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Author(s): Evan Thompson

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Evan Thompson Planetary thinking/planetary building: An essay on Martin Heidegger and Nishitani Keiji

In *The Question of Being*, Martin Heidegger writes that we are

... obliged not to give up the effort to practice planetary thinking along a stretch of the road, be it ever so short. Here too no prophetic talents and demeanor are needed to realize that there are in store for planetary building encounters for which participants are by no means equal today. This is equally true of the European and of the East Asiatic languages and, above all, for the area of a possible conversation between them. Neither of the two is able by itself to open up this area and to establish it.¹

What is the practice of planetary thinking? What is the relation between philosophy and this thinking?

Heidegger's call for planetary thinking occurs as part of his attempt to read the Western philosophical tradition as a whole. Although the truth of philosophy is not dependent on the historical actuality of the West, philosophy is, for Heidegger, essentially Western discourse. In *What Is Philosophy?*, he writes that

The word *philosophia* tells us that philosophy is something which, first of all, determines the existence of the Greek world. Not only that—*philosophia* also determines the innermost basic feature of our Western-European history. The often heard expression “Western-European philosophy”, is, in truth, a tautology. Why? Because philosophy is Greek in its nature; Greek, in this instance, means that in origin the nature of philosophy is of such a kind that it first appropriated the Greek world, and only it, in order to unfold.²

I wish to discuss here the nature of this claim, especially in its relation to the project of planetary thinking. We must realize first, however, that these statements are not an argument for Western superiority; they are, rather, an attempt to think the nature of philosophy, the “field” on which it originates. As Jacques Derrida explains: “It is simply that the founding concepts of philosophy are primarily Greek, and it would not be possible to philosophize, or to speak philosophically, outside this medium.”³ Heidegger's conception is, then, a philosophical one: it is a conception of the form or *eidos* of a culture and the *essential relation* of philosophy to that form.

For Heidegger, metaphysics consists from the beginning in a determination of Being which he calls the “ontological difference.” Metaphysics establishes itself by establishing a difference between beings and Being; metaphysics is this difference. At the same time, metaphysics does not think this difference *as difference*, but looks to the components of the difference instead. Put another way, metaphysics does not think *Being as such*, immediately conceiving Being within an opposition instead. Metaphysics comes to understand Being as the universal ground of all beings, and at the same time as the ground of itself, *the highest being*. This determination of Being (what Heidegger calls “onto-theology”) is an event in the history of Being, which marks the forgetting of Being. Metaphysics does not think its own ground; it is the “oblivion of Being.” Heidegger's project of

Evan Thompson is a doctoral student of philosophy at the University of Toronto. Philosophy East and West 36, no. 3 (July, 1986). © by the University of Hawaii Press. All rights reserved.

thinking Being as such means, then, a dismantling of the structures metaphysics has erected in order to reach their ground.⁴ His call for a planetary thinking is inseparable from this project, for if metaphysics is essentially Western discourse, and if metaphysics is necessarily oblivious of its own ground, then the attempt to think this ground confronts the limits of Western thought.

Heidegger's reading already requires a distance from or displacement of the Western tradition. One must not confuse, however, this general displacement with a stepping out of the tradition, as if this were simply possible. This displacement comes about as *a displacement of the tradition in the discourse of the tradition*, and so is everywhere problematical. Philosophy can no longer take itself for granted; we do not know if the path we tread leads to the clearing or leaves us lost in the forest. Heidegger would "step back" from metaphysics so that its essence (the ontological difference) could be thought. But what is the nature of this step? Where can we step when the notion of *position* has become suspect?

To be cast adrift from one's moorings is both liberating and disorienting, and is a condition of the thinking we are searching for. We sense our limits and appear to be open for a conversation with other traditions. Indeed, it is at this point that we occasionally find an awareness of non-Western traditions in the writing of philosophy. One thinks of Heidegger's dialogue with the Japanese⁵ and, more recently, Derrida's comments on phonocentrism and the Chinese language in his development of the problematic of writing, in *Of Grammatology*.⁶ These attempts are a step forward from much of the provincialism in philosophical writing, and yet they are everywhere ambiguous: on the one hand, these discussions displace the narrative in which Western culture is the final reference point. On the other hand, we cannot forget that the formulation of this displacement has only come about because of the assertion of the identity of philosophy and the discourse of a particular tradition. This identification is never subjected to criticism and justified, even in confrontation with other traditions, but is presented as if it were perfectly natural (the force of the so-called tautology "Western-European philosophy"). This identification rests, furthermore, on the ontological and epistemological division of "East" and "West," which is also never questioned; the contours of what Edward Said calls "imaginative geography" inform philosophical texts no less than proper "Orientalist" ones.⁷ In the very displacement of Western culture, at precisely the moment when binary oppositions were to be questioned, a logic of Same and Other, centre and margin, is perpetuated in which the non-Western becomes merely another name for the margin, the blank space, the Other. The reification of geographical boundaries not only impoverishes philosophy, but all of language, for it makes traditions appear self-enclosed, with no gaps and passageways among them.

At issue, then, is our understanding of difference and a logic of same and other. To take account of difference implies a critical attitude to our understanding of our own tradition, one which includes questioning the identification of philo-

sophy and Western discourse. This claim has, of course, already been countered on historical and comparative grounds. Many scholars are concerned with showing the importance of other traditions in the development of Western philosophy, and with comparing philosophies in different cultures. Although these investigations are essential, they do not quite reach the problems we face here. Comparative philosophy does not often reflect on the problem of its own status, on the nature of comparative discourse. Of course, these problems are always present in the practice of translation, but translation is still largely conceived in a *comparative* framework, one not hermeneutically subtle enough to account for the growing processes of confrontation, interference, accommodation, and appropriation among various traditions. The development of more complicated hermeneutics cannot rest content with only historical and comparative analyses, for one of the tasks of comparative philosophy is, as Henry Corbin puts it (rightly, I believe, though in a different spirit from the discussion I will pursue here), “to enquire into the form, here and there, of time lived, and thus of the advent of the concept of something like a history, and so of a history of philosophy.”⁸ In our case, beginning with Heidegger, we must attempt to understand what the words “West” and “philosophy as Western discourse” signify *philosophically*, in texts that are philosophical; in other words, with how philosophy understands itself.

