



Doubt, Certainty, and Value in Descartes and Nishitani

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Kyoto School Seminar

May 2007

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I. Introduction

The roots of doubt as a central concept in Western philosophy can be traced back at least as far as Pyrrho if not further to a source shared with Eastern thought. Against this backdrop, René Descartes secured his reputation by announcing in his *Mediations* that he would use doubt as a tool to set first philosophy on a sure and certain foundation. Though in recent times it has become de rigeur to utilize the figure of Descartes as a convenient caricature of the rationalist and dualist position in order to show the superiority of one's own position by defeating him, at the same time, there seems to be some underlying insight at the heart of Descartes' work that prevents his being tossed out of the Western canon entirely.

In this vein, Keiji NISHITANI's *Religion and Nothingness* (originally titled 宗教とは何か?, *What is Religion?*) addresses serious issues in the structure and role of religion in part by tackling the doubt and dualism of Descartes head-on. He contrasts the "methodical doubt" of Descartes' method with the "Great Doubt" (大疑) of Zen practice and suggests that experience of the latter leads to deeper ontological insights.

In order to better understand the multifaceted role of doubt in philosophy, this paper will begin by giving a brief typology of doubt before applying it to the work of Descartes and Nishitani, and finally concluding that, as Nishitani expects, doubt has a great role to play in the formation of certain types of “religion” due to its relationship to the grounding of values, but parting with him and Descartes on the role of doubt in philosophy per se due to the properties associated with doubt as a form of anxiety.

II. Typology of doubt

Doubt takes a number of forms concerning a variety of content types. In its most ordinary form, we may doubt that some ordinary factual state of affairs holds. For example, “Did I turn off the stove?”, “Did I remember to bring my keys?”, and so forth. In these cases, the content of the doubt is an objective state of affairs that is readily available to direct empirical verification, and the doubt itself is a real psychological affectation in our minds in the form of worry or concern about the matter at hand.

In contrast, we may also employ more theoretical doubts, as when we doubt the truth of a particular theory or the outcome of a counterfactual occurrence. For example, “Is the Theory of Relativity true?”, “Would I have been happier if I had chosen a different career?”, and so forth. In these cases, since there is no direct means to empirically observe a theory or counterfactual, our doubt must be directed at particular empirical evidence which is felt to bear a relevant relationship to the provenance of the matter indirectly inducted. Further, our psychological attachment to the doubt in this case is also greatly reduced in comparison to the case of ordinary doubt. While ordinary doubts are typically accompanied by anxiety, theoretical doubts tend to be the manifestation of curiosity.

Common to both of these kinds of doubt is the supposition that some particular has an (at least theoretically) determinable state which one posits happens not to be the case. For example, if I doubt that I turned off my stove, then I must hold that there are such

things as stoves which are either on or off. Similarly, if I doubt that I would have been happier in a different career, then I must hold that there exists a degree of truth about counterfactuals, which though undisclosable to us, can be actually said to be objective. In other words, doubt relies on the existence of a degree of certainty that a state is dubitable, and being dubitable relies on there being a fact of the matter about which one could hold false beliefs. Hence both of these kinds of doubts rely on their non-encompassing nature to provide them with a particular structure. On the one side, we have our certainty that only one state of affairs or theoretical description is the case and on the other side we have our uncertainty about which of the many possible states or descriptions is the actual one. In other words, we have subjective doubts about what we take to be objective matters.

Of course, doubt is not only directed towards objective matters. It is also possible to have doubts about one's own subjective state. Indeed, it is quite commonplace for young lovers to ask themselves, "Am I really in love?" or for persons of all ages to ask, "Do I really want to do this?" knowing full well that the "really" of "really in love" and "really want to do" does not depend on any sort of external objective realness but on the internal and subjective condition to which the questioner alone is intimately privy. In other words, unlike in the case of an objective doubt in which the resolution of the doubt depends on the existence of an external truth, in the purely subjective case it is the asking of the question that itself creates the answer. Whether one is really in a particular mental state is not fixed proposition before one asks the question. Rather it is the asking of the question that fixes the answer one way or the other. This subjective doubt can be said to share with the first ordinary sort of doubt the same sense of psychological anxiety about the outcome of the inquiry, but the structure of this doubt does not presume the same sense of certainty about the fixity of the matter that doubts directed at objective matters do. Rather, certainty manifests itself in relation to this sort of doubt as certainty of the

anxiety which is provoked by the doubt due to the potential for the psychological state of the subject to be overturned by itself.

