

The concept of emptiness in Nishitani Keiji and the culmination of the phenomenological method

El concepto de vacuidad en Nishitani Keiji y la culminación del método fenomenológico

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Artículo de Investigación

Resumen

La fenomenología tiene sus orígenes históricos en el pensamiento de Edmund Husserl. Este autor desarrolló el método fenomenológico, que tiene como objetivo llegar a las “cosas mismas”. El desarrollo del concepto de fenomenología continúa a través del trabajo de Nishitani Keiji. En la fenomenología de este autor, perteneciente a la llamada “Escuela de Kioto”, se llega a la comprensión de la “cosa misma” como vacío. Este concepto esencial de su pensamiento se analiza en la primera sección del presente artículo. La segunda sección se centra en un análisis de las obras de Dōgen y Meister Eckhart, así como en su

recepción en el pensamiento de Nishitani Keiji. Estos autores son ejemplos paradigmáticos de un tipo de pensamiento que no puede enmarcarse dentro de las tradiciones metafísicas y onto-teológicas occidentales y orientales. En la tercera sección, se explica cómo la experiencia del vacío culmina en la aspiración última de la fenomenología de llegar a las “cosas mismas”. Esencial en esta sección es la confrontación de Nishitani con el pensamiento de Heidegger. Finalmente, en la última sección, y a modo de conclusión, se hace una propuesta sobre posibles líneas de investigación basadas en los desarrollos de Heidegger y Nishitani.

Palabras clave: vacuidad, Nishitani, Dōgen, Meister Eckhart, Heidegger.

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Abstract

Phenomenology has its historical origins in Edmund Husserl's thought. This author developed the phenomenological method, which aims to reach the "things themselves". The development of the concept of phenomenology is further continued through the work of Nishitani Keiji. In the phenomenology of this author belonging to the so-called "Kyoto School", one arrives at the understanding of the "thing itself" as emptiness. This essential concept of his thinking is analyzed in the first section of this article. The second section focuses on an analysis of the works of Dōgen and Meister Eckhart as well as their reception in the thought of Nishitani Keiji. These authors are paradigmatic examples of a type of thinking that cannot be framed within the Western and Eastern metaphysical and onto-theological traditions. In the third section, it is explained how the experience of emptiness culminates in the ultimate aspiration of phenomenology to reach the "things themselves". Essential in this section is Nishitani's confrontation with Heideggerian thought. Finally, in the last section, and by way of conclusion, a proposal is made regarding possible lines of research based on the developments by Heidegger and by Nishitani.

Keywords: emptiness, Nishitani, Dōgen, Meister Eckhart, Heidegger.

The understanding of Reality as *emptiness* in Nishitani Keiji

Being is only being if it is one with emptiness

Nishitani Keiji (1982, p. 124)

Phenomenology has its historical origins in the work of Edmund Husserl. This author developed the phenomenological method, which aims to reach the “things themselves”. For Nishitani Keiji (1900-1990), disciple of Heidegger in the 1930s during a stay of the Japanese thinker in Freiburg, the understanding of reality as emptiness culminates the ultimate aim of phenomenology to reach the “things themselves”. His most notable work, *Religion and Nothingness*, published in 1961, delves into the concept of emptiness in the Buddhist philosophy. Nishitani interprets fundamental experiences of the Buddhist tradition in a phenomenological sense. According to Nishitani’s conception as it presented in this work, after the disappearance of the hegemony of the *field of consciousness* –where the self experience reality in terms of concepts and representations– extinguished by the irruption of the *field of nihility*, and the arrival of the *field of emptiness*, reality does not appear distorted by the interference of the mind. As will be seen in the second section of this article, the radicality that certain authors possess in the Eastern Buddhist tradition is analogous to others in the Western Christian tradition. Paradigmatic examples of this radicality are Dōgen and Meister Eckhart, respectively. Before delving into this topic, the following lines analyze the *fields of existence* in the thought of Nishitani Keiji.

For Nishitani, the *field* (*ba* 場) of consciousness “is the point at which the seer and the seen are discovered, at ground, to be one” (1982, p. 114). The identification of consciousness with thought and emotions (the “field of reason” and the “field of sensation”) leads, according to Nishitani, to the conception of the entity as substance (*jittai* 実体). For Nishitani, the substance grasped on the field of reason cannot be the mode of being of a thing in

