

Philosophy Live : A Perspective from Japan

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CHAPTER 5

THE INCOMPREHENSIBLE OTHER

In order to survive in this world, we have to be firmly grounded in a particular position or standpoint. Going through life without such grounding is like trying to perform some feat on a shifting cloud; being knocked off balance is inevitable.

So how are we to establish such a firm standpoint from which to get on in the world? Perhaps there is no recourse but to rely upon the Absolute and Infinite (*zettai mugensha*). As to whether such a being is within the mind or outside the mind, we perhaps do not need to decide one way or the other. Why? Because when a person seeking the Absolute and Infinite feels its presence, he or she cannot tell whether it is within or without. All we know is that without being in contact with this Absolute and Infinite, we cannot establish a firm footing for making our way through life. We also know that the path toward developing a mind thus firmly grounded is called spiritualism.⁵⁵

—Kiyozawa Manshi

The “Other” is a word used these days in all manner of senses, but here let me limit its meaning as follows: The Other is a “being” with which one must have some relationship yet that is impossible to understand. The Other stands in contrast to *ningen*—human beings whose nature is premised upon mutual understanding of each other, as discussed in Chapter 3 (cf. p. 35).

It must be said, however, that “being” is probably not a suitable concept here, for when we say “being” it gives the impression of something that is intrinsically autonomous without relationship to ourselves. Indeed, the debate over “being” has occupied a central position in the tradition of Western philosophy. What it is that truly exists is the issue of supreme importance, and true being is deemed to have the greatest value, making it a kind of ethical standard. The philosophy of Martin Heidegger (1889–1976)

⁵⁵ Kiyozawa 2001, p. 194. See also Tajima and Shacklock 1936, p. 3.

was founded on his ontology of Being; indeed, according to him what it means for a being to *Be* is the most basic issue of philosophy.

But just how appropriate is it to make “Being” the premise of philosophy? It seems rather futile, after all, to make an issue of the existence of anything that is unrelated to ourselves. We might pay attention to the existence of a star far off on the other side of the

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galaxy when we can observe it through an electronic telescope (or whatever means is used), but if there is a star that does not show up in our observations, we would not be concerned with it at all.

Some people might say that such stars exist whether we see them or not. We observe them just because our technology for observing the heavens has advanced. But that we did not observe them does not mean they did not exist. Regarding the micro-level world as well, human knowledge went only so far as the atom for a very long time, but eventually extended with the identification of the proton and then the neutron, and that knowledge was increasingly refined with the naming of ever-smaller particles of matter, until whether a particle can be called a particle at all was called into question. One might say that is simply the nature of matter, but the progress of science has certainly not ended; recently there is talk of the existence of an elusive presence filling the universe known as “dark matter,” and we really do not know what other new discoveries will be made.

No matter how deeply we probe, we will never reach the ultimate answer to what truly exists and we will never know the true nature of existence. Distancing himself from the epistemological, Kant called the true existence which is the origin of our cognition “things-in-themselves.”⁵⁶ But human beings cannot cognize things-in-themselves, he says. We cannot confirm that such things-in-themselves truly exist; we are left only to surmise that they *may* exist. Are not such things in fact unrelated to our lives and therefore of no consequence?

This argument seems to lead us to the idealist conclusion that what is cognizable relies on our ability to cognize things and that things which we cannot cognize do not exist or at least that we do not need to be concerned about them. Indeed, modern epistemological views of the self evolved in that direction. The world of things we are cognizant of is uncertain—they may be illusions, and yet the “I” that cognizes them does certainly exist, and we have already seen how that can fall victim to solipsism.

56 In his words: “[F]rom this deduction of our faculty of cognizing a priori [...] there emerges a very strange result [...], namely that with this faculty we can never get beyond the boundaries of possible experience, [...] and that such cognition reaches appearances only, leaving the thing in itself as something actual for itself but uncognized by us” (Bxix-xx). <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant/>

Solipsism, however, is untenable. People are born “among people” (as discussed in Chapter 3) from the outset, and it is impossible to consider human beings as completely isolated or autonomous. But if so, does that mean that everything is “between persons” and thus that trying to think of something outside of that is pointless? In the world of human beings, everything makes sense, everything is pervaded by reason. If reason is all-powerful, then there should be nothing unintelligible. If people were completely governed by reason, then there should be no Other.

