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Nothingness, place and encompassing

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Abstract

The following paper is an endeavor to analyze and clarify some concepts, namely: *basho* (Japanese word), *Khôra* (Greek) and the encompassing (das *Ungreifende*, in German). Moreover, this reflection will face up one challenge: the complexity to understand the concepts named, due to its specificity. Philosophy must assume this test: consider concepts that challenge the very notion of concept. This is not a mere episode in the history of philosophy, but something that deserves our attention.

Keywords

Basho, *Khôra*, *encompassing*, Nishida Kitarô, Plato, Karl Jaspers, place, nothingness.

“No man of intelligence will venture to express his philosophical views in language, especially not in language that is unchangeable, which is true of that which is set down in written characters.”

Plato, *The seventh letter* 342 c – 343 a

Introduction

There is a conceptual thread gathering the philosophy of Plato, Nishida Kitarô and Karl Jaspers. In all the mentioned authors we find this “third kind” (Plato) which is not possible to fully understand with reason or determine it clearly. For us, this is one overlooked feature in the history of the philosophy, similar to the notion of sublime in the aesthetic realm. This “third kind” – the Greek *Khôra*, like Plato says -, the absolute nothing according to Nishida, the encompassing in Jaspers’ theory, the horizon of horizons, is the other side of the philosophy that we should scrutinize from east to west.

The zen tradition, inherited and practiced by Nishida, is not oblivious

to the absolute nothingness. However what is extraordinary is that notion involves and produces an active attitude; impossible to substantiate or to determine, rather escapes any possible rationality in favor of an intuition. The religiosity usually attributed to Nishida and Jasper's transcendence, when estimating the leap from immanence to transcendence, must be understood as a place (*basho*) where everything becomes related and where everything is - because every being and everything is what it is, is in some place, according to Parmenides' lesson.

Here it is the other side of the philosophy history capable to rub the unspeakable. We must remember, at purpose, the anecdote told by Aristotle regarding Heraclitus, when he was receiving his guests, for their great astonishment, in a humble place like his kitchen. He tried to calm them down by saying that "gods also live here". It is in the simplest places where gods inhabit. And it is in the absolute nothing, the relation, the place, in the encompassing, where they live in. Regarding this, we could also remember Eckhart and his conception of godhead¹.

1. Basho

We must consider the growing interest about Nishida Kitaró's philosophy. Since 1980, works published in French language, translations and versions of Nishida's works have multiplied, as the reflections concerning Kyoto school. Bernard Stevens, Jacynthe Tremblay or Michel Palisser are, among others, philosophers who have translated, organized meetings and written reviews about the Japanese philosopher.²

When I began to read Nishida Kitaró, one of his most quoted words were in the preface of a work entitled *Intelligibility and the Philosophy of Nothingness: Three Philosophical Essays* (1958): "I have always been a miner of ore; I have never managed to refine it". This means a lot about Nishida's philosophical inquiry.

In his first book, *An Inquiry into the Good* (1911), Nishida is interested

1. Ueda Shizuteru writes (In "Nothingness in Meister Eckhart and Zen Buddhism with Particular Reference to the Borderlands of Philosophy and Theology," in *Transzendenz und Immanenz: Philosophie und Theologie in der veränderten Welt*, ed. D. Papenfuss and J. Söring (Berlin, 1977), trans. James W. Heisig). "In his exposition of the gospel passage on Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38), Eckhart sees a completeness in Martha at work in the kitchen to take care of the guests that is lacking in Mary who sits at the feet of Jesus and listens to what he has to say, thus inverting the usual interpretation of the story. Martha toils away in the kitchen. In her, the return to the everyday reality of the world is at the same time the real achievement of a breakthrough beyond God to the nothingness of the godhead. For Eckhart, God is present as the nothingness he is in his essence in and as Martha at work in the kitchen. He points the way to overcoming the so-called *unio mystica* and to arriving at a non-religious religiosity."

2. As far as we know, there are no studies about Nishida philosophy in our country, a gap that we must overcome.

in *pure experience*. This is a notion which has its roots in William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. In fact, we know how the Japanese philosopher was influenced in his youth and later on by western philosophers. However, in his first work - well known in Japan and with great influence in others Japanese philosophers - Nishida interprets the reality beyond subject-object dualism. The pure experience is a direct experience. We can say that what matters is not the subject that has the experience but rather that *experience occurs in the subject*. So, Cheung Ching-yuen writes in "The Potential and Limits of Nishida Kitarō's Philosophy", that "Nishida's philosophy of pure experience can be understood as a third position beyond intellectualism and voluntarism"³. As we will see, the German philosopher Karl Jaspers aims to overcome the split between subject and object.