Ultimately, of course, none of these problems can be separated. The hermeneutic activity is always connected to certain problems and texts, which in turn are found in particular traditions and communities. We must begin from where we find ourselves, from a particular situation or encounter, but we should not proceed naïvely, in isolation from broader, theoretical concerns. We should draw on the resources of the Heideggerian critique, yet at the same time not lose sight of the particularities of the issues we are investigating.

In this spirit I wish to approach the matter of planetary thinking through the thought of the Japanese philosopher, Nishitani Keiji. Nishitani is one of those who might be called the “heirs” of Heidegger (he studied with Heidegger in Germany in the 1930s). His philosophical endeavour (and that of the Kyoto School) is monumental, for it is one of the few examples of European philosophy being appropriated by another tradition and being replied to by that tradition, both thereby becoming part of a planetary movement. If one of the philosophical tasks left to us in the late twentieth century is the appropriation of Heidegger’s thought, we would do well to look to Nishitani, for he shows that Heidegger’s call for planetary thinking has not gone unheard. I wish here to continue the conversation between Heidegger and Nishitani and to explore this meeting of traditions in Nishitani’s recently translated work, *Religion and Nothingness*.⁹ My conviction, which I hope to make persuasive, is that Nishitani’s presentation and development of a contemporary philosophy of “emptiness” (*śūnyatā*) not only address Heidegger’s key concerns, but provide the space in which dialogue among civilizations and planetary thinking become possible.

In Nishitani's thought we are presented with a movement from what he calls the "field of consciousness," to the "field of nihility," to the "field of emptiness."¹⁰ This movement is both historical and personal: in it "relative nothingness" or nihilism is situated as a particular development of our culture and a stage of individual transformation. For Nishitani, European thought has become trapped on the "field of nihility," stopping short of an understanding of what Buddhists call "emptiness." Nishitani's challenge to us, though, is not to adopt Buddhism, but to achieve an understanding of emptiness working from our own premises. He recognizes, however, that his own thought has only come about because of an encounter with Western thought and history. His discussion of the relations between emptiness, time, and history is especially a result of this encounter, for Nishitani openly admits that Buddhism has not encountered the problem of the historicity of time to the extent that it has been encountered in the West. This meeting of Buddhist and European traditions around the problem of history is the starting point for Nishitani's meditations in the latter part of *Religion and Nothingness*:

How is it possible for what we call history to carry its historicity through to its last and final transhistorical base without thereby being terminated as history at the hands of the transhistorical? In other words: How is it possible for history to become radically historical by virtue of its historicity being carried through to a transhistorical ground? (*RN*, p. 213)

Nishitani follows Toynbee in presenting the problem. In the Abrahamic religions, historical consciousness develops as an aspect of God's relationship with humanity: God establishes a covenant with a people in the *Old Testament*; for Christians, God becomes human in the unique event of the birth of Christ. Historical processes here become intrinsically significant; the articulation of history takes a narrative form as the destiny of a people, the fall and redemption of humanity, or the modern narrative of the emancipation of the subject. For Nishitani, this development of historical consciousness is a movement beyond a merely cyclical conception of time found, for example, in Brahmanical India. What is sacrificed in such a development, however, is the universal, impersonal nature of time. Historical time is now inseparable from a standpoint of person or will; the development of an historical conception of time goes hand in hand with the realization of Divinity in a *personal* relationship. It becomes increasingly difficult, however, to mediate this personal relationship with an impersonal universality; thus the growth of religious intolerance. In our times, though, the crisis of religious consciousness has resulted in a denial of a transcendent Divinity and the deepening of the nothingness of creation into an abyss always underfoot (the "field of nihility"). Here the intrinsic significance of history begins to come apart so that, in the words of Dostoyevsky's underground man, "anything can be said of world history, anything conceivable even by the most disordered imagination."¹¹ This is the situation in which Nietzsche also finds us. We have found that there is no truth, but we continue to seek it: "What does nihilism

mean? *That the highest values devalue themselves.* The aim is lacking; ‘why’ finds no answer.”¹² Nishitani shares Nietzsche’s estimation of our situation: we cannot escape from time, and so must analyze our desire to escape and find a mode of being-in-time where time is no longer felt as a burden. The transition to emptiness, however, does not mean that we simply turn our backs to “nihility.” We must attempt to enter the heart of nihilism and open it up to what lies beyond it.

Heidegger confirms this when he writes in *The Question of Being* that to overcome nihilism we must first enter into its essence. For Heidegger, to enter the essence of nihilism is to “step back” towards the place where Being and nothingness are gathered together. In “What is Metaphysics?” nothingness appears as the totally other of Being, that which is not any determinate entity.¹³ For a thinking that only knows entities, what Heidegger calls the “horizon of scientific conception” and Nishitani the “field of consciousness,” Being, that which is not any being, can only appear as nothingness. This nothingness is, then, a “relative nothingness,” a qualification that Heidegger also makes explicit in *The Question of Being*.¹⁴ Heidegger questions this nothingness in order to make problematical, and thus ultimately to transcend, a thinking bound to the representation of determinate entities. He interprets *Dasein*’s projection into nothingness to mean that humanity is the “place-holder for nothingness”; humanity holds “the place open for the complete other of beings, so that in its openness there can be such a thing as being present (Being).”¹⁵ Whereas Nishitani transforms “relative nothingness” into “absolute nothingness” or emptiness, Heidegger assimilates nothingness to the possibility of being-present; absence belongs to presence as one of the possibilities of Being: “Being and nothingness are not side by side. One intercedes on behalf of the other in a relationship, the amplitude of whose essence we have scarcely considered yet.”¹⁶ (I will have more to say of this difference later.) The essence of nihilism is, then, not nihilistic: the essence of nothingness belongs to Being; thus nihilism, as a determination of Being, belongs to metaphysics.