But reality is far from that. I am always surrounded by what I cannot completely understand. I do not understand what they are, but they press upon me and haunt me; they are the Other. I am constantly haunted by these Others who are different from me. The Other does not act according to the rules that govern my perceptions of things as I perceive them. I can never fully grasp the Other; it is incomprehensible, it eludes my powers of understanding. So I am not only born “among people”; I am, while being “among people,” also related to the Other that I cannot wholly understand.

People do not always follow rules. Someone who has always understood what I say and with whom I have believed I had a good understanding might suddenly burst out in anger or even strike me. People are not always calm and rational. One does not know when a person might suddenly be transformed into an incomprehensible Other. Or maybe it should be said that people always have an Other-like quality within them; perhaps they understand me only in part and take the form of “among-people” humans only partially.

And so inevitably we find ourselves thrown into relations with the Other. When that happens, the important thing to be aware of is that the Other presses upon us from outside of ourselves. “Outside” may seem rather ambiguous, but by that I mean to say the “not I,” or that regarding which I exercise no freedom. It is not a matter of physical space; it is not an existential matter of some kind of Other being present in the space outside of me. In some cases, I am haunted by something, even though I am not even sure if this “something” exists or not—say, for example, an illusion. It may be that the Other in my illusion attacks or torments me.

As far as the nature of the Other is concerned, . . . what is the most important is what kind of relationship it has to me.

Insofar as we are more concerned with existence, illusion may never even enter into our discussion. People will say that you are simply tormenting yourself to think about illusion. However, to say that what torments me is an illusion is something that only a third party observing the situation could say. From my own viewpoint, it does not really matter whether the something that confronts me and torments me represents “true existence” or not. At least, that concern is secondary.

So, as far as the nature of the Other is concerned, we know that the question of existence is not the primary problem. What is the most important, rather, is what kind of

relationship it has to me. One might formulate this by saying that “relation comes before existence.” It then follows that the Other is more appropriately defined as “that which confronts me with a relationship that is incomprehensible to me.” We do not need to introduce the concept of existence into such a formula.

As I said before, when it comes to things that do not relate to me, the question of existence is not at issue. All that concerns me is that which captures my attention, no matter how faintly, and demands some relation to me, and—obtaining my recognition of it—then forces me into a relationship, whether it truly exists or not: That is the Other.

As a matter of fact, all things possess the qualities of Otherness. Even that which can be perceived spatially has its other side that we cannot see or understand, insofar as we cannot see through things. That of course is true not only for visual cognition, but applies generally to anything that the intellect cannot perceive or comprehend. Perhaps it is only the mathematical that can be made intellectually transparent. But even that is dubious. Not all that is mathematical can be clarified.

As suggested above, there is even an Otherness about ourselves. We cannot, after all, see even our own selves with complete clarity. What we know about ourselves is really just a faint picture of the whole. For example, we do not know clearly what the situation is like within our own bodies or how it functions. That sort of thing can only be known from the outside through the expertise of a doctor, the use of drugs, or specialized testing equipment.

The same applies, not only for the condition of the physical body, but for one’s mental or psychological state. I cannot say that I really understand the inner workings of my own heart and mind, and I cannot be in full control of those workings either. If we could know ourselves completely and control our hearts and minds, there would be no such thing as mental illness. As it is, I might think, for example, that I would be the last person to be a victim of depression, and yet suddenly find myself suffering from its symptoms. Even if the condition is not so extreme as to be clinically diagnosed, we have all had such experiences in our daily lives of feeling helpless in the face of our own moods or desires.

As this shows, I am also the Other to myself, and external to myself. Does that mean that there is no “inside” of myself? That cannot be said either. One’s own experience can only be grasped internally, so that is entirely a matter inside, a matter that is thoroughly private. If I have an illusion, it is something only I can see. Shock, too, is something that one experiences alone; others will not experience the same impact of something that I feel. In that sense, it is a matter within me, but I do not understand well what is going on there. Our insides are full of what we cannot know and thus definitively “outside” us, in the same way that, when we dig down into the earth, we come across successive layers of earth, various minerals, ores, and metals, along with troves of relics from the past that cannot be seen from the surface.