Cheung tries to read Nishida in the light of phenomenology. For him, Nishida's philosophical core is phenomenology, understood like "a way of going back to the most fundamental way of seeing"⁴. And he adds that "Nishida's notion of pure experience is phenomenological in a certain sense, especially in the opposition to philosophical dualism."⁵

However, one of the challenges that Nishida's philosophy must face up is the allegation that his reflection is obscure, illogical and has nothing to do with real philosophy⁶. Nevertheless, we must recognize that Nishida was very interested about what we can denominate as religiosity. Indeed, his aim is not religion, like we generally understand it, but something broader and surely more important to him. Like morals and aesthetics, the thought of Nishida has the purpose to reflect about the "absolute nothingness", that is, something unexplained that involve the world, the being and the subject, in order to achieve the "absolute dialectic of contradictory".

We can only understand these ideas clearly if we understand not only

3. "The Potential and Limits of Nishida Kitarō's Philosophy". In Lam Wing-keung and Cheung Ching-yuen, eds., *Frontiers of Japanese Philosophy 4: Facing the Twenty-First Century*, Nagoya: Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, 2009, p. 166.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 167.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 168. Can we talk about Nishida's phenomenology? The familiarity with phenomenology is a evidence for Agustín Jacinto Zavala (in: "El Encuentro de Nishida Kitarō con a fenomenología: Husserl, Heidegger y Jaspers", *Azafra. Rev. Filosofía*, 7, 2005, pp. 205-224). In fact, Nishida's disciples know Husserl and Heidegger, and translate phenomenological books in Japanese. Moreover, Nishida knows Jaspers' books, namely the notion of encompassing. Writes Zavala about the relationship between Husserl and Jaspers: "Aquí Nishida no es totalmente consistente, ya que dice que el «abarcante, *das Umgreifende*, debe tener el significado de algo que es histórico espacial» (XI: 182), con lo que se pierde la diferencia entre Husserl y Jaspers que acababa de señalar. Añade que «pensar lo «abarcante» es idéntico a la acción interior incesante [por la que] el yo se ilumina a sí mismo», es decir, es el pensamiento de la «inseparabilidad entre el «yo soy» [*watakushiga arujy* el «yo existo»» (XI: 182).

6. Joseph S.O'Leary, in his review of Robert E. Carter book, *The Nothingness Beyond God: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Nishida Kitarō*, 1997 [(in *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* (29/1-2)] defends that we find a "murky writer" in Nishida's texts "stringing out an argumentation that is unsatisfactory in terms of logical development and lucid articulation (p. 166).

the religious or moral concepts, but also the principle of aesthetics. As an example one must ask how beauty is understood by Nishida. In 1900 he wrote a little essay about this subject and emphasized the sense of *mu-ga*, a Japanese word that means “no-I”, “out of oneself”. The beauty is something that is beyond oneself, transcends the self. The lecture of Kant, particularly *The Critique of Judgment*, is an inspiration for Nishida. Beauty is disinterested, a form of living: *mu-ga*. In that way, beauty is a direct experience, something intuitive, free of the logic and the rational. Nishida praises the intuitive truth, something that connects us to reality. However, he says that Hamlet, the hero of Shakespeare, is a kind of truth, someone that we can sympathize with. But how can we reconcile the *mu-ga*, out of ourselves, with *our* feelings? Can we simultaneously be ourselves and not ourselves? Isn’t there a contradiction? To us, Nishida says that beauty presupposes that we are out, that is, we feel intuitively the beauty, disinterested, disconnected from ourselves⁷.

What we say about aesthetics is not so different from what we think about religious or even moral. The *mu-ga* is the key to understand that we must perceive ourselves not as an ego but in another way. Nishida is not confident about logical truth; he prefers the intuitive truth, near to what is really important in life. In that spirit, we can understand the statement: “if something is uniquely designed by the intellect, is not God”⁸.