(One source of this anxiety may be the tendency to assume that the mind, like the macroscopically observable world, can only be in one state at a time, thus one either is or is not in a particular emotional state or one does or does not have a particular desire. Of course, this belief that one cannot have contradictory subjective states is the result of needlessly imposing the categories of the externally observed on parts of subjective self where they do not belong, which induces stress as one's assumptions about the self conflict with self-observation. Our subjective states do in fact conflict at times, and—as is elucidated further in later sections—it is the role of our prioritized values to resolve these self-contradictions.)

Like subjective doubt, existential doubt is intimately intertwined with anxiety, but instead of being concerned with the determination of wholly subjective states, it concerns the determination of the proper relationship between one's own values and the values that one "should" have. That is, existential doubt is the fear that one's subjective desires have an improper relationship to an objective "ought." Typically, this sense of anxiety about the proper ends of the self arises from the certain awareness of the melancholy ravages of time and death, as this awareness causes one to question whether one ought to value anything if those things held as values will eventually be brought to nil. Carl Olson explains theologian Paul Tillich's view of existential doubt by stating that it reflects, "the insecurity of man, which appears in oneself, one's world, and one's own being. Existential doubt can become radical when it entails questions about the meaning of life and the rejection of ultimate concern" (6).

Though, famously one cannot derive an "ought" from an "is," nevertheless in the case of existential doubt, the "is" of death casts a shadow of doubt on the "ought" of maintaining one's values, for if all values come to nothing, what is there to choose between them? Note then that this doubt shares a sense of anxiety with all of the preceding

doubts except theoretical doubts, which are driven more by curiosity than by anxiety. Also, like all of the kinds of doubt catalogued so far, it is implicitly based on a certainty that lies at the heart of its supposition, which is in this case the certainty of death and nihility.

In addition to these kinds of doubts, Nishitani introduces another level of doubt: the Great Doubt (大疑) of Zen practice. In Nishitani's description, the Great Doubt can be categorized neither as a doubt about objective affairs nor as a subjective anxiety. Instead, it is an all encompassing obliteration of subject and object as everything comes under the lens of doubt.

Here we come to something fundamentally different from ordinary doubts we have about one thing or another, that is, doubts that have to do with objective matters. It is also fundamentally different from doubt understood as a state of consciousness. ... When the distinction between the doubter and the doubted drops away, when the field of that very distinction is overstepped, the self becomes the Great Doubt. (17–18)

While Nishitani denies that the Great Doubt manifests itself as either an objectively directed or a subjectively felt doubt, we can nevertheless express its relationship to the other more conventional forms of doubt by noting that the Great Doubt is a certainty of absolute uncertainty which (unlike the other doubts) obliterates even itself. In the Great Doubt, doubt becomes certainty, and certainty becomes doubt, and neither remains though neither disappears.

Though there may be yet other distinct forms of doubt, this short typology is sufficient for performing our remaining analysis on the relationship of doubt, certainty, and value in the first philosophy of Descartes and Nishitani.

III. Descartes

Descartes begins his *Meditations* by noting that in his youth he constructed his present opinions on the basis of other opinions he now finds to be false. Seeing that the falsity of his now discarded premises casts doubt on his currently held beliefs, he hopes therefore to “raze everything to the ground and begin again from original foundations” (17) with

respect to the entirety of his beliefs. In order to perform this thorough razing, he decides to “attack straightaway those principles which supported everything I once believed” (18). Thus we see from the start that Descartes’ application of doubt is not founded on authentic anxiety about his foundational beliefs, but rather doubt is a tool that he uses to prepare the ground for the construction of a new house of metaphysics. As a consequence of his method, instead of sensibly doubting what we have solid grounds to doubt, Descartes begins by doubting everything except what he finds indubitable.