What then, is this “I” surrounded by the Other? How is the oneness that is “I” maintained? This is a subject I would like to take up in Chapter 7, but to suggest the direction I am going, let me say that I do not think any complete oneness of the “I” is maintained at all. “I” is fluid; it expands and contracts. Just as the Other may not take material form, so “I,” too, is something that is elusive and does not take material form.

The Ultimate Other

Philosophy was not always so concerned with the matter of “the Other.” If the opacity and mystery of the Other could be eliminated through the powers of reason and all would become clear and knowable, then in principle there would be no such thing as the unknowable Other. Greek philosophy indeed developed out of the intention to identify the laws governing all things, and the basic premise of that tradition was the existence of such laws. In the medieval West, human knowledge was thought to be incomplete, but since God was all-knowing, there would be nothing that was unknowable of God’s absolute knowledge. Then, in modern times, with the development of science, human beings embarked on the task of obtaining God’s all-knowing power for themselves. It was thought that although our current knowledge might be limited, in due course everything would become clear and understood.

The same notion can be found in Eastern philosophy. In Buddhism, for example, while an all-knowing god is not recognized in the usual intellectual sense, the Buddha after attaining enlightenment is thought to have understood the most profound truths of the world. That would mean that for Buddha, there was nothing that was not transparent and knowable. The same would apply to enlightenment attained in Zen. Even in Confucianism, Zhu Xi (Chu Hsi) taught that through the control of individual temperament (*ki*) and the clarification of universal principles (*ri*), one could attain the state of sagehood.

As against this sort of optimism regarding the possibility of attaining complete and universal knowledge, even in the field of epistemology, it is no longer thought that such universality of knowledge can ever be obtained. One of the major questions that occupied Edmund Husserl in the latter years of his life was how the Other was perceived and whether inter-subjective knowledge was possible. Wittgenstein, too, in the word games of his later period highlighting language as a means of bridging understanding between people on the level of words, ended up bringing to light the difficulty of understanding in cases when language is not understood. So the problem of the incomprehensible Other is today the focus of considerable attention.

Contemplating the problem of the Other and tracing it back in the tradition of Western thought brings us to the problem of God in the Old Testament. The way God is depicted as treating humans there is not something that can necessarily be understood logically, as classically illustrated by the *Book of Job*. Job was a man of devotion and duty,

but God allowed Satan to test Job's faith. Satan took away all Job's possessions and the people dearest to him, ravaged him with disease, and visited all sorts of hardship upon him. But Satan did not succeed in shaking Job's faith in God and in the end Job prospered. The story is difficult to accept, however, from the viewpoint of the logical and universal access to knowledge, because of the cruel and unreasonable way that Job's faith was tested and the fact that God gave Satan a free hand in the testing. It doesn't make sense.

Another example is the story of Abraham in *Genesis*. As leader of the tribe, Abraham had led the people of Israel in accordance with the will of God and then, despite finally having been blessed with a son at an advanced age, suddenly he is ordered by God to sacrifice his son. When Abraham meekly follows the command and is about to kill Isaac, God recognizes the purity of his faith and stays his hand. That story, too, evokes a treatment of humankind that seems all too unreasonable. Since Søren Kierkegaard's (1813–1855) detailed examination of the story of Abraham in his work *Fear and Trembling*, questions about these stories have again entered philosophical discourse.

Among human beings, it may be possible to attain understanding—sometimes only with great difficulty—with each other, but when dealing with an absolute God, there is no choice but to accept what God does, no matter how cruel or irrational. The one and only absolute God, therefore, is the foremost among incomprehensible Others. In ancient times, that Other-like incomprehensibility was softened somewhat through the intercession of Jesus Christ. The rational discourse about God developed by scholars of medieval theology further alleviated the strict Otherness of God.

Discussions of the Other in modern times made great strides through the work of Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas (1906–1995). Before looking at Lévinas, however, I should mention the earlier scholar of religious philosophy, Martin Buber (1878–1965). According to Buber, as explained in his book *I and Thou*, human beings adopt two types of attitudes toward the world. One way is in terms of relations between “I” and “It.” The other way is between “I” and “Thou.” In contrast to the “I-It” attitude, in which the relationship with “it” is objectified, the “I-Thou” relationship is personalized. Even when the relationship is with another human being, if it is one that can be used for one's own benefit, it will become an “I-It” relationship. Only if a personal bond is to be established between people will the relationship become one between “I” and “Thou.”