Another feature of Nishida’s philosophy is what he named as dialectic. Surely there is Hegel’s influence, but in the Japanese philosopher the term had a much wider scope. The “identity completely contradictory” means that there is an identity between the opposites, this is, between inside and outside, the ego and the world, time and space, subjective and objective, and so on. Nishida writes:

Awareness of our self can’t take place in an I closed in itself. Consciousness is only possible when the self, surpassing himself, faces another I. When we say that we are conscious is because the self have surpassed himself.⁹

7. See “Una Explicación sobre la Belleza”, in *Pensar desde la Nada. Ensayos de Filosofía Oriental*. Trad. Juan Masía y Juan Haidar, Salamanca: Ediciones Sígueme, 2006. There is a growing reflection about art and morality in Nishida’s philosophy. Britta Stadelmann Boutry, *Nishida Kitarô (1870-1945) à travers ses lectures de Fiedler et de Kant dans son texte Art et morale (Geijutsu to dôtoku) de 1923*. Thèse de doctorat, présentée (en octobre 2002) et soutenue (le 28 avril 2003) à l’Université de Genève (on line), is a good example of this. We may quote a piece of Boutry’s work: “Ainsi nous invitons notre lecteur à deux voyages : l’un vers la théorie de la création artistique pour laquelle Nishida s’inspire de Fiedler, et l’autre vers la théorie du beau - sous forme de jugement du goût - pour laquelle Nishida retourne à Kant. La question est de savoir comment Nishida concilie la divergence de ces deux théories. Comment il ramène le beau dans l’immanence, d’une part, et comment, d’autre part, il rattache la création corporelle à une dimension transcendante”.

8. See “En la lógica de la Nada y la cosmovisión religiosa, in *Pensar desde la Nada. Ensayos de Filosofía Oriental, op., cit.*, p. 24. “Si algo es concebido exclusivamente por el intelecto, no es Dios”).

9. *Ibid.*, p. 29: “La consciência de nuestro yo no puede tener lugar en un yo cerrado sobre si. La consciência tan sólo es posible quando el yo, superándose a si mesmo, se enfrenta a outro. Quando philosophy@LISBON

Our *ego* is then a temporal determination, meaning that each one of us lives in an absolute present, what is completely contradictory. Our ego has past and future, two distinct moments *in the present*. Hence, our life is a contradictory determination.

Another important notion in Nishida's philosophy is *zettai mu*. Boutry quotes this term, disagreeing with the version of Yo – *absolute nothingness* – from the French translation *rien absolut* or *néant absolut* which not a good one (cf. pp. 14-15). To underline the importance of that term, Boutry also says that “Nishida conceives it like the infinite possibility of creating all the beings.”

For others, like Yasuo Yuasa, the “nothing” or “nothingness” is which is related to the Buddhist *satori*, that is, the experience of emptiness *sunyata* in Mahayana Buddhism”¹⁰. For Yuasa, the nothingness must be understood through the light of Kantian philosophy, namely the concept of “consciousness-in-general” – the concept of transcendental.

In this inspection about Nishida's philosophy, we must, therefore, concentrate ourselves in *basho*, a fundamental concept in Nishida's thought. How can we translate it? The French translations prefer “lieu” (place) and articulate this notion with “auto-éveil” (*jikaku*; self-awakening). As we will see, the *place* can be understood as *self-awakening*.¹¹ However, the difficulty to understand this concept, invites us to question it at the light of western thought. In order to do that we must deepen the notion of *basho*, and compare it with the platonic *khôra* and the *encompassing* (das *Umgreifen-de*) of Karl Jaspers.¹² Our aim is to show the conceptual thread that bounds different cultures, times and philosophies.

Jacynthe Tremblay thinks *basho* is similar to the Russian traditional dolls, *matryoshkas*. The dolls enchain in one another, which signifies that

decimos que tenemos consciencia, es porque el yo ya se ha superado a sí mismo.”

10. Cf., Yasuo Yuasa, *The Body: Toward an Eastern Mind-body Theory* SUNY Series in Buddhist Studies; Kasulis, Thomas P. publisher: State University of New York Press, 1987.

11. About self-awakening, see Jacynthe Tremblay, *Introduction à la philosophie de Nishida*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2007, p. 25. See also: Jacynthe Tremblay: “Le testament philosophique de Nishida Kitarô < The philosophical testament of Nishida Kitarô >”, Centre d'études sur l'Asie de l'Est, Université de Montréal (Canada) ; Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, Université Nanzan (Japon) , 2ème Congrès du Réseau Asie / 2nd Congress of Réseau Asie <Asia Network> ,28-29-30 sept. 2005, Paris. To Tremblay: “Nishida constate qu'il n'est pas possible d'élucider un fait intérieur, en l'occurrence l'auto-éveil, à partir d'un fait extérieur. C'est plutôt le second qui devrait être éclairci à partir du premier. Si la véritable religion ne peut être fondée sur de simples croyances, c'est que ces dernières sont des faits d'ordre extérieur. Le fait intérieur que recherche Nishida en est un qu'il est impossible de révoquer en doute, à savoir l'auto-éveil découvert par Augustin et réinterprété par Nishida.”