Though the use of doubt was first admitted as a tool and not a real psychological state, Descartes does seem to succumb to genuine anxiety as the second meditation begins, at least for the sake of creating more stimulating prose. He writes, “It is as if I had suddenly fallen into a deep whirlpool; I am so tossed about that I can neither touch bottom with my foot, nor swim up to the top” (23–24). Hence, by employing doubt, he has inadvertently summoned anxiety. The source of this anxiety is his lack of certainty about any particular, but, as noted in this paper’s typology, he soon realizes that even his confusion is premised on the basis of a certainty, which is in this case a certainty about doubting.

In his desperate state, he asks, “What then will be true? Perhaps just the single fact that nothing is certain” (24). Of course, we may take Descartes to task here for sloppy language. He cannot mean “the single fact that *nothing* is certain” for if he did, then the nothing would include his single fact and render it too false under his condition that only the indubitably true will be admitted as true. Thus, Descartes must have meant to write, “the single fact that *nothing else* is certain.” This infelicity of language allows Descartes to conceal from himself that he has not yet reached the true bottom of doubt. Though he says “nothing is certain,” he clearly means “nothing else” is certain, and the difference between the two statements is symptomatic of a greater lack of attention paid to the forms and foci of doubt employed. Of course, as is well known, he soon seizes on this contradiction of supposing both that this single fact of non-certainty may be admitted

and that he himself is presumed by the act of doubt to exist as the sort of thing that can doubt. Thus, Descartes' great *cogito* may be said in some respects to stem merely from his failure to be truly thorough in his application of doubt.

One of the confusions here for Descartes is that he begins with the observation that ordinary opinions often come to false results (ordinary doubts), which leads him to attempt to doubt all his opinions methodically (theoretical doubts), which in turn causes him anxiety as if drowning (existential doubts).

By gliding so quickly from doubt to doubt, Descartes has overlooked the important difference between the means by which each doubt is to be resolved. An ordinary doubt is relieved by direct observation of the matter of concern ("my keys are in my pocket"). Theoretical doubts are resolved by finding the most satisfactory explanation ("the Theory of Relativity does match the evidence more than Whitehead's theory"). But, existential doubts are not resolved by finding new external evidence. Existential doubts resolve themselves when the subject says, "No, not that. I can doubt anything, but I cannot doubt that, for that value is the value by which I will live my life." The key to the resolution of existential doubt is what is excluded from it by the self.

Thus, the existential nature of Descartes' descent into doubt shows that if the doubt is to be resolved then the "else" of "nothing else is certain" is not the only thing that he left unchallenged. For example, he never expressly doubts that the meditative process employed in the *Meditations* can be reliably used to find truth. (This, we shall see, owes to the central concerns of philosophy as such.) Similarly, he never doubts that one may reliably infer "I am, I exist" from the thought of it. More broadly, we can criticize Descartes for directing all his doubt to objective affairs, but never more than feigning doubt of the subject as subject, only the subject as body-mind. Thus he freely employed his unexamined certitude of subjective anxiety as a platform for constructing metaphysics even though he did not first attempt its obliteration. As Nishitani elucidates,

the self-evidence of the self-consciousness—the very fact that the self is evident to itself—keeps us from feeling the need to look at that evident fact from a field beyond that fact itself. (14)

Thus, Descartes felt security in the self as subject, because it is the self that creates the “self-evident.” However, this presumption that the self can be trusted to give itself up wholly and correctly is never put to doubt within the misapplied objective doubts of Descartes. The Great Doubt of Zen, however, does seek out a field beyond the self and in so doing questions even the possibility of its being a doubt by a thing that doubts. The Great Doubt is paradoxical, and thus obligingly engulfs even itself, leaving behind neither certainty nor doubt.

