

On the Principle of Comparative East Asian Philosophy: Nishida Kitarō and Mou Zongsan*

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Abstract

Recent research both on the Kyoto School and on the contemporary New Confucians suggests significant similarities between these two modern East Asian philosophies. Still missing is, however, an explanation of the shared philosophical ideas that serve as the foundation for comparative studies. For this reason, I analyze the basic theories of the two distinctly East Asian philosophies of Nishida Kitarō (1870-1945) and Mou Zongsan (1909-95) so as to identify and extract the same type of argument. This is an alternative to the analyses provided by the previous studies of their philosophies, which inevitably regard their theories as an East Asian assimilation of modern European philosophy in the Kantian, Neo-Kantian, or phenomenological tradition, or else as the traditional tenets under the guise of philosophical speculation, without being able to clarify how these theories contribute to philosophy. My analysis shows that both the logic of *basho* and the theory of

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perfect teaching formulate the same type of theory, the ontological or topological — *onto-topological* — turn from the act of consciousness to its *basho* or its vertical enfolding, which constitutes the bedrock of East Asian philosophy.

Keywords: East Asian philosophy, *basho*, perfect teaching, act of consciousness, ontology

東亞哲學比較研究之基礎： 西田幾多郎與牟宗三

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摘 要

近年來，當代新儒學和日本京都學派的許多專家逐漸意識到代表東亞哲學的這兩學派之間有明顯的相似性。可惜的是，真正比較研究所需要的哲學上的共同理論卻未受到充分的闡明。這個比較研究上的困難來自過去東亞哲學研究中經常遇到的兩種陷阱，即視這兩學派一方面為西方哲學如康德、新康德或現象學傳統的追隨者，另一方面為東方的傳統思想如儒家或佛教之複述者。本文非但要避免這兩種解釋方式，更想要闡明東亞哲學對全世界哲學何以做出了具體的貢獻。本文欲指出，代表兩個學派的西田幾多郎（1870-194）之場所論和牟宗三（1909-95）之圓教論其實共有一個哲學模型，即從意識作用的考察到其縱貫的場所之存有論式的轉折，而此共同理論是東亞比較哲學不可或缺的基礎。

關鍵詞：東亞哲學、場所、圓教、意識的活動、存有論

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1 Gulf between Japanese and Chinese Philosophies

Recently, researchers are increasingly aware of the need to take comparative and synthetic approaches to the issues in East Asian philosophy. Thinkers in this region indeed present many similarities without being aware of them; for example, the tenets of critical Buddhism cannot be fully understood without considering the issues raised decades earlier by the Chinese Inner Studies School although “the former is unaware of it.”¹ There is fairly general agreement that many other cases exist. However, no two intellectual movements need the synthetic approach more urgently than the two philosophical schools in this region that have so far scarcely appreciated each other — the Kyoto School and Contemporary New Confucianism.²

Yet, the comparative study of these two schools has not been very successful thus far. Of course, similarities are obvious between the two schools of philosophy, because both have developed their philosophical discussions within, or arguably within, the intellectual background of the traditional East Asian belief systems such as Buddhism and Confucianism. Consequently, it seems reasonable to group them together as *East Asian philosophy*. Similarities, however, are still unable to serve as the firm bedrock for comparative philosophy; researchers have rarely found any distinctive philosophical arguments that are truly *common* to them, on the basis of which comparative studies become genuinely effective. Therefore, a foundation for comparative East Asian philosophy still seems to be missing.

¹ LIN Zhenguo 林鎮國, *Emptiness and Modernity* 空性與現代性 (Taipei: Lixu 立緒, 1999), 36.

² See also Asakura Tomomi, “From the Study of Life to the Phenomenology of Death 生命の學問から死の現象學へ,” *Journal of Death and Life Studies* 死生學研究 (Tokyo: Graduate School of Humanities and Sociology 東京大學大學院人文社會系研究科), 11: 147-172, 2009.

In order to find such a foundation, I must first draw attention to their *dissimilarities*, as the huge gulf between Japanese and Chinese philosophies must be surveyed for the purpose of bridging it.³ First, a sharp difference is immediately detectable in the usage of the term *philosophy* itself. On the one hand, the New Confucians naturally regard themselves as Confucians; they are themselves the great historians of Eastern thought. On the other hand, Kyoto School philosophers find no difficulty in regarding themselves as *philosophers*; their popular image — Zen Buddhists under the disguise of Western philosophy — must be rejected for the moment.⁴ Japanese thinkers tend to use the term *philosophy* (*tetsugaku* 哲學) in a narrower sense, indicating an intellectual activity with the tradition of ancient Greek *philosophia* in the background; and this rigorous usage is now widely accepted in Japanese society.⁵ Accordingly, classical East Asian texts are seldom studied in Japanese departments of philosophy; neither Confucianism nor Buddhism is considered to be “philosophy” in this sense — although these belief systems may inspire a philosopher to develop his own thought, contributing thus to philosophy.⁶

³ On the dissimilarities concerning the attitude toward modernity, see Lin, *Emptiness and Modernity*, 133-139.

