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Non-being Self as Mediator in Tanabe Hajime's
Philosophy
田邊元哲學中作為無的自我之媒介者

Shigeru TAGUCHI
田口茂*

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關鍵詞：自我、無、媒介、日本哲學、田邊元、倫理、宗教

* Associate Professor, Hokkaido University, Japan.
日本北海道大學副教授。

Abstract

The influential 20th century Japanese philosopher Tanabe Hajime (1885–1962) developed a unique concept of the self that can help us to rethink the question "What is the self?" In his view, the self should neither be objectified nor thought of as something hidden behind the phenomenal world. It entirely manifests itself in our experience, but nevertheless, cannot be observed as a fixed object. This is because the self is nothing other than the "mediation" that is operating in our experience of all that appears as concrete reality. For example, the mediation between the material and the spiritual is naturally accomplished in the bodily action that the self performs without making itself appear as an objective being. It is neither the case that the visible body is the self, nor that the self is completely apart from the body. The self is the most engaged performer in this play, but who, for all that, does not appear on the stage.

Thus, the self as "mediation" should not be regarded as a being, but as "nothingness." This does not mean that our self is simply nothing, however. Rather, it is only by being aware of the self as nothingness that we can properly understand how our self is able to serve as a transcendental condition (or mediator) of all those things that appear as beings.

By this thought, we are not required to willfully abandon the self as a being; in a practical action, we are already made to abandon it. This fact shows that the thought of the self as nothingness has significant practical implications. Such a reinterpretation of the self culminates in a reinterpretation of the mediation between God and worldly subjects, which is determined by Love and Great Compassion (大悲).

摘要

田邊元（1885-1962）在二十世紀的日本，是一位具有影響力的哲學家，針對「自我」概念有其獨特的開展。這對我們重新思考「何謂自我」這個問題時，會有相當的助益。在田邊的想法裡，自我既不能被對象化，也不是隱藏在現象世界背後的什麼。自我雖然會完全顯現在我們的經驗當中，但並不能作為一個固定的對象來被觀察。因為自我並非「媒介」以外的任何一種存在。所謂自我，便是指我們在經驗到作為具體現實而顯現出來的一切存在時，作用於其中的「媒介」。譬如，物質性的東西與精神性的東西之媒介，在身體性的行為中，很自然地就能被實現出來。然而當自我在進行身體性的行為時，自我並不會將自己作為一種客觀存在，來顯現自身。因為自我既不是可觀看的身體，也不是完全和身體割離的存在。所謂自我，雖是演劇中最忙、最活躍的角色，卻不曾出現在舞臺上。

因此我們不能將此種作為「媒介」的自我視為「有」，而應該視為「無」。雖說如此，我們的自我並非是完全沒有的存在，亦即非單純的零。應當說，唯有透過自覺作為無的自我才能正確地理解，要怎麼做我們的自我才能作為以有的姿態出現的一切存在之超越論條件（或是媒介者），來付諸行動。

此種思想，並不是要求我們必須意圖性地拋棄作為有的自我。因為在實踐的行為裡，我們早就被迫捨棄它了。這正表示，作為無的自我之思想，帶有重要的實踐意涵。而此種自我的重新詮釋，最終將會歸結到，將神與現世的主體之媒介重新解釋為由愛與大悲所規定的關係當中。

I. Introduction

In today's world, there seem to be more than a few problems that have their roots in unreasonable concepts of the self. What is our "self"? How can we develop our "self" while at the same time establishing better (trusting, close, stable, healthy) relationships with others? Such questions are pressing on more and more people in the modern world, in which diverse cultures are crossing geographical borders. It is true that concepts of the self that originated in modern Western philosophy have a liberating effect in many societies, but they seem perplexing at the same time. The encounter between different concepts of the self makes it possible to relativize a concept that one naturally took for granted. However, this also means that each concept of the self may lose its obviousness, which was undoubtedly valid in the culture from which it came.

The concept of the self in the work of Tanabe Hajime (1885-1962) is a philosophical response to such a situation as it arose in 20th-century Japan. In an effort to explore the essence of the leading Western ideas about the self, Tanabe dealt with fundamental challenges in the problem of the self, which demanded that he reevaluate the Buddhist tradition, especially that of Japanese Shin-Buddhism founded by Shinran. Still, he did not simply adopt the Buddhist concept of the self but examined it from the perspective of Western philosophy until he had developed an original concept of the self that he believed to be the ultimate outcome of Western and Buddhist thinking about the self. In the following, I briefly outline how the self is reinterpreted in Tanabe's philosophy. It will culminate in an understanding of the self as non-being mediator between different dimensions of reality, especially the worldly and the divine.