1 Regarding the guiding principle of the phenomenological method, Husserl writes: „Wir wollen uns schlechterdings nicht mit bloßen ‘Worten’, das ist mit einem bloß symbolischen Wortverständnis, zufrieden geben, wie wir es zunächst in unseren Reflexionen über den Sinn der in der reinen Logik aufgestellten Gesetze über ‘Begriffe’, ‘Urteile’, ‘Wahrheiten’ usw. mit ihren mannigfachen Besonderungen haben. Bedeutungen, die nur von entfernten, verschwommenen, uneigentlichen Anschauungen –wenn überhaupt von irgendwelchen– belebt sind, können uns nicht genug tun. Wir wollen auf die ‘Sachen selbst’ zurückgehen“ (Husserl, 1901, p. 7).

its selfness: “Such original selfness must lie beyond the reach of reason and be impervious to thought” (p. 114). Consciousness identified with reason and emotions is what creates the superficial and substantial understanding of the entity. The *field of consciousness* is, in this sense, the psycho-physical construct formed by thoughts and emotions. To arrive at the true understanding of the thing as emptiness, it is necessary to dismantle the internal structure of the *field of consciousness* from within. However, this dismantling is not achieved through reason itself, but through a collapse of reason by way of embracing the *field of nihility*. For Nishitani, “the substance of things laid bare on the field of reason scatters and fades away like fog over a bottomless abyss when laid out on the field of nihility” (p. 124). The existential experience of negative nothingness, intimately related to the presence of anguish, disrupts the linear, substantial and subjective view of reality. In this existential situation, “self and things alike, at the ground of their existence, turn into a single great question mark” (p. 124). The identification of consciousness with rational thought is shattered by the assumption of the *field of nihility*. The doubt that Nishitani mentions differs from the “mental” doubt that arises in the field of reason: “When the distinction between the doubter and the doubted drops away, when the field of the very distinction is overstepped, the self become the Great Doubt” (p. 18). That doubt becomes “Great Doubt” precisely indicates the transcendence of the subjective character that doubt possesses in the field of reason. The “Great Doubt” is beyond the subject/object dichotomy. It is a “nullifying” totality. As a consequence of its eruption, things cease to be “objects” originated by the representation of a “subject”. As will be seen in the third section of this article, Nishitani’s conception of the emergence of negative nothingness owes much to the unfolding of the phenomenological method in Heidegger’s work. The irruption of negative nothingness has the function of disrupting the field of reason. Despite having the ontological status of an existential field, negative nothingness, according to Nishitani, must be “*run quickly across*” (p. 137). Negative nothingness grants the vision of the unreality of both the being and the subject. From an existential standpoint, interiority becomes one with exteriority. Both domains are nullified or nihilized, giving rise to the phenomenon of the “Great Doubt” within the Nishitanian conception.

What precisely brings Nishitani to the culmination of the unfolding of phenomenology is the existential description of the experience of emptiness. This pre-conceptual and post-mental stage is the very place of the manifestation

of the phenomenon itself, which Nishitani understands as voidness (*kokū* 虚空) and emptiness (*śūnyatā* शून्यता). The concept of emptiness mentioned here comes from the Sanskrit language, not Japanese. It has an essential relationship with the Japanese concepts of selfness (*soku-hi* 即非) and void (*kū* 空), which are fundamental in the Buddhist conception of reality. The Chinese translation of the concept of *śūnyatā* is *kōng* (空; void in Japanese), which may also mean *sky* (Marra, 1999, pp. 179-180). The *empty sky* is the *emptiness* that can contain all particular things and *is* all particular things. According to Nishitani, that every entity is emptiness means that everything possesses the character of illusion at its foundation; that everything is, in essence, illusory appearance (Nishitani, 1982, p. 109). It also means that the being of things in emptiness is truly more real than what is normally taken as the reality of things (for example, their supposed substance): “It is the point at which the self is truly on its own home-ground. Here plants and trees have penetrated to the bottom to be themselves; here tiles and stones are through and through tiles and stones; and here, too, in self-identity with everything, the self is radically itself. This is the knowing of non-knowing, the field of emptiness itself” (p. 110). To know “without knowing” indicates an existential form of understanding of phenomena located beyond or “further back” from rational thought. It is the “silent” understanding that transcends the parameters of rational thought and its eminently dual mode of understanding reality.