⁴ This popular image is indeed severely rejected by Nishida himself. Nishida Kitarō, *Complete Works of Nishida Kitarō* 西田幾多郎全集, 2nd ed. (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten 岩波書店, 1965-66.), 19: 224-225.

⁵ For example, the University of Tokyo was forced to change the name of one of its departments. The Department of Chinese Philosophy 中國哲學研究室 officially changed its name in the 1990s to the Department of Chinese Intellectual Culture 中國思想文化研究室, abandoning the problematic expression *Chinese Philosophy* (although its English name has not yet been altered).

⁶ This point is more fully developed in Asakura Tomomi, “Philosophy and the Traditions of Thought 思想の傳統の中の哲學,” in *Introduction to Philosophy I 哲學への誘い I*, edited by MATSUNAGA Sumio 松永澄夫 and SUZUKI Izumi 鈴木泉 (Tokyo: Tōshindō 東信堂, 2010), 282-324.

This dissimilarity — over the concept of philosophy itself — may explain why communication between philosophers is uncommon in East Asia. Few Japanese philosophers have so far examined New Confucianism.⁷ Their apparent lack of interest, however, may be the result of another type of dissimilarity; there is an often ignored difference between the two schools' philosophical framework, concerning the *status of morality*. It is well known that the New Confucian framework is formulated as *moral-metaphysics* by MOU Zongsan 牟宗三 (1909-95). If this formulation, however, is described with the idea of the primacy of moral reason, such a description will hardly intrigue Japanese philosophers — at least those who are sympathetic to the Kyoto School, because these philosophers, unlike the New Confucians, emphatically distinguish morality and religiosity, expounding the latter's implications in an existentialist manner. It is also well known that the Kyoto school philosophers — ever since NISHIDA Kitarō 西田幾多郎 (1870-1945) — have pursued instead the *religious standpoint* as an absolute auto-critique of reason that is attained through the transcendence of the contradiction of morality and thus regarded more highly than the moral standpoint.⁸

There is yet another reason that discourages Japanese thinkers from reading Mou's texts. It concerns Mou's attitude toward Kant. Whereas Kyoto philosophers at least attempt to *contribute to philosophy* by their own investigations, the keystone in the possible metaphysics that Mou envisions is

⁷ One can object to this claim by raising such studies by SHIMADA Kenji 島田虔次, AZUMA Jūji 吾妻重二 and NAKAMURA Shunya 中村俊也. However honorable they may be, they are not regarded as “philosophers” in the Japanese sense, not even as the researchers of philosophy; instead, they are seen as the researchers of Chinese culture and history.

⁸ This point is further discussed in Asakura Tomomi, “Nishida and Mou Zongsan's Buddhistic Ontology 西田哲學と牟宗三の佛教的存在論,” in *Zen no Kenkyū: The Centennial Anniversary 『善の研究』の百年*, edited by FUJITA Masakatsu 藤田正勝 (Kyoto: Kyoto University Press 京都大學學術出版會, 2011), 282-324.

no more than Kant's primacy of practical reason. Mou's scheme of *moral-metaphysics* — Kant scholars will prefer the Koenigsberger's own expression, the *practico-dogmatic* type — can be approximated, or at least symbolized, by the simple equation “Confucianism = Kant”; furthermore, Mou's interpretation of Buddhism and Taoism is also inseparable from this scheme. In short, Mou appears in Japanese eyes as just another Kantian.

Am I too simplistic to insist that Mou is just another Kantian? Mou is perhaps the most creative philosopher in modern China; yet, his creativity does not seem to counteract his faith in Kant. For example, the “two-door mind (*yixinkaiermen* 一心開二門)” paradigm — one of Mou's key ideas — is no more than a description of Kant's framework, as this Buddhist expression serves to describe the duality of phenomena and noumena. Certainly, Mou interweaves his highly original insights with it; among others, it must be noted that Kant's so-called experience or knowledge is shown to have the conceptualized nature, *parikalpita-svabhāva* (*bianjisuozhixing* 遍計所執性) — a groundbreaking interpretation that affirms attachment as the foundation for scientific knowledge.⁹ Despite such occasional insights, however, Mou's metaphysical scheme hardly presents genuine “philosophical” originality — at least in Japanese eyes.