II. From "Certainty" to "Mediation" of the Self

Let me begin by examining the "certainty" of the self. In the important tenets of Western philosophy after Descartes, the certainty of the self as ego was supposed to be the principle that grounded a system of philosophy, as was the case for Descartes, Fichte, the early Schelling, and Husserl, just to mention a few. However, it would be superficial of us simply to contrast this with the allegedly Eastern concept of the "fleeting" self or the Buddhist view of "no self." Such a bare dichotomy would not help us to explore a deeper meaning of the self.

The question is, what kind of "certainty" was meant by the modern philosophers mentioned above? Is it the same kind of certainty that we have in our everyday-life experiences? In this brief paper, I cannot go into these questions in detail, but I will point to the bottom line of my interpretation, which serves as an introduction to Tanabe's concept of the self.

In everyday life, when attempting to obtain certainty, we ordinarily try to grasp the stable, unmoving essence of the object or event being experienced. An object in motion and change cannot be easily observed with certainty. If we can control its motion and change (for example, in a controlled experiment) and grasp its essential form as a higher-order object of recognition, we might expect to obtain certain knowledge about it. If there is something moving in the dark, so to speak, we try to grasp its form and the characteristics that are unchanging, in spite of the movement of the object to which they are attributed. By grasping such attributes, we can be sure about what it is because we have identified its essence (for example, "it is a cat"). Fixation and immobilization, achieved in various ways, would thus be the initial strategy for recognition in everyday experience.

We tend to employ the same strategy in our efforts to identify the self, but it is soon clear that such a strategy does not work in case of self-recognition. If we

attempt to secure the self as a fixed object, it can be seen that the real self is not the secured one but the one that is observing it. Although we think we have grasped the essence of the self, it is not the real self because the grasped essence is not the subject that I am at the moment of grasping.

In spite of this "aporia of self-reflection," we do not think that it is meaningless to speak of a "self." Rather, it seems still to be meaningful to think that there exists something that is called the "self." This fact already implies that there is a kind of self-knowledge that does not need fixating, immobilizing objectification.

This insight that the self cannot be fully grasped by this objectifying recognition tacitly signifies the nature of the self. The self has a kind of "certainty" only insofar as it is in the *living execution of its own activity*. The "certainty" of the self does not consist in its objective, fixating self-recognition, but in the fact that the activity of the self cannot be nullified by the very execution of such a process. This is what Descartes means when he says that the "proposition, I am, I exist, is necessarily true whenever it is uttered by me or conceived in my mind" (the Second Meditation of *Meditationes de prima philosophia*). The same line of thought can be found in Fichte's *Tathandlung* and Husserl's "apodicticity of the ego."¹ If the self were abstracted from its living activity, its "certainty" would instantly disappear. It can even be said that the self is nothing other than this "living activity" (*lebendige Tätigkeit*) itself.²

At this point, we are forced to avoid objectifying fixation even though it is our natural, accustomed method of thinking. The certainty that is attributed to the non-objective actuality of the self can be understood as a transcendental

1 As for Husserl's concept of the "apodicticity of the ego," see Chapter VII of my book *Das Problem des 'Ur-Ich' bei Edmund Husserl. Die Frage nach der selbstverständlichen 'Nähe' des Selbst (Phaenomenologica 178)* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006), pp. 189–240.

2 See also Zahavi's distinction between "self-awareness" and "self-recognition" in *Self-Awareness and Alterity* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1999).

condition for objective appearing in general. To speak of transcendental subjectivity is meaningful insofar as it is understood as one such function that makes objectification possible. It becomes lost to philosophical reflection if it is hypostatized into a quasi-object that would be hidden behind its phenomenon.

However, such a transcendental turn remains a problem instead of a solution. By appealing to the transcendental meaning of the living actuality of the self, we are forced to do without objectification in our philosophical thinking about the self. This is extremely difficult to achieve in the strict sense. We have to engage in a way of thinking without supposing any objective substratum. At the same time, we have to be careful to avoid lapsing into sheer mysticism or engaging in metaphysical speculation that goes beyond any evidence. That is to say, we should be specific and precise in thinking without depending on the straightforward recognition of any objectively "given."

