

## HISTORY AND ETERNITY IN TANABE'S PHILOSOPHY

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**ABSTRACT.** *The paper attempts to elucidate the relationship of action, history, and eternity in terms of the so-called Logic of Species, advocated by the Kyoto School philosopher, Tanabe Hajime. Tanabe does not presuppose any eternal prototype of history prior to history, but starts from the present situation given in the actual world. History is composed of subjective action and objective being, and is directed towards the future as a moving point or contact point between time and eternity. This shows a parallel to A.N. Whitehead's conception of process constituted by subjective becoming and objective or superjective being with the irreversible direction towards the future. The irreversibility of time corresponds to Tanabe's concept of the future as the actively creating presence of eternity in the world. Time, however, does not exist by or in itself, but is rather created by actual entities in succession. The reciprocal transformation of action and being, or, subject and object, occurs in and through the mediation of eternity as the principle of absolute universality in the field of history. The movement of history and eternity in and through action is interpreted by the dialectic of the triadic Logic of Species.*

**KEYWORDS:** *future, eternity, action, history, negation, dialectic, Absolute Nothingness*

Hajime Tanabe (1885–1962), the so-called Kyoto School philosopher of modern Japan, explores his own unique Triadic Logic of Species in the form of the Dialectic as the foundation of his whole system of thought. He creates a new synthesis of Western and Eastern philosophy on the basis of the traditional Buddhist notion of Emptiness or Absolute Nothingness, the latter of which was first used by his mentor Kitaro Nishida under whose influence Tanabe develops his ideas in a different way from Nishida's. Nishida's system of thought focuses upon the concept of ultimate Place or Topos as Absolute Nothingness which encompasses everything in the world. Tanabe is very critical of this seemingly static logic of Place as dichotomic in character and further develops his own logic in the form of the Triadic Dialectic of the three parties, the genus or universal, the species or particular, and the individual. Tanabe's Triadic Logic or Trinity, however, is different from the ancient Christian doctrine of the Trinity in that the latter occurs in the eternal dimension of God, whereas the former takes place in the historical realm in which human activity plays a central role. This means that Tanabe stands by practical action, without resorting to any type of contemplation of truth, and his goal is to bring about the self-realization or self-manifestation of eternity in history through the mediation of free human subjective action, so that his philosophy aims at constructing the sort of philosophy of history. Substantially, in the latter, we might find a link to Aristotle's (and the Biocosmological) four-valued aetiology, with the leading significance of inherent (telic) causality (Aristotle's immanent essentialism).

The relation of time and eternity is crucial for understanding Tanabe's Logic of Species. Eternity comes from the future. The future is a perpetually moving point of eternity in time. Eternity is made to become time through the future. Eternity comes

to manifest itself in the present in and through the act of the future. The active mediation of the future perpetually makes eternity manifest in time. This bears a resemblance to McTaggart's idea of eternity as the future, and Moltmann's God as the coming future as well. The difference, however, is that for both McTaggart and Moltmann eternity seems to come from the future non-mediatedly without self-negation in action, whereas for Tanabe, eternity returns to time through the perpetually active conversion in negation from the future as the moving point of eternity. Although eternity as such is unbegotten without the beginning, nevertheless, it contains the temporal dynamism within itself, as the origin of time, and realizes the temporality in the uncertain openness of the future, without surrendering the temporal changeableness into the specious coexistent whole. Eternity comes to the end and always anew begins at each moment of the present. In other words, time, participating in the unbegotten, beginningless eternity in the direction of the past, retains the possibility of the end and the uncertainty of its coming, without being immortal and endless. The past is to be determined and renewed by present activity and is to be exposed to the end as well. The past is no longer the expression of unbegotten, beginningless eternity, but is mediated by the uncertainty of the future and resurrected at each present moment as the higher repetition. That is, the repetition in the present, in which the end is identical with the renewal, becomes a symbol of eternity. The infinite repetition of the self-negation of eternity as non-being or nothingness is the origin from which time arises, and the subject of making a decision as to a unification of the future and the past, necessity and freedom, is none other than the self as the individual existence. Its subjective action entails the repetitive superposition of the present in which the end of the past is converted into the arising of the future through negation. Eternity is mediated by the present moment of negation, and self-negatively becomes manifest and present in time in return, with the result of forming a temporal continuity. The mediator of the unification of the past end and the future uncertainty is the self as the subject of the self-consciousness of nothingness. Eternity takes place in the present moment in repetition through the active conversion of the subjective self in negation from the future. These positions also demonstrate the evident link to conceptual constructs of Biocosmology (neo-Aristotelism).