Perhaps we can reproach the Japanese philosophers' ignorance on this point. But are the contemporary Chinese researchers of New Confucianism better qualified to offer this criticism? In fairness, the latter seldom consult Japanese arguments; unfortunately, the same is true of scholars writing in English. In short, Japanese and Chinese philosophers — together with the Western interpreters of each philosopher — remain unable to find common ground for meaningful dialogue. The gulf between the two East Asian schools indeed seems insurmountable.

⁹ Mou Zongsan, *Nineteen Lectures on Chinese Philosophy* 中國哲學十九講 (Taipei 臺北: Xuesheng Shuju 學生書局, 1983), 271-277.

So here is the initial question again: Is it possible to find a core philosophical argument common to the two schools, or at least to the two philosophers, Nishida Kitarō and Mou Zongsan? This question is closely connected to a much bigger problem, namely: Is it possible to conceive, by synthesizing these two schools, anything like an *East Asian philosophy*? To answer these questions, I will focus attention on their two basic notions: first, Nishida's *basho* 場所; second, Mou's perfect teaching (*yuanjiao* 圓教).

2 Nishida and the Logic of *Basho*

Before explaining the notion of *basho*, I must first give a brief overview of Kyoto School philosophy. This productive school has a number of important philosophers, such as TANABE Hajime 田辺元 (1885-1962), NISHITANI Keiji 西谷啓治 (1900-90), and KŌYAMA Iwao 高山岩男 (1905-93), all of whom show more or less intense interest in Buddhism. However, it is mainly Nishitani who established the prevalent image of this school: the image of Zen practitioners being disguised as philosophers. Such an image, however, must be rejected as an inappropriate illustration, at least for the present purpose, because it is a philosophical argument about the notion of *basho* — itself irrelevant to any East Asian traditional thought — that has inspired the entire development of this school. Therefore, this notion is crucial for explaining their philosophy.

The theory of *basho* — better known as the logic of *basho* — is itself the result of the series of painstaking inquiries developed by the early Nishida. Although his philosophy is often said to be astonishingly consistent throughout his long career, the most important earlier discussion for the present purpose is presented in his 1917 book, *Intuition and Reflection in Self-Awareness* 自覺に於ける直観と反省. This should be said with some emphasis because his earliest discussion on “pure experience” does not explain the notion of *basho*; indeed, the core concept of his successful first

book, *An Inquiry into the Good* 善の研究 (1911) is itself borrowed from William James, and other great names casually mentioned there — from Heraclitus to Wang Yangming — fail to reveal the depth of Nishida's arguments. Therefore, the truly important beginning of Kyoto School philosophy must be witnessed in Nishida's first full-fledged attempt, his 1917 book on the system of self-awareness (*jikakuteki taikai* 自覺的體系). It is this allegedly “failed attempt” that laid the foundation for Nishida's mature philosophy.

Let us not be misled by Nishida's own description of his thought at this stage: *voluntarism*. At first sight, the notion of self-awareness or self-consciousness may remind us again of the influence from certain Western philosophers: the great German “system builders” such as Fichte and Schelling, who consider it as the model for cognitive activities. And the ultimate standpoint considered in the 1917 book is indeed described as *absolute free will* (*zettai jiyuu no ishi* 絶対自由の意志); Nishida seems to conclude that the point of creation, “which generates being from nothingness is... where absolute free will resides and one can come in contact with infinite reality.”¹⁰ It must be noted that Nishida's so-called voluntarism is an answer to the question that is quite different from the one asked in moral metaphysics as his question concerns, as Nishitani righteously emphasized, the *irrational ground* or *non-ground*; against its appearance, the notion of self-awareness has an extremely anti-metaphysical or *existential* character, questioning the standpoint of reason, thus already anticipating the later exploration of the

¹⁰ Nishida, *Complete Works*, 2: 281. The original text is: “無から有を生ずる創造作用の点…そこに絶対自由の意志がある、我々は此処に於て無限の實在に接することができる。” Cf. Nishida Kitarō, *Intuition and Reflection in Self-Consciousness*, trans. Valdo H. Viglielmo with Takeuchi Toshinori and Joseph S. O'Leary (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 141.

religious standpoint that characterizes the Kyoto School.¹¹ Although Nishida never ignores morality, absolute free will is not a moral concept, but an *amoral* notion, so to speak, which cannot be judged as good or bad from a mere moral standpoint; rather, it must be a standpoint of “art and religiosity.”¹² Nishida’s apparent voluntarism is the precursor of *basho* in this sense.