This is the task that Tanabe attempts to face and to achieve in his thinking about the self. In his view, modern Western philosophers tend to reify the pure activity of the self even if they have correctly divined the transcendental nature of the self. The self should neither be objectified nor thought of as something hidden behind the phenomenal world. It is always "here and now" in the midst of our ongoing experience and entirely manifests itself in all parts of our experience; nevertheless, it cannot be observed as a fixed object. This is what Tanabe tries to explore through his concept of "mediation" (媒介). The self is nothing other than the "mediation" that is operating in our experience of all that appears as concrete reality. It is impossible for this "mediation" to appear as a "being" insofar as "being" means "being experienced as a being," which is already an occurrence enabled by that very "mediation" itself. That is why "mediation" should not be regarded as a being (有), but as "nothingness" (無).

III. Tanabe's Concept of Mediation

Before moving on to a closer examination of Tanabe's thinking about the self, a few remarks should be made concerning his concept of mediation.

Tanabe attempts to deprive the term "mediation" of the connotation of reconciliation or a harmonizing synthesis. Rather, it is used as an expression of radical difference. If there are things radically different from each other, it is their difference that binds them together because without such a concrete, specific difference, they would have no relation to each other. It is true that such an understanding of mediation (*Vermittlung*) originated with Hegel, but Tanabe takes it to a radical extreme. The "dialectic" in Tanabe's sense does not allow that differences are ultimately overcome with the result that those that differ from each other merge into a unity (9.129; *Met.* 132).³ Difference is even more sharpened in what he calls the "absolute dialectic" (絶対媒介). The function of difference is indicated by the symbolic expressions "connecting by disconnecting" or "binding by cutting off" (切ることによって繋ぐ).⁴ Without disconnection, it is impossible for a thing to be tied to something else, because it is obvious that nothing can be tied when there is only a unity that is completely continuous and homogeneous. Discontinuity is even supposed for something to be related to itself; in this case, the thing is disconnected from itself in one way or another. Without any disconnection, we would not even be able to imagine what we call reality. If reality did not entertain any difference and disconnection, it would be like a mathematical point that contains absolutely no diversity.

In Tanabe's dialectic, the emphasis is not on the unity that covers the

3 The *Tanabe Hajime Zenshū* [*Complete Works of Tanabe Hajime*, Chikuma-shobō, 1963-1964] are referred to thus, (9.124), which means vol. 9, p. 124. The English translation of *Zangedō toshite no Tetsugaku* (9.1-269) (*Philosophy as Metanoetics*, Y. Takeuchi, V. Viglielmo, J. W. Heisig (trans.) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986) will be abbreviated as *Met.*, followed by page numbers. All citations from other works of Tanabe are my translations.

4 In this line of thought, Tanabe is inspired by the "Dedekind cut" (*Dedekindscher Schnitt*) in the theory of continuum in mathematics. See 6.334-5, 12.216-7.

difference created by the disconnection, but on the very "cutting" itself in its living operation. The seemingly solid unities that we encounter in our experience are in fact "self-alienations" of the movement of the absolute mediation. Static objectivity is an effect of the intrinsic dynamism of mediation. It is this mediating process that we — always and everywhere — experience, live through, and face. Ultimate reality is not composed of substantial beings that lie outside, awaiting mediation, but rather, reality is the perpetually mediating movement that gives rise to knowable beings and knowing itself. These are effects of the movement of mediation, which, in turn, can serve as reference points for further mediations.

For Tanabe, mediation is nothing other than this "connecting qua disconnecting." It also implies that mediation is intrinsically "mediation by nothingness." If we suppose that there is a being that functions as a mediator between two different beings, true mediation would be impossible because if two beings, A and B, are mediated by a third being, C, it must be asked how this third can be mediated with each of the two other beings. If mediation were always performed by a being as mediator, the mediation between A and C as well as that between B and C would require fourth and fifth beings as mediators (D and E, respectively). In this way, we would fall into an infinite regress so that mediation would be endlessly unfulfilled. This is why Tanabe argues that mediation is only accomplished by nothingness. Nothingness mediates between beings, i.e., cuts and binds them at the same time. Without such a "unity reached by a qualitative leap," there could be no opposition of beings as well.⁵

At this point, we cannot be too careful in avoiding the hypostatization of nothingness. We should repudiate the perverse view that there *is* something that is merely called nothingness.⁶ Tanabe's term "mediation by nothingness" (無の

5 See 3.479.

6 See the following remark: "Thus any claim to know nothingness 'objectively' or to grasp it in an act of self-consciousness, insofar as it involves some thing called 'nothingness' or some self that is aware of it, is misguided" (9.118; *Met.* 119).