Heidegger’s call for planetary thinking comes from this attempt to think the essence of nihilism. Nihilism now envelops the planet and in this envelopment it appears as if there are only beings, that Being is an empty concept. Yet metaphysics itself is, for Heidegger, the oblivion or concealment of Being, for metaphysics never thinks Being as such. The withdrawal of Being in nihilism, and hence the collapse of the ontological difference between Being and beings, is already at work in metaphysics; it is inherent in the grasping of the difference by way of its components. Our sight is fixed on *what differs*, and we remain blind to *difference as such*.¹⁷ The overcoming of nihilism is based on understanding metaphysics as the “oblivion of Being.” The “step back” would think this oblivion, and so enter the heart of nihilism. For Heidegger, metaphysics can never come to a realization of the oblivion of Being in the ontological difference, for metaphysics is founded upon it. Thus, the question of Being “*dies off, if it does*

not surrender the language of metaphysics, because metaphysical conception forbids thinking the question as to the essence of being" (italics in original).¹⁸ The attempt to think the ontological difference as difference is, then, to move out of metaphysics. Such a move cannot be made by a series of propositions or chain of reasons, for reason is essentially metaphysical. For Heidegger, one must rather leap out of metaphysics, a leap he would accomplish by the "step back."

The "step back" is not an historical one; one does not attempt to return to a supposed premetaphysical thinking. The "step back" is a step away from metaphysical thinking towards its ground, so that the essence of metaphysics, the ontological difference, can be thought. One attempts to move from the oblivion of the difference to a field where Being can be thought nonrepresentationally.

... we must first assume a proper position face to face with the difference. Such a confrontation becomes manifest to us once we accomplish the step back. Only as this step gains for us greater distance does what is near give itself as such, does nearness achieve its first radiance. By the step back, we set the matter of thinking, Being as difference, free to enter a position face to face, which may well remain wholly without an object.¹⁹

The "step back" would move away from the vestiges of representation on the "field of nihility" to experience what Heidegger calls the "*belonging together*" of humanity and Being in the Same. The Same is not the merely identical free of difference; the Same preserves difference, implying a process of mediation or unification. This unification, however, is not one in which humanity and Being exist separately and then somehow happen to meet. Their relationship is not one of a necessary connection, a systematic encounter between terms that are metaphysically grounded. Instead of determining belonging by together, the unity of a manifold, together is determined by belonging, by identity in movement, a process of appropriation: *Dasein*, as that being who exists, that is, who stands out from beings into the present of Being, is appropriated to Being. Being, as presence, needs the openness of *Dasein*, its "place-holder," to arrive as presence.

... a spring is needed in order to experience authentically the *belonging together* of man and Being. This spring is the abruptness of the unbridged entry into that which alone can grant a toward-each-other of man and Being, and thus the constellation of the two. The spring is the abrupt entry into the realm from which man and Being have already reached each other in their active nature, since both are mutually appropriated, extended as a gift, one to the other. Only the entry into the realm of this mutual appropriation determines and defines the experience of thinking.²⁰

Nishitani shares Heidegger's attempt to move out of metaphysics to a new way of thinking. In *Religion and Nothingness*, he also confronts the problem of identity, here in its relation to the mode of being in emptiness. Traditionally, metaphysics understands identity as a characteristic of the Being of beings: an entity is said to be the same with itself, and this sameness is variously articulated as idea, form, substance, and so forth. Inherent in this conception is the separation of actual from essential being and the attempt to approach the former by

way of the latter. To discover *that* something is metaphysics asks *what* it is. This separation is, of course, the ontological difference: “Being is divided into whatness and thatness. The history of Being as metaphysics begins with this distinction and its preparation. Metaphysics includes the distinction in the structure of truth about beings as such as a whole.”²¹ For Nishitani, emptiness is the complete negation of metaphysical identity and “a conversion of the standpoint of reason and all its logical thinking” (*RN*, p. 117).

The standpoint of emptiness comes about as a negation of “nihility,” not in order to assert the priority of beings, but as a realization of the nonduality of being and nothingness. “Relative nothingness” becomes “absolute nothingness,” for nothingness appears at the heart of self-identity. Here the self-identity of an entity is shown to be its nonself-nature; thus Nishitani abandons the term “nothingness” and takes up “*śūnyatā*” or “emptiness.” The mode of being and thinking on the “field of emptiness” Nishitani finds expressed in the ancient Zen phrases: “Fire does not burn fire,” “water does not wet water,” “the eye does not see the eye.” Here the essential being of fire, for example, is expressed by saying that it does not burn itself; actual being, on the other hand, is expressed simultaneously by saying that fire burns. The essence or self-nature of fire occurs at precisely the point where it does not burn, that is, is not itself; this point of nonself-identity, however, is inseparable from the actual process of combustion. Nishitani writes:

If we suppose that the natural, essential quality (*physis*)—or, in Buddhist terms, “self-nature”—resides in the power and work of combustion, then the selfness of fire resides at the point of its so-called *non*-self-nature. In contrast to the notion of substance which comprehends the selfness of fire in its fire-nature (and thus as *being*), the true selfness of fire is its non-fire-nature. The selfness of fire lies in non-combustion. Of course, this non-combustion is not something apart from combustion; fire is non-combustive in its very act of combustion. It does not burn itself. To withdraw the non-combustion of fire from the discussion is to make combustion in truth unthinkable. That a fire sustains itself while it is in the act of burning means precisely that it does not burn itself The non-self-nature of fire is its home-ground of being. (*RN*, p. 117)