Now, the key concept in this discussion is the act of consciousness. The concept of *act* plays the pivotal role in Nishida’s discussion, from *Intuition and Reflection in Self-Awareness* onward — this term, rendered as *sayō* 作用 in Japanese, is also crucial in Mou’s discussion, as I will show later. This term is commonly used in epistemological investigations, and especially highlighted in the early phenomenology since Edmund Husserl used it as a synonym for *intentional experience* in his *Logische Untersuchungen*. Nishida indeed begins the *basho* essay by referring to this important notion: “Epistemology these days distinguishes three things: object, content, and act, and treats their interrelations.”¹³ At the same time, however, Nishida’s usage of the term *act* must be understood in a much broader context of Western philosophy because Schelling tends to replace Fichte’s *Tathandlung* with *Akt* in his *System of Transcendental Idealism*.¹⁴ Thus, an act of consciousness means the mental activity connecting the elements of cognition, such as

¹¹ Nishitani Keiji, *Collected Works of Nishitani Keiji* 西谷啓治著作集 (Tokyo: Sōbunsha 創文社, 1986-95), 14: 138-139, 143.

¹² Nishida, *Complete Works*, 2: 320.

¹³ Nishida Kitarō, *Place and Dialectic*, trans. John Krummel and Shigenori Nagatomo (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 49. Concerning Husserl, see his *Logische Untersuchungen*, V §13.

¹⁴ Schelling describes transcendental philosophy as follows: “in ordinary cognition the knowing itself (the act of knowing [der Akt des Wissens]) vanishes into the object, in transcendental cognition, on the contrary, the object *as such* vanishes into the act of knowing.” Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, trans. Peter Heath (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1978), 9.

subject, content, and object, and remains inseparable from these elements of cognition, as Nishida argues in a rather neo-Kantian manner:

With the mutual separation of the transcendent object and the field of consciousness-in-general, whereby acts cannot be said to belong to either, we accordingly come to think of the epistemological subject as the unifier of acts.¹⁵

In this sense, the unifying point of acts — transcendental subjectivity — must be seen as the extremity or the *limit*, in the mathematical sense, of the field of consciousness. Absolutely free will is also characterized as the unifier of acts.¹⁶

Yet, the act of consciousness is also inseparable from the consciousness *of* that act.¹⁷ This consciousness or self-awareness *of* an act necessarily means that the act as such is already objectified. Once an act of knowing is isolated and identified, it must be already *objectified as the known*; therefore, “a reflected act is no longer the act itself” (Nishida 1965-66, 2: 316). Not only the cognitive acts themselves but also the knower as the unifying point must be already objectified. Undoubtedly, the true knower is always missed in such a view:

We may conceive the self to be a unifying point that posits knower and known... yet we cannot consider such a unifying point to be the knower; it is instead merely what has already been objectified and known.¹⁸

The self or subject is mirrored again in the field of consciousness. The analysis of act-experience therefore faces a seemingly irresolvable difficulty: the true self cannot be grasped because everything is always already objectified.

¹⁵ Nishida Kitarō, *Place and Dialectic*, 53.

¹⁶ Nishida, *Complete Works*, 2: 316.

¹⁷ Nishida, *Complete Works*, 3: 430.

¹⁸ Nishida, *Complete Works*, 4: 215.

Then, how can the act of consciousness, not to mention the unifier of acts, be grasped correctly? In the groundbreaking essay titled *basho* (1926), Nishida advances recklessly toward that which resides in the background of the act of consciousness. Based on his earlier attempt at explaining the system of self-awareness (which has shown that the concept of pure act as the spontaneity of self-awareness necessarily leads to the idea of *successive and serial development* similar to the dialectical movement), Nishida further distinguishes pure act from its matrix — virtuality or virtual *being*:

Although we may speak of a substanceless activity [*hataraki*] or pure act [*sayō*] in contrast to substantial being, if we eliminate virtuality from the act, it would no longer be an act. [Thus] something like *basho* must be conceived further in the background where such virtual being is established.¹⁹

His exploration into the self-awareness of mental act suddenly transforms its phase, illuminating the infinite background of virtuality, the behind-the-scenes field of consciousness that is no longer objectified in an epistemological manner. And this field is not an object anymore; previously, it was called absolute free will, and Nishida claimed that “we must move from the merely philosophical viewpoint to the religious one, from self-consciousness as a theme of conscious reflection to the world of mystery that lies behind it.”²⁰ It now becomes describable topologically — as a place or *basho*, in which every object is mirrored, seen, and conceived.

Simply put, this is how Nishida turns from *act* to its *basho*. It is clear that the notion of *basho* is, as Nishitani correctly claims, indeed closely connected to that of *act*; and this shift from the standpoint of act to that of *basho* marks the beginning of so-called “Nishida philosophy”; it begins “with the

¹⁹ Nishida, *Complete Works*, 4: 218; *Place and Dialectic*, 56. I altered the English translation, replacing the term *latency* with *virtuality* in order to emphasize the difference from phenomenology.