What characterizes Buber as a Jewish scholar of philosophy is that he has placed at the basis of the “I-Thou” relationship the “eternal Thou,” that is, the monotheistic, absolute God. In other words, the relationship with the “eternal Thou” is what makes individual relationships between the human “I” and “Thou” possible. “The relation with man is the real simile of the relation with God; in it true address receives true response.”⁵⁷ Buber did not make a particular point of verifying the existence of God as the “eternal

⁵⁷ Buber 2000, p. 103.

Thou.” This is because the direct relationship with the eternal Thou has been formed beyond individual I-Thou relationships as the prior premise, as he says, “Only one Thou never ceases by its nature to be *Thou* for us.”⁵⁸

We should note here that in saying these things, Buber is denying the notion of a mystical union with God. Union with God would mean that “Thou” is no longer a “Thou.” “Thou” can never be one with “I” and continues to have the character of Other. A person encounters God through revelation. But, says Buber, “All revelation is summons and sending.”⁵⁹ That explains why the relationship with God is not one relating only to God, but through God enters into the reality of the world. And it is therein that social activities makes sense.

Buber’s ideas in some respects remain alive today. The part of the relationship with the God that has a very strong Judaic character has been obscured and the difference in relations between “I and Thou” and “I and It” is often cited. Departing from Buber’s terminology, the idea is roughly the same as what is called a relationship in the second person and a relationship in the third person.

Emmanuel Lévinas’s theory of Other is structurally the same as that of Buber, but the way “Thou” manifests itself differs. Buber was connected with the Zionist movement, and after being driven out of Germany by Hitler, moved to Jerusalem. His faith in God remained strong and unequivocal. It was difficult for Jews who had suffered at Auschwitz and restarted their lives from nothing after the end of World War II to entertain such firm belief in God after what they had been through. They had been thrust into the kind of ordeal that Job witnessed and seen many who received no such mercy. This was the experience that shaped Lévinas’s ideas on the Other. Here let us look at the gist of his main work, *Totality and Infinity*.

Lévinas draws a clear distinction between the “same” and the “other.” The “I” is irrevocably the “same” and other people are “other,” and the two cannot be merged. Western philosophy up to Lévinas had made assiduous efforts to dissolve the “other” into the “same.” The transformation of everything into the “same” brings into being the concept of totality. However, there are things that cannot be encompassed within that totality, which break away or transcend it, becoming “other” nevertheless. The Other is infinitely separated from the “I.”

The way the Other manifests itself vis-à-vis “I” is what Lévinas calls the “face.” He defines “face,” writing, “The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me*, we here name face.”⁶⁰ The Other does not appear the way I think it will

58 Buber 2000, p. 99.

59 Buber 2000, p. 115.

60 Lévinas 1961, p. 50.

appear, but catches me unawares. He continues, “The face is present in its refusal to be contained. In this sense it cannot be comprehended, that is, encompassed.”⁶¹

Lévinas explains the Other as appearing as the alien or anomalous, the weak or vulnerable, or the poor. This is probably based on Lévinas’s own personal experience as a Jew. Born in Lithuania, he studied in Germany and France, and became a French citizen. He was captured by the Germans while serving in the French army and although he himself survived, all his close kin were killed by the Nazis. Irrevocably the alien, Lévinas was haunted also by the voices of the victims of the Nazi extermination program. Such were the circumstances that defined Lévinas’s thinking, preventing him from feeling the kind of affinity that Buber felt for the Other.

Therefore, although Lévinas writes of the Other as a “quasi-nothing,” vulnerable and easily erased, the Other retains this power to oppose and struggle against me. He does not oppose me with overwhelming force, but rather by his weakness, his defenseless gaze, appeals to me, as if to say, “you shall not commit murder.” That is what Lévinas terms “ethical resistance.” It is a resistance without direct opposition, that challenges the temptation to murder.⁶²

Lévinas’s theory of the Other crushes optimistic notions of “I-Thou” relations. But in pressing upon “I” an inevitable relationship, his idea is not far from that of Buber. Also resembling Buber is his basing of the relationship upon God as the absolute Other. Lévinas says his position is as an atheist, but his atheism rejects not the idea of God, but the possibility of “participation” in the divine, as it would rob the Other of otherness. In that it is rather like Buber’s rejection of union with the mystical God. However, he does not think, as does Buber, that the “I” can have a direct relationship with God.