Here actual and essential being cannot be presented separately. This is not to say, however, that the two are simply identical, which would be the monistic extreme. Emptiness is the negation of an inherent being in things, and thus expresses the true condition of phenomena. But as a lack or negation, emptiness is not separate from phenomena; it is not a ground, substance, or essence behind or within things. Emptiness, then, cannot be understood simply in terms of the ontological difference; “the way things are” is not operative within such a division. The nonduality of form and emptiness, or actual and essential being, means that being is illusory at its ground, that everything is illusory appearance. Yet it is not some *thing* or *being* that appears, it is appearance itself with nothing behind or beneath it. The traditional Buddhist example for such a mode of appearance is that of the magician who fabricates the illusion of a horse or some other animal.

Although there never was any animal there, the appearance nevertheless arises. As Nishitani puts it: "... appearance is illusory at the elemental level in its very reality, and real in its very illusoriness" (*RN*, p. 129). This mode of being is thus knowable, but not as the representation of an object by a subject; in Nishitani's words, emptiness is experienced as a "non-cognitive knowing of the non-objective thing-in-itself" (*RN*, p. 139).

The transition from "nihility" to emptiness also involves a transformation of our understanding of time. On the "field of nihility," the recognition of the "infinite openness" of time results in an understanding of time as infinitely extended without beginning or end. *Dasein*, being-in-the-world, is the living of this time; *Dasein* does not live *in time*, but *lives time*. In the living of time as infinite extension, *Dasein* loses its purely human determination, for it is dispersed along the endless pathways of spatial and temporal relations and revealed as *sheer* being-in-the-world, being-in-the-world *as such*. The origin or ground of time cannot be found, then, by searching ever backwards or ever forwards, for the ordinary, linear conception of time has been displaced by infinite dispersion. This dispersion, however, is being continually constituted each "moment," and it is there that the origin of time is to be sought.

On the "field of emptiness," the infinite openness of time becomes an ecstatic field of transcendence at each moment, a field where the self is ecstatically outside of time. Here the *intrinsic reality* of being-in-the-world is negated, but this negation is not a denial of our *actual* being-in-the-world, for the latter can only come about if it is free of intrinsic determinations. From the perspective of the "field of nihility," the "field of emptiness" transcends being-in-time; *Dasein* appears as *not-being-in-time*. On the "field of emptiness," however, the "field of nihility" is reappropriated so that transcendence occurs as a revaluation of being-in-time, a living of time where the debt of existence is realized as the Bodhisattva vow, which is responsible to all beings and takes on their suffering. The nonduality of form and emptiness here shows itself as the nonduality of time and eternity. Time cannot be circumscribed by an inside and outside; the tracing of boundaries is always relative, situated in a particular universe.

Nishitani distinguishes several levels of understanding time: when being-in-time manifests as being-at-doing (*samskr̥ta*), time becomes a field of infinite becoming without beginning or end, an endless continuum of moments, each new and impermanent. The realization of "nihility," however, opens up an abyss at the bottom of each moment, so that the beginning and end of time are to be found in an ecstatic field "beneath" the present. Time takes on a cyclic form, while "nihility" appears as eternity, a transcendent field from which the world, grasped as the totality of what is, is perpetually slipping away. For Nishitani, either of these aspects, considered in isolation, robs time of its full historicity: irreversibility in isolation leaves us with religious eschatology or the secular myth of progress, both ultimately tied to will and egocentrism, and thus intolerant.

Cyclic time destroys novelty and creativity, for the beginning and end of time become one in the nothingness “beneath” each moment. Even so radical an understanding as Nietzsche’s eternal return, Nishitani argues, errs in the extreme of sacrificing the individual to the universal. Nietzsche recognizes that the will is not a faculty of an intrinsically real subject, that we “foist” the grammatical category of subject on an impersonal process of figuration (the will to power), but he is unable to retain what Buddhism calls the “conventional self.” On the “field of emptiness,” however, linear and cyclic time are reconciled and revaluated. The emptiness of time means that time can *function* irreversibly, but the awareness of an openness at the ground of each moment means that the beginning and end of time can always be found *now*, in the dependent-origination of the present moment. *In this sense*, the past, present, and future are all simultaneous: linear and cyclic time become “circuminsessional” time. This simultaneity allows us, in Nishitani’s words, to “encounter Śākyamuni and Jesus, Bashō and Beethoven in the present” (*RN*, p. 161). This encounter is not an empathetic one of subjects, as in nineteenth-century hermeneutics, for here we are located on a field of selflessness. The Buddhist actively *realizes*²² Buddha in the Bodhisattva vow; Bashō’s frog again becomes an occasion for poetry in the writing of Sengai.²³

The displacement of the division of actual and essential being on the “field of emptiness” results in a nonegocentric mode of being-in-time. We find a similar displacement in Heidegger’s later thought, for just as Nishitani reappropriates “nihility” in emptiness, so for Heidegger nihilism becomes a “moment” in the history of Being, one of the ways Being is, as he puts it, “sent” in history.

