Introduction

Faith, Flesh, and *Basho*

The fifteenth-century German philosopher and theologian Nicolaus de Cusa described God as an "infinite circle whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere." The origin of this saying is uncertain; it might have been spoken earlier by Empedocles or the mythical Hermes Trismegistus. A later religious philosopher, Pascal, as well as a staunch critic of religion, Voltaire, also invoke the dictum. So too do Nishida and Merleau-Ponty. The Kyoto School philosopher appeals to the notion throughout his writings to describe the "absolute present," and "absolute nothingness," whereas for the French thinker it is philosophy itself that is such a circumferenceless circle. Given the philosophic and religious appeals to this idea throughout history, its invocation at decisive moments of Nishida's and Merleau-Ponty's writings raises perplexing questions concerning the status of their philosophies in relation to religion, and the possible resonance between their projects. If their philosophies conform to this geometry, if they are circles whose circumferences are nowhere and centers everywhere, how might they overlap? And, if they do, how might we draw a comparative line from one project to the other, or conceive of the intercultural distance between East and West when the fields of philosophy are configured according to this enigmatic geometry?

The implications of this question are wide ranging for this dialogue in particular and for comparative philosophy in general. Certainly, they are much too broad for any single study, nevertheless, the provocative similarities between Nishida's and Merleau-Ponty's philosophies—only heightened by critical differences—call for a dialogue between the two, which embraces the challenges of intercultural encounter at a deep level. Nishida (西田幾多郎, 1870–1945) and Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961) lived in worlds

with little overlap at the time, and despite not having spoken each other's languages or had access to each other's writings, there are, nonetheless, remarkable similarities and critical differences running throughout the entirety of their projects, presenting an exceptional opportunity for intercultural dialogue. Both of their far-reaching undertakings began as attempts to divert from Western metaphysical dualism. While they are by no means the only thinkers East or West to do so, they both strive to meet this challenge by exploring the moving and perceiving body, particularly as it can be studied in artistic expression. Beyond this shared point of departure, the terminus of their projects further motivates the encounter between the two: As their works culminate in their ontologies of flesh (*chair*) and *Basho* (場所), a philosophically curious concept comes to the fore in their late writings, namely the concept of faith, thus further invoking the question regarding religion. Neither would live to fully realize the implications of this notion, yet the extent to which faith confounds Western philosophy's self-conception compels a reading of their works in tandem. To that end, this study stages a dialogue between Merleau-Ponty and Nishida, to explore the similarities and differences between their conceptions of faith in hopes of expanding the problematics this concept poses for philosophic methodology that too easily distinguishes itself from religious and artistic practice.

Despite the intriguing affinities between the two philosophers, there are, of course, important, sometimes implacable differences that punctuate the encounter. We find one crucial point of divergence at the very outset: Nishida's is a religious faith (*shinnen* 信念), while Merleau-Ponty speaks of a perceptual form of faith (*foi perceptive*). This presents obvious challenges, nevertheless, neither of their conceptions of faith adhere to a strict sacred-secular binary, nor does either thinker interpret faith as the choice of a subject. By contrast, faith, for Nishida and Merleau-Ponty, is an orientation that negates the subject while affording a world beyond the sacred-secular opposition and philosophic methodology not categorically opposed to religion.

The philosophies of Nishida and Merleau-Ponty represent two distinct responses to a similar impulse. They pose a serious challenge to the philosophic method, not only in terms of its relation to faith and religion, but also regarding philosophy's relation to artistic expression. While their considerations of faith bring religious problematics into philosophy, they also suggest how the artist has developed more viable practices for enacting a version of faith that philosophy has neglected but must face. In reading their depictions of artistic expression along these lines, we can articulate new continuities between their earlier writings on artistic expression and their

later works, as well as build conceptual bridges that enable the similarities and differences to circulate among their respective projects; bridges, which likewise, in one small way, span philosophy East and West.

