

Nishitani and Nihilism: The Institution of a History*

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0. Introduction

It is common knowledge that *nihilism* is a notion that labels a distinct moment in European cultural history. It is usually associated with Friedrich Nietzsche, who first recognized that humankind has been left without an immutable dimension of values, and who first realized that the human condition is ultimately revealed by an irrevocable verdict: «the aim is lacking, and “Why” finds no answer». It is also common knowledge that the Prajna-paramita-sutra emphasises *emptiness* (*viṃśati śūnyātā*) as a central teaching. At first glance, no apparent connection between the two instances – nihilism and emptiness – can be identified. Except, maybe, a vague reference to nothingness.

In the second half of 20th century, Nishitani Keiji (1900-1990), one of the most celebrated Japanese philosophers, attempted to bridge these two notions regardless of their apparent difference in order to show that Japan, after embracing a nihilistic way of life as a result of a rushed modernization, could win back its cultural roots in two moves: firstly, by way of a thorough adoption of the transvaluation of all values, as Western nihilism announces; secondly, by means of a rediscovery of the Buddhist teaching about the translucent emptiness that would accommodate the essential trait of Western nihilism by reducing any form of being to nothing.¹

Aim of this short essay is briefly to analyze Nishitani's project against a backdrop of critical points concerning his definition of nihilism.

1. Nishitani's Nihilism

Nishitani Keiji was one of the most relevant philosophers of the first half of the 20th century Japan and, as a member of the so-called Kyoto School, became a point of reference for the analysis

* This essay has been supported by JSPS P19767, KAKENHI 20F19767.

1 A good first introduction to Nishitani's work can be found in Keta Masako, *Philosophy of Overcoming Nihilism*, in *The Philosophy of the Kyoto School*, ed. by Masakatsu Fujita (Singapore: Springer, 2018), pp. 217-229, and J.H. Maraldo, *The Identity of the Kyoto School: A Critical Analysis*, in *The Philosophy of the Kyoto School*, cit., pp. 253-268.

of the advent of nihilism in modern Japanese culture. Among Nishitani's publications, we can select one book that summarizes his ideas about nihilism and advertises his call for the restoration of Japanese Buddhism in the form of a counteraction against dominant Westernization.

This text is unequivocally called *Nihirizumu* (ニヒリズム) and it is translated into English with the title *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*.² With the purpose of presenting a complete profile of nihilism, Nishitani's book includes a series of essays (published between 1949 and 1972) which dissect few texts of those modern thinkers deemed crucial to define European nihilism. Guided by his historiographical inquiry, Nishitani brings out the trajectory of this phenomenon and contends that, after leaving its birthplace, nihilism turned toward Asia and spoiled Japanese culture. However, Nishitani reassures that the evolution of this phenomenon has not reached its peak at the time of its ruinous effect on Japan. In fact, he foresees the possibility for nihilism to further evolve and change sign, from negative to positive, in light of the revelation that nihilism itself promotes: the emptiness of all beings. According to Nishitani's viewpoint, Japanese Buddhist tradition, if duly restored, would eventually bring European nihilism to its demise and finally restore Japanese identity.

From its onset, it is clear that the book presents nihilism as a threat that revokes Japanese heritage and mores. But at the same time, it claims that nihilism itself provides the tools for Buddhism to regain the central stage in Japanese life. One can easily see that Nishitani's whole cultural project assumes that nihilism is not only detrimental to Japan, but it can become the antidote against Westernization. Nihilism, if properly understood, can be used to reinstate an inborn, beneficial axis at the center of Japanese life. We can better understand this intent if we look at the English title of the book. To be sure, the «self-overcoming of nihilism» presupposes, so reads Nishitani's work, a complete development of Western nihilism that would eventually change not only sign (from negative to positive) but also quality: from its venomous Western to its beneficial Eastern form.

