

By: Christopher Satoor

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Affiliation: Department of Humanities

York University

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The Japanese Schelling: Nishitani Keiji, Freedom, Mysticism, and the Center as the Grounds of Being.

Introduction

There has been a growing Renaissance of Schelling scholarship, in the Anglo-American world but while Schelling was in decline in the west, the story was rather different in the East. According to Eiko Hanaoka ... "Schelling has been an important figure for the philosophers of the Kyoto school" (Eiko Hanaoka, *"The Problem of Evil and Difference: A Report on Nishitani's Relationship to Schelling"* pg. 238). Schelling's philosophy was of great importance to Nishitani. Nishitani's early interest in Schelling was due to how the philosopher dealt with the problem of evil. Schelling's approach to evil was not the typical Christian approach such as seeing evil as sin or privation. More than likely, Nishitani is viewing this Christian lens from a Zen position. Both Nishitani and Schelling will argue that notions of good and evil are grounded from the same origin. Nishitani's first work was dedicated to the problem of evil; and evil, according to Nishitani was a moment of the emergence of self-awareness, which like Schelling, was grounded in metaphysical necessity. Nishitani's work on evil lead him to be interested into the meaning of religion (Eiko Hanaoka, pg. 238).

The following paper will outline the several convergences between the German philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling and the Japanese philosopher Nishitani Keiji. I begin by asking a simple question why Schelling and why Nishitani? Is the jointure between these two philosophers an unnatural union? Could we imagine the possible creation of a *Japanese Schelling* through the mediation of Nishitani's philosophy? What sort of possibilities are created through this philosophical endeavor? These questions and more will be elucidated through a careful analysis of Schelling's *Freiheitsschrift (Freedom Essay)* and Nishitani's work on *Religion and Nothingness*.

Melancholy, Death and the Turn to Freedom

Interestingly enough both Schelling and Nishitani's philosophy of freedom was surrounded in both sadness and despair. In 1809 Schelling's wife Caroline Schelling died of dysentery, the same illness that took his step daughter Auguste Bohme years earlier, leaving Schelling in a daze of depression. Schelling was utterly devastated and left to seek refuge with his brother in Stuttgart (Bruce Mathews, Schelling, and the Odysseus of German Idealism: A brief Biographical sketch, pg.160) Similarly, Nishitani was also going through his own period of depression. But like

Schelling, it was this depression and melancholia that bound Nishitani for his future in philosophy ...

“My life as a young boy can be described in a single phrase ... it was a period absolutely without hope ... my decision to study philosophy was a matter of life and death in the little history of my soul this decision meant a kind of conversion” (Van Bragt and L. King, Introduction to Religion and Nothingness pg. xxxv).

According to Schelling, the drama of melancholia presents being with a spiritual creativity within the realm of reality, which Schelling calls ... *the darker side of the world of spirit* (Schelling, Stuttgart Seminars, pg. 241). Nishitani sees this *darkness* in Schelling’s philosophy as a revealing of *Absolute Identity’s* ground in the phenomenal world (*Hanaoka, pg. 240*). Influenced by Zen, Nishitani’s idea of the center represents the point at which the being of things is constituted in the unison of emptiness. As posited, the center for all life must strive for the middle (Nishitani, Religion and Emptiness, pg. 98). Schelling would agree with this same sentiment as he states ...

“The most obscure and thus the deepest aspect of human nature is that of nostalgia, which is the inner gravity of the temperament, so to speak; in its most profound manifestation it appears as melancholy. It is by means of the latter that humanity feels sympathetic relation to nature ... and likewise such an indestructible melancholy inheres in all forms of life because life is founded upon something independent from itself” (Schelling, Stuttgart Seminars, pg.238).

This independent life in-itself (melancholy and desire) is a primordial will that longs for the center or what the Japanese scholar James W. Heisig states, is an actual return to the ground of absolute nothingness (James W. Heisig, pg. The Religious Philosophy of the Kyoto School: An Overview, pg 16.).

Mythology as the Ground, Existence and the Mystical Union of Freedom

According to Eiko Hanaoka, Schelling’s *Freiheitsschrift* had quite an impact on Nishitani’s philosophical project. The young philosopher had even translated Schelling’s work into Japanese. What struck Nishitani was the profound mythological and mystical elements that Schelling used to describe the genesis of the cosmos. It was in this union of mythology and mysticism that Nishitani saw the ideal world as the grounds of non-being and the phenomenal world of being united as spirit. Once again, we hear whispers of Zen. This non-ground of being cannot according to Nishitani, be grasped as difference but is rather the *bond* of all life that is properly known as *love* (Hanaoka pg.241). It is through Schelling’s theodicy of freedom that helps Nishitani construct a philosophy of emptiness (Hanaoka pg. 241).

Nishitani defines mysticism as a kind of religiosity, which emerges out of an immediate union with the divine. Schelling also uses mysticism to speak about the unspeakable, which he calls the unprethinkable. This unprethinkable is what he will later call a *remainder* or an eternal past that is forever creating itself. Both thinkers apply these mystical elements in order to make the past and present simultaneous. Schelling attempts to resurrect a Christology that is freely unbound from both Greek and Roman worlds. However, these missing civilizations are not dead or past but are *alive* and breathing before us in the present. It is this remainder that echo’s as an ancestral bond for all living matter. For Nishitani he looks for these mystical elements in Buddhism (Nishitani Keiji pg.109). Like Schelling, mysticism adds an important feature to human

nature. Both are in an agreement and see a deep metaphysical creativity of life with mysticism. Mystical union allows an individual to have an immediate relation with the whole of reality (Nishitani pg. 110) It is this mystical union with the divine that grounds the possibility of having a direct living experience with the *world soul* (Hanaoka pg. 240). Nishitani's main interest in both Schelling and mysticism is due to the fact that both rely on a profound knowledge of logos. Nishitani states ... "It is not salvation that is being attained but a desire to fully comprehend the universe" (Nishitani Keiji pg.111). This metaphysical experience arises from what Schelling calls *intellectual intuition*. However, this experience goes beyond all logical explanations, Schelling claims that intellectual intuition is not reason, yet it is able to grasp the dark ground of spirit. What is this deep ground of spirit? And what is this ungrounded abyss? (Schelling, *Philosophical Inquiries into the Nature of Human Freedom*, pg. 357).