The eminently dual nature of rational knowledge has been further emphasized in modernity. René Descartes, in his work of 1637 *Discourse on the Method*², presented the central philosophical assertion of his thinking: “I think, therefore I am” (*Cogito, ergo sum*). With this discovery, Descartes believed he had found the fundamental truth that could not be doubted and that would serve as the starting point for his entire philosophical system. Nishitani, in reference to the fundamental discovery by the French philosopher, comments: “His *cogito, ergo sum* expressed the mode of being of that ego as a self-centered assertion of its own realness. Along with this, on the other hand, the things in the natural world came to appear as bearing no living connection with the internal ego” (1982, p. 11). The absence of connection with the totality of reality is an essential trait of consciousness identified with thought and emotions. In this sense, Descartes’s statement could be transformed into: “I think, therefore I do not exist”. The emergence of a mental and emotional “screen” between consciousness and the self, and between consciousness and the world, “kills

2 *Discours de la méthode pour bien conduire sa raison, et chercher la vérité dans les sciences.*

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off” the experience of emptiness as an “overflow of life” just as the encounter of consciousness with its abyssal and absolute depth. It is necessary to quiet the mind to uncover a more essential mode of understanding reality. Therefore, according to Nishitani, philosophical endeavor must be linked to meditation. Meditation leads to the “silent” knowledge mentioned above, which is infinitely more essential and profound than the mere “mental” or rational knowledge proposed by Descartes.

Descartes inaugurates the modern mode of understanding reality. Nishitani asserts that Cartesian thinking is unfolded and reworked in Kant’s work (p. 132). For Nishitani, the fundamental consequence of the adoption of Cartesianism is that “Kant looks on things from the very outset as *objects*” (p.133). The preeminence of the subject/object duality leads to the emergence of nihilism and existentialism in Western philosophy as philosophical currents and as fundamental experiences. An example of this existentialist and nihilistic drift is found, according to Nishitani, in the work of Sartre. According to the Japanese philosopher, Sartre “describes existentialism as a subjective standpoint” (p. 31). For Nishitani, “Sartre has shifted the foundations of this awareness from God to nihility, from theism to atheism. In this shift we get a glimpse of the distance that modern man has gone since he began to pursue his own path to the awareness of subjectivity” (p. 31).

Nishitani understands that the emergence of negative nothingness, like the rise of nihilism, are epochal phenomena. Both phenomena, according to this author, have ceased to be a problem confined to the European thought. The universal nature of nihilism is understood as the macrocosmic correlate of the unfolding of inner nothingness. The relationship between interiority and exteriority is central to understanding the unfolding of nihilism on a planetary scale. Nishitani writes: “At present, most people think that to transform society is one thing and to transform man is another, and that the former should be achieved before the later. But in reality, these two aspects cannot be separated from each other so easily” (1966, p. 1). This historical aspect, uncovered through Nishitani’s engagement with the philosophies of Nietzsche and Heidegger, is analyzed in the work *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, published in 1949. In this work, Nishitani asserts: “The essential thing is to overcome our inner void, and here European nihilism is of critical relevance in that it can impart a radical twist to our present situation and thereby point a way toward overcoming the spiritual hollowness” (1990, p. 178). For Nishitani, nihilism must be overcome from

within nihilism itself. It is not enough to simply step outside of it; one must delve deeper, listen to what nihilism is telling us, in order to reach the “negation of negation” or, in other words, the transcendence of nihilism from within, from its very essence. As mentioned previously, the hegemony of the *field of reason* and the emergence of modern nihilism are situated in modernity. Now the overcoming of rational thinking has become the fundamental problem that philosophy confronts in its post-metaphysical stage. The Heideggerian concept of “metaphysical thinking,” as well as the theme of overcoming nihilism, are analyzed in the third section of this article. Before that, in the following lines, a study of the works of Dōgen and Meister Eckhart is conducted. According to Nishitani, both authors are paradigmatic examples of a type of discourse that precisely does not allow itself to be framed within the so-called “metaphysical thinking”. According to Nishitani, both authors demonstrate a mode of understanding being that closely aligns with the proposal of the Japanese philosopher himself.

The thought of Dōgen and Meister Eckhart and its reception in Nishitani

Despite being a practitioner of meditation in a Rinzai school temple, Nishitani extensively studied and commented on the works of Dōgen, a 13th-century author recognized as the founder of the Sōtō Zen Buddhist school. Dōgen’s most important philosophical work is *Shōbōgenzo* (正法眼藏). It is considered one of the most important texts in the Sōtō Zen tradition. The practical nature of Dōgen’s teachings is linked to a marked emphasis on the primacy of *zazen* meditation over mere theoretical knowledge. The ultimate goal of this meditation is to reach the “empty” *substratum* beyond the mental plane formed by thoughts and emotions. To refer to the absolute immediacy of the fundamental experience of the Self, Dōgen uses the Japanese concept of *Genjōkōan* (現成公案), which can be translated as “immediately manifest here and now” (2002, p. 39). With this concept, Dōgen refers, on the one hand, to the distinctive individuality of each entity and, on the other hand, to the absolute ultimate identity: “When all things are the Buddha Dharma, there is illusion and enlightenment, practice, birth, death, Buddhas, and sentient beings. When all things are without self, there is no illusion or enlightenment, no birth or death, no Buddhas or sentient beings” (p. 40). The identification of the Self with the mental plane formed by thoughts and emotions is what gives the substantial character of reality characteristic of Nishitani’s *field of consciousness*. Stripped of substantial character, the reality re-appears as real