Nishitani refers to Nietzsche's *Will to Power* to define nihilism: nihilism occurs when «the highest values devalue themselves. The aim is lacking, and 'Why' finds no answer».³ This apparently ecumenical definition is instead used by Nishitani to situate nihilism within specific geographical and historical coordinates. Those of 19th century Europe. In addition to this historically precise delimitation that defines nihilism as a local phenomenon, he positions himself

2 Cf. Nishitani Keiji, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, tr. by Graham Parkes and Aihara Setsuko (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990). [Henceforth, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*].

3 F. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. by W. Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1969), 12, and F. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Part 2, I. On the impact of Nishitani's text on the Nietzsche Studies see Graham Parkes, "Nietzsche and East Asian Thought: Influences, Impacts, and Resonances," in *The Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche*, ed. by B. Magnus and K.M. Higgins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 356-383.

within the specific coordinates of 20th century Japan, claiming that nihilism should be defined as an event that grew outside of the perimeter of Japan and affected Japanese people only as a consequence of a foreign incursion. Assuming these historical and geographical boundaries, he claims that nihilism does not result from a specific requirement of the culture itself, nor does it surface as the ultimate development of ancient paradigms, it is instead incidental both in its essence and for the Japanese people.

In the last chapter of his book Nishitani explains how the meeting with European culture meant an unprecedented shock that shattered the very roots of Japanese identity. Japan welcomed and eventually assumed European values – aesthetic, cultural, social, etc. – in a moment when European culture itself was in crisis. In a sense, claims Nishitani, the replacement of Japanese cultural identity with European cultural identity was marked by the internal decay of imported elements: Japan actually replaced its heart with a foreign, deteriorating heart.⁴

At this point, Nishitani quickly suggests a solution.

In light of the catastrophe that Europe suffered ever since the advent of nihilism, and in order to turn the current nihilistic tendency upside down, the Japanese first need to take into serious consideration the rich legacy of critical analyses that Europe produced after the advent of nihilism. Secondly, Japan needs to replace this foreign disfunction with its own cultural core and perform what Nishitani calls «the overcoming of Nihilism through Nihilism itself.»⁵ By welcoming Western nihilism, Japanese people may re-discover the hidden creativity of this empty horizon and therefore assume back the Mahayana Buddhist annihilation of the self as a way of living. In Nishitani's opinion, the «amor fati» hidden in Nietzsche's works is a way to accept the vacuity of being that eventually produces an impulse towards life.⁶ This maneuver would remove the Western nihilistic humanism in which we live today only to establish a new religious dimension of life.

2. A Different History.

One may want to analyze Nishitani's interpretation of the Mahayana teaching to investigate his actual grasp of the teaching hidden in the Prajna-paramita-sutra. But our purpose is different. We would rather like the center of gravity of this essay to lie upon the other pole of Nishitani's interest. We intend to see if European nihilism can really be said to advocate – as Nishitani seems to believe – the «amor fati» of a spirited prosperity. In truth, we believe that Nishitani's analysis of that phenomenon is insufficient, as he misinterprets the nature of nihilism. Although we will try to show that Nishitani seems to have a fragmentary understanding of European nihilism, we would

4 Cf. Nishitani Keiji, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, pp. 238-243.

5 Cf. Nishitani Keiji, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, p. 246.

6 Cf. Nishitani Keiji, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, pp. 257-260.

eventually intend to advance an hypothesis in favor of Nishitani's reading: his strategy (overcoming nihilism through nihilism) could disclose a fruitful way to look into the essence of nihilism itself. But first, we need to move a few steps in direction of a clarification of the concept nihilism to provide a general backdrop on which to weight Nishitani's interpretation.