Lévinas talks about the “invisible God.” This is not a god one can directly approach. Rather, one approaches God indirectly through ethics, understood as our relationship with the Other. God, in other words, hides himself behind the interrelationships among human beings.

The Realm Inhabited by the Other

Buber considered that the framework of I-Thou relations might not be limited to humans but could extend to other living or inanimate things, but he nonetheless assumes the ascendancy of human beings. In Lévinas’s thought, Other is limited basically to humans. Both men take the absolute God in the background as the basic premise, respectively, of I-Thou relations or relations with the Other.

A quite similar structure can also be seen in the philosophy of Kiyozawa Manshi (1863–1903). Kiyozawa studied philosophy at Tokyo Imperial University, but instead

61 Lévinas 1961, p. 194.

62 Lévinas 1961, pp. 199–200.

of pursuing his studies in academia, he became a follower of the Ōtani school of Shin (True Pure Land) Buddhism and was involved in the reform of the sect as it faced the changes taking place in Buddhism with the advent of the modern era. During that time, he struggled with tuberculosis, coming face-to-face with death, and deepened his study of religious philosophy. In the final years of his life, based at the Kōkōdō (his private school in the Hongō area of Tokyo), he and his disciples led a “seishinshugi” (spiritualism) movement and published a magazine called *Seishinkai* (Spiritual World). These activities were to become the starting point of modern doctrinal studies for the Shin school and also exerted a broad trans-sectarian influence in Buddhism.

From the time of the essays he wrote on religious philosophy in his younger days, Kiyozawa worked on building a system of thought from the perspective of the relationship between the finite dimension of humanity and the Absolute Infinity (*zettai mugen*; he also calls this “the Absolute and Infinite,” *zettai mugensha*) that is Amida Buddha. The feature of Kiyozawa’s work was that instead of the specifically Buddhist deity Amida Buddha, he used the universalistic philosophical term “the Absolute Infinite.” He resembled Buber and Lévinas, too, in directly tackling the issues of religion and ethics.

Now let us look at Kiyozawa’s basic philosophy through his essay “Shūkyō to rinri no sōkan” (The Correlation of Religion and Ethics). This essay criticizes ideas that treat religion and ethics as equivalent or that emphasize ethics, and establishes religion and ethics as two distinct realms. In this respect he differs from Lévinas, who emphasized ethics. Kiyozawa defines human beings as relative and finite entities. After all, we cannot exist in isolation but can only survive as one in relation to others, and that is the realm of ethics and morals.

The self-reliance of those who share these finite, relative relations, however, cannot be attained by ethics and morals alone. “People are led to recognize that considering the relative and finite nature of the self and others, there has to be the Absolute Infinity that is distinct from the self and others.”⁶³ In this way, people transcend their finite relations with each other and come into a relationship with the Absolute and Infinite, which is the realm of religion. They are taken beyond the realm of ethics into the realm of religion. The Absolute and Infinite can be seen as an Other that is completely separate from the “I.”

Buber’s and Lévinas’s ideas about the Self and Other were premised upon the Judaean God. Buber believed that it was possible to forge a direct relationship with God, whereas Lévinas places “God” in the background as the “invisible God.” How does the Absolute and Infinite manifest itself in Kiyozawa? On this point, we may look back at the paragraph quoted at the head of this chapter. These lines were part of a text that can be seen as Kiyozawa’s declaration when he launched the “spiritualism” movement in the

63 Kiyozawa 2001, p. 194.

last years of his life. There he says we need not ask whether the Absolute and Infinite is “within the mind or outside the mind.” This statement expresses his questioning of premodern Jōdo (Pure Land) Buddhism in which the Buddha—Amida Buddha—is considered external.