²⁰ Nishida, *Intuition and Reflection in Self-Consciousness*, 135-136.

emergence of” this idea in the sense that “it provided his thought with a clear and distinctive form,” although “Nishida’s thinking from the start contained an intuition whose uniqueness can hold its own admirably in the company of other leading philosophies.”²¹

There are several alternative expressions for this new notion. On the one hand, Nishida always prefers to describe his new ideas using mathematical explanations: a geometrical expression *enveloping plane* (*hōyōmen* 包容面) clarifies its difference from the unifying *point*, revealing the additional dimensions that must be analyzed.²² On the other hand, Nishida carefully wards off the possible misunderstanding of this notion as a metaphysical “ground”; it does not mean anything substantial, nor an enlarged “I” such as Hegel’s *Geist*. Instead, *Basho* is rather describable as the *non-ground* because it must always be that which *envelops* subjectivity, encompassing and generating one’s own existence. This is what generates the celebrated expression, *basho of absolute nothingness* (*shin no mu no basho* 真の無の場所), which is suitable for describing the “deepest sense of consciousness” being conceived “without any constraint at the root of our will.”²³

Together with these alternatives expressions, the following three points must be emphasized in order to avoid possible misunderstandings. First, the term *basho* should be used mainly in the adjective/adverbial form as *basho-teki* 場所的, in the “topological” sense. Although Nishida himself often uses the noun form, his investigation actually operates in a *topological* manner, revealing the hidden background of subjectivity upon which the latter is mirrored. In a topological investigation, many instances of *basho* are to be identified, analyzed, and systematized, of which the ultimate one must be that of absolute nothingness that is absolutely beyond objectification and

²¹ Nishitani, *Collected Works*, 14: 288. And Nishitani, *Nishida Kitarō*, trans. Seisaku Yamamoto and James W. Heisig (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 67.

²² Nishida, *Complete Works*, 4: 322.

²³ Nishida, *Complete Works*, 4: 224-225.

representation, the enveloping plane that “contains infinite differences.”²⁴ The concept of *basho of absolute nothingness* develops into the *world of historical reality* in his later works; even then, however, his logic remains to be topological as the “topological dialectics” (*basho-teki beshōhō* 場所的辯證法), which is characterized as the manner of thought that allows the singular thing become truly singular.²⁵

Second, Nishida *does not* borrow the term *nothingness* exclusively from the Eastern tradition. His terminology — meaning that which cannot be objectified — comes primarily from the epistemological discussion on *mē-on* by Hermann Cohen; thus, it appears as a purely epistemological concept. Another source comes indeed from vast religious literature, from Western mysticism such as Boehme’s non-ground 無底 to the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*’s “the emergence of all beings from the non-ground 從無住本立一切法,” the expression to which I will return later.²⁶ The latter source influenced the subsequent Kyoto philosophers, among whom Nishitani admittedly went the furthest by unfolding every implication of Nishida’s inspiration in a sophisticatedly religious manner; he uses colorful expressions taken from the vast tradition of both Western philosophy and Zen Buddhism, and his so-called “standpoint of emptiness” is to be endowed with the “post-philosophical” descriptions — the result is the prevalent image of the Kyoto School.²⁷ However, Nishida’s thought itself is — unlike Mou’s

²⁴ Nishitani, *Collected Works*, 14: 283.

²⁵ Although Krummel translates *kobutsu* 個物 as *individual*, Nishida uses this term in order to study singularity, that is opposed to both particularity and universality. Cf. *Place and Dialectic*, 153. Concerning the problem of singularity in the Kyoto School, also see Asakura Tomomi, *Notion and Singularity 概念と個別性* (Tokyo: Tōshindō 東信堂, 2012), 268-269.

²⁶ Nishida, *Complete Works*, 2: 274; 283.

²⁷ Cf. Asakura Tomomi, “East Asian Philosophy of Awakening 「覚」をめぐる東アジア哲学,” *Risō 理想* (Tokyo: Risōsha 理想社), 689: 132-143, 2012.

thinking style — considerably free from the East Asian belief systems because of its epistemological context.

From these remarks, another point is confirmed: Kyoto School philosophy has a profoundly *amoral* character. The consideration of the irrational ground or non-ground is already surpassing (without ignoring) the horizon of morality. *Basho* is revealed, as Nishida clearly states, through “the transcendence of the contradiction of will.”²⁸ And the philosophies of each Kyoto philosopher can be distinguished by each one’s different manner for explaining this transcendence or the transition from the moral to the amoral or religious, a characteristic that also differentiates them from the phenomenological movement. This concludes the brief overview of Kyoto School philosophy.

3 Mou Zongsan on Perfect Teaching

Then, what is the common philosophical question shared by Nishida and Mou Zongsan? I have already shown that the former does not share the metaphysical scheme of the latter’s moral standpoint. It seems impossible to find a theory common to the two — unless we consider Mou’s non-metaphysical, if not non-Confucian, aspect. Indeed, this prominent modern Confucian is also a great interpreter of Buddhism, especially of the problem of doctrinal classification — a problem that is itself important in a comparative study of Mou and the Kyoto School philosopher Kōyama.²⁹ For the present purpose, I will focus attention on how Mou departs from the Kantian framework in his interpretation of the notion of *perfect teaching*.