12. Says Rolf Elberfeld and Jean-Pierre Deschepper, «Lieu». Nishida, Derrida”, IN: *Revue Philosophique de Louvain*. Quatrième série, Tome 92, N°4, 1994, pp. 474-494. p. 482: “Comme on l'a montré, la pensée du «voir» chez Plotin, de la «khôra» chez Platon et de l'«hypokeimenon» chez Aristote interviennent tant qu'éléments essentiels dans la pensée du «lieu» chez Nishida.

there are dolls that involve others. In the same way there is the continent and the tenor, but also, a set of concepts like relation, place, space and others. *Basho* is like the greatest doll which involves and enchases others. Everything is in relation with everything; although *basho* signifies *zettai mu*, the *absolute nothingness*, precisely what is less understood by the mind. The notion of *basho* could create a new vision of religiosity. The consciousness, the history but also the religiosity deserves a new thinking. But what is the relation between that concept and the platonic *Khôra* and the notion of *encompassing* in the Jasper's philosophy of existence?

2. Khôra and encompassing

Let us now see the *Timaeus*.

Currently there are stories within stories in Plato's books. *Timaeus* is an example: like the Russian dolls applied to the order of speeches. A story is fit into another story and that goes on successively. In the *Timaeus*, Sócrates listens to part of Crítias' story concerning the citizens of the old times. He is telling what he heard from his grandfather, who in his turn told him what he had heard from his own father, Drópides, Crítias' great-grandfather, on the other hand, told what he had heard from Sólon, one of the seven scholars, a relative and Drópides' friend.

The series of stories do not finish here: Sólon himself listened to these mysterious stories concerning the origin of the first citizens from the mouth of an Egyptian priest, the same that starts saying that the Greeks "are all young in the soul", therefore they ignore the first impressions without taking in consideration the history of the peoples and the fact that "men to have been and will continue to be destroyed of many and varied ways" (22 c).

It is this succession of stories, that supports the narrative and give it likelihood and the deserved solidity, that prepares the speech of *Timaeus* (27), an expert in astronomy and someone who can speak wisely about the genesis of the orderly word (the cosmos) and about the nature of man. It is a "complete" speech, from the order of the world to the nature of man, without forgetting that this speech is just a conversation between friends, to celebrate of the Panatheneias, in honor of the Athena goddess. If initially the debate was about the organization of politics and other similar subjects, the Plato's book gives account of other stories.

In fact, the speech of *Timaeus*, the main character, at the beginning tends to care of one epistemological issue: "What is that which always is and has no becoming; and what is that which is always becoming and never is" (cf., 27 d - 28). If the first is proper to reason, the second is one attribute of opinion, that is, something proper to sensations. Therefore, even

before making his speech, he intends to establish the epistemological coordinates that support it. However, this commanded world is “an image of something”, which means that it is inconceivable that this world had been produced without paradigms. It implies that it is a difficult task to discover the father and producer of this world, even so “a time discovered”, is “impossible to say of it to all people” (28 c). “This sky is and will be the only one of its species” (31 b). Considering that “infinite skies” cannot exist, Timaeus defends that there is a decision on the part of the demiurge in making only one sky, therefore there is only one paradigm in accordance with that creation. This single sky contains or involves all the things.

We must emphasize the insistent idea in Plato’s writings that the soul *involves* the visible. We know the impossibility of the creation *ex nihilo*, that is, in accordance to Plato a demiurge does not create the cosmos out of nothing. If so, it was the very idea of creation that would lose its direction. In fact, for Plato the creation of the cosmos alone is justified from the moment when already something existed, what means that the creation must be understood as an order of the previous data, otherwise to create something from nothing would be unintelligible. It is in this picture that enters the notion of soul as something that involves the visible one. We can say that the “poetical tone” of the *Timaeus*? appeals very often to the encompassing, is the invisible one, able to cover or involve the visible one. Sky and time are created jointly. Thus the time is the image of the eternity and it only exists to justify the movements of the cosmos.