First, we must stress that nihilism cannot be deemed – as Nishitani instead seems to do – a phenomenon occurring in 19th century Europe. Research in the history of the notion has proved that the notion «nihilianismus» appears first in Christian theology with an unmistakable reference to the nature of Christ. Although instances can already be found in Augustine, it is with Walter of Saint Victor that the term was used with distinct perspicuity. In his works, «nihilists» are those who claim that Christ's human nature is just an accident, hence it is not a necessary part of the unity of Christ. As one can see, nihilism in its original implementation does not advance the thesis according to which everything is merely devoid of substantiality, it rather refers to a specific understanding of the reality of an absolute being. Only a few centuries after – yet still in connection with theological controversies – F.L. Goetz in his *De nonismo et nihilismo in theologia* (1733) uses the term «nihilismus» with reference to the nullity of all.⁷ Goetz's use of the term is of paramount relevance.⁸ Apparently, a shift in perspective had taken place: nihilism does not concern the substantiality of Christ's humanity only, rather it applies to the substantiality of *being* in general. Nihilism seems to have developed from the precise coordinates of the nature of Christ to the dimension of reality as such.

If we cannot indulge ourselves with an analysis of reasons and nature of this evolution, we can still bring to light some of the outcomes that this new form of nihilism generates. To that end, we can select the most significant among those cultural and social outcomes that seem to be responsible for the obliteration of the “Why” that Nietzsche reports. We shall see that the obliteration of the “Why” seems to have a different profile than the one that Nishitani employs to start his maneuver.

A more articulated and better-defined use of the term «Nihilismus» appears at the end of the 18th century when F.H. Jacobi first introduced the notion in the panorama of purely philosophical discussion. As this latter qualification suggests, Jacobi was not primarily concerned with the absolute being – as Walter of Saint Victor instead implies – rather he was involved in the debates about the definition of being in general, somehow mirroring what F.L. Goetz's text presents. Yet Jacobi's analysis of the problem is unprecedented in terms of penetration and breadth. In fact, one may even argue that Jacobi was the first to give the term its actual definition.⁹

7 Cf. F. Volpi, *Il Nichilismo*, (Bari-Roma: Laterza, 2018), p. 14

8 Cf. F.L. Goetz, *De nonismo et nihilismo in theologia*, J. F. Hoeffleri, 1733.

9 Cf. Cf. *Nihilismus. Die Anfänge von Jacobi bis Nietzsche*, ed. by D. Arendt (Köln: Hegner, 1970) and H.-

Jacobi's interpretation of nihilism is quite straightforward: nihilism is equal to idealism.¹⁰ At the basis of idealism – as Jacobi understands it – lies the idea according to which *being* is nothing but the *concept* of being. Being, in other terms, is not a mind-independent substance, rather it is the outcome of the subject's theoretical activity: the form of being (given by the subject) and the content of being (supposedly independent of the subject) are one and the same, because they are both the product of the subject's intellectual structure. The final result is that reality is a system of relations, whose founding principle (the subject's mind) is homogeneous with the objects of reality. In fact, no difference remains between the form of reality and reality as such. However, if this result may seem to imply that Western philosophy has finally won the eternal race for absolute knowledge thanks to a complete equivalence between *thinking* and *being*, in truth it merely shows that being has lost its independency from the subject: knowledge has not become absolute, rather it has turned into a subjective illusion. And evidences of this decay are easy to spot.

Jacobi contends that the equivalence between thinking and being represents a catastrophic outcome of the history of thinking. All starts as soon as the thinking has been turned into the mere ability to making inferences according to the principle of sufficient reason, namely « Since existing is something positive, we cannot say that it has nothing as its cause. Therefore, we must assign some positive cause, or reason, why [a thing] exists—either an external one, i.e., one outside the thing itself, or an internal one, one comprehended in the nature and definition of the existing thing itself».¹¹ This controversial paradigm has progressively grown into a variety of philosophical systems, which the history of culture presents as different but actually are, their difference notwithstanding, quite consonant. All systems of philosophy concur in the thesis that everything is explicable and justifiable only by means of something different than itself. This maneuver *de facto* eradicates «autonomy» from the very definition of real objects. In short, the equivalence between thinking and being implies the nullity of any individual and autonomous substance.¹² As Jacobi

J. Gawoll, *Nihilismus und Metaphysik. Entwicklungsgeschichte Untersuchung vom Deutschen Idealismus bis zu Heidegger* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: frommann-holzboog, 1989).