With the modern age, the concept of Amida Buddha as abiding in the “Western Paradise” became less persuasive, and Kiyozawa continues from the passage quoted above as follows. “Spiritualism is the seeking of fulfillment within one’s own mind. So there is no need to follow some external lead or suffer agony or distress in the effort to obey others.”⁶⁴ He declares clearly that to reach the Absolute and Infinite or Buddhahood, one need not search outside the self but only “within the mind,” hence, “spiritualism” (*seishinshugi*).

Is this *seishinshugi* the same as the Western philosophical concept of idealism? Arguing that “*Seishinshugi* does not necessarily exclude the exterior,” Kiyozawa refuses to fall into philosophical idealism. This is clearly spelled out in his essay “*Seishinshugi to yuishinron*” (On the Distinction between Spiritualism and Idealism). What Kiyozawa sought is not something theoretical as in the spiritualism-vs.-materialism framework, not

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directs me.*

an objective philosophy, but the nature of the subject’s being—how one should relate to the Other that is the Absolute and Infinite. One might say that exterior existence is phenomenologically suspended in judgment, and attention is focused upon the relationship between the relative and finite I and the Absolute and Infinite Buddha. In other words, relationship precedes existence.

Here, therefore, the question whether the Absolute and Infinite exists or not is irrelevant. Just because it is “in the mind” does not mean that it is something that I made up in my own finite mind. Even if one has encountered the Absolute and Infinite through introspection, it does not mean that such a being is something closed up within oneself, but that it is manifested as an Other bursting out from within. One might call it the “outside within.” What I find in the course of my introspection is an Other that transcends the finite me, lodges within me, prods me to action, and provokes and directs me.

Kiyozawa’s discussion of Absolute Infinity does not necessarily explain things so clearly, but one might say that it does at least lead in that direction. Admitting that, he does not go quite as far as Lévinas’s theory of the Other. In the above-mentioned essay on the correlation of religion and ethics, Kiyozawa says, “Human beings are two-layered”;⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Kiyozawa 2001, p. 194.

⁶⁵ Kiyozawa 2001, p. 190.

one layer represents the human being as microcosmos and the other the human being as the universe: The human being as microcosmos is finite and relative, but as macrocosmos, the human being is equivalent to Absolute Infinity. That is to say, considered in terms of the grand scheme of things, it is possible for a relative, finite human being to become one with the universe. This can be considered to be close to the notion of union with God or *participacion* as criticized by Buber and Lévinas.

After he became an advocate of spiritualism, Kiyozawa rarely asserted his ideas on union with the universe, and his orientation to posit the Absolute and Infinite as Other-like became stronger, but in the position of Buddhism in general, the notion of union with the universe is by no means unnatural. Of course, the idea of the absolute versus the relative ego is Brahmanistic, not Buddhist. There is no conceptual axis in Buddhism that places Absolute Infinity and the relative and finite character of humans decisively in conflict. It appears that Kiyozawa's conflict between Absolute Infinity and humans was rather strongly influenced by Christianity and diverges from the usual thrust of Buddhist thought.

This is one of the greatest points of difference between Buddhism and the Judaean monotheistic God of Christianity or Islam. In the Judaic tradition, God as the ultimate Other is completely different from humans and is the creator of this world. Buber and Lévinas do not make much of the dimension of God as the Creator, but they stress that he is absolutely "Other"—not something into which humans can assimilate. It is assumed that only with such an absolute God at the basis that people's relations with human Others will function properly. In contrast to this form of the Absolute and Infinite, Buddhism's buddhas were originally ordinary mortals, who became buddhas through asceticism and training, and who are therefore made of the same stuff as humans. Amida, the principal Buddha of the Pure Land schools, too, was an ascetic named Hōzō Bosatsu (Bodhisattva Dharmākara) who sat in meditation for five *koṭi* (an ancient Indian unit of time) and attained buddhahood, after which he went on to work for the salvation of ordinary people. So in Kiyozawa's work, while he uses the term Absolute Infinite, the Buddha he refers to is not endowed with any of the absoluteness of the Old Testament God. It would not be surprising, then, if Kiyozawa's idea of Amida incorporated the quality of "the Other" as well as "the same" that we share.