Carrying out such a dialogue poses a substantial challenge to philosophy's self-conception, since it has historically been delineated in straightforward opposition to artistic expression and religious practices involving faith. Hoping to amplify this challenge, I explore Nishida's and Merleau-Ponty's theories of expression as motor-perceptual conceptions of faith. If it is meaningful to speak of the term I propose in this book's title, "motor-perceptual faith," it is only half neologistic since it derives from Merleau-Ponty's concept of "perceptual faith" (foi perceptive), or perhaps less than half neologistic since for him perception is always motor-perception. Thus, through a straightforward act of conceptual analysis, we might take perceptual faith to already be motor-perceptual faith. Nevertheless, if there might be a motor aspect that we can productively think alongside his concept of "perceptual faith," Merleau-Ponty does not appear to have explicitly drawn out these possibilities. This study is an attempt to do that work. What we find when unearthing the motor significance of "perceptual faith" is twofold. First, Merleau-Ponty's earlier depiction of artistic expression comes into focus as prefiguring the later concept. Looking back at "Cézanne's Doubt" from *The Visible and the Invisible*, the artist's work can, on my reading, be construed as a practice of "motor-perceptual faith." That is, his rendering of Cézanne's practice calls for the motor elements implicit to his later concept "perceptual faith." Second, when those motor implications come to light, intriguing pathways illumine that enable dialogue with Nishida's philosophy, whose theory of faith has comparable motor and perceptual features when considered in light of his theory of artistic expression. I thus propose to explore the possibilities of a sensorimotor faith as a provisional interpretive device derived from the encounter between the two thinkers, which, I must emphasize, is reducible to neither. I do not claim that there is a similar concept of motor-perceptual faith found in either of their projects. Rather, it is a meeting point where similarities and differences among their philosophies can circulate, sometimes productively, other times leading to irreconcilable differences. Certainly, one of the concerns I explore at greatest length (see chapter 4, "Seeing without a Seer" and Moving without a Mover) is a crucial variance between Nishida and Merleau-Ponty's ideas of the obstructions inherent to motion and perception. While the French thinker articulates explicit limits where perception is obstructed, the same question evokes possible inconsistencies in the writings of the Kyoto School philosopher. With this in mind, I seek

to render this tension productive by elucidating similarities and differences between their notions of faith, hoping to discover new conceptual continuities and discontinuities among their projects and beyond any too-facile distinctions between art, religion, and philosophy East and West.

I will not in any way suggest that one should neglect the important qualities that distinguish philosophy, art, or religion East or West. Yet, in following Nishida and Merleau-Ponty's incitement to think beyond identity-difference binaries, we cannot take their philosophies seriously while applying the very logic they refute in service of upholding crude disciplinary or methodological boundaries. To think beyond rigid distinctions between philosophy, religion, and art might seem an appropriate approach to Nishida's philosophy, but not to Merleau-Ponty's. After all, historically speaking, Nishida's East Asian tradition has allowed greater fluidity in terms of delineating religious, aesthetic, and philosophic methodology. As I discuss in chapter 3 regarding the painter-priest Sesshū Tōyō, being a landscape artist was at once a religious as well as a philosophic practice. Whereas these boundaries tend to be more strictly enforced in the West, we must acknowledge how numerous critical features of Merleau-Ponty's understanding of philosophy—its relation to "non-philosophy"; the centrality of artistic expression in his writings; his explicit remarks about the ambiguity between religion and philosophy; and the unexplored implications of faith for his thought—when taken together, entice one to explore his project beyond simple disciplinary borders.

Nishida's project began as a deliberate attempt to establish a liminal position between disciplines and cultures. His philosophical undertaking was from its inception an explicit synthesis of Eastern and Western thought in what many have referred to as a "world philosophy." I discuss this feature of his thought at greater length throughout, yet his status as an intercultural philosopher is beyond dispute. Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, is, of course, not known for having developed intercultural thought in any systematic way, nevertheless, one does not have to look far to see that he was, in fact, an unrecognized champion of intercultural thinking and a vocal critic of the Eurocentrism of his time, which demoted Asian thought to an inferior status. In his *Les Philosophes Célèbres* (1956) Merleau-Ponty proves a rare exception to encyclopedists who exclude the East from their compendia. That work of 1956 not only includes but *begins with* four chapters on Asian philosophers with a forward by Merleau-Ponty, "*L'Orient et la Philosophie*." Three years earlier, in his essay "Everywhere and Nowhere," he works to redeem Western philosophy from its deeply rooted chauvinism by taking aim at the philosophers who did not flinch at