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in its unreality. Because it lacks substance, individuality is illusory in its reality and real in its manner of being illusory. Through the original, non-objective, non-substantial Self, a self transformed into a subject becomes possible. The essence of this latter self is founded through reflection, understood as the twist that objectifies the absolutely empty. Subjectivity is nothing other than the Self in itself projected into the field of consciousness. In its bottomless bottom, it is non-reflective, non-objective, non-cognitive subjectivity. Nishitani writes: “When Dōgen says that the dropping off of body-and-mind is the practice of Zen, he seems to be suggesting the same thing. To practice or ‘observe’ the Way of the Buddha is nothing other than the Dasein of the self on the field of emptiness” (1982, p. 261). The concept of *Dasein* refers to Heidegger, an author who is analyzed in the third section of this article. Here, just mention that Heidegger’s concept of *Dasein* points towards a non-metaphysical understanding of the concept of human being. The metaphysical tradition has understood human beings in various ways: an idea (Plato), as a creation of God (medieval scholasticism), as a subject (modern thought). All of these ideas, rather than illuminating this concept, conceal it.

The essence of Dōgen’s message is to return to the true Self through the emptying or destruction of the core of the psycho-physical construct formed by thoughts and emotions. This, according to Dōgen, is the impermanent self, only real in a relative sense. Dōgen writes: “Once firewood turns to ash, the ash cannot revert to being firewood. But you should not take the view that it is ashes afterward and firewood before. You should realize that although firewood is at the dharma-stage of firewood, (...) ashes are in the dharma-stage of ashes” (2002, p. 42). The perception of time as a process that produces changes is transcended in the re-cognition of the Self: “We set the self out in array and make that the whole world. We must see all the various things of the whole world as so many times. These things do not get in each other’s way any more than various times get in each other’s way” (p. 49). The whole world is a manifestation of the Self. If the Self ignores its absolute foundation, the world unfolds as substantial, disconnected, and as temporal multiplicity. In this existential situation, when the Self look at the world, the world is the Self “set out in array”. In this sense, Dōgen asserts: “The entire world is completely free of all objective dust; right here and now there is no second person!” (p. 62). As the world is a temporal and a-temporal unfolding of the Self, it is impossible to assign an ontological character to the existence of a

subject (*kakujin* 客塵) perceiving a world. For Dōgen, the present moment is the a-substantial essence of Being-time, or existential moment (*uji* 有尽). It is related to the ambivalent character that Dōgen observes in his analysis of the concept of time. For this author, time flows and does not flow. Flowing as not flowing leads to the essence of time. In an analogous sense to Dōgen, Nishitani writes: “On the field of emptiness, all time enters into each moment of time passing from one moment to the next” (1982, p. 161). The essence of time is thus identified by Dōgen and Nishitani with the essence of existence. To exist is to be in non-time in a temporal manner. Wholeness always arises as wholeness, but the tonality of the present moment is determined by the way in which consciousness identifies or disidentifies with the mental plane. The identification creates the tonality that leads to the apparent concealment of the Self. Concealment should not be understood in Dōgen’s thought as a subjective phenomenon. Precisely, this author transforms the previous Buddhist conception that postulates enlightenment as a potential inherent to each being, which can be individually actualized. Dōgen’s position modifies this subjective idea of enlightenment: if all other beings are not present in enlightenment, and the totality of reality is not “illuminated”, then enlightenment is not true. According to Dōgen, the nature of Buddha is therefore not merely a potential that can be actualized by a subject, but the empty core of reality. In non-time, it is understood that there is nothing but the Self. This is illumination which transforms everything accidental, transmuting it into essentiality. The term Dōgen uses to refer to this phenomenon is *dōjijōdo* (道地常道), or “simultaneous attainment of the way” (Masao, 1997, pp. 73-75). Dōgen emphasizes that enlightenment is not a separate state attained through practice, but rather it is intrinsically present in every act and everyday experience. The simultaneous nature of the attainment of enlightenment precisely indicates the total absence of differentiation between the *essence of the Self* and the *essence of reality*. Both essences are, as observed, *emptiness*.