10 Cf. F.H. Jacobi, *Jacobi to Fichte*, in F.H. Jacobi, *The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel Allwill*, ed. by G. di Giovanni (Montreal: McGill-Queen Press, 2009), p. 519.

11 Benedictus de Spinoza, *Renati des Cartes Principiorum Philosophiae*, pars I & II, vol. I, in *Spinoza Opera*, ed. by Carl Gebhardt (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Verlag, 1925), p. 158. For the translation of the paragraph and a general overview see Y.Y. Melamed and L. Martin, "Principle of Sufficient Reason", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2021 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2021/entries/sufficient-reason/>>.

12 Cf. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Die Philosophischen Schriften*, ed. by C.I. Gerhardt, vol. 7, Berlin, Weidmann, 1890 (1970), p. 355; Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, tr. by R. Ariew and D. Garber, Indianapolis, Hackett, 1989, p. 321. On this see F.H. Jacobi, *Concerning the Doctrine of Spinoza in Letter to Moses Mendelssohn* (1789), in *The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel Allwill*, cit. pp. 372-373. On the relationship between Jacobi and Leibniz, see K. Hammacher „Die Vernunft hat also nicht nur Vorstellungen, sondern wirkliche Dinge zu Gegenstände. “ *Zur nachkantische Leibniz-Rezeption, vornehmlich bei F.H. Jacobi,* in *Beiträge zur Wirkungs- und Rezeptionsgeschichte von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz* (Studia Leibnitiana, Supplementa 26), ed. by A.F. Heinekamp (Wiesbaden, Stuttgart: Steiner Verlag, 1986), pp. 213–224.

stresses, idealism is just the last instance in the history of this eradication, but it is also the most efficient in rejecting precisely being's characteristic feature: *autonomous individuality*. One may even claim that idealism is the most efficient system of philosophy for it shows that being's characteristic feature (the individuality of objects) conflicts with thinking's distinct feature (the interdependency of objects). As a consequence of what we can call the "idealistic turn", knowledge becomes the cradle of the annihilation of being.

Notwithstanding the nihilistic epistemology that the history of philosophy has eventually accomplished, Jacobi realizes that idealism represents a coherent end result of human relentless analysis of our knowledge of reality. Ultimately, the principle of sufficient reason has allowed the humankind progressively to build perfected systems of internally justified truths which, apparently, destroyed the very substance of reality. As a consequence, if one takes into consideration the history of philosophy, he can easily realize that the eradication of being is not new in the panorama of human cultural evolution; it actually inspires such an evolution. In other terms, nihilism has had a long and concealed development, whose starting point can be placed as far back – Jacobi observes – as Aristotle. Modernity, he adds, has merely brought the core idea of nihilism to its full disclosure.

A further explanation of this nihilistic accomplishment is introduced by Jacobi in a study concerning the philosophy that, he believes, grounds both modern scientific approach and nihilism ultimate form. *Über die Lehre des Spinoza in Briefen an den Herrn Moses Mendelssohn* analyzes Spinoza's philosophy to prove that a systematic knowledge of reality is attainable at the cost of the annihilation of any being: «all individual things mutually presuppose one another and refer to one another so that none of them can either be or be thought of without the rest, or the rest without it.»¹³ The result is inevitable: «the sum-concept of all conditional beings, cannot reveal more to the searching understanding than what is contained in it, namely, manifold existence [...]; never a *real* principle of some *objective* existence».¹⁴ In conclusion, existence – in the form of autonomous substances – fades away as soon as reality is systematically conceived. Thus, Jacobi prompts us to draw the conclusion that the roots of nihilism are essentially tied to a systematic vision of reality, because a systematic vision of reality is a mere «mode of production» that turns any object into the operator of the justification of the next object.¹⁵

For these reasons, when Nishitani deems nihilism an event, he jeopardizes the possibility to

13 F.H. Jacobi, *Concerning the Doctrine of Spinoza in Letters to Herr Moses Mendelssohn*, in *The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel Allwill*, cit., p. 227.