excluding the East from "true" philosophy—primary among whom is Hegel, but also those who inherited his mistakes, which includes Husserl.[1] Against Husserl, who considered Chinese and Indian philosophy to be "empirical or anthropological specimens," Merleau-Ponty argues that "if Western thought is what it claims to be, it must prove it by understanding all 'life-worlds.' "[2] He further undermines any strict East–West distinction when he writes, "Pure or absolute philosophy, in the name of which Hegel excluded the Orient, also excludes a good part of the Western past."[3] Countering the Hegelian condemnation of Indian and Chinese philosophies to a state of "immaturity," philosophies never able to develop to the level of universality the West had, Merleau-Ponty proves uniquely sensitive for his time when he writes:

> Indian and Chinese philosophies have tried not so much to dominate existence as to be the echo or the sounding board of our relationship to being. Western philosophy can learn from them to rediscover the relationship to being and initial option which gave it birth, and to estimate the possibilities we have shut ourselves off from in becoming "Westerners" and perhaps reopen them.[4]

A significant thrust of "Everywhere and Nowhere" involves dismantling Hegel's "geographical frontier between philosophy and non-philosophy,"[5] the latter being the thinking of any tradition not progenitor or inheritor of the universalism of the Western Enlightenment. Rather than a single tradition at the top of the philosophical hierarchy, below which we find non-phi-

---

1. Husserl distinguished between the purely theoretical type of knowing characteristic of the European tradition, which carries that project from its Greek origin, and the "empirical anthropological type" of knowledge that is characteristic of China and India. Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*. Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, sees all thought traditions, including his own, as empirical or "ethnophilosophical" in the sense of being inescapably conditioned by their anthropological specificities. See Hwa Yol Jung, "Revolutionary Dialectics: Mao Tse-Tung and Maurice Merleau-Ponty."

2. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Les Philosophes Célèbres*.

3. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 138.

4. Ibid., 139.

5. Ibid., 138.

losophy, Merleau-Ponty implores that "subordinating 'non-philosophy' to true philosophy will not create the unity of the human spirit. It already exists in each culture's lateral relationships to the others, in the echoes one awakes in the other."[6] Both Kwok-Ying Lau and Hwa Yol Jung see in Merleau-Ponty's concept of the "lateral universal" a paradigm for world philosophy.[7] He was a Western philosopher through and through, yet was not interested in excluding non-philosophy or demoting it to an inferior status; he rather sought the "Orient's secret, muted contribution to philosophy."[8] He wanted a lateral way of thinking that not only took into account the point of view on both ends of intercultural encounter, but also believed that "the mistaken views each has of the other can all find a place." What results is not a universal philosophy that shuns meaningful dialogue with other "particular" thought traditions, but what Merleau-Ponty describes as a "more comprehensive experience which becomes in principle accessible to men of a different time and country."[9] It is perhaps unfortunate that such an important thinker did not develop his inspiring intercultural openness into a more systematic facet of his philosophy, but the extent to which his thinking proves remarkably open and inviting to encounter with other thought traditions—in this study and a growing volume of scholarship that places him in dialogue with other non-Western traditions—might suggest that his cultural broad-mindedness and his refusal to peddle the Eurocentrism of his own tradition enabled a way of thinking that deserves attention and praise for its world-philosophical potential.

———◦———

6. Ibid., 139.

7. Jung sees the concept as a "transversalist" alternative to the exclusionary universality the West upholds to distinguish itself from the thought of other cultures. He goes so far as to refer to Merleau-Ponty, as "unmistakably a consummate transversalist avant la letter." Hwa Yol Jung, *Transversal Rationality and Intercultural Texts: Essays in Phenomenology and Comparative Philosophy*, 23. Lau proposes that his "lateral" thinking is a viable way to disabuse Western medicine of its universal claims and to incorporate traditional Chinese medicine. Kwok-Ying, Lau, *Phenomenology and Intercultural Understanding: Toward a New Cultural Flesh*, 167–169.

8. Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 140.