The thought of Meister Eckhart has a surprising essential relationship with the work of Dōgen. This medieval author was born in 1260 in Hochheim. He was a Dominican friar and a disciple of Albertus Magnus, who was also teacher of Thomas Aquinas. Within Eckhart’s corpus, there is a work written in Latin, which is incomplete, as well as more than a hundred sermons and several treatises written in High German, the vernacular language of the master. Part of the content of these sermons and treatises was condemned by the Catholic

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Church. Meister Eckhart died during the inquisitorial process in Avignon in 1327. However, his condemnation did not prevent his teachings from spreading throughout Europe through direct disciples of the master such as Johannes Tauler or Heinrich Seuse.

The concept of nothingness in Meister Eckhart's work not only refers to the creature itself but also to the very essence of the Self and of divinity. In the sermon in medieval High German titled "Surrexit autem Saulus de terra", Eckhart comments on the moment of Paul's conversion, after being struck by lightning. Four distinct senses of the concept of nothingness are described as follows: "One is that when he rose up from the ground with open eyes he saw Nothing, and the Nothing was God; for when he saw God he calls that Nothing. The second: when he got up he saw nothing but God. The third: in all things he saw nothing but God. The fourth: when he saw God, he saw all things as nothing" (Meister Eckhart, 2009, p. 137). The first sense indicates the existential plane where the Self identifies with the psycho-physical structure that Eckhart calls the "creature". This plane has not yet been transcended in this initial sense of the experience of nothingness. The experience of nothingness is here uncovered by the creature itself. The destruction of the "creaturely" mode of experiencing nothingness is the theme of the second sense. Here, nothingness ceases to be "something" situated "before" the Self. The co-belonging of being and nothingness is described in the third sense, where all things appear interpenetrated by nothingness. The fourth sense, finally, leads to the experience of non-duality, where only God exists.

In Eckhart's philosophy, the concept of God does not point towards the existence of a being or a supra-being situated in front of the Self. If it were so, his thinking would still be within the framework of the Western onto-theological and metaphysical tradition. The crux of his work lies precisely in this rupture from this tradition, which inaugurates a type of thought whose radicality brings it closer to Dōgen and Nishitani. The paradigmatic concept that leads to the transition from the onto-theological conception to the non-dual is that of "spiritual poverty". Through the de-appropriation of every creaturely mode of understanding the Self and God, consciousness arrives at the Self situated beyond both. Eckhart, in the Old High German sermon on spiritual poverty titled "Beati pauperes spiritu", asserts:

While I yet stood in my first cause, I had no God and was my own cause: then I wanted nothing and desired nothing, for I was bare being and the knower of myself in the enjoyment of truth. Then I wanted myself and wanted no other thing: what I wanted I was and what I was I wanted, and thus I was free of God and all things. But when I left my free will behind and received my created being, then I had a God (p. 421).

As observed in the quote, Eckhart places the creative act within the very will of the Self, and not in a supra-being situated outside it. This original will of the Self is diametrically opposed to creaturely will. The first is the absolute will. What it wants *is*, and what *is*, is what it wants. There is no difference between the act of wanting and its realization. The will of the creature operates in time and arises from a state of lack and forgetfulness of the Self. The latter must be denied or transcended if one wishes to uncover the original will of the Self. The mode “without mode”, that is, the trans-rational mode of overcoming the creaturely will, leads to transcending the metaphysical and onto-theological conception that the creature has of divinity. Finally, when all identification with the creature is transcended in the absolute knowledge of the Self, divinity reappears as emptiness. Nishitani, in this sense, comments: “Absolute nothingness signals, for Eckhart, the point at which all modes of being are transcended, at which not only the various modes of created being but even the modes of divine being” (1982, p. 61).

Eckhart, in this same sermon, implores the essential God or divinity to liberate him from the onto-theological God, who is the being or supra-being situated in front of the Self: “Therefore I pray to God to make me free of God, for my essential being is above God, taking God as the origin of creatures” (2009, p. 424). To the essential God, who is pure emptiness and absolute unity with the Self, he asks to transcend the conception of God as an object. Nishitani, in relation to Eckhart’s differentiation between God and divinity, writes: “In Eckhart, then, the pursuit of subjectivity necessitates the distinction between God and godhead. For the ground of subjectivity is to be found only at the point that one reaches beyond God for the absolute nothingness of godhead” (Nishitani, 1982, p. 63). Eckhart, in this sense, asserts: “For in that essence of God in which God is above being and distinction, there I was myself and knew myself so as to make this man. Therefore I am my own cause according to my essence, which is eternal, and not according to my becoming, which is temporal. Therefore, I am unborn, and according to my unborn mode I can never die” (2009, p. 424).