IV. Nishitani

Nishitani explains exactly this point in “Nothingness and Religion,” when he writes that,

When Descartes entertained the possibility of doubting everything that presents itself to us by suspecting it all of being the illusion of a dream or the trick of a malicious demon, and so, considering that this doubt itself was the only thing beyond doubt, arrived at the conclusion *cogito, ergo sum*, he was engaged from the very start in a process of methodical doubt. This is something fundamentally different from the self-presentation of the Great Doubt. (18–19)

Hence it is the very methodical nature of the doubt employed that caused Descartes to pull back from its truly universal application. Under ordinary circumstances, doubt is only employed towards what is presumed to be in principle objective, hence these doubts quite naturally exclude the subject from their scope. Going further, existential doubts may confront the subject, but whether these doubts succeed or not is a matter of the individual’s non-compromisable values.

This is in contrast to the Great Doubt. According to Nishitani, “Whenever doubt becomes existentially serious and something real to the self, it contains the ‘self-presentation of the Great Doubt’” (18). The greatness of this doubt emerges from “the very condition of basic uncertainty regarding human existence in this world” (16), or, we may say, from our absolute certainty of uncertainty within this mortal realm. However, “it

would be an error to regard the self-presentation of the Great Doubt as kind of psychological state" (19) as we might ordinary existential doubt. Rather, the Great Doubt is

a real doubt making itself present to the self out of the ground of the self and of all things. ... In its presence, the self *becomes* Doubt itself. ... Through it the uncertainty that lies at the ground of the self and of all things is appropriated by the self. (18)

In other words, Nishitani feels that the Great Doubt is not a state that the self undergoes, but a fundamental reality that the self becomes. It is also called the "Great Death" (大死), because in the Great Doubt, the self passes away and becomes a nothingness that is awareness of nothingness. In it, "death and nihility are *realized* in the self, both in the sense of becoming present to awareness as something real, and in the sense of becoming themselves something 'spiritually' real" (21). The realizing of this change to the self is radical and is the basis for a new foundation of ontology, since "[w]ith the disclosure of the very existence of things in nihility, existence itself is disclosed as a real 'doubt,' and the subject itself appears in its original Form..." (111). As the Zen priest Hakuin says of doubt, "At the bottom of great doubt lies great awakening. If you doubt fully you will awaken fully" (Olson 9). In giving us the original form of the self, the Great Doubt awakens in us the "elemental" nature of Being, from which we can work out ontology anew. This original form of the self is, according to Nishitani, the absolute nothing, since a "[p]erson is an appearance with nothing behind it to make an appearance" (70). By going from certainty to absolute doubt, philosophy moves from substantial ontology to nihilism, which prepares it for the final breakthrough to absolute nothingness. As he explains it,

Traditional ontology was unable to move beyond a simply "theoretical" standpoint of merely inquiring into existence, a standpoint at which the questioned and the questioner were set apart from each other. ... Ontology needs to pass through nihility and shift into an entirely new field, different from what it has known hitherto. (111–112)

Nishitani goes on to explain in later sections that the entirely new field which opens up is the final field of absolute nothingness. Thus, Nishitani hopes to surpass Descartes

by appropriating his methodology while fixing its perceived defects—in this case, that Descartes' doubts had not been as thorough and radical as everything is within the Great Doubt.

V. Critique

I will here criticize Nishitani's repurposing of the Cartesian method of doubt by first illuminating a subtle but important difference between religious and philosophical values, and then showing that on this basis Cartesian doubt is better suited to the religious realm than the philosophical. Finally, I will show that the anxieties which Descartes and Nishitani attempt to placate through first philosophy are better remedied through a religious recommitment to the everyday.