The mysterious third kind that appears in the *Timaeus* aims to give “likelihood” a conclusion that explains the beginning of the commanded world. This third kind - different of the paradigmatic forms, that are intelligible and perpetual, but also different from the ephemeral and visible that imitates the paradigms – we can say that this third kind is for Plato something that is “*difficult of explanation and dimly seen*” (49). “What nature are we to attribute to this new kind of being? We reply, that it is the receptacle, and in a manner the nurse, of all generation. I have spoken the truth; but I must express myself in clearer language, and this will be an arduous task for many reasons” (49). And further on (52 b), says Plato that the third kind is *Khôra*: “And there is a third nature, which is space (*Khôra*), and is eternal, and admits not of destruction and provides a home for all created things, and is apprehended without the help of sense, by a kind of spurious reason, and is hardly real; which we beholding as in a dream, say of all existence that it must of necessity be in some place and occupy a space, but that what is neither in heaven nor in earth has no existence. Of these and other things of the same kind, relating to the true and waking reality of nature, we have only this dreamlike sense, and we are unable to cast off sleep and determine the truth about them.”

To Jacques Derrida¹³, what Plato writes about *Khôra* is impossible to clarify completely. The concept is a challenge to the logic of contradiction – the “logic of *logos*”. Sometimes, says Derrida is “this or that, or neither this nor that”. To Derrida, if the *Khôra* is a third kind, than it is not neither myth nor logos. It is impossible to translate the word because its meaning is not sensible neither intelligible. With *Khôra* we have, in western thought, something very similar to *basho*, another untranslatable concept.

To Karl Jaspers¹⁴ “whatever becomes an object for me is always a *determinate* being among others and only a *mode* of being.” And further on, he continues: “No know being is *being itself*”. To the existentialist philosopher there is, in the course of our growing knowledge, something that seems to recede for us –and it is this being that we call *encompassing*. Moreover the encompassing is not the horizon of our knowledge but rather the source “from which all new horizons emerge, without itself ever being visible even as a horizon”. The main thing is that for Jaspers the encompassing never becomes an object – it never appears directly to us. It may actually appear in two modes: The encompassing in which being itself appears is called the world and the “encompassing that I am and that we are is called consciousness in general.”

Beyond the split between subject and object, there is the encompassing. It is in fact the widest range of the possible. For Jaspers we always live and think within a horizon, “but the very fact that it is a horizon indicates something further which surrounds the given horizon. From this situation arises the question about the encompassing”¹⁵. If the encompassing is not a horizon, each being has its meaning because emerges from it. The encompassing never appears as an experience, yet everything is possible because there is encompassing. This means that I am genuinely myself when I am the vehicle to transcendence: “without existenz the meaning of transcendence is lost”.

And Jaspers also wrote: “The encompassing preserves my freedom against know ability. But if I take de content of knowledge already to be reality itself, that which is known leads me, so to speak, along a detour by-passing reality”¹⁶ “. Lastly, we underline that the encompassing is something that indicates the whole and embrace all things. Gerhard Knauss refers de Anaximander’s *apeiron* (infinite/undetermined), and writes that “Anaximander thought of it in the manner of a encompassing of all the elemental

13. Jacques Derrida, *Khôra*, Paris, Galileu, 1993.

14. Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy of existence*, translation and introduction by R.F.Grabau, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, p. 17.

15. Karl Jaspers, *Reason and Existenz*, The Noonday Press, 1957, p. 52. *Reason and Existenz*, a series of lectures delivered at Groningen, are the first publication using the concept of encompassing.

16. Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy of existence*, *op., cit.*, p. 23.

materials contained in it”¹⁷. In other opportunity, we must analyze the importance of the notion of *Idea* (in Plato and Kantian terms) and its affinity with totality. The encompassing is *apeiron*, idea, the whole. Nevertheless, we must not forget the significance of the notion of existence in Kierkegaard and Nietzsche.

Conclusion

Like we said in the introduction, there is a link between *basho*, *Khôra* and encompassing. Nothing, place and the great surrounding, have something familiar: a third kind! And if philosophy as difficulty in thinking the third kind, that shows that we must be humble – as simple as Heraclitus and Martha, who fulfilled their tasks in the kitchen. The philosopher does not lose himself in what is merely known, writes Jaspers, because he understands the meaning of the Encompassing as something that creates possibilities. And the same can be said about *basho* and *Khôra*. The philosopher must think about being and nothingness with the *same indeterminacy*, according to Hegel’s lesson. The challenge is to understand the place and the being; the nothingness and the encompassing that surrounds all things.

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