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The dichotomy God/creature is transcended in the discovery of the eternal Self. The absence of knowledge or self-knowledge of the Self is what causes the emergence or transformation of the Self into a creature. According to Eckhart, the transformation of the Self into a creature must be transcended if one wishes to attain happiness. The concept that Eckhart uses to refer to the state of happiness or fullness, inevitably absent in the state of identification of consciousness with the creature, is “blessed”:

When I flowed forth from God, all creatures declared, ‘There is a God’; but this cannot make me blessed, for with this I acknowledge myself as a creature. But in my breaking through, where I stand free of my own will, of God’s will, of all His works, and of God himself, then I am above all creatures and am neither God nor creature, but I am that which I was and shall remain for evermore (p. 424).

Blessedness is not, therefore, something external that can be obtained through the acquisition of material or spiritual achievements. Blessedness is the joy of being. In it, and from it, occurs the movement of the Self’s departure from its most intimate essence. In Eckhartian mysticism, blessedness is not understood in an ontic sense. In a strict sense, one cannot win or lose blessedness. However, the movement of disidentification of the Self with the creature must unfold in order to rediscover what has always been present. Nishitani comments: “Eckhart conceived of this as the soul ‘breaking through’ God, with its final consummation at the breakthrough to the essence of God: absolute nothingness, a point at which not a single thing remains” (1982, p. 62). Blessedness is emptiness itself. For Eckhart, the onto-theological God, just like the creature and “all things”, has its origin in the Self. In his work, the departure and forgetfulness of the Self is understood as *birth*: “In my birth all things were born, and I was the cause of myself and all things: and if I had so willed it, I would not have been, and all things would not have been. If I were not, God would not be either” (Meister Eckhart, 2009, p. 424). The absolute will of the Self determines existential unfolding in the sense of a *gift*. This means that the unfolding does not seek to achieve something in a predetermined future. The absolute will of the Self does not seek to obtain “something”. This understanding of will belongs to the creature. The concept of will is going to be essential for understanding how phenomenology, in Heidegger and Nishitani, breaks with metaphysical and onto-theological thought. The next section of this article deals with this topic.

The experience of emptiness and the culmination of the phenomenological method: Nishitani's confrontation with Heidegger's thought

As seen in the first section, negative nothingness grants the vision of the unreality of both the thing and the subject. Nishitani's conception of the emergence of negative nothingness owes much to the unfolding of the phenomenological method in Heidegger's work. In 1929, in his opening course (*Antrittsvorlesung*) titled *What is Metaphysics? (Was ist Metaphysik?)*, Heidegger analyzes the concept of nothingness (*Nichts*) in such a way that it finds reception in the emerging "Kyoto School"³. For Heidegger, while metaphysical thought—which arises from Nishitani's *field of consciousness*—is characterized by the inquiry into beings—and in this sense, thus arrives at the concept of "substance"—the question concerning nothingness does not aim towards "something" (Heidegger, 1976, p. 107). Heidegger states that the answer to the question of nothingness cannot be attained through conventional thinking. This kind of thinking would only arrive at a formal concept of nothingness, but not at "nothingness itself" (*das Nichts selbst*) (p. 109). Both Nishitani and Heidegger, as it can be seen, posit the apprehension of the concept of nothingness through the assumption of its fundamental existential experience. Nishitani writes: "In Heidegger's terms, the being of beings discloses itself in the nullifying of nothingness (*das Nicht nichtet*). The field of nihility is thus the very field where the subject becomes more originally subjective and, at the same time, where everything appears more in accord with its suchness" (Nishitani, 1982, p. 109).

That the subject becomes more originally subjective implies within Heidegger's existential analysis a turn towards the most proper possibility of being, which is intimately related to the experience of negative nothingness through anxiety (*Angst*). In his 1927 work *Being and Time (Sein und Zeit)*, Heidegger distinguishes between the concept of anxiety and that of fear. According to this German thinker, anxiety, unlike fear, lacks an object. Furthermore, anxiety possesses an ontological level higher than that of fear: anxiety can appear without fear, but never fear without anxiety (Heidegger, 1977, p. 247). Similarly to Nishitani, anxiety in Heidegger dissolves the difference between subject and object, and therefore compels *Dasein* to return to itself and take charge of its most proper possibilities of being. As observed, both authors have the same

³ In this sense, it is significant that the first translation of this course was done in the Japanese language. Regarding the reception of Heidegger's thought in Japan (Buchner, 1989).

existential starting point in the experience of negative nothingness, which is understood by both as a form of transcendence.