Already in *The Question of Being*, Heidegger reads the “concealment of Being” in both senses of the double genitive: Being is concealed, but this concealment also belongs to Being. He writes that the oblivion of Being can be seen “as a concealment, presumably a sheltering which still preserves what has not yet been revealed.”²⁴ Concealment is thought as veiling—in Greek, *lēthē*, what remains concealed in unconcealment: *a-lētheia*.²⁵ The history of Being is now thought in its *epochs*, from the Greek *epochē*, a holding back. This holding back Heidegger sees as the fundamental characteristic of the history of Being as “sending.” His understanding of this “sending” is important, especially for our comparison with Nishitani, for it effects a displacement of the concept of the ontological difference. Heidegger turns to the German idiom “*es gibt*” and the French “*il y a*,” and sees Being as a “gift” that is sent in history; the “It” that gives, however, is veiled, concealed. The gift instead becomes thought by way of the ontological difference: a gift of *Being* that secures, establishes, maintains *beings*. In its very giving of the gift, the “It” and giving hold back, conceal themselves. In “Time and Being,” Heidegger writes:

A giving which gives only its gift, but in the giving holds itself back and withdraws, such a giving we call a sending. According to the meaning of giving which is to be thought in this way, Being—that which It gives—is what is sent.

Each of its transformations remains destined in this manner. What is historical in the history of Being is determined by what is sent forth in destining, not by any indeterminately thought up occurrence.²⁶

The “step back,” then, would think this giving that remains veiled in the gift of Being, releasing the ontological difference to the more originary play of giving: Being “overwhelms” beings, is given to beings as a gift; beings, on the other hand, receive Being and in their reception sustain Being in its overwhelming. Being’s overwhelming of beings allows beings to arrive and be present. The arrival of beings, however, keeps itself concealed in the unconcealedness of Being. Pierre Livet uses the analogy of an archer aiming at a target to explain this overwhelming and arrival.²⁷ The tension of the bow is the fundamental energy that moves the arrow. The direction of the arrow is determined by the archer who aims the bow, but one can also consider the direction of the arrow to be guided by the target that will receive the arrow. By analogy, the tension of the bow is the “It gives,” the energy by which Being is sent. The movement of the arrow to the target is the movement of Being to beings, determined not only by the sending, but by beings, the target or *destination* of the sending (*Geschick*). This analogy shows how Heidegger conceives the relation of Being to beings as the unity of an *event*: bow, arrow, target, and archer all come together as an event, and in this event there is no question of grounding the movement in a final, determining factor. The relation of Being to beings becomes a back-and-forth movement of overwhelming and arrival, unconcealment and concealing:

The difference of Being and beings, as the differentiation of overwhelming and arrival, is the perdurance (*Austrag*) of the two in *unconcealing keeping in concealment*. Within this perdurance there prevails a clearing of what veils and closes itself off—and this its perdurance bestows the being apart, and the being toward each other, of overwhelming and arrival.²⁸

The sending of Being as unconcealment points to an intimacy of time and being. Being is not any being in time, yet Being as unconcealment or *presence* is determined by time. Time, however, is also determined by Being: time passes away, but its passing away is constant; it endures, *presences*. Being is not any being, and time is not any thing in time; Being and time, as presence, determine each other reciprocally. In metaphysics, however, Being as presence is forgotten: Being is conceived as ground for and the highest of present beings. In the same way, the presence of time is conceived by way of the present moment, the now. Yet for Heidegger, the presencing of time cannot be determined by the present as moment. As we saw, Heidegger assimilates nothingness to Being as a mode of being-present; in the same way, he sees absence (the no-longer-now and the not-yet-now) as a “manner of presencing and approaching.”²⁹ In the past, presencing is extended, whereas in the future, presencing is offered. In a passage similar to one of Nishitani, Heidegger writes:

Approaching, being not yet present, at the same time gives and brings about what is no longer present, the past, and conversely what has been offers future to

itself. The reciprocal relation of both at the same time gives and brings about the present. We say “at the same time,” and thus ascribe a time character to the mutual giving to one another of a future, past, and present, that is, to their own unity.³⁰

In the next paragraph, however, Heidegger qualifies this “mutual giving” so that it can no longer be said “that future, past and present are before us ‘at the same time’.” What Nishitani calls the “non-self-nature” of time, Heidegger expresses by writing that the “mutual giving” of time is nothing temporal: past, present, and future offer each other the presencing that is given in them. It is this presencing, for Heidegger, that opens up what he calls “time-space”: the “mutual giving” of past, present, and future opens a region in which what we know as space occurs.

The reciprocal determination of past, present, and future, and the space it opens up is, for Heidegger, the “dimensionality” of time. Dimension here does not mean an area of measurement, but the opening up of time-space, in which the threefold giving of time shows the three dimensions of time. But Heidegger also writes of a fourth dimension of time, one he calls “nearhood” (*Nahheit*). “Nearhood” is the first, primal giving that allows each moment of time its own presencing, holding the moments both apart and towards each other:

... it brings future, past and present near to one another by distancing them. For it keeps what has been open by denying its advent as present. This nearing of nearness keeps open the approach coming from the future by withholding the present in the approach, nearing nearness has the character of denial and withholding. It unifies in advance the ways in which what has-been, what is about to be, and the present reach out toward each other.³¹

Time, like Being, is then a gift of a giving that opens and conceals.

The sending of Being as presence and the opening of time, their active identity as an event, Heidegger calls *Ereignis*, the “event of appropriation.” We have already seen *Ereignis* in the form of the mutual appropriation of humanity and Being, their *belonging* together. Being and humanity, in the reciprocity of their movement, come to presence each in its own way; in their *appropriate* coming to presence, each is delivered to the other. Heidegger plays on the relation of *Ereignen* to *Eräugnen*, “to place before the eyes” or “to show,” both suggesting a “coming into the light.”³² The *belonging* together of humanity and Being can also be seen, then, as the process by which the “clearing” (*Lichtung*) occurs, which grants both Being and time. As gifts of appropriation, Being and time both vanish in *Ereignis*, a play both active and passive in which even the “It” of “It gives” would remain a representation. The opening and concealing of Being and time belong to the “event of appropriation”: *Ereignis* appropriates and expropriates.