A. The nature of religion versus philosophy

Some remarks must first be made here about the problematic use of the term "religion" in Nishitani's work. If by "religion," one means to indicate historically real systems of communal activities, rituals, and doctrines aimed at explaining the existence of and reaching accord with a supernatural realm, then it is not clear that Nishitani ever addresses the subject of "religion" in *Religion and Nothingness*. Even if we restrict the term "religion" to refer to a narrower understanding of the overarching goals of certain world faiths (namely, Christian mysticism and Zen), it is not clear that what Nishitani does accurately portrays the self-understood goal of these groups either. However, if we understand "religion" to refer to the working out of an existential crisis of values by constructing a more reliable metaphysics, then perhaps we can forgive Nishitani his use of the term, though perhaps at the cost of including Descartes as a religious inquirer, although his *Meditations* (perhaps to be understood literally as "meditations"?) begins with the stated goal of "establish[ing] anything firm and lasting in the *sciences*" (17, emphasis added) and not the field of religion. Nishitani's use of the term "religion" in this manner is by no means indefensible, but when attempting to understand *Religion and*

Nothingness we must be sure to recognize just how narrowly the term is being employed. In Nishitani's work, "religion" means philosophy employed to resolve religious/existential crises of a sort endemic to Buddhist and Christian thinkers.

To properly pursue Nishitani's objective of understanding religion, which is narrowly defined but broadly ranging, we must keep our conceptions of religion and philosophy distinct, lest we confuse their aims and methodologies, which at first glance may seem exceedingly similar. Both religion and philosophy concern what the Buddha called, "Right Understanding," but what they mean by that term differs markedly. For religion, "Right Understanding" is the understanding demanded by conscience and hence the understanding that leads to salvation. For philosophy, "Right Understanding" is the understanding that reflects the truth of reality as it really is. Because these differences are subtle, in our ordinary way of speaking, we may confuse or intermix the two fields quite readily with few ill effects. For general purposes, we may act as if the difference between religion and philosophy were merely that religion tends to speak about God through the use of historically received texts whereas when philosophy attempts to reason about God it employs *a priori* logic, since typically the employment of this heuristic allows us to distinguish the two well enough. However, if we wish to speak strictly concerning these subjects, the ordinary heuristic fails us for it cannot distinguish the philosophy of religion from the natural theology of ontology, if only because the first concerns the implications of historic faiths and the second concerns the values arising from *a priori* reasoning. Accordingly, we must be clear about the difference between religion and philosophy in these cases, for the differing commitments of the two will lead them to different conclusions.

The different commitments of religion and philosophy can also be called differences of "values." Specific religious traditions vary in the particulars upon which they place central value. Some religions value individual salvation, other religions value communal harmony, and yet others obedience to divine mandate. Quite often in a particular religion

it is unclear which value is central, since it is presumed that the several values held to be of special importance all point in the same direction. Buddhism in general places central emphasis on the relief of suffering. Christianity tends to emphasize the need for love, both divine and communal. No matter what the religion though when disputes arise about the proper understanding of an issue, those disputes are ultimately resolved by an appeal to some core value within the religious community. Philosophy as such can be somewhat broadly identified as the “religion” or “religious methodology” that regards as particularly valuable what Kant called “critique.” Other ways of expressing the central values of philosophy are to point to Socrates’ dialogues or to the general tradition of rational inquiry. Whatever the precise formulation of philosophy’s values may be, it should be clear that what all modes of philosophy are engaged in is an attempt to understand the world from a universal standpoint—that is to say, the standpoint of “truth”—come what may. (Even post-modern and neo-pragmatic philosophy are concerned primarily with the truth of no-truth and exposing the true absence of truth as a monolithic absolute.) Science might then be called a sub-discipline of philosophy, which shares its commitment to truth, but also further presumes methodological commitments to demonstrability, materialism, mathematical definability, etc. Mathematics is a separate but related “religion” that shares philosophy’s commitment to rational inquiry but privileges rigorously codified abstraction over its connection to the empirical world.