The similarity between both authors does not only refer to the mode of apprehension and understanding of negative nothingness. Both resort to Meister Eckhart to carry out the phenomenological analysis of the overcoming of rational or metaphysical thought. In this sense, in the 1940s, Heidegger appropriated the concept of releasement (*Gelassenheit*) from Meister Eckhart. According to the philosopher from Meßkirch, this concept indicates nothing less than the very essence of thinking (1983, p. 38). In his dialogue about the concept of releasement, Heidegger begins by relating conventional thinking to the concept of will. Conventional thinking operates through the dichotomy between the thinker and the thought. Thinking, in this sense, is always thinking “about something”. This tendency of conventional thinking to want to think “something” conceals the very essence of thinking. Therefore, Heidegger starts by asserting that to reach the essence of thinking, one must negate the will through the will (p. 38). The act of denying the will through the will implies, evidently, the emergence of the will. However, the origin of the will that denies itself is distinct from the origin of the will that unconsciously operates by unfolding rational thought. This other will arises from releasement, *Gelassenheit* or the essence of thinking. Its movement of denial opens the possibility for the emergence of existential dispositions of “silence” and “listening”. Both existential dispositions should not be understood in a metaphysical or rational sense. From *another* and transrational perspective, silence *is* the Self. From it and within it unfolds a world, which becomes improper due to the absence of listening. The absence is a consequence of the identification of consciousness with the noise of the mind. Essential listening is not aimed at capturing a specific message. It is not about listening to “something”. The content of listening is silence itself. “Silence” and “listening” have, in this sense, an essential relationship of co-belonging.

The relationship between the volitional negation of will mentioned here and the meditative disposition of Zen Buddhism is clear. In this sense, Nishitani and Heidegger distinguish a type of superficial, metaphysical, predominantly rational and mental thinking from another that is essential, original and trans-rational. Heidegger calls the first kind of thinking “metaphysical thinking”. In his work, one of the fundamental consequences of the emergence of metaphysical thinking is the phenomenon of the “forgetting of Being” (*Seinsvergessenheit*).

This phenomenon gives rise to a specific understanding of nothingness, either as “something” threatening or as “something” entirely absent. In both cases, nothingness is understood as an entity: in the first case, as an entity that induces the fear of emptiness, and in the second, as an entity that ultimately must be ignored for lacking reality. In his confrontation with nihilism and Nietzsche’s work, Heidegger asks whether the very absence of a proper question about nothingness is the origin of the unfolding of metaphysical thinking. If so, nihilism would be “an essential non-thinking about the essence of nothingness” (*das wesenhafte Nicht-denken an das Wesen des Nichts*) (1961, p. 44). According to Heidegger, metaphysical thought flees from nothingness. In its sscape, it seeks a foundation in beings. This foundation, in turn, is constituted as another being or as a supra-being. That the supra-being is called the good (Plato), God (medieval scholasticism), or the will to power (Nietzsche) shows to what extent the unfolding of metaphysics has marked the course of history.

The fact that the comprehension of the being by the self always becomes objectified is related to the characteristic mode of access to it in Nishitani’s *field of consciousness*. This comprehension, according to Heidegger, emerges in this sense through an act of “placing the being before oneself.” The act of “placing before oneself” is, according to Heidegger, representation (*Vorstellung*). Representation has as its starting point the dualistic experience of the being. Representation is re-representation. The encountered is presented to the representing self, towards it, back to it, and in opposition to it (1997, p. 28). The transformation of the Self into a “representing self” indicates, within Nishitani’s conception, the phenomenon of the emergence and hegemony of the *field of consciousness*. The “modeless” mode of rediscovery of the Self is *releasement* (Heidegger) or meditation (Nishitani). That the mode of access to the Self lacks, paradoxically, a mode, indicates the incapacity of conventional thought to access it. This type of conventional, predominantly mental thinking, arising through the identification of consciousness with thoughts and emotions, must be brought to a state of complete silence. In Heidegger, this disposition is called waiting “without waiting”. While the improper and rational understanding of the concept of waiting tends to relate the act of waiting to some future event, waiting “without waiting” lacks an object. Heidegger, in his discourse on *releasement*, emphasizes that indeed one waits for “something”, but at the moment when that “something” becomes objectified, waiting ceases (1983, p. 49). *Waiting* in this original sense reveals the being in its truth through *releasement* as the act

of letting-be, overcoming the traditional relationship between consciousness and being as a subject-object relationship. The traditional relationship reveals only a historical modification of the human's relationship to the being (p. 60). This historical development led to the emergence of the split between consciousness and the being. The being, separated from consciousness, appears as an autonomous and substantial entity. Through the act of waiting "without waiting", consciousness transcends this historical, metaphysical, and improper mode of understanding the being to reach its essence.