Tanabe does not regard the Absolute as self-identical Being without self-negation within itself, but rather regards it as the perpetually self-converting unification of the opposites through negation in action in terms of Absolute Nothingness. This is what is meant by the Buddhist principle of Emptiness (*suyata*) in the modern context of a new creative synthesis of Western and Eastern philosophy. For Tanabe, the principle of Absolute Nothingness has the dynamic structure which displays the perpetual self-negating conversion in action in the process of self-development in history. This is the distinctiveness of his concept of Absolute Nothingness as the most appropriate interpretation of the Buddhist notion of Emptiness. Consequently, he rejects the intuitive identity of intellect with object, as in the case of Nishida, but instead establishes his own standpoint of the perpetual active conversion of the opposites in and through negation in terms of Absolute

Nothingness. Certainly, Biocosmology could be also useful for the development of new forms of creative synthesis, for, it advances a truly rational (Organicistic) approach to the perceiving and understanding of our actual world.

It may be said that Tanabe is successful in establishing the modernization of the traditional Buddhist notion of Emptiness (*suyata*) from the perspective of Western philosophy, while Nishida fails to do, and hence remains committed to the Chinese philosopher Lao-tu's idea of Nothingness, which is very similar to the Neo-Platonist Plotinus' concept of the One as beyond being from which the world is produced and to which it returns. The authentic meaning of the Buddhist notion of Emptiness excludes any substantial nature but rather points to non-substantiality of being. On account of its own non-substantiality, everything in the phenomenal world can arise co-dependently. This is the reverse meaning of Emptiness as the co-dependent origination (*pratityasamutpada*). The difference between Nishida and Tanabe is parallel to the ancient Chinese historical situations in which the Buddhist notion of Emptiness is confused with the Taoist notion of Nothingness as ultimate reality from which everything in the world arises and to which it returns.

Tanabe distinguishes the two different kinds of the concept of universal: one is the absolute universal, and the other the relative universal. This distinction is important to an interpretation of Whitehead's concept of eternal object as universal form vis-a-vis its particular instance or ingression into actual entity's concrescence. In this regard, many people are inclined to involve in confusion of them, and fail to make a clear distinction between them.

Although Tanabe attempts to construct the philosophy of history, the emphasis is placed on the isolated point as the individual existence, and as a result, the goal and line of history are attenuated. This may be influenced by his existentialist contemporaries, Heidegger and Bultmann. In comparison to Christian theology, Tanabe's eschatology is centered upon the present moment of time, without epochal duration of time as a historical period.

Tanabe's Triadic Logic of Species refers to the distinction between the absolute universal as the genus and the relative universal as the species, and may contribute to the analysis of social entities such as the political state and a possible higher union of the world, which modern existentialism fails to grasp in its entirety due to its own individualistic tendency.

Another weakness in Tanabe's Logic of Species is that the Dialectic tends to operate at the level of a logical scheme lacking concrete content. The same thing holds true for Nishida. To provide the concrete content, it is necessary for both of them to compare and synthesize their thoughts with the modern scientific and empirical philosophy of Whitehead who regards reality as process.

What I intend to explicate as the distinctiveness of Tanabe's idea lies in the returning way from transcendent eternity to the immanent historical world, and this is to be borne by the free individual existence as the subject of action which is contingent in history, having the inherent possibility of even doing evil and fault. In this light, a neo-Aristotelian (Biocosmological) research perspective (strategy) may be in sight, inasmuch as the conceptions of "immanent historical world", "the free

individual existence”, “the subject of action”, “the inherent possibility”, etc. – directly fall into the scope of Biocosmology.