Mou shows in remarkable depth why perfect teaching is called perfect. Simply put, it is because Tiantai’s position illuminates a kind of plane that

²⁸ Nishida, *Complete Works*, 4: 249; *Place and Dialectic*, 76.

²⁹ Cf. Asakura Tomomi, “Nihilism, Absolute Critique, and Doctrinal Taxonomy ニヒリズム・絶対批判・教相判釋,” *Journal of Philosophy* 哲學雜誌 (Tokyo: Yūhikaku 有斐閣), 123: 125-143, 2008.

enfolds — or envelops — all the other moments or entities. Mou characterizes it as *ontological* perfection, leading to the expression, *Buddhistic ontology*. This discussion, seemingly irrelevant to transcendental philosophy, is nonetheless inseparable from the epistemological investigation on consciousness and the knowing I, just as Nishida's topological inquiry is. To see how this enigmatic view is obtained, it is necessary again to observe the concept of *act*.

Mou frequently uses the epistemological concept of mental act — just as Nishida did — under the Chinese term *zuoyong* 作用. Readers may easily be misled, for the standard translation of phenomenology is not the same; it is usually rendered as *huodong* 活動, and Mou himself also uses the term *huodong* for *act* (*Actus*) and *gongneng* 功能 for *function* (*Funktion*) in his translation of Kant's *First Critique*. Conversely, the term *zuoyong* is not endowed with such a rigorous equivalent, allowing multiple interpretation. Nonetheless, it is this Chinese word that Mou employs in his exploration of the cognitive act of consciousness, such as in the phrase *sixiang zhi zuoyong* 思想之作用 explaining the concept of function, or in the phrase *jueding zuoyong* 決定作用 meaning “the determinant” (*das Bestimmende*).³⁰ Therefore, *zuoyong* means the act of consciousness at least in an epistemological context.

It must be noted that Mou's understanding of Buddhism deepens through his interpretation of Kant's philosophy. Moreover, the doctrine of emptiness is “clearly epistemological in character, with a practical and soteriological purpose behind it.”³¹ Now, Mou does not hesitate to characterize the Buddhist

³⁰ Cf. Mou Zongsan (trans.), *Critique of Pure Reason* 純粹理性之批判 (Taipei: Xuesheng Shuju 學生書局, 1981), 198; 315.

³¹ Ng Yu-Kwan, *T'ien-T'ai Buddhism and Early Mādhyamika* (University of Hawaii Press, 1993), 28. It must also be noted that that Mou develops his interpretation of the non-ground through the concept of intellectual intuition. Mou Zongsan, *Intellectual Intuition and*

concept *prajñā* as a kind of *zuoyong*; an important usage that would remain largely unintelligible without correctly understanding this context. Although the term *zuoyong* is indeed equivocal, here its epistemological sense is clear because the *prajñā* wisdom is indeed an act of consciousness: the pure act as *prajñā*, being free from attachment unlike all the other cognitive acts, illuminates reality intuitively without actually determining any particular aspect of the “object” as such. The standpoint of emptiness is therefore called the perfection of act or the actional perfection (*zuoyongde yuan* 作用的圓).³²

Based on this observation, Mou attempts to go further, illuminating an additional dimension in the act of *prajñā*. The standpoint of emptiness can only be characterized negatively because cognition without determination signifies contradiction, even if it can actually reveal the true aspect of reality; as Ng Yu-Kwan claims, “emptiness as the Truth is negative,” whereas “the Truth should be spoken of in such positive terms as No-emptiness.”³³ Behind all the representations and cognitive acts, however, another type of transcendence is to be revealed as a kind of enveloping or enfolding that contains all the entities positively and *vertically*, as Mou explains:

The intellectual act of lively *prajñā* enfolds all the entities in the way that makes it possible for them to realize themselves. Yet this enveloping is nothing

Chinese Philosophy 智的直覺與中國哲學 (Taipei: Taiwan Shangwu Yinshuguan 台灣商務印書館, 1971), 216-325.

³² Mou Zongsan, *Phenomenon and Thing-in-itself* 現象與物自身 (Taipei: Xuesheng Shuju 學生書局, 1990), 404. Concerning this characterization, Jason Clower mentions “Mou’s often-difficult terminology,” connecting it with the expression “wondrous functioning of *prajñā*.” I admit that this term can mean function or meritorious function depending on the context, except for the specific technical usage discussed above. See Jason Clower, *The Unlikely Buddhologist: Tiantai Buddhism in Mou Zongsan’s New Confucianism* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishing, 2010), 83-84.