Accordingly, it should be clear that within a particular soteriological-oriented religion if the choice is between truth and salvation, salvation is to be preferred, whereas the religion of philosophy must take its damnation if doing so better reflects the truth of the world. Of course, typically it is presumed that the values of truth and salvation do not conflict (“the truth shall make you free” claims John 8:32), but to be truly strict in our understanding (which is a key aim for philosophy’s rational dialogues), we cannot presume the harmony of truth and salvation before it is shown. What the prioritization

of values does is to allow the individual within a discipline to resolve apparent conflicts or contradictions by finding a way to preserve their discipline's values at the cost of all else. Since the values of philosophy differ from those of other religions, it will resolve the same crises in different ways.

(Incidentally, the preceding is not in any way intended to discourage philosophers from stepping into the realm of religion or theologians from stepping into the realm of philosophy. Rather, it is aimed at understanding precisely where a particular text by a particular author centers itself within the larger traditions of religion and philosophy, so that a right understanding of its tools and methods can be brought to bear on the text.)

B. Doubt's role in exposing values

Next, it is worth inquiring into the use that Nishitani makes of the Great Doubt within the philosophical realm, and into whether his goal is merely to surpass Descartes in the grounding of philosophy. It seems as though by using the Great Doubt, Nishitani's aim is to be thorough where Descartes was merely superficial while pursuing the same project: doubting everything then sketching philosophy afresh atop the *tabula rasa*. However, this expanded project fails to resolve many of the same problems that underlie Descartes' project. In particular, using the Great Doubt as a tool for grounding ontology means treating it as an expansion of objective doubt, since ontology is concerned with giving a true account of the relationship of subjective and objective beings, and the search for a true account is the search for an universal fact of the matter. The Great Doubt however is more naturally akin to existential doubts, which proceed from the certainty of death to question whether the relationship of the self's values to the natural values of the world is correct. In this case, the Great Doubt sees the self as self stripped of its self-regard, and in so doing, it removes the possibility of a self-evident nature of self-existing self-consciousness.

However, as Nishitani himself notes, these existential doubts are of a religious rather than philosophical nature, because

the basic difference between religion and philosophy comes to this: in religion one persistently pushes ahead in a direction where doubt becomes a reality for the self and makes itself really present to the self. This sort of real doubt may, of course, show up in philosophical skepsis, but philosophy tends to transfer it to the realm of theoretical reflection, and within those confines to seek an explanation and solution of the problem. (18)

As we saw in the last section, it is natural that philosophy should confine itself to the “explanation and solution of the problem” given its absolute commitment to rational inquiry as the measure of the world. It would be hypocritical of Nishitani if he intended for his explanation of ontology to be interpreted as wholly philosophical rather than working out of the philosophy of a religion, that is to say the rational understanding that comes from assuming the values of the religion of the Great Doubt. Therefore to be charitable to his project, we must interpret *Religion and Nothingness* as a religious text imbued with philosophical rigor rather than as a philosophical text lending support to religious concerns. As a philosophical text, *Religion and Nothingness* would be wholly unable to lend any support to religion, because philosophy cannot induce support for values external to the values of its discipline. It can only show that its own values are not in conflict with those other values.

My criticism of Nishitani’s apparent purpose in the use of the Great Doubt is then that he, like Descartes, attempts to harness existential doubt to build a stronger philosophy, but succeeds instead in merely showing up his own irreducible value commitments, rather than providing philosophy qua philosophy with unshakeable grounds. What radical doubting does is to remove from consideration all but what its employer finds indispensable. This process can be highly useful on a personal level, since it can reveal to the individual what she is unwilling to part with. However, as a tool of first philosophy it is both needless and useless. It is needless because philosophy has already demonstrated unshakeable commitments to the process of rational inquiry, to the use of dialogue, and

to truth. It is useless because even if the method of radical doubt does uncover more indubitable propositions, it will not be clear from the process of doubting alone whether those propositions are necessary truths or mere biases of the inquirer.