This is the issue I would like to explore from various angles in the chapters that follow. For example, as to whether the "I" maintains an absolute self-sameness vis-à-vis the Other, that apparently is not so. In accordance with the diversity of the Other, the character of self-sameness of the "I" fluctuates, and the line between "I" and "Other" often becomes ambiguous. Also, in the way macrocosmos

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and microcosmos can become one, we cannot ignore the dimension of us being absorbed into the totality. I will return to this issue in Chapters 7 and 8.

The point I would like to make in this chapter is that depending upon the type of Other, the nature of the Other can be quite different. In the case of Kiyozawa, the type of Other is not an absolute God completely separated from “I”; the Other is rather a familiar presence, characterized as not being assimilatable, but rather, maintaining its heterogeneity. As I stated earlier, the Other is that which does not fit into the territory of the human being as “among people.”

What belongs to the realm of the Other? Buber thought that organic matter and manufactured goods could be included in the scope of “Thou,” but humans were central. Lévinas seems not to have considered anything other than humans and the “invisible God.” And of course he would not have included a pantheon of deities represented in the form of idols. His thinking follows a strict worldview based on the Judaic tradition. Even within Christianity, Catholicism tolerates the notions of spiritual beings other than God in the form of angels, Satan, and the saints, while such elements are rarely seen in Protestantism. With the progress of modern rationalism, inhabitants of the ambiguous realm distinct from Absolute Infinity and not “among people” were gradually consigned to the irrational and eventually eliminated. Beings that cannot be explained rationally and scientifically were dismissed as superstition and given no place at all, their names stricken from any record.

Is this really such a good thing? Of course, as I observed above, people who ought to be understood as “human” (*ningen* 人間), turn out to have aspects of the incomprehensible, and even the “I”—whom we ought to know best—continues to be in some respects the Other. And that is not all. When we look back at Japan’s medieval times, we find that in addition to all the visible existence of the world, people recognized the existence of all sorts of invisible Other-like beings, the foremost among which were the Shintō gods (*kami*) and Buddhist deities. Japan’s *kami*—representing the divine in indigenous belief—are rather different from the Greek gods. They tend to lack human-like idiosyncracies and yet are characterized by holding unfathomable power over human beings—their Other-like character is quite strong. Because of the traditions of Buddhist statuary, the Buddhist deity image as an idol asserts itself, but Buddhist deities are actually a pantheon of buddhas, bodhisattvas, *myōō*, and so forth. In neither case are these deities of the same character as the Judaic absolute divine being, nor can they be described as idols (fully visual representations). They could be described as “intermediately invisible.” They form a realm of the Other whose outlines are not clearly delineated.

Jien (1155–1225), the medieval historian of Buddhism called this realm of the Other “*myō*” (冥; concealed, shadowy; otherworldly) and contrasted it with the comprehensible realm of humanity or “*ken*” (顯; open, exposed, thisworldly). We think that history unfolds according to the laws of the world of *ken*. But according to Jien, in fact,

history is set in motion largely by the laws of the world of *myō*. For example, the lord-vassal relationship between the family of the Japanese emperors and the regency families was based on an alliance formed in the world of *myō* between their ancestors, the deities Amaterasu and Amanokoyane.

Today such a story might seem rather preposterous, but at least in medieval times, it was quite persuasive and the notion that the world was made up of these two realms of *ken* and *myō* was widely accepted. In that world, dreams played an important role. While today dreams are thought to be result of individual urges or aspirations or little more than expressions of the collective unconscious, in medieval times, they opened up channels to the world of *myō*. Dreams were not part of the real world, but transcended the *ken* world of reality, offering footholds leading to the greater world of *myō*.

Understandings of the world of *myō* shifted through subsequent ages. In Japan's early modern (Edo period) times, gradually the *ken* world was expanded and inhabitants of the *myō* world were given visible, albeit weakened, form as apparitions (*yōkai*), and ghosts (*yūrei*). In the modern period, these beings were considered relics of the past and eliminated at least from the outer surface of the rational order. As Japanese intellectuals became avid students of Western science, they increasingly scorned and sidelined the world of *myō* as mere superstition, and the monism of the thisworldly realm of *ken* became complete.