On the first point so much attention has, it seems to me, not been paid so far, except for the Japanese scholar Senichro Higashi, who touches upon this point implicitly from the Buddhist perspective. In the double way of attaining eternal truth from the side of appearance, and vice versa, what is important is the reverse way of returning from the eternal side of truth to the actual historical world of appearances. The historical background of this thought lies in the Tendai Buddhist doctrine of the perfect harmony among the three realms of truth, with the special emphasis on the second one, i.e., the direction from truth to appearance, rather than the reverse course. In Tendai Buddhism, however, this idea is contemplated without involvement in socio-historical practice. The distinctiveness of Tanabe’s thought is not as a guide for individual subjects to attain or ascent toward an eternal truth, but, on the contrary, in his analysis of how eternal truth may be realized in the actual world. This is nothing but the returning aspect of transcendent eternal truth to the historical world of human existence, and this echoes Plato’s later dialectic depicted in the *Nomoi*, which Tanabe aims at a further development as his own position.

In this regard, the stress is shifted from the eternal God to historical man who can make mistakes and be evil because of the twin possibility of acting from goodness or evil. This is the problem of radical evil since Kant, and Tanabe was entangled with it. We must situate Tanabe within the modern context of understandings of the contingency of human existence, within the limits of historical freedom. In the light of modern interpretations of the free subjectivity of contingent human beings, Tanabe’s way of thinking points out the vivid dynamic activity of the historical dimension on the stage of the history of human ideas. In general, an idea is that Tanabe carried out (repeated) the path of Aristotle, who was a pupil of Plato, – but who in the course of his career decisively abandoned the cosmological grounds of perceiving the world as the result of transcendental ideas embodiment, but founded his own rational cosmology, wherein the inherent final causality has the leading significance.

As John Macquarrie points out, even in the Latin Neo-platonist Eriugena’s thought, there is no historical element of the human existential struggle for attaining goodness on the side of human beings, so that the double movement of procession and reversion, or progress and return, occurs solely in the eternal realm of God, lacking the human existential activity of the struggle to overcome evil and fault in actual history. As a consequence, there is no real historical time or historical reality of time. This is entailed by the contemplative attitude toward truth, which Tanabe is very critical of from the standpoint of historical existence.

Even though the *Logic of Species* was motivated by the fact that Tanabe was inevitably involved in the surrounding circumstances of his time, in which the state was committed to the World Wars, and consequently in the theoretical task of justifying the state’s existence from a philosophical standpoint, nevertheless, his thought does not immediately lose its validity, but rather exhibits it in the shift of emphasis from the state to cultural-civilizational typology to attain the absolute

universality beyond specific particularities of different cultural patterns or zones.

Tanabe already anticipated the coming of the dialogue and mutual transformation of world religions in connection with the political action of the state existence in terms of the Logic of Species more than fifty years ago at the time when almost nobody had predicted such a situation in the near future. This shows Tanabe's deep insight into the ideal state of world religion in the coming era. He intends to integrate Japanese Buddhism, Christianity, and Marxism with the view of a reformation of them into a higher stage of world religion. This means that he is neither satisfied with Zen Buddhism nor with Pure Land Buddhism, but rather aims to reform them in such a way that both types of Japanese Buddhism can be integrated with the historical character of Christianity, though the Christian idea of the personal God should at the same time be demythologized in terms of the Buddhist principle of Emptiness or Absolute Nothingness, and with Marxist social and historical practice as well (but overcoming Marxism, due to the existential and historical essence of Tanabe's approach).

Tanabe's construction of the philosophy of history is an existential and historical one, which avoids the dualities of an individualistic type of existentialism, devoid of socio-historical extension in the space-time dimension, or a relativistic type of historicism, that never gets beyond a relativity merely immanent in the historical horizon, without the eternal dimension. The existential-historical type of metaphysics, which Tanabe claims, denies the one-way emanationist line of thought, according to which history is no other than the self-manifestation or self-unfolding of the Absolute, on the transcendent side of God, where free existential action borne by an individual person as a subject in history disappears, like Hegel's concept of history, as Tanabe suggests.

On the relationship between religion and culture, particularly the debate between Karl Barth and Emil Brunner, Tanabe asserts that religion must not stand by itself in the transcendent realm apart from human society, but, on the contrary, religious truth should appear in the secular world as cultural phenomena. This, however, does not mean the direct, immediate identity of religion and culture, but rather religious truth is to be self-manifested through conversion in negation by means of human existential activity in the realm of culture in which human values are created. Religion and culture are in opposition to each other, nevertheless, they are in mutual conversion in negation through human free, subjective action. Hence, culture is not automatically unfolded as if it emanated from the transcendent One, but rather is perpetually created anew at each moment of time through the mediation of human existence as the subject of free action.

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