Imagine if you will a rational creature that evolved from less intelligent forms of life that instinctively practiced a mating dance of some sort, much as birds do. For members of this hypothetical species the fact that certain set of movements must be interpreted as a mating dance would become an indubitable fact about hermeneutics, just as for us the fact that seeing certain wavelengths of light must be called "seeing red" is an indubitable fact about consciousness. However, it does not follow from this inability to doubt what they are seeing is a mating dance that the mating dance is necessarily "real" in the objective sense that philosophy demands, because simply showing that an individual cannot doubt something does not show that it is a part of the fabric of Being, merely that it is a part of the fabric of the being considering the proposition. Neither also does it follow that our qualia of experience are necessarily real, though no ordinary human can successfully convince herself that she is not experiencing them. Indubitability in these cases does not mark philosophically necessity. What is uncovered here is inviolate for the individual, but not necessarily for the discipline of philosophy, for which all things are subject to critique (especially and excruciatingly itself).

A philosophy grounded on the indubitable is at best free from the possibility of critique, but this best case scenario is antithetical to philosophy, in which the possibility of critique is the ground from which rational assent is derived. It may be that no one properly enlightened can raise an objection to the Great Doubt, but it would be much greater if no one could fail to affirm it necessarily even without first experiencing enlightenment. The Great Doubt finds that everything is subject to nihility and thence crosses through to the absolute nothingness that, it is contended, underlies being. Such a finding is of incomparable value to an individual in religious inquiry, for it gives that seeker what Descartes called "just one thing, however slight, that is certain and unshaken" from

which “great things are also to be hoped” (24). Through the process of first existential doubt and then the Great Doubt, the individual has found something that she cannot relinquish. The value of absolute nothing is a value which an individual can employ to ground all of their other values, since it is without the possibility of doubt for that individual. However, these grounds are not strong enough as such for first philosophy in general. Doubt in its existential sense is a form of anxiety, but just as absence of sorrow does not mean the absence of sorrowful things, so too does the absence of anxiety for the individual about absolute nothingness fail to ensure its place as the true ontology of our cosmos free of the worry of fallibility.

Hence when Nishitani said, “Traditional ontology was unable to move beyond a simply ‘theoretical’ standpoint of merely inquiring into existence,” (111) it was no slight for philosophy, but an illustration of its difference from religion. Traditional ontology will always be stuck at the level of inquiry, but religion is able to jump over these bounds by employing values to which philosophy is reluctant to assent.

C. Doubt as a measure of anxiety

Next let us turn attention to the question of why Descartes adopted the method of doubting and why Nishitani was tempted to follow him down that path. The use of theoretical doubts in everyday affairs is a common and commendable occurrence. Using theoretical doubt allows individuals to try out new hypotheses and in so doing refine their understanding of the world. The trouble for Descartes came from immoderation. One dose of doubt may be medicine, but two doses are poison. Theoretical doubts are useful because they suggest new hypotheses, but widening the shade of doubt too broadly risks total eclipse and subsequent blindness. If every hypothesis is in doubt, then there is nothing left to recommend one hypothesis over another. Thus, we are no longer in the realm of theoretical doubt, in which the commensurability of hypotheses is assumed. Once all moorings are tossed off, it is natural for existential doubt to develop

as anxiety about the irresolvability of the all-encompassing theoretical doubts becomes apparent and pressing. Of course, even existential doubts have their use as tool for identifying those propositions most dear to the self, but the failure to notice their difference in kind from theoretical doubts leads to their misapplication as though they were proven hypotheses and axioms rather than indispensable parts of the individual self.

Still, the defender of the method of doubt may persist in asking why it is that we cannot suppose that what is revealed by existential doubt truly is indispensable as a means of setting philosophy on a secure path to freedom from anxiety. To show this, recall that the tap root of existential doubt is ordinary uncertainty about life in this world. So long as the one exists, the other resprouts like a weed. To eliminate the possibility of existential doubt, we must eliminate the possibility of conventional doubt brought on by uncertainty, and to eliminate uncertainty about the world would require what we will call here "self-verifying meta-knowledge," meaning, to know that we know and thoroughly know it.