Insofar as the destiny of Being lies in the extending of time, and time, together with Being, lies in Appropriation, Appropriating makes manifest its peculiar property, that Appropriation withdraws what is most fully its own from bound-

less unconcealment. Thought in terms of Appropriating, this means: in that sense it expropriates itself of itself. Expropriation belongs to Appropriation as such. By this expropriation, Appropriation does not abandon itself—rather it preserves what is its own.³³

For Nishitani, the realization of “nihility” prefigures the transition to emptiness; for Heidegger, we are given a prelude to the “event of appropriation” in the relation of humanity and technology. What Heidegger calls the “framework” (*Ge-stell*) is the confrontation, the “mutual challenging,” of humanity and Being in the technological age. The “framework” might be called the “configuration” of this epoch of Being that is our own age: everywhere beings are determined as what is calculable, capable of being quantified and manipulated. The “framework,” however, is never anywhere present as an entity; it is not subject to the determination it enforces, and so remains unthought. Yet it expresses the manner in which the *belonging* together of humanity and Being is determined in our age: Being withdraws in favour of the calculable being, while humanity unceasingly strives to bring all entities under its control. Perhaps, in what seems to be the furthest withdrawal of Being, a strange transition is announced.

What we experience in the frame as the constellation of Being and man through the modern world of technology is a prelude to what is called the event of appropriation. This event, however, does not necessarily persist in its prelude. For in the event of appropriation the possibility arises that it may overcome the mere dominance of the frame to turn it into a more original appropriating. Such a transformation of the frame into the event of appropriation, by virtue of that event, would bring the appropriate recovery—appropriate, hence never to be produced by man alone—of the world of technology from its dominance back to servitude in the realm by which man reaches more fully into the event of appropriation.³⁴

The course that I have charted so far through the texts of Heidegger and Nishitani has revealed what might be called “family resemblances” of thought. In both philosophers, we are presented with a movement, which I will call one of *transcendence*. My choice of this word is, perhaps, infelicitous, for it is a word of many meanings whose confusion Heidegger sees as “the distinguishing characteristic of metaphysical conceptions still customary today.”³⁵ Transcendence is essential to the ontological difference: it is the movement from beings to Being; from what Heidegger calls “changeable being” to a “*being in repose*”; it is also the title for *the highest being*, the onto-theological determination of Being.³⁶ In Heidegger’s early writings, however, transcendence becomes the “surpassing” essential to *Dasein*, the ground phenomenon of *Dasein*’s freedom.³⁷

Man’s *Da-sein* can only relate to what-is by projecting into Nothing. Going beyond what-is is of the essence of *Da-sein*. But this “going beyond” is metaphysics itself. That is why metaphysics belongs to the nature of man. . . . Metaphysics is the ground phenomenon of *Da-sein*. It is *Da-sein* itself.³⁸

In Heidegger’s later thought, metaphysics is called the “fate of transcendence”: “Transcendence is metaphysics itself, whereby this name does not signify

a doctrine and discipline of philosophy but signifies that ‘it’ ‘gives’ that transcendence.”³⁹

It is precisely this understanding of transcendence that establishes a conversation among Asia, Europe, and Greece—here among Buddhism, Nishitani, and Heidegger. The philosophical narrative of Nishitani’s writing is formed by this movement of surpassing: on the “field of nihility” transcendence as constitutive of *Dasein* is first grasped—*Dasein*’s freedom is grounded in perpetual surpassing to the world as being-in-the-world. On the “field of emptiness,” *Dasein* is revealed as *not-being-in-the-world*; *Dasein* has attained the “other shore”: “‘Gate, gate, paragate, parasamgate, bodhi, svaha!’ (O Bodhi, gone, gone, gone to the other shore, landed at the other shore, Svaha!).”⁴⁰ Yet this “other shore” is what Nishitani calls an “absolutely near side”: *Dasein*’s surpassing of the world occurs simultaneously as the most thorough being-in-the-world. If such a movement of thought, this movement of *transcendence*, is common to Greco-European philosophy and Buddhist philosophy (to say nothing of other Asian philosophical traditions), then Heidegger’s equation of philosophy with Western discourse cannot be admitted, even in his own understanding of the statement. This identification was meant to prevent the imposition of our thought on other traditions, but it reinforces the perception of the “East” as an ineffable Other. Heidegger’s effort to achieve a conversation is monumental, but the plurality of the planet’s traditions cannot be accommodated by the simplistic opposition of “East” and “West,” or in a reductive logic of Same and Other. We must move to a logic that is plural, in which we are aware of our criteria for sameness, difference, for what constitutes a universe of discourse. Such a pluralism should not be uncritical, and cannot be built on ignorance; we can only open ourselves to the traditions of the world, however, if we do not a priori consider ourselves to be the only bearers of a certain thought.

Before closing, I wish to investigate some of the differences between Heidegger and Nishitani, and the various directions that their thought might take us in our task of planetary thinking. My suggestions are meant to be tentative, to further a conversation that is only beginning.

