysics?”) of 1929 was understood in the Far East after the appearance of its Japanese translation in 1930 as opposed to the common charge of nihilism made in Europe at the time. (See GA15 414/FS 88) Ironically some of Nishida’s ex-students who became prominent Kyoto School philosophers, such as Tanabe Hajime and Nishitani Keiji, while intrigued, were still not satisfied with Heidegger’s treatment of the question of *Nichts* or *mu* (“nothing”). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
21. Heidegger interprets Nietzsche’s diagnosis for the death of god as the end not necessarily of god *per se* but that of metaphysics, the supreme principle of onto-theology that attempts to provide the definitive answer to the question of “Why is there anything at all?” in terms of a grounding presence. God here is one being among others albeit the highest or supreme being. But such a god of philosophy is not awe-some. To it one can neither pray nor offer sacrifices. (ID 140g/72e) This is the god of metaphysics that Heidegger seeks to deconstruct. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
22. Hence be-ing and god for Heidegger are not identical. (GA65 263/CP 185) Rather being “ises” god, lets god be god (“…das Sein ‘istet’ Gott, das heißt das Sein läßt Gott Gott sein.”). (GA15 325/FS) [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
23. On this see Günter Figal, “Forgetfulness of God: Concerning the Center of Heidegger’s *Contributions to Philosophy*” in *Companion to Heidegger’s Contributions to Philosophy*, ed. Scott, Schoenbohm, Vallega-Neu, and Vallega (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), 202-03. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
24. Heidegger views metaphysics as inquiring into the nature and ground of beings as such and as a whole. As theology it seeks that which, as the supreme being, can account for that ground of beings. (ID 120-128g/54-60e)But such a grounding presence is conceived from out of beings, as *a* being albeit the highest, ignoring the very difference between beings and their being, the differentiation that enables beings to be. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
25. Heidegger appears here to identify the Aristotelian uncaused cause (unmoved mover) that becomes the primary conception of God in the Western metaphysical tradition as a kind of *causa sui* or “self-cause.” But whether uncaused cause and self-cause are simply the same is truly a difficult matter that one might still look into. Also compare the Heideggerian sacred here with Georges Bataille’s distinction of the sacred moment from the substantialized and personalized god in his *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927-1939* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985). The sacred for Bataille is the opposite of a substance, it does not withstand the test of time, it cannot be grasped, “a moment of the convulsive communication of what is ordinarily stifled.” (242, and see 241) The disjunction between the sacred and substance opens for Bataille a field of violence, which may be entered. Freed from god — the transcendental substance — the human will surrenders to “the passion of giving the world an intoxicating meaning.” (245) Could that be “the poet”? These ideas of Bataille were from the mid-to-late 1930s, roughly the same period when Heidegger was working on his *Beiträge*. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
26. My understanding of what Heidegger means here by “the last god” owes much to Günter Figal’s reading in his “Forgetfulness of God: Concerning the Center of Heidegger’s *Contributions to Philosophy*,” e.g., 207-08. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
27. And herein lies the sense of the Heideggerian concept of *Ereignis*, en-owning/event. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
28. This would be the sense of what Gadamer calls the “religious dimension in Heidegger” that begins to seek expression once Heidegger had turned away from onto-theology or metaphysics. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Heidegger’s Ways* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1994), 179. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
29. See Figal, 205. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