Final considerations

Although in Heidegger, the mode of access "without access" leading to the experience of the entity as emptiness is reached, it is in Nishitani where the final step is taken, leading to the culmination of the phenomenological method. The phenomenological method, from its origins in Husserl, attempts to differentiate consciousness from rational thought through the act of "suspension of judgment" (*epoché*). Consciousness is thus freed from its attachment to thoughts and emotions in order to, in this way, reach "the things themselves". The first step towards understanding being as emptiness is found here in Husserl pre-figured, still without being consciously aware of it. In Husserl, in this sense, the transition towards a trans-rational form of thinking has not yet been accomplished. The being is not experienced as emptiness, but is rather placed "in quotation marks". Husserl's phenomenology remained captive to Cartesianism by distinguishing consciousness from the being. If one considers the development of the phenomenological method from its inception in Husserl to its culmination in Nishitani, the concept of *epoché* can be understood as the preconception of Heidegger's *releasement*, which serve as a bridge to the supra-rational understanding of the entity as *emptiness*. This step arises from the movement of disconnection of consciousness from thoughts and emotions. In the historical inception of phenomenology as a philosophical discipline, this moment of lucidity appears in Husserl in a germinal way. It is in Heidegger's thought where the seed begins to grow, becoming –following this metaphor– a great tree that bears many fruits. The fruits are *emptiness* itself. In order to savor them, the "representing self" must be transmuted into the absolute Self. This final step occurs in the work of Nishitani.

While the identification of consciousness with thoughts and emotions (the identification that generates Nishitani's *field of consciousness* and Heideggerian

metaphysical thought) has a “centrifugal” force that pulls the Self away from its center, the dis-identification or *releasement* creates the “centripetal” force necessary for the assumption of trans-rational thought. The phenomenological approach to the experience of emptiness does not lead to the undifferentiation of the entity. That the entity is emptiness does not imply the emergence of a “gnoseological leveling” of all that is real. Each entity, in this sense, possesses its own characteristics that distinguish it from others. However, it arises from the empty, omnipresent, and eternal depths of absolute consciousness. The culmination of phenomenology in the experience of emptiness also does not imply its end. The realization of a phenomenological analysis that enables the understanding of the transition from absolute consciousness to relative consciousness, and *vice versa*, remains pending. In this sense, the analysis of the body is fundamental. If already in Heidegger the concept of the body takes on a dynamic that transcends the understanding inherent to the natural sciences, the phenomenological analysis of the different “bodies” and the ontological planes of their manifestation that unfold in the transition from relative to absolute consciousness remains.

These pending tasks that phenomenology faces today should not be understood as truths yet to be discovered in a latent state. Another point in common between Heidegger and Nishitani lies precisely in how both authors understand the concept of truth, which does not have to do with the validity of a statement about a being in the sense of an *adaequatio rei ad intellectum*, but rather with an act of “unconcealment” (*ἀλήθεια*). From the perspective of emptiness, the Self is the truth (Nishitani, 1965, p. 100). Describing, from a phenomenological standpoint, the stages of the Self and its modes of manifestation implies to conduct a phenomenological analysis of all the “subtle” and “physical” bodies that the Self “inhabits” in its transition from pure consciousness to the understanding of the being as substance. It also remains to strip the Heideggerian concept of *Dasein* of its neutral character. This does not imply denigrating it through gender conceptions of an ontic nature, but rather elevating it towards an ontology of the *primordial masculine* and the *primordial feminine* as original forces. The phenomenon of absolute consciousness is thus seen as non-dual duplicity, and not as undetermined unity. The phenomenological analysis would differentiate here from the reductionist conceptions typical of the eminently “henological” traditions of the East (i.e. Advaita Vedanta) and the West (i.e. Neoplatonism). As observed in the analysis of the works of Dōgen and Meister Eckhart, the mystical transcendence leads here to the rediscovery of the absolute Self, and not to unity with God, un-

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derstood as the One. That this absolute Self is, in turn, self-identical with divinity (Eckhart) does not lead to a henological conception but to a trans-metaphysical one.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that phenomenology, understood in this way, is not just another discipline within philosophy but precisely philosophy in its post-metaphysical stage. As Heidegger himself writes, the time of rational or metaphysical systems is over, but the time of the construction of the essential shape of beings from the truth of Being has not yet come (1989, p. 5). The construction mentioned here cannot be achieved, therefore, through mere logical reason, but only through a leap or existential transition from the *representational self* to the *absolute Self*. The fact that such a transition uses rational and logical language does not imply, in this case, a regression to metaphysical thought. Once all onto-theological traces have been eliminated from it, only self-identity remains, which, from the silence and listening to its own essence, unfolds its timeless becoming as a detached state of openness to the absolute.

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