14 F.H. Jacobi, *Concerning the Doctrine of Spinoza in Letters to Herr Moses Mendelssohn (1789)*, in *The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel Allwill*, cit., p. 375.

15 F.H. Jacobi, *Jacobi to Fichte*, in F.H. Jacobi, *The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel Allwill*, cit., p. 528.

appreciate the real history of such a phenomenon. At the same time, though, Jacobi's definition of the nature of nihilism seems to near Nishitani's reading of Japanese Buddhism. Yet we will see that this apparent concurrence is only specious, because a few steps need yet be taken to disclose nihilism true nature.

3. *A Different Notion.*

The history of the revelation of nihilism has not come to a halt in the 19th century. It progressed even further than Jacobi's analysis and Nietzsche's pronouncement. Yet, again, this new development has not been seriously taken into consideration by Nishitani. His analysis, though it was first published in 1949 and subsequently expanded through 1972, omits to take into consideration the ample and decisive analyses of two German authors: Ernst Jünger (1895-1998) and Martin Heidegger (1889-1972).

In truth, Nishitani dedicates a chapter of his work to Heidegger's writings, but fails to take into consideration precisely those texts where Heidegger analyzes nihilism comprehensively, namely: his many courses on Nietzsche (1936 through 1940) later published in his *Nietzsche* (1961), the brief yet fundamental *Selbstbehauptung der deutschen Univeristät* (1933), and his indispensable confrontation with E. Jünger in *Zur Seinsfrage* (1955).¹⁶ Instead, Nishitani turns toward other texts, such as *Sein und Zeit* (1927), *Vom Wesen des Grundes* in *Wegmarken* (1929), *Was ist Metaphysik?* (1929), and *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik* (1929) which do not consider *nihilism* as such. Indeed, they only deal with the notion of *nihilum*.

When reporting Heidegger's contributions to the analysis of nihilism, Nishitani misses Heidegger's actual investigation of the topic, which coincides with his tormented confrontation with Nietzsche. For this reason, Nishitani seems to disregard the paramount distinction between *nihilum* and *nihilism*. Although both notions substantiate an experience of negativity, *nihilum* and *nihilism* postulate a quite different jurisdiction. *Nihilum* – writes Nishitani in his last chapter on Heidegger – is the experience of the gradually disappearing being, whereas *nihilism*, conceived as the profound essence of Western metaphysics, obliterates absolute being and leaves the human within an infinite universe of finite entities. The former (*nihilum*) lays the foundations of Nishitani's interpretation of Heidegger's alleged notion of nihilism, the latter (*nihilism*) is apparently absent from Nishitani's undertaking. But this distinction can be understood only if we take a closer look into those works where Heidegger focuses on Nietzsche's texts.

It is notorious that at the time of his *Sein und Zeit*, Nietzsche was not a decisive thinker for

16 To this list one should add the famous *Nur noch ein Gott kann uns retten*, but this interview was given in 1966 and made public only in 1976, hence after Nishitani published his study. I use the title that the essay took when published in *Wegmarken*. See footnote 18.

Heidegger. Only later, as Heidegger started actually to work on Nietzsche's body of texts (we may mention Heidegger's appointment in the editorial board of Nietzsche's *Will to Power*), Nietzsche's definition, analysis, and experience of nihilism found their place in Heidegger's thought.¹⁷ Only the combination of the interest in Nietzsche and the analysis of the history of metaphysics produced Heidegger's far-reaching contribution on that topic. Among the aforementioned texts, we can select the one that should likely be deemed the most representative for the limited scope of this brief survey. More than a text, it accounts for a conversation between Heidegger and Jünger, who was – so Heidegger – the one thinker that, more than any other, shed a bright light on the issue. Clearly, we cannot detail the whole constellation of topics that this conversation brought to the stage; nevertheless, we can select a few elements that may help understand at least the urgency of a certain way to ask what nihilism really is.