30. It is in fact a re-working of its former conception in *Sein und Zeit* where “region” meant the organizing context for places of the availably handy (*zuhanden*). E.g., in 1944 “that-which-regions” takes on the connotation of a “surrounding region” (*Umgebung*, *umgebende Umgegend*). (Martin Heidegger, *Heraklit* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1979), 335.) This further highlights its spatial sense. And in his *Zur Eröterung der Gelassenheit* of 1944-45, it is the free expanse (*Weite*), an “open that *surrounds* us…” (*das uns umgebende Offene*), wherein things may “while” in their presencing-absencing. (Heidegger, *Aus der Erfahrung des Denkens 1910-1976* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1983), 45-47; and Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking* (NYC: Harper & Row, 1966), 65-66). [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
31. Martin Heidegger, *Einführung in die Metaphysik* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1983), 71; and Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Philosophy*, trans. Gregory Fried & Richard Polt (New Haven, MA: Yale University Press, 2000), 70. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
32. Nishida takes this to be the original sense of the Christian concept of original sin. (Z10 342) In eating of the “tree of knowledge,” man “becomes like god” (*Genesis* ch.3) to mirror in self-awareness the self-contradiction of the absolute. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
33. See Günter Figal, “Forgetfulness of God: Concerning the Center of Heidegger’s *Contributions to Philosophy*” in *Companion to Heidegger’s Contributions to Philosophy*, 201. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
34. Heidegger discusses this originary turning in terms of a “counter-turning” (or “re-turning”) (*Widerkehre*), a “turning-relation” (or “reciprocal-relatedness”; *kehriger Bezug*), *between* the “call” (*Zuruf*) or “throw” (*Zuwurf*) or “need” (*Brauchen*) of be-ing *and* the *belonging* (*Zugehören*) of the one called or thrown, an overflow (*Übermaß*) of turning between human and divine that comes into the open (*Offene*). (GA65 7/CP 6, GA65 251/CP 177, GA65 407/CP 287, GA65 414/CP 291) In terms of the highly significant concept of en-owning (*Ereignis*) it is a “counter-resonance/swing” (*Gegenschwung*) between the enowning call (*ereignendem Zuruf*) or need (*er-eignendem Brauchen*) (*by* and *of* be-ing) and the enowned projecting (*ereignetem Entwurf*) or projecting belonging (*entwerfendem Zugehören*) (*by* and *of* being-(t)here), happening *in and of* be-ing *as* the enowning event itself. Heidegger calls this “the turning in enowning” (*die Kehre im Ereignis*). (GA65 407/CP 286) On this see Friedrich-Wilhelm von Hermann, *Wege ins Ereignis: Zu Heidegger’s “Beiträge zur Philosophie”* (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1994),18-19; and also Kenneth Maly, “Turnings in Essential Swaying and the Leap” in Scott, Schoenbohm, Vallega-Neu and Vallega, 158. *Ereignis*, “en-owning,” refers to the event of gathering and differing that brings a being into its *own*, in a proper “fit” or be-fitting vis-à-vis everything else. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
35. For a further and detailed analysis of the relationship of the spatiality of clearing with the turning and letting, see John W.M. Krummel, “Spatiality in the Later Heidegger: Turning — Clearing — Letting,” *Existentia*, Vol. XVI, Fasc. 5-6 (2006), 405-424. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
36. The phrase is actually “sky’s emptiness” (*die Leere des Himmels*) and appears in reference to the Japanese Buddhist concept of *kū*, “emptiness,” which is then suggestively juxtaposed or associated with Heidegger’s own notion of the open (*das Offene*). (See GA12 136/OWL 46) The graph for *kū* is used for the Buddhist concept of emptiness but also can be used to mean “sky.” [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
37. This is specifically in regard to Kuki Shūzo’s concept of *iki*. Had Heidegger been more familiar with Nishida’s concept of “place” how might he have responded to it? The Japanese Germanist Tezuka Tomio, whose visit with Heidegger in 1954 supposedly led to Heidegger’s composition of this fictional dialogue, in his own alleged re-telling of the original dialogue, records Heidegger as remarking that, “East and West must engage in dialogue at this deep level.” See Tezuka, “An Hour with Heidegger” in May, 62. Also see GA12 89/OWL 8 in regard to a hidden but single source of European and East Asian saying. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
38. See e.g., his “Memorial Address” in *Discourse on Thinking*. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