This experience of intellectual intuition occurs when one is attuned with the ground of non-being/emptiness which is a withdrawal of being. Schelling calls this the flight from the periphery to the center; while Nishitani calls this center the middle of being (Schelling pg. 358). The withdrawal of being is taken from the mystical philosopher Meister Eckhart. Eckhart referred to this withdrawal as a form of *releasement*. (Meister Eckhart, the Divine Consolation, pg. 78).

Science and modernity have abolished the necessity of the mystical and the *ancestral supplement of being* and have displaced us fleeing headfirst into the abyss (Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, pg.23). Nishitani agrees with Schelling, that the importance of the immediacy of mysticism arrives from a *primal will*, a yearning, which is called forth from the depths of beginning of times past; where humans, gods, earth; and sky were founded on an original unity. This original unity could not be comprehended through oppositional things like subjects or predicates; it is a birth from the springs of an authentic *longing for the union of God and being* (Nishitani Keiji pg.122) The union to Schelling, or *lucid purity* represents the purest attractive force, "love" as a mystical awareness rooted in intellectual intuition as a continual striving forth (Schelling, *The Ages of the World* 1811 draft, pg. 115). However, this form of striving, for both Nishitani and Schelling, have nothing to do with a subject or an ego.

These representational concepts must be renounced to achieve Nishitani's understanding of *emptiness* or Eckhart's concept of *releasement*. Nishitani cites Meister Eckhart to explain this withdrawal of being ... "God is nearer to me than I am to myself, it is just like wood and stone but they do not know it" (Nishitani, pg 123). This withdrawal of being is nothing more than the highest ground of freedom. For *releasement* forms the highest mystical state which Nishitani calls *ekstasis* (Nishitani pg.113). *Ekstasis* is a state of pure *thrownness* in the midst of the center or what Schelling calls the Unground.

Pantheism, Primal Will, and Un-Ground,

The concept of the *Unground* was created by the German theosophist Jakob Boehme. Nishitani states, that Schelling owes a great debt to Boehme's mystical teachings and that it is through Boehme's philosophy that Schelling is able to unify his thoughts on reality and pantheism (Nishitani, pg. 123). Pantheism main claim, according to Nishitani, is that all things are immanent in God. He states ... "pantheism is neither theism nor atheism which in the end

negates the soul. Pantheism, in essence, transcends idealism and materialism and offers a more robust ground to reality than the binary between theism and atheism, idealism and materialism (Nishitani, pg. 123).

The unground is the most important concept in Schelling's philosophy of freedom and it is at the heart of Nishitani's philosophy of emptiness (Nishitani, pg.124). In order to explain this unthinkable dark chasm, we must go back in time to the very moment when in a flash of light, matter emerged from a primordial chaos. Schelling explains that *this very moment is like a wave-wound whirling sea akin to Plato's matter* (Schelling, Freedom Essay pg. 360-361). This is the first stirrings of divine existence. In order to understand the *unground* we must embark on poetic theodicy. Schelling uses a mythological tale to explain the cosmogenesis of reality.

We begin by imagining a story of a seed not yet a plant, and not in the dark soil. This simple seed is a metaphor for the primordial origins of all life and the dark abyss of the soil. The seed is without any stimulus, there is no soil in the beginning for it to stretch its roots. It lies dormant and is eternal. It is the eternal past, a pure contracting force upon itself. Schelling calls this *a will that wills nothing* (Schelling Ages of the World pg. 127). However, deep within this seed, there is a moment of longing, an attractive force which is at odds with this contracting force, and bellowing beneath its subterranean chasm there is now an expansive force. A new will arises in this expansive force, "*a will that will something*" (Schelling, pg. 128). The expansive/attractive force longs for love and spirit; a rupture occurs and the seed is divided by two wills.

The first is the shell of the seed (primordial seed) that stays outside of the soil and the other will reaches for the soil to impregnate the ground with life. It is the soil that is the deepest ground, the unground or (urground) that binds the life of the new plant. The primal seed, the plant and the soil form, three potencies in a constant rotation. This rotating wheel of powers forms the unity of all reality; and because of these two primal wills, nature and spirit are formed as two equal sides of a coin. Darkness and light, male, female, life, death, ying and yang; all are bound together in the bond (das bond) of life. This is the path that all life follows, the endless cycle of the seed, soil and the plant. Schelling states ... "Nature is visible spirit and spirit is invisible nature," (Schelling, First outline for a System of the Philosophy of Nature pg. 229) There can be opposites but only unities tied together by the unground, that is Nishitani's philosophy of freedom and emptiness (Nishitani, pg. 127). This bond of Freedom and emptiness can best be described by Schelling when he states ... "This is the incomprehensible basis of reality in things, the indivisible remainder, that with which the greatest exertion cannot be resolved in the understanding but rather remains eternally in the ground" (Schelling, Freiheitsschrift, 359-360). In conclusion, this goes hand in hand with what I had stated before about Nishitani and Zen ... "that what comes from the void returns to the void" (Goulding, 2008).

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