I have remarked several times that whereas Nishitani transforms “relative nothingness” into emptiness, Heidegger assimilates nothingness to Being, absence to presence. Yet the matter is not quite so simply put. At issue is how we understand the opposition presence/absence, how we see it function. In *Ereignis*, Being as presence is given as a gift, but the giving conceals itself, and so remains absent. The forgetting of Being is not a human lapse of memory; it is the necessary lack or concealment of the clearing in the granting of Being as unconcealment (the *lêthē* of *alêtheia*). *What comes to presence is also a lack*. In a late prose-poem, “The Lack of Sacred Names,” Heidegger writes:

To speak poetically—that means here: to let say to itself the pure call of coming to presence as such, even if this be only and precisely a coming to presence of a removal and of a withholding.⁴¹

It is this lack that we never experience; instead of experiencing coming to presence as the self-concealing openness of the clearing, we experience presence as the present. Heidegger's thoughts on this lack are some of his most wavering, or, as Derrida would put it, his most "undecidable." On the one hand, the opposition of presence and absence is surpassed in *Ereignis* expropriating itself of itself. Here "presence" and "absence" could only be determined by arresting the movement of *Ereignis*, in an attempt to determine its "moments," but that would be like trying to determine exactly at what point a dancer's weight has fully shifted from one foot to another. On the other hand, Heidegger always refers absence back to presence, *lêthē* to *alêtheia*; thus the possibility remains that the self-concealing clearing is an ineffable presence: "If this were so [that *lêthē* belongs to *alêtheia*], then the opening would not be the mere opening of presence, but the opening of presence concealing itself, the opening of a self-concealing sheltering."⁴² On the "field of emptiness," however, the assimilation of absence to presence can only appear as a symptom of not having realized nonduality, of not freeing oneself fully from grasping things by way of the ontological difference. To the extent that either presence or absence is made ultimate, one remains caught in representational thinking. Emptiness is not an ineffable presence: it is the absence of inherent being *and simultaneously* the presence of form. "Form is emptiness, and emptiness is form." To speak of absence *coming to presence as absence* is subtly to reify absence, for presence and absence are themselves empty. It is this nonduality of form and emptiness that allows for Nishitani's "circuminsessional" time. Heidegger comes close to this understanding when he writes of the "mutual giving" of time, but this giving always remains one of presence. Heidegger insists that the presencing that opens time-space cannot be conceived on the basis of the present, the now, and yet he never returns to the conventional moment; our everyday conception of time remains derivative from a more profound understanding. For Nishitani, though, the "mutual giving" of time is one of emptiness, and, because of the nonduality of form and emptiness, he is able to return to the everyday form of time as the succession of moments.

Heidegger's and Nishitani's meditations both call for a thinking that surpasses reason. For Heidegger, reason cannot think the lack or holding back of Being, for reason is metaphysical: instead of thinking Being, metaphysics establishes a *reasoned* hierarchy between Being and entities, in which the former is ground for the latter. For Nishitani, reason operates within the separation of actual and essential being, and thus "does not enter directly and immediately to the point where something *is*. It does not put one directly in touch with the home-ground of a thing, with the thing itself" (*RN*, pp. 114–115). Nishitani interprets philosophy as *theoria*, an intellectual or contemplative beholding of reality that does not overcome the division of self and world. Religion, however, enquires after reality in such a way that reality is *realized* in the questioning. Nishitani bypasses a subjectivistic understanding of religion, but preserves the self in an identity

of process: religion is the “self-awareness of reality,” in which “our ability to perceive reality means that reality realizes (actualizes) itself in us; . . . this in turn is the only way that we can realize (appropriate through understanding) the fact that reality is so realizing itself in us; and that in so doing the self-realization of reality takes place” (*RN*, p. 5). This division between religion and philosophy in Nishitani’s writing seems to be inherited from European existentialist thinking in its response to the erosion of religious belief and the predominance of science. Heidegger, in a similar way, always understands science to be technical thinking, whereas philosophy and poetry confront the fundamental matters of Being and language. These separations, however, recapitulate the division of actual and essential being: on the one hand, we have an ontic thinking, concerned with entities; on the other hand, a thinking of essential matters. The distinctions Heidegger and Nishitani draw in the realm of thought, then, reinforce the divisions to be overcome. An effect of these separations can be seen in Nishitani’s occasional statements that ultimate reality can only be presented as paradox:

When we persist in our pursuit of what is *truly* true, among the things that are true, the *truly* true appears in the mode of paradox or absurdity, under the conditions ordinarily considered as altogether contradictory to truth. Where *ratio* is pushed to its limits the “irrational” shows up. Where meaning is pushed to its extreme, “meaninglessness” shows up. And yet what thus appears as paradox, irrationality, or meaninglessness, is truly absolute reality. (*RN*, p. 180)

But if emptiness is nondual, then how can it be so easily aligned with the simple opposites of reason and meaning? The “irrational” does not seem to be the emptiness of reason, but reason’s flip side, which appears in the movement from the “field of consciousness” to “nihility.” If one holds that reason is inadequate to convey ultimate reality, then one must hold paradox to be inadequate as well; if ultimate reality is *ultimately* inconceivable, then it must escape any attempt to capture it, reasoned and paradoxical. On the other hand, if the “field of emptiness” is an “absolutely near side,” then we must be led to an appreciation of reason in its role of guiding us in the everyday world.

Nishitani does not always remain within the separation of meaning and paradox. He tells us that the Japanese word “*kokoro*” can mean both “meaning” and “mind”; thus to understand meaning is to obtain the mind of a given matter (“*koto*”). Understanding is a reciprocal transmission of minds, “wherein a *koto* takes possession of us and transfers into us, even as we in turn really transfer over into the *koto* so that our mind becomes and works as the *koto*” (*RN*, p. 179). In this back-and-forth movement, “meaning” is an abstraction, for it arrests the process and attempts an ideal correlation of thought, meaning, and matter. In Mahāyāna Buddhist literature, such as the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*, ultimate reality is said to be inconceivable for the grasping mind, that is, for the mind that constructs realities out of concepts and then clings to these reifications. On the “field of emptiness,” one tolerates the impossibility of *grasping* things as they really are: as Robert Thurman puts it, “the grasping mind cannot grasp its

ultimate inability to grasp; it can only cultivate its tolerance of that inability.”⁴³ In the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras*, emptiness is said to be empty even of itself: emptiness is the lack of *svabhāva* (intrinsic reality), but this lack does not itself have an intrinsically real status. This understanding is said to prevent the two extremes of reification and repudiation (nihilism): emptiness is not intrinsically real, but it is not a denial of conventional things, for it is the dependent-origination of form. Thus, as Nishitani tells us, the *realization* of “mind-meaning” is not an act of *grasping* or *discerning*; it is what he calls “a discernment of non-discernment” (*RN*, p. 182).