39. While Heidegger’s interest in *nothing* may perhaps be traced, along with Nishida’s interest in the topic, to East Asian sources — as both May and Parkes suggest (See May, *Heidegger’s Hidden Sources*) —, another intriguing common root, but this time in the sphere of the West (and to add to Plato’s *chōra*), is Emil Lask, whose idea of domain predicates (*Gebietsprädikate*) or domain categories (*Gebietskategorien*) (in his *Die Logik der Philosophie und die Kategorienlehre* of 1911 and *Die Lehre vom Urteil* of 1912) appears to have exerted a profound influence upon both thinkers, especially in Heidegger’s formulation of truth as openness or clearing and in Nishida’s conception of place. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
40. According to Reiner Schürmann, Heidegger’s phrase, “last god,” recalls Rudolf Bultmann’s theology that he was familiar with from his weekly sessions with Bultmann in Marburg a decade prior to the period of *Beiträge*. Bultmann’s was a theology of “last things” (*eschata*), but *eschaton* was understood here in terms of salvation offered in the moment rather than as an outcome of a sequence of events. See Schürmann, *Broken Hegemonies* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003), 518. Also see Gadamer, *Heidegger’s Ways*, 175. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
41. D.T. Suzuki, “Erinnerung an einen Besuch bei Martin Heidegger” in *Japan und Heidegger*, ed. Harmut Buchner (Sigmaringen: Jan Thorbecke, 1989), 170. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
42. A German translation of a work by Nishida was published in a German journal in 1939. See May, 27.fn.77. It is likely that Heidegger may have known of Nishida’s thoughts from Nishida’s colleagues and students who traveled to Germany to study, such as Tanabe Hajime in the early 1920s or Nishitani Keiji in the mid-to-late 1930s. See Graham Parkes, “Rising Sun Over Black Forest: Heidegger’s Japanese Connections” in May, 82, 89, 98, 100. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
43. However, I am not denying here the connection of Nishida’s dialectics with Mahāyāna “dialectics,” e.g., Huayan. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
44. But also from his friend D.T. Suzuki’s phrase, “the logic of is/is-not” (*soku-hi no ronri*). The same question can be thrown at Suzuki as well. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
45. Evidently Nakamura Yūjiro in his *Nishida tetsugaku* (Nishida Philosophy) (Tokyo: Iwanami, 1993) makes a similar point, i.e., that the philosophy Nishida birthed betrayed his intent and purpose. (209-14 cited in Weinmayr, “Nishida to Haidegā: hikakutetsugaku no kokoromi” [“Nishida and Heidegger: An Attempt at Comparative Philosophy”] *Shisō* (Nov, 1995), 88-106.). [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
46. Heidegger, *Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1992), 276; *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), 187. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
47. And by *chiasma* I am referring to what in Nishida’s works, especially of the 1930s and 40s comes out as a multi-dimensional (spatio-temporal) dynamic complexity involving a cross-section between the “horizontal” interrelationality amongst individual elements and the “vertical” interrelationality between the individual/s and either the whole it/they co-constitute/s or the place of its/mutual implacement, involving mutual self-negations (or *kenosis*) on these multiple levels. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
48. Elmar Weinmayr has raised a similar issue, in his second article on Heidegger and Nishida, “Nishida to Haidegā: hikakutetsugaku no kokoromi,” and speculates whether this has something to do with differences between their cultural contexts. Weinmayr points out that Nishida’s project was to provide a systematic philosophical grounding to the given experience of our reciprocity between self and world, our implacement, while Heidegger’s project, starting from the tradition of Western philosophy, was to dismantle the very philosophical will to ground in order to retrieve the experience of an originary mode of being, the co-respondence between man and being. Weinmayr contends, in other words, that Heidegger’s thinking moves “from philosophy to experience,” while Nishida’s thinking moves “from experience to philosophy.” (See 94, 95, 98) Weinmayr adds that Nishida, compared to Heidegger, failed to reflect with any depth on the significance and implications of conceptualization and the role language and terminology may play in thinking. (See 99) And yet he also concludes his article by speculating whether this difference may have to do with the difference in their cultural starting points: the primacy of *logos* in the experience of Western thought vs. the primacy of a pre-linguistic *ethos* in East Asian dwelling. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)