³³ This reflects Tiantai’s attitude toward the Mādhyamika doctrine or the standpoint of emptiness. Ng, *T’ien-T’ai Buddhism and Early Mādhyamika*, 43-44.

but the actional and horizontal enfolding (*shuipingde juzu* 水平的具足); it is still not the ontological and vertical one (*shushingde juzu* 豎生的具足).³⁴

Obviously, such an enfolding is no longer comprehensible as a type of mental action; nor is it the “ground” of subjectivity because it is not a substance. That which enfolds all the entities in this dimension immanently will become describable only with the idea of the non-ground — once again, *the emergence of all beings from the non-ground*. In addition to the actional perfection of emptiness, the Tiantai School arrives at the ontological perfection (*cunyoulunde yuan* 存有論的圓), which means the horizontal enfolding of all acts.

And Mou claims that this is the Buddhist mode of the question of being, first posed by the Tiantai School: “the reason why Tiantai perfect teaching is called perfect must be found [...] in the *question of being* (*cunzai wenti* 存在問題) of all the entities.”³⁵ In this ontological question, Mou himself turns from the standpoint of the cognitive act to that of ontological investigation that attempts to embrace all the entities immanently; in other words, from the stratum of act (*zuoyongceng* 作用層) to that of being (*cunyouceng* 存有層).³⁶

In short, Mou discovers, beyond the actional perfection of emptiness, a new dimension that is exclusive to perfect teaching: the ontological perfection. This means a shift from the standpoint of act to that which enfolds the former. Obviously, this transition is fundamentally similar to the one I have mentioned above: Nishida’s topological transcendence from act to *basho*, which is the phase transition from the epistemological standpoint to the ontological

³⁴ Mou, *Phenomenon and Thing-in-itself*, 404.

³⁵ Mou, *Nineteen Lectures on Chinese Philosophy*, 358.

³⁶ Mou Zongsan, *On the Perfect Good* 圓善論 (Taipei: Xuesheng Shuju 學生書局, 1985), 330. However, the “stratum of being” is seen as exclusive to Confucianism, a point which I am unable to discuss further here.

question. It also follows that what Mou describes as the *vertical* or *ontological* corresponds to the *topological* in Nishida's thought — a significant agreement that will serve as the bedrock for the comparative studies of the two philosophers.

Before making this conclusion, however, I must discuss Mou's case a little more fully: namely, the alleged deviation from moral-metaphysics. At least, it is clear that Mou's interpretation of perfect teaching cannot be contained in his metaphysical scheme and its "two-door mind" paradigm.³⁷ One of the reasons is that perfect teaching represents a non-moral and religious worldview. The best account for this amoral character is found in the Tiantai-Huayan antagonism, as explained by Mou. According to Tiantai's argument, the Huayan School has the tendency to ignore the lower worlds and resort instead to the transcendent basis. This characterization — *yuanli duanjiu* 緣理斷九 — illustrates the same type of situation that is seen in transcendental idealism that avoids the question of evil. The Tiantai School, on the other hand, pursues the problem of evil to the limit, for the sake of radical immanence; to use Mou's superb phrase, perfect awakening means the becoming of Buddha in the *immediacy* with Hell, Hungry Ghost, and Animality. It has indeed revealed the univocal being of all existent entities by illuminating one's own existence through the immediacy with the evil worlds in a paradoxical identity — or in infinite difference — to the point that evil immediately *is* Buddha (*mojie jifo* 魔界即佛).³⁸ Although there is no space to discuss whether Mou's interpretation of doctrinal classification is valid or

³⁷ See Asakura Tomomi, "On Buddhistic Ontology: A Comparative Study of Mou Zongsan and Kyoto School Philosophy," *Philosophy East and West*, 61.4: 648-656; and Wing-Cheuk Chan, "On Mou Zongsan's Hermeneutic Application of Buddhism," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 38.2: 186, 2011.

³⁸ Mou, *Nineteen Lectures on Chinese Philosophy*, 363; 383. And also: Mou Zongsan, *Buddha-nature and Prajñā* 佛性與般若 (Taipei: Xuesheng Shuju 學生書局, 1977), 779.

not, it is clear how far his idea of perfect teaching deviates from moral-metaphysics in its non-moral character that is beyond good and evil.