Planetary thinking requires such a middle way, one that does not sacrifice identity to difference, or reduce difference to identity. Instead of trying to merge many traditions into one, or resting content with tolerant isolation, we must attempt to create the spaces in which traditions can interfere and call forth modifications in each other. I say “spaces” in the plural, for space and tradition are interdependent; neither one is ultimately situated in the other. The encounter among traditions should not be dogmatically combative, but we should not exclude critical confrontation, that is, confrontation aimed at furthering the conversation, not drowning out the voices of others. Agonistics is not necessarily intolerant (as many proponents of religious dialogue seem to think), for it can be a strategy for furthering a conversation.

What unites us in conversation here is the attempt to think in a planetary context, and so to build and dwell in a planetary world. Heidegger tells us in “Building Dwelling Thinking” that the “nature of building is letting dwell. Building accomplishes its nature in the raising of locations and the joining of their spaces. *Only if we are capable of dwelling, only then can we build*” (italics in original).⁴⁴ Heidegger writes that a bridge gathers a landscape together; in creating a passage, it sets off the banks of a river and does not merely connect what was already there. A bridge determines a space, and space is the openness that permits us to build; in his words, “building . . . is a founding and joining of spaces.”⁴⁵ The joining of spaces is not their unification, but, to borrow an image from Michel Serres, the negotiation of passages among them. A passage is created by movement, and, in movement, passage and traverser are inseparable. Planetary thinking must search for pathways among traditions, must attempt to join the spaces that make up our world. Such a journey not only alters our “imaginative geography” to the contours of the landscape, but produces new spaces and terrain, places we have not dwelt in before.

NOTES

1. Martin Heidegger, *The Question of Being*, trans. William Kluback and Jean T. Wilde (New Haven, Connecticut: College and University Press, 1958), p. 107.

2. Martin Heidegger, *What Is Philosophy?* trans. William Kluback and Jean T. Wilde (New Haven, Connecticut: College and University Press), pp. 29–31.

3. Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, Illinois: The University Press of Chicago, 1978), p. 81.
4. See Heidegger, *What Is Philosophy?* pp. 71–73.
5. Martin Heidegger, "A Dialogue on Language," in *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz (New York: Harper and Row, 1971).
6. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), pp. 25–26, 90–91.
7. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), pp. 49–73.
8. Henry Corbin, *The Concept of Comparative Philosophy*, trans. Peter Russell (Ipswich, England: Golgonooza Press, 1981), p. 4.
9. Keiji Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, trans. Jan Van Bragt (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1982); hereafter referred to in the text as *RN*.
10. The "field of consciousness" refers to the separation of self and world where the latter is understood as a field of objectivity for a subject, the former. "Nihilism" is the term Bragt coins for "relative nothingness," the nothingness of nihilism and existentialism, in contrast to "absolute nothingness" or "emptiness."
11. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Notes From Underground; The Double*, trans. Jessie Coulson (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1972), p. 37.
12. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), p. 9.
13. Martin Heidegger, "What Is Metaphysics?" in *Existence and Being* (South Bend, Indiana: Gateway Editions, 1949).
14. Heidegger, *The Question of Being*, p. 97.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*
17. See Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), p. 70.
18. Heidegger, *The Question of Being*, p. 73.
19. Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, p. 64.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
21. Martin Heidegger, *The End of Philosophy*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), pp. 2–3.
22. Nishitani uses "realize" in the double sense of "to actualize" and "to appropriate through understanding." See *RN*, pp. 5–6.
23. See *World of the Buddha: A Reader*, ed. Lucien Stryk (New York: Anchor Books, 1969), p. 356.
24. Heidegger, *The Question of Being*, p. 89.
25. Cf. Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, pp. 50–51.
26. Martin Heidegger, *On Time and Being*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), pp. 8–9.
27. Pierre Livet, "Interférence entre civilisations ou dialogue autoréférent: l'ambiguïté heideggerienne," in *Les Études Philosophiques: Philosophies Orientales et Extrême Orientales*, Octobre-Décembre, 1983 (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France), pp. 477–478.
28. Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, p. 65.
29. Heidegger, *On Time and Being*, p. 13.
30. *Ibid.*, pp. 13–14.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
32. See Albert Hofstadter's introduction to his translation of Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), pp. xviii–xxii.
33. Heidegger, *On Time and Being*, pp. 22–23.
34. Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, pp. 36–37.
35. Heidegger, *The Question of Being*, p. 57.
36. *Ibid.*
37. See Martin Heidegger, *The Essence of Reasons*, trans. Terrence Malick (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press).
38. Heidegger, "What is Metaphysics?" p. 348.
39. Heidegger, *The Question of Being*, p. 87.

40. "The Prajñāparamita-hridaya sutra," in D. T. Suzuki, *Manual of Zen Buddhism* (New York: Grove Press, 1960), p. 27.
41. Martin Heidegger, "Der Fehl heiliger Namen," *Contre Toute Attente*, 2–3, Printemps-Été, 1981; English translation, "The Lack of Sacred Names," by Thomas Pepper (unpublished manuscript). I wish to thank Thomas Pepper for making this manuscript available to me, and for many conversations that have aided me greatly in writing this essay.
42. Heidegger, *On Time and Being*, p. 71.
43. Robert A. F. Thurman, trans., *The Holy Teaching of Vimalakīrti* (Philadelphia, Penn.: Pennsylvania University Press, 1976), p. 161.
44. Heidegger, "Building Dwelling Thinking," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, p. 160.
45. *Ibid.*, p. 158.