9. Ibid., 120.

Despite Nishida's explicit intercultural approach, and Merleau-Ponty's openness to thinking beyond the constraints of his tradition, many good reasons endure for proceeding cautiously with this comparison. For instance, even between philosophers open to such dialogue, there are sometimes vastly divergent philosophical methodologies that have characterized the traditions out of which their thinking grows. The Western lineage we trace back to Greece has developed a set of practices and institutions that differ in fundamental ways from those that have evolved throughout East Asia. This leads many to question whether "philosophy" is even an appropriate term for the intellectual and spiritual traditions in this part of the world. The precursors to Nishida's philosophy, which include Buddhism, Daoism, Shintoism, and Confucianism, embrace religious, devotional, and meditative practices typically excluded from Western secular philosophy. A variety of practices originating in India and spreading through China, Korea, and Japan were legitimate sites for engaging in what amounted to philosophic-religious exercise. These included landscape painting, haiku poetry, rock gardening, calligraphy, tea ceremony, and—one of the most significant features that distinguishes the East Asian tradition from the Western tradition—the various bodily exercises of self-cultivation, including meditative and linguistic practices. Although exceptions exist, such practices are almost completely absent from Western philosophy, which has kept a strong hold on the distinctions between speculative, devotional, and artistic practices. No doubt there are good reasons to approach various studies according to distinct methodologies. Disciplinary specialization can achieve a great deal, and Western philosophy has made many advancements within this mode of inquiry. Yet, where the specialization of the Western tradition endures as an impediment to dialogue with a foreign tradition able to derive insights from a plethora of methodologies, a tacit and limiting commitment remains to a methodologically pure philosophy severed from non-Western philosophies, and detached from the insights available in religious and artistic practice. Yet, an honest look at the full breadth of the Western philosophical tradition, one that includes Heraclitus and Plotinus, Nietzsche and Wittgenstein and takes seriously the Asian influence on the ancient Peloponnese, shows that this position is untenable. Likewise, as I hope to show, simple distinctions between philosophy, religion, and art do not hold up in Nishida or Merleau-Ponty's thought considered separately; *a fortiori* if considered together. This is not to say that the philosopher is an artist or a person of faith, or that she should be. Rather, philosophy must acknowledge the limitations of two of its orthodox features that have

enabled a too narrow self-conception, namely the methods of unrestricted doubt and reflection. Neither Nishida nor Merleau-Ponty calls for dismissing these methods outright, but both compel us to go beyond thinking about philosophy within simple identity-difference binaries that would underwrite its supposed distinctiveness. Nishida and Merleau-Ponty offer the possibility of seeing philosophy as an expressive practice not limited to reflection and doubt, a practice with generative continuities among the discontinuities with art and religion. Following this incitement in their thought, one can discern the constitutive role of faith within philosophy. Curiously, it seems that the artist's sensorimotor practices make this particularly visible.

Problematizing the definition of philosophy at this scale might sound like an audacious claim and one that is too broad for scholarly work. Rightly or wrongly, we are given to accept that academic philosophy operates on the micro-scale and cannot do serious work at the level of questions such as What is philosophy? or What is religion or art? or What are the relations among the three? Ultimately, I intend to explore a narrower and more specific concern arising between the philosophies of Nishida and Merleau-Ponty, but two things must be kept in mind. First, within Nishida's East-Asian tradition, one need not go out on a limb to defend such a transdisciplinary starting point, because philosophic practice in that milieu has always been hospitable to religion and art. By contrast, this starting point is deeply problematic in the Western intellectual tradition. Second, as one of the most celebrated thinkers of that tradition, Merleau-Ponty does explicitly call for thinking beyond religious and philosophic divisions. In the notes to his last work, *The Visible and the Invisible*, he is not far from basic East Asian orientations when he writes that nature and logos

> must be presented without any compromise with humanism, nor moreover with naturalism, nor finally with theology—Precisely what has to be done is to show that philosophy can no longer think according to this cleavage: God, man, creatures.

While Merleau-Ponty can by no means be considered a "religious" philosopher, his openness to "non-philosophy" provokes us to think beyond doubt and reflective intellection through what he called an "interrogation" of perceptual faith. This line of inquiry of his can both inform and learn a great deal from dialogue with Nishida, who likewise struggles to find a more complex methodology that remains philosophic yet thinks beyond the rigid confines of the discipline.