Yet it was not as if the world that was represented by *myō* had completely disappeared. Even though the world of *myō* might have been eliminated from the realm of public discourse, it remains inconspicuously in the background. Even Japan's modern emperor system continues to be sustained by the ancient ethos of the emperor as the incomprehensible, living god of the world of *myō*, which cannot be explained in the kind of logical, theoretical terms demanded by our current age.

Another major issue of the *myō* world of the Other is the matter of death. Issues regarding the dead, who are invisible, transcending the visible world of the living, were eliminated from public discussion in the modern era, although lately the subject is returning to discourse. I will take up this subject in Chapter 6.

In concluding this chapter, let me lay out diagrammatically the points regarding the Other that I have been trying to make (see the figures). Figure 1 shows the basic scheme of the Christian worldview, in which the one and absolute God faces off with human beings, as seen typically in Buber's formulation of "I" and "Thou." Ideas of neighborly love among people are based on this model of the relationship. Figure 2 shows the modern atheist worldview, where God has been excluded. In this scheme, this world is the only world, and is governed only by science and the ethics prevailing among people. Watsuji Tetsurō's ethics, which does not take into account the Other outside human relations, belongs to this scheme.

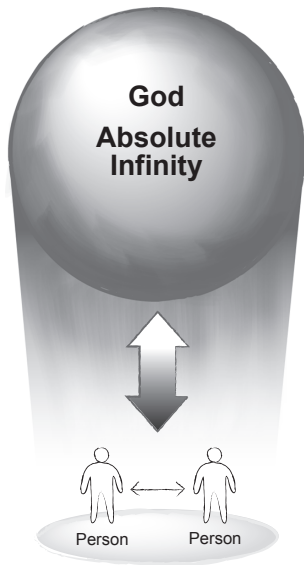


Figure 1 The basic framework of the Christian worldview

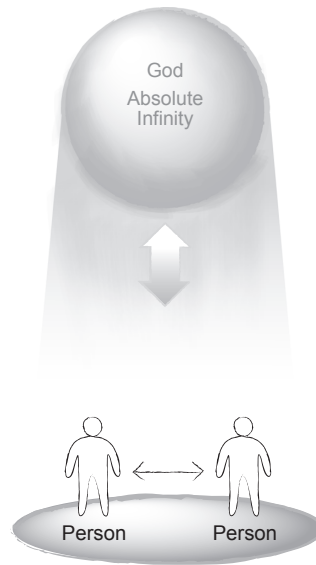


Figure 2 The basic framework of the modern worldview

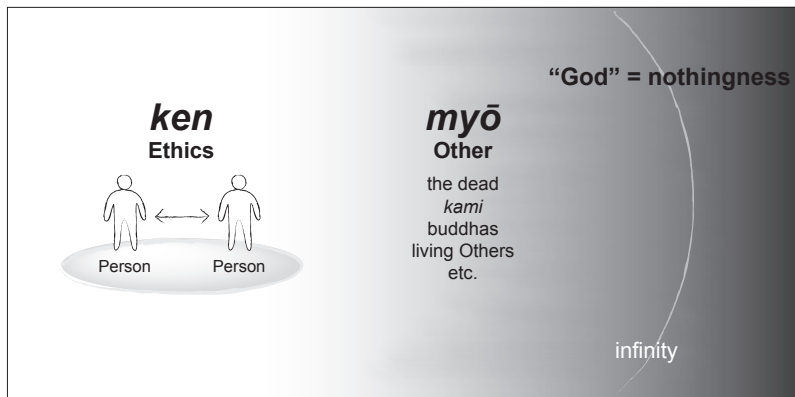


Figure 3 The basic framework of the worldview based on Japanese religion

What I have tried to suggest in this chapter is the worldview outlined in Figure 3. Outside the *ken* (thisworldly) realm of ethics governing people-to-people relations, is a vast world of the Other that cannot be explained by secular ethics. This is the world of *myō*. Even among people who meet each other every day and who successfully communicate in the thisworldly realm, there are in fact aspects of *myō* that cannot be grasped by *ken* terms. Not only that, there is the “invisible” which cannot be admitted into the world of *ken*, such as the gods, buddhas, and the dead. What lies at the ultimate extreme of *myō* is where the monotheistic God is located that can only be described by the term *mu* (emptiness, nothing). This I would like to examine in Chapter 8.