媒介) points to the fact that the performance of mediation itself cannot be regarded as being. In short, according to Tanabe, "nothingness" is nothing other than mediation. No being remains unmediated, i.e., all beings only stand as they are by virtue of the performance of mediation. What makes beings come into "being" is not a being but *nothingness qua mediation*. Nevertheless, we are not able to think or speak of nothingness without making reference to a being, which is why nothingness can only be considered to be a function of mediation that makes being possible.⁷ Every being is mediated, and mediation itself, in turn, is mediated through the beings that are mediated by it. This is what Tanabe claims when he speaks of the "absolute mediation" in which nothing remains unmediated (6.192, 473).

IV. The Self as the Nothingness that is Mediation

Let us now return to the problem of the self. As we suggested, in philosophical thinking about the self, it is necessary to be specific and precise without depending on objective recognition. How is this possible? Tanabe's answer is that the self should be understood and analyzed as a particular sort of mediation *qua* nothingness.

As we noted, the self is only experienced in the very performance of its living activity. It cannot be secured as an objective being. This very incapacity of being secured as a being belongs to the intrinsic nature of the self. Therefore, Tanabe claims, we should realize that "self" stands for nothingness. This does not mean that our self is simply nothing, however. Rather, it is only by such an

7 Laube rightly notes that, "In the dialectics of absolute mediation even the absolute is understood as mediated by an absolute self-negation for the sake of the relative elements. Indeed, this is why Tanabe can speak of it as 'absolute nothingness.'" Johannes Laube: *The Way of Metanoia and the Way of the Bodhisattva*, in T. Unno and J. W. Heisig (eds.), *The Religious Philosophy of Tanabe Hajime* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1990), p. 317.

awareness of the self as nothingness that we can properly understand how our self is able to serve as a transcendental condition (or mediator) of all those things that appear as beings.

Let me examine the dichotomy between spiritual and material being. Spiritual being is not material being, and vice versa. Their essential difference makes it impossible for them to be *directly* connected to each other. Nevertheless, they are intrinsically tied together in the acting of the self that is performed *bodily*. "Therefore," Tanabe claims, "we should say that it is nothingness where we connect them by disconnecting. [...] That is to say, it is nothingness that makes being possible" (8.139). The self could not mediate between spiritual and material being if it belonged exclusively to one side of the dichotomy. The same holds true for any third being that might stand side by side to those two beings that are mutually exclusive. Only by the mediation of the self *as nothingness* between them, can they be connected and properly separated at the same time.

This means that the self is nothing other than self-awareness (自覚) of the transformational mediation (轉換媒介) between those entities that are opposed to each other, such as the spiritual and the material, the individual and the universal, the past and the future, etc. Such mediation constitutes a "concrete unity" in which mutual opponents "are not apart from each other while divided; by transforming itself into its opponent, one connects to the other while opposed" (9.304). Each one excludes the other, but they mediate with each other insofar as they both belong to the same reality, as is shown in the case of materiality and spirituality. The mediation between them is naturally accomplished in the bodily action that the self performs without making itself appear as an objective being. It is neither the case that the visible body is the self, nor that the self is completely apart from the body. The self is the most engaged performer in this play, but who, for all that, does not appear on the stage.

Such a reinterpretation of the self makes it possible to understand the

practical self better. Insofar as the self is regarded as a *being* that is *grasped* as its own object, the practical self in the midst of its action remains neglected. In practical activity, the self does not have itself as its goal. Rather, to pursue the goals of our practice, we necessarily ignore ourselves as an object to be grasped. To be practical, the self does not need to *seek* nothingness; it already *is* nothingness. We are not even required to willfully abandon the self as a being; in a practical action, we are already *made* to abandon it.⁸ This fact, for Tanabe, clearly shows that our self is, in its essence, mediation.

Accordingly, to abandon our own self as a being does not mean to abandon freedom. On the contrary, it is this kind of liberation from being (i.e., letting go of one's own self grasped as a being) that enables free will, because in such liberation we can be a self that is in no way fixed. "It is not being, [...] but nothingness that provides a foundation in the human for freedom, a locus at which the will is constituted" (9.117; *Met.* 118).