Nishida between Religion and Philosophy

The ambiguities between philosophic and religious thinking East and West are not an impediment to comparing these two thinkers; rather, it is an incitement to such inquiry. The writings of Merleau-Ponty and Nishida afford an exceedingly valuable intercultural dialogue between two formidable intellectuals. The dialogue is more complex and rich *because of* not despite the different ways both thinkers transcend major aspects of their respective traditions. For instance, we do not have the luxury of treating Nishida as a straightforward "Eastern" or religious philosopher.[10] Just as there is a deep-seated propensity to think about philosophy relative to art and religion within identity-difference binaries, likewise, we want to say Nishida is or is not a religious thinker or a Buddhist philosopher. Despite many scholars casting him as such, he was emphatic that his philosophy was not a "Zen philosophy." He does make abundant references to religious ideas and religious figures, yet the vast majority of those actually invoke Western religious traditions and Christian doctrine. It might be surprising to someone not familiar with his works that most allusions to religious ideas do not entreat his own East-Asian heritage. He scarcely refers to Buddhist literature or concepts, but more often and more directly to Christian orthodoxy of the Old and New Testaments, as well as Western religious thinkers such as Augustine, Boehme, Kierkegaard, Cusanus, and Eckhart with a particular affinity for the apophatic lineages of Christian mysticism. He appropriates their terminology to his own ends, invoking ideas of *kenosis*, *gratia*, "*Gotheit*," communion, faith, and salvation, as well as eschatological themes all inflected according to his intercultural ambitions.

While Nishida frustrates our desire to categorize thinkers as either religious or secular, neither can we label his thought—or the Kyoto School of Japanese philosophy he helped found—as "Eastern" as opposed to "Western" philosophy. Philosophy began as an academic discipline in Japan only after several Meiji-era thinkers returned in the late nineteenth century from Europe and North America inspired to establish a Western-style academic discipline. This was the beginning of the department of philosophy at Kyoto Imperial University, and eventually the "Kyoto School" of Japanese philosophy.

---

10. John Maraldo (1988, 2003, 2011) has engaged this issue extensively, approaching the question of Nishida's relation to Zen and religion from many angles. See also Davis (2004); Dilworth (1969, 1970); Heisig (1990); Kopf (2005); Krummel (2010).

Meanwhile, to this day, most departments in Japan consider themselves to be practicing Western-style philosophy. The explanatory strategy that casts Nishida as a straightforward "religious" or "Eastern" thinker is symptomatic, as many have noted, of a broader propensity toward essentialist treatments of Japanese thought, art, and culture.[11] More precisely, it is symptomatic of a propensity toward identity-difference thinking both Nishida and Merleau-Ponty strive to overcome.

Despite scarce references to his Buddhist lineage, we cannot ignore the influence of Nishida's background and education in Eastern religions. In exceeding his own tradition as a scholar, he does so as a Japanese man who for his entire life was deeply immersed in East-Asian thought, culture, and practice. Nishida grew up in a religious household and practiced Zen Buddhism for a significant period of his early adulthood. He was born in 1870 in the Ishikawa prefecture on the northwest coast of Japan where Pure Land Buddhism was widely adhered to. His father died when he was young, and Nishida was raised by his mother, who was a devotee of Pure Land. Despite growing up in a home and a homeland where Buddhist religious practice was part of everyday life, Nishida came to reject religion as superstition. Meanwhile, in high school the young Nishida studied the Confucian, Neo-Confucian, and Daoist classics. He became proficient in English and German, and studied Western philosophers including Hegel and Kant. Exposure to Western thought and Enlightenment ideas cast the Japanese schooling system as oppressive for Nishida, inciting him to protest and eventually drop out in 1890. He was later admitted to Tokyo Imperial