Through Nietzsche's *Will to Power* Heidegger and Jünger reach a factual equation between the history of nihilism and its contemporary configuration: technology. This equation does not sound as a complete surprise to the reader of Jacobi's texts, because the technological approach to reality has been revealed ever since Jacobi deemed idealism the effort to turn any beings into an apparatus of the whole. Following a similar – albeit not completely equivalent path – E. Jünger's *Die totale Mobilmachung* (1930), *Der Arbeiter. Herrschaft und Gestalt* (1932), and *Über den Schmerz* (1934) picture the full implementation of this last configuration of nihilism. A report of Jünger's political, moral, aesthetic, and religious remarks are beyond the scope of this essay, but the general character of his theory can be perceived thanks to the short essay that Jünger wrote on the occasion of Heidegger's 60th birthday in 1950, “*Über die Linie*”, and that represents the inception of the aforementioned conversation. This essay is more than just a good introduction to Jünger's thought on nihilism. If combined with Heidegger's reply – the *Zur Seinsfrage* – it can be considered an unparalleled picture of the *status quaestionis*.¹⁸

Thanks to these two essays, it becomes evident that Nishitani's analysis is limited to an underdeveloped idea of nihilism, which is instead fully revealed only when the equation between the aforementioned «amor fati» and the emptying freedom of the void is overturned. Jünger's *Über die Linie* (*Across the Line*) bears witness to the great achievement of modern culture, which brings to full disclosure the real nature of the «will to power». The will to power entails the eradication of

17 Cf. G. Anders, *Über Heidegger*, ed. by G. Oberschlick (München: Beck, 2001), pp. 39-71 and 116-277.

18 Cf. M. Heidegger, *Zur Seinsfrage*, in *Wegmarken*, Gesamtausgabe, I. Abteilung: Veröffentlichte Schriften, Bd. 9 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2004). I do not mention the fundamental *Die Frage nach der Technik* (1953) because it would excessively broaden the scope of this short investigation. Cf. E. Jünger, *Über die Linie*, in *Sämtliche Werke*, Bd. 7 (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2002), E. Jünger, *Über den Schmerz*, in *Sämtliche Werke*, Bd. 7 (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2002), E. Jünger, *Der Arbeiter*, in *Sämtliche Werke*, Bd. 8 (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2002), E. Jünger, *Die totale Mobilmachung*, in *Sämtliche Werke*, Bd. 7 (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2000).

what is considered «Ancient» and the full discharge of the technological organization of reality. Albeit the technological organization of reality appears to be just a concrete control over the bodily dimension of reality, it is cultural and social in essence for it requires a total control over every aspect of reality. Jünger's writings not only present a mature explanation of nihilism, but they actually manifest the cultural thrill of this unprecedented power. From the pages of that short pamphlet, it appears that nihilism devalues ancient values by substituting them with the healthy progress of human control over any aspect of being.¹⁹ Nothing objective stands in the way of this new power, which seems to take the form of the ultimate subjectivation of reality. In fact, every entity shows itself as the result of the subject's manipulation.

Apparently, nihilism does not present itself as something foreign to the human condition. It does not show itself as a pathology. Instead, it has become a healthy way of living. It incarnates the hope of our generation and the form of imagining the future. Nihilism seems to uncover the destiny of the human: the human world is spelled out by means of abnegation, workforce, determination, success, and even joy and compassion, because the human being forgoes the responsibility to be different than its project.²⁰

Toward the end of his essay, Jünger gifts us with the hope of a foreseeable conclusion of nihilism, as he bears witness to phenomena that seem to announce the end of the human control over reality; phenomena that would bring about a different form of life. And yet, Heidegger observes, Jünger does not reflect upon what he claims. Heidegger helps us understand that Jünger still thinks according to «a future to give shape to», he presents possible «forms that would shape the real», he believes in a «morphology of the history» that will transmute beyond nihilism. The verdict is final: Jünger is still trapped in nihilism, for he forgets that nihilism is primarily the act of framing the being. The mere act of representing the truth is an act of nihilistic outcome, because the very act of representing involves the framing the being within the limits of an entity. The same act also assumes that the subject performing this framing, i.e. the human, is just human. In nihilism, in fact, both sides of representations, subjects and objects, become entities embedded within an unlimited representation.²¹

In the end, nihilism is the result of a «ratio» that does not merely get rid of any substantiality – like Nishitani instead contends – rather it consists in the turning any possible object of thinking into

19 Cf. E. Jünger, *Über die Linie*, in *Sämtliche Werke*, Bd. 7 (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2002), 124.