Such knowledge would need to be meta-knowledge, because it wouldn't be enough just to know that, for example, the sun will rise tomorrow. By the ordinary criteria, I "know" that the sun will rise tomorrow because I believe it, I have justification for it involving astronomy and so on, and tomorrow it will turn out to have been true (let us hope!). Yet, it is not clear that I know that I know that the sun will rise tomorrow, for though I believe that I know it, showing that I know that I know would require a justification for the third criterion, that is to say demonstrating that it is true that the sun will rise tomorrow. Of course, I cannot show that this is true until tomorrow and even then truth is so slippery a thing that it may still be impossible to show it clearly and distinctly. Accordingly, I only have only knowledge of the sun's rising tomorrow and not knowledge of my knowledge. The difference between knowledge and meta-knowledge on this account is that for knowledge we allowed my justification by means of allusion to astronomy and such, but for meta-knowledge, actual demonstration of the truth of the fact in

question was required. The reason that this requirement was tightened is that to remove all doubt about a fact we need to have a justification for our justification as well as for the fact itself. However, such tightened requirements will not be easily met so long as we are working within a framework of all encompassing doubts.

The requirement that meta-knowledge must give justification for its justifications makes the clear need for it to be “self-verifying.” If the justifications are not to lead to an infinite regress of further justifications, the meta-justification must be capable of justifying two things at once: the fact and itself. Only by justifying both the fact and itself can the meta-justification hope to slay doubts as quickly as they arise.

Notice, however, the problem that arises with self-verification. Ordinarily, we don’t allow self-verifying forms of knowledge. If I said that “Santa is real. This is so because everything I say is true, and you know everything I say is true because I say so,” then certainly I have grounded both my claim and its justification on a single basis that attempts to justify itself as well, but I have done so in such a way that merely begs the question. The listener has no point from which to grasp my claim because its self-containedness makes it impenetrable to those who do not presume its correctness. Thus, a true meta-justification of the sort necessary to a first philosophy based on the principle of indubitability must be more than a merely circular claim if it is to banish anxiety. It must be a tool that can remove the anxiety of the doubter about itself by giving sure knowledge of the external world. However, in ordinary experience knowledge is always subject to doubt and critique and cannot self-verify. Thus, even should we find self-verifying meta-knowledge, its very unfamiliarity in comparison with ordinary knowledge would render it dubious due to the anxiety that would arise concerning its unfamiliarity to us.

Unfamiliarity with the self-groundedness of meta-knowledge will lead to anxiety about its truth because, as was shown, existential doubt arises from ordinary doubts which are allowed to metastasize. So long as ordinary doubts persists, anxiety may arise

and assail meta-knowledge, which we only sought out in the first place due to our hope that it would give us freedom from existential anxiety. Thus first philosophy is better grounded in the rational defensibility, likelihood, coherence, elegance, etc. of a proposed ontology than in the indubitability of the grounding for any particular individual, since doing so better coheres with the implicit values that philosophy brings to its project, which is universal explanation rather than personal assuagement.

Hence we see that philosophy must align itself with theoretical doubts, which, unlike other forms of doubt, were grounded in curiosity rather than anxiety. Philosophy is the “love of wisdom,” not the fear of nihility, and love proceeds from a playful spirit of inquiry rather than a fearful spirit of doubt.

For personal assuagement, there are two clear paths. The first path is that of engagement in the ordinary world, since, as is pointed out by David Hume and numerous others, such engagement presupposes many propositions underlying our activity. The mere act of living quickly reveals to us how solid are commitments to the world are and how easily doubt as an anxiety can be routed. The second path is that of sounding out the depths of existential doubt. Doing this reveals the commitments of the individual, from which engagement in a religion (in Nishitani’s sense) may be undertaken. It is doubt that drives the Kierkegaards to their “leaps of faith,” but a leap of faith is not one that philosophy can take while still call itself traditional ontology. Should philosophy follow in the leap, then it becomes the philosophy of a religion rather than philosophy in all its essential commitments.

Thus we see that the approach of applying universal doubt, while admiral and noble in the religious sphere, is ultimately separate from the sphere of philosophy itself, the values of which ought to prevent it from making an idol of indubitability.

VI. Bibliography

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