---

11. Despite Nishida often being labeled as the sole "originator" of the Kyoto School, there were several important Meiji-era precursors to the fully formed school, including Nishimura Shigeki (1828–1902), Nishi Amane (1829–1897), Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835–1901), Katō Hiroyuki (1836–1916), Inoue Tetsujirō (1855–1944), Inoue Enryō (1858–1919). For further elaboration, see Ōhashi (1990), Davis (2014), and especially Maraldo's (2017) "Framing the Place and Significance of Nishida's Philosophy in Europe and North America," where he charts five major interpretive contexts for reading Nishida outside of Japan. He challenges our labeling of Nishida as Japan's "first philosopher," or the "founder of the Kyoto School," since both contravene Nishida's own principle of "continuity of discontinuity." Maraldo further cautions that taking Nishida as a "philosopher of the East" or a "philosopher of Zen" ignores his substantial and persistent engagement with Western philosophy. Further, both estimations rely on an autobiographical determination that Nishida explicitly countered in his efforts to develop a philosophy irreducible to individual consciousness.

University, studied under the first Western-style philosophy professors in Japan, and graduated in 1894 with a thesis on Hume. While beginning his first forays into academic publishing, he became devoted to meditative discipline alongside his new friend, the popularizer of Zen Buddhism, D. T. Suzuki. Together they practiced seated meditation (*zazen*), undertook kōan training, and participated in several retreats (*sesshin*). Nishida would later give up these practices, leaving scholars to speculate about the measure to which his own religious experience influenced his philosophy.[12] While this will remain an open question, the status of Nishida's lifelong project as an endeavor to found a philosophy that embraced both Zen and Western thought, religion, and philosophy is beyond doubt.[13] For Nishida, philosophy was about seeing the self, and in his words, "this seeing means a transformation of the self, identical with the attainment of faith; this transformation or conversion must be in every kind of religion."[14] To foreshadow the later discussion, this vision and the faith it entails involves overcoming Western-style subjectivity, since, in Maraldo's words, "religious awareness, Nishida claims, arises out of the subject's knowledge of its own negation."[15]

Nishida's formal academic career began with his appointment to the department of philosophy at Kyoto Imperial University, and it took off in 1911 with the publication of his *An Inquiry into the Good* (*Zen no Kenkyū* 善の研究). Throughout his career, Nishida's studies focused almost exclusively on Western philosophers, including Hegel, Kant, Hume, the Neo-Kantians, Royce, Bergson, Lotze, and Husserl. He never wrote extensively on any of the forebearers of his Japanese tradition. Yet, as Bret Davis explains—in

---

12. See John Maraldo, "Nishida and the Individualization of Religion," *Zen Buddhism Today: Annual Report of the Kyoto Zen Symposium* (1988).

13. In a letter to his student Nishitani, Nishida writes, "You are absolutely right to say that something of Zen is in the background of my thought . . . It has been my dearest wish since my thirties to unite Zen and philosophy, even though that is impossible." But he claims that most do not understand what this entails and writes that "if ordinary uninformed people call my thought 'Zen,' I would strongly object because they do not understand either Zen or my thought. They simply bundle together x and y as the same thing, which is to misunderstand both my thought and Zen." Michiko Yusa, *Zen and Philosophy: An Intellectual Biography of Nishida Kitarô*, xx.

14. Nishida Kitarō, *Nishida Kitarō zenshū*, 2: 425, 445.

15. Maraldo, 150; "Nishida's Ontology of History," in *Japanese Philosophy in the Making: Crossing Paths with Nishida*.

an article dealing with the question of Japanese "philosophy of religion" (*shūkyōtetsugaku* 宗教哲学)—when asked regarding his first major publication, Nishida claimed that it was both his intellectual study and his religious experience as a Zen practitioner that had inspired the volume.[16] In the introduction to his maiden work, he writes that religion is "the consummation of philosophy"[17] and he later expresses that "great philosophies always arise out of a profound religious heart. Philosophies that forget religion are shallow . . . I think that all great philosophies are religious."[18]