This amoral or religious character is inseparable from the way perfect teaching poses the ontological question. As is already discussed in relation to the ontological perfection, radical immanence is crucial for Tiantai Buddhism; “Chih-i’s criticism of the Mādhyamika Middle Way,” Ng Yu-kwan claims, “points out that it is not dynamic and immanent... consequently, it tends to be interpreted as transcendent of this world.”³⁹ And radical immanence necessarily leads to the irrational ground or non-ground, which affirms the being of evil and hell, a standpoint that remains largely unintelligible in the framework of moral-metaphysics. Mou himself admits that the idea of non-ground or emergence from the non-ground brought a breakthrough in his philosophical development.⁴⁰

This development — the alleged deviation from moral-metaphysics — necessarily brings a tension to Mou’s otherwise stable metaphysical framework, a tension that finally forced him to apply the idea of perfect teaching to Taoism and Confucianism. Therefore, he comes to understand the latter’s profoundly religious character in his theory of the *maturation of vertical system*, to which the final chapter of *Nineteen Lectures on Chinese Philosophy* (and *On the Perfect Good* as well) is dedicated. Yet, to inquire further into the matter would lead us into a discussion that is of no immediate relevance to our present topic.

³⁹ Ng, *T'ien-T'ai Buddhism and Early Mādhyamika*, 60.

⁴⁰ Mou, *Buddha-nature and Prajñā*, 1033. It is not unusual to see this amoral character or the problem of evil in Tiantai Buddhism; for example, Andō Toshio clarifies to what extent the notion of *xing-e* 性惡 is essential to perfect teaching. See Andō Toshio 安藤俊雄, *Tendai Shōgu Shisō-ron* 天台性具思想論 (Kyoto: Hōzōkan 法藏館, 1953), 63-74.

4 The Onto-topological Constitution of East Asian Philosophy

In spite of the brevity of the discussion, the above consideration necessarily leads us to understand that Mou's interpretation of perfect teaching presents indeed the same type of argument that is seen in Nishida's logic of *basho*. And my aim here is just to show this significant agreement, of which the most important common features are summarized as follows:

First, both philosophers explore the difference between the act of consciousness and being; in other words, they illuminate the phase transition from act to its vertical enfolding. Nishida's topological transcendence and Mou's ontological turn can be synthesized as the *onto-topological* shift. The difference between the two is negligible except for the fact that Nishida more consciously pursues this manner of thought by differentiating himself from phenomenology without resorting to the intellectual history of East Asia.

Second, the onto-topological question leads to the irrational or paradoxical ground — rather, the non-ground, or the *basho of absolute nothingness*, an existential standpoint that is radically different from that of transcendental idealism. This aspect seems more or less equally recognized and emphasized in the logic of *basho* and perfect teaching, respectively, with their reference to the Buddhist expression: *the emergence of all beings from the non-ground*.

Third, both philosophers reveal the amoral or religious character of philosophy, which affirms even the being of evil and hell in the univocity of being — a position that establishes itself on the paradoxical non-ground. This point is clearly recognized by the Kyoto School philosophers, but more explicitly described by the otherwise moralistic Confucian philosopher in his interpretation of perfect teaching, although a problem remains in the latter's final application of this insight to Confucianism.

Although I am fully aware that the above delineation of the two philosophers — and the list of common features — are considerably insufficient, these common features indeed constitute the first principle for the comparison of these philosophies since the comparative method becomes effective once a common philosophical foundation is established, by which differences are measured. Nishida's logic of *basho* and Mou's perfect teaching supplement and clarify each other with their different approaches: if one tends to describe an idea with an intuitive description, the other develops the argumentative details; if one ignores the context in which the idea should be located, the other relocates it in a more adequate manner. In short, many unclear points will be clarified by such a comparative investigation based on the principle of the onto-topological constitution of philosophy. Furthermore, such a comparative approach serves as the bedrock for the synthesis of these two philosophies, which will eventually make it possible to unify modern Japanese and Chinese philosophies as *East Asian philosophy*.

One question then arises: How much does the onto-topological constitution of East Asian philosophy owe to the traditional belief systems? Although the philosophical logic of *basho* is far less relevant to the Buddhist doctrines than usually expected, Nishida later came to emphasize that his philosophy indeed reflects the Eastern spirit, namely the “radicalization of subjectivity that eventually leads to the objective world.”⁴¹ On the other hand, it is also well known that Mou applies the notion of perfect teaching to Confucianism, which means, as the recent studies by CHAN Wing-Cheuk 陳榮灼 suggest, that the typological distinction *within* Confucianism far exceeds the difference between Confucianism and Buddhism.⁴² Does this necessarily mean that this

⁴¹ Nishida, *Complete Works*, 12: 364-365.

⁴² Chan Wing-Cheuk, “Mou Zongsan and Martin Heidegger 牟宗三與海德格,” *National Central University Journal of Humanities* 中央大學人文學報, 51: 1-23, 2012; and “A New Investigation of Mencius' Philosophy 孟子哲學新探,” *Journal for Contemporary Studies of*

type of thought originates from the essence of the Eastern tradition — or merely reflects one aspect among others? Much still remains to be done, and I leave the matter open.

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