V. Practical Implications of the Idea of the Self as Mediation

The thought of the self as nothingness has significant practical implications. According to Tanabe, if we think of the self as a substantial being, we are immediately involved in the game of opposition and contradiction. To think of oneself as an existing agent makes it possible to discriminate oneself from other agents to which one can attribute various grades of ethical goodness. If we believe ourselves to be ethically good, we tend to condemn the moral flaws of others. However, no one can be regarded as morally perfect. We humans necessarily find deep-rooted evil in our own minds if only we have the courage to face our real selves (as Kant pointed out in *Religion within the Boundaries of*

⁸ See 9.118-9; *Met.* 119-120. The fact that we *are made* to abandon the self as being has religious implications, signified by the term "Other power" (他力), which originates in Pure Land Buddhism.

Mere Reason). Insofar as we take an *ethical attitude*, ultimately we are unable to tolerate our evil selves. This inability does not excuse us from thinking about the evil in our selves, however. To ignore it would mean to abandon being moral. How can we continue to live with such evil selves without losing all hope of being ethical?

For Tanabe, this is a central question of religion. In the *religious attitude*, ethics is not abandoned, but it desists from splitting the self between good and evil without simply erasing moral distinctions and dilemmas. Such an exceptional sort of mediation is called "love" (愛) or "great compassion" (大悲).

In the case of a love that forgives evil or a compassion that redeems one from sin, it is not that the evil and the sin cease to be what they are, but only that they lose their force of opposition. [...] The opposition remains, but evil and sin lose their power to oppose. (9.129; *Met.* 133)

In such an absolute mediation of love, the transformation of the self that I described in Section 3 plays a fundamental role. The awareness of the self as nothingness makes it possible to live with ethical contradiction in us ourselves. Tanabe remarks, "[B]ecause the subject dies in the depths of the contradiction, the opposition ceases to be an opposition, but the contradictories are left as they are" (9.129; *Met.* 133).

Such a transformation of the self cannot leave our practices unchanged. Religious love or great compassion drives us to help others in an attitude of gratitude. In this "absolute mediation" in religious form, the self is purely practical, which means that it is liberated from the drive of self-preservation in which one clings to the self as a motionless being. One occupies oneself in performing the mediating function while being aware of oneself as nothingness. Such a self is, in its essence, mediation; that is to say, it cannot stop mediating itself to the other. Thus, the self as nothingness *qua* mediation can be a *principle*

of solidarity. "Self-awareness is awareness of the self as nothingness. It is embodied by the fact that the self mediates the others. The true self-awareness is of such a religious nature; it naturally contains sociality on the basis of which it is established" (15.268).

According to Tanabe, through the mediation between the self and others, divine love is mediated to the actual world. For Tanabe, God or Divinity is the most radical, genuine nothingness. Consequently, it cannot act in the world to affect worldly beings directly. This is why God moves us, worldly subjects, to act for the others in the world (9.363). Our intersubjective, interpersonal practice in the world acquires a meaning of the agency of divine love. Tanabe claims that, "The absolute nothingness of God pivots on human existence; it is accomplished by the mediation of humans' negative emptiness" (9.315). He also states that, "The essence of relative self consists in the fact that it is a nothingness for mediating absolute nothingness; it is emptiness, void" (9.34; *Met.* 23).

Thus, for Tanabe, the nothingness and emptiness of the self do not entail backward-looking resignation; rather, by acting as an agent for divine love and great compassion, such an empty self can find salvation in being forgiven for its evilness, precisely because our evilness drives us to negate our self as an independent being. By being negated as a being, the self is approved as a non-being mediator through which the divine love manifests and substantiates itself in the midst of mutual relationships among worldly subjects. Our individual self can embody the unworldly transcendent value of love precisely because it is void and, in its essence, mediation. Only by being mediated by such worldly selves can divine love, in its turn, function as absolute mediation. "Hence the absolute is nothing but the absolute mediation at work in the mutual relationships between relatives" (9.251; *Met.* 276). "To love God and to love other humans are only possible by mutual mediation; they are two and one at the same time; and this is based on the fact that God is nothingness" (15.272).

Thus, Tanabe's idea of the self as nothingness shows itself as an ultimate consequence of the thought of absolute mediation, which leaves nothing unmediated.

I am keenly aware of the flaws of my presentation, in which Tanabe's concept of the self is oversimplified, but in this brief paper, I have attempted only to introduce a few of the characteristic features of this concept. According to my description, it may be said that Tanabe's concept of the self is not esoteric or mystical and that it does not simply repeat the conventional view of the allegedly Buddhist tradition. Rather, he attempts to draw a radical conclusion from the different conceptions of the self that are formed by modern Western philosophers and in the Buddhist tradition. Tanabe's attempt may stimulate our inevitably biased thinking to get in touch with and to be mediated by the reality of the self, which will never be secured in the form of a simple proposition.⁹ ♦

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