20 Cf. M. Heidegger, *Zur Seinsfrage*, in *Wegmarken*, Gesamtausgabe, I. Abteilung: Veröffentlichte Schriften, Bd. 9 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2004), 112 and M. Heidegger, *Die Frage nach der Technik*, in *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, Gesamtausgabe, I. Abteilung: Veröffentlichte Schriften, Bd. 7 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2000).

21 Cf. M. Heidegger, *Zur Seinsfrage*, in *Wegmarken*, Gesamtausgabe, I. Abteilung: Veröffentlichte Schriften, Bd. 9 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2004), pp. 60-65.

a finite entity. Nishitani seems unaware of this later development of nihilism and looks completely powerless in contrast to the full disclosure of a bright never-ending progressive present that nihilism gives rise to. To be able to identify nihilism, one must take a difficult step aside the usual understanding of it, because one needs to understand that the root of nihilism is nothing nihilistic. The «will to power» has in fact become the shape of our rationalizing, which replaces substantiality with overall organization and interconnection of entities. Actually, following Heidegger interpretation of Nietzsche, this organization of reality serves in truth no purpose at all (no real “Why”). The only impulse that it serves is the control over the real; or, better, the production of the real (no real “What”).

This unexpected manifestation of the nature of nihilism – from alleged “chaos and disruption” to concrete “organization and empowering” – shows that nihilism is not a recent event, nor is equivalent to the emptying experience that Nishitani would endorse. On the contrary, the analysis of this distinct form of negation has a long history, which needs to be properly instituted to avoid the obliteration of the power of such an intellectual instinct. In fact, it seems that only by means of the institution of its actual history, we could hope that the “problem nihilism” never becomes an empty suit.

4. Conclusion. A Matter of Questioning.

Initially, we have seen that nihilism was labeled the cultural movement that obliterated the “Why”. But we have also seen that underneath Nietzsche’s analysis there was a karstic evolution that had started far before Nietzsche’s pronouncement. In light of this evolution, we can now sense that, while deleting purposiveness, nihilism was gradually annihilating the “What”. The two annihilations were apparently connected, as the “What” did not serve the purpose of revealing absolute truth anymore.

What is left to ask then, if thinking does not reveal truth? Can a question still be raised meaningfully? One perhaps needs to raise a different question: is the analysis of the decaying “Why” and “What” really apt to the challenge of finding a different thinking that grows outside the shadows of nihilism? Or should philosophy eventually drop its alleged ambition to think the thinking and take on a different challenge, which would welcome the bitter truth that thinking itself does not possess any substantial form? In other terms: if thought is the dimension where nihilism takes form, should we not consider focusing our attention on the identity of thinking itself, as Jacobi and Heidegger do?

We can even go as far as to formulate a different question: should we not approach a definition of a thinking that can perform a real question to which it has no answer? Maybe, if this is the case,

a philosophical question that projects our thinking beyond philosophical answers can serve the purpose of conducting human beings outside the shadows of nihilism. This maneuver would present the «reason» of nihilism, but at the same it would elude the destiny of being the «principle» of it. This latter strategy seems to be at the basis of Nishitani's recourse to Buddhist teaching. But it is a strategy that becomes a stimulus for our thinking only if it is devised according to a quite different understanding of nihilism than the one that Nishitani introduces. In this sense, philosophy may be deemed the horizon of nihilistic nature within which we find the issue that needs to have a different cradle of its consummation.²²

Keywords: Nihilism, Nishitani Keiji, Friedrich Nietzsche, Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, Martin Heidegger.

22 For a further study on this approach see H. Jonas, *Entre le néant et l'éternité* (Paris: Belin, 2000).