Nearing the end of his career, Nishida concentrated increasingly on the relation between philosophy and religion. After becoming embroiled in the government's attempts to justify Japanese nationalism and its expansionist project, shortly before his death in 1945 he completed his last essay "The Logic of Place and the Religious Worldview" (*Bashoteki ronri to shūkyōteki sekaikan* 場所的論理と宗教的世界観). In this culmination of his life's work, he engages many Western religious ideas, but recasts them according to East-Asian principles, particularly according to the concept of nothingness (*mu* 無) as conceived in the Mahāyāna lineage that was the foundation of the Zen Buddhism he studied and practiced. Far from being a straightforward "Eastern" or "religious" philosopher, it was Nishida's stated goal to think beyond the East–West divide to establish a "world logic" (*sekai no ronri* 世界の論理) capable of reconciling the major Eastern and Western intellectual and religious traditions. As we delve into his writings throughout the next chapters, we will not find a resolution to the tensions between the sacred and the secular, or between philosophy East and West, but a deepening of his thought as he sustains those tensions that divide and unite various disciplines and cultures beyond identity-difference binaries. The question of the sacred and secular will be in the background throughout the first three chapters and reemerge in the last sections of the final chapter.

---

16. In his "Provocative Ambivalences in Japanese Philosophy of Religion: With a Focus on Nishida and Zen," Davis develops an intriguing framework for considering the relation between religion and philosophy in Nishida's thinking. He proposes understanding Japanese "philosophy of religion" as a double-genitive, which is "productively ambivalent" in that it instantiates the meaning of both the objective genitive (philosophy-of-religion: philosophical thinking about religion) and subjective genitive (philosophy-of-religion: the philosophical thinking that religion does).

17. Nishida, *An Inquiry into the Good*.

18. Nishida, *Nishida Kitarō zenshū. 18: 176.*

Merleau-Ponty between Philosophy and Religion

Just as Nishida's writings do not abide by a simple East–West dichotomy, neither does Merleau-Ponty's philosophy fit neatly within his own Western tradition where it thinks of philosophy, art, and religion as oppositional categories. Merleau-Ponty is well-known for his commentary on artistic expression, but much less so regarding religion. Yet, if one looks, one finds what I think is a quite unexpected measure of religious motifs and metaphor at critical moments of his writings, including ideas of "faith," "communion," "transubstantiation," "sacramentality," "grace," and he also refers to expression as a "miracle."

Like Nishida, Merleau-Ponty had a religious upbringing. He was born in 1908 and grew up in a devout Catholic household in Rochefort-sur-mer on the west coast of France. Although he would later turn away from his upbringing in the mid-1930s, his interest in religion persisted at least until his doctoral studies at the École Normale Supérieur. At that time, he was active in the Catholic socialist movement and wrote for several left-wing Catholic journals, including *Sept* and *Esprit*, edited by the Christian philosopher Emmanuel Mounier. Among his first publications were reviews of works by Max Scheler and Gabriel Marcel who were contemplating the relation between existentialism and Catholicism.[19] The decisive turn away from his religious upbringing was precipitated by what he viewed as the church's unjust support for several violent dictators.[20] In the late 1930s and early '40s, while forging a close friendship with Sartre, Merleau-Ponty departed from Catholicism toward Marxism and Gestalt psychology. He died in 1961 and received a Catholic burial. Shortly before his death, the last words he wrote—those quoted above, urging philosophy to think beyond the God-man-creatures "cleavage"—not only attest to how religion was a constant concern, but also show how his understanding of "non-philosophy" did not exclude religion. Indeed, far from it; he claimed that Christianity was of "enormous historical value"[21] and did not conceive of philosophy

---

19. Those works include Max Scheler's *Ressentiment* and Gabriel Marcel's *Être et avoir*.

20. Merleau-Ponty was shocked by the role the Catholic church played in supporting actions by Dollfus against workers in Austria. He was also disheartened by the church's support for violent dictators, which precipitated his turning away from religion toward Marxism and gestalt psychology in the late 1930s, leading to his thesis later published as *La structure du comportement* (1942).

21. Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 142.

as necessarily atheistic[22] because for him "there is no rivalry between faith and reason."[23]

That said, the French philosopher did not believe that the distinction between reason and faith should be passed over: "As soon as [philosophy and religion] are made identical," he writes, they "perpetually play the role of warring brothers in history."[24] They are neither simple friends nor adversaries; rather, they have a "hidden conflict of each with itself and with the other"[25] such that theism, naturalism, and humanism are not opposed but "ceaselessly pass into one another," not resulting in a philosophy-religion binary but a "nexus" or "vinculum 'Nature'—'Man'—'God.' "[26] This "hidden conflict"; how they "pass into one another"; the status of the "vinculum"; the question of their relation, as well as the question of relationality itself, compels us to take seriously the ambiguous logic underpinning Merleau-Ponty's philosophy—an ambiguity further emphasized through dialogue with Nishida. Philosophy is not distinct from religion, nor does it coincide. The two are related beyond identity and difference. Among Nishida's and Merleau-Ponty's many critical dissimilarities, they are aligned in complicating one's ability to hold faith and reason distinct. When considered together, these philosophers show how neither religious nor philosophic disciplines are purely different nor wholly identical with each other *nor with themselves*. If their boundaries are affirmed too strongly, if philosophy is held as absolutely distinct from faith, fully circumscribed by reflection and doubt, then it is questionable whether it is even conceivable as a discipline. Yet, if no distinction is upheld, then the rivalry Merleau-Ponty alludes to ensues. This position between identity and difference results in an ambiguity arrived at by a mutual form of negation, which is one of the persistent themes of this study. Where negation makes up one of the most basic features of Merleau-Ponty's and Nishida's ontologies, the similarities that do abide on this most abstract level enable dialogue on several concrete issues, regarding artistic expression, the artist's body, their motion, vision, the tools they use, and the traditions they inherit. The differences on the abstract level, on the other hand—the limits and obstructions of ambiguous relationality—invoke

---

22. Merleau-Ponty, *In Praise of Philosophy*, 46.

23. Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 143.

24. Ibid., 145–146.

25. Ibid., 143.

26. Merleau-Ponty, *Nature: Course Notes from the Collège De France*, 204.

a tension between the two thinker's projects, which nevertheless allows us to drive the study deeper into crucial issues concerning phenomenology, ontology, artistic expression, and ultimately regarding a bodily form of faith and its implications for philosophy.

——◂◦▸——

The deep ambiguities in Nishida's and Merleau-Ponty's thought are an excellent occasion for dialogue between the two. While there are what Davis calls "productive ambivalences"[27] between philosophy and religion in Nishida's thought, those only expand when placed in dialogue with similar ambivalences in Merleau-Ponty's writings. Both arrive at a remarkably similar point between philosophy and religion where the ambiguity of that position is well illustrated.

If it is tenable to say our philosophers in dialogue reach a similar intercultural and interdisciplinary position, it is noteworthy that they arrive at this point from opposing directions. Nishida engages Western religious terminology and brings it down to earth, in effect, secularizing the spiritual terminology of Christianity. He speaks of the Christian God, but not as a transcendent being causing or judging activities on earth, not a personalistic deity, but as a principle immanent to the fabric of this world. His notion of God as "the absolute" (*zettai* 絶対), and related concepts of "absolute negation" (*zettai hitei* 絶対否定), and his over-arching theme of "absolute nothingness" (*zettai mu* 絶対無) instantiate his non-binary thinking as a feature of the fabric of reality. In other words, the highest spiritual principle is immanent, not a personalistic and transcendent God. The religious is the ontological. Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, reaches a similar ambiguity between philosophy and religion by pushing the secular practice of phenomenology to its limits where he develops methodologies ("faith," "interrogation," "hyper-reflection") and terminology ("incarnation," "flesh," "communion," "sacramentality," "grace," "devotion," etc.) typically reserved for the sacred. In his case, the ontological is inflected with the religious. Further, when both philosophers reach this medial point—where philosophy as reflection and doubt is brought to its limits—they both recognize the necessity of faith. Although neither Merleau-Ponty's "perceptual faith" nor Nishida's "religious faith" are straightforwardly theistic, they are not straightforwardly secular.

---

27. Bret W. Davis, "Provocative Ambivalences in Japanese Philosophy of Religion: With a Focus on Nishida and Zen," in *Japanese Philosophy Abroad*, 250.

There is no God in whom to have faith, but there is a persistent demand to recognize elements of faith latent within the grounds of philosophy.

Of course, artistic expression and faith are part of Western philosophy insofar as we have philosophy of art, aesthetics, and philosophy of religion. Yet, I would argue, there is something different at stake in Nishida and Merleau-Ponty, something that calls into question philosophic methodology at a more foundational level. This is in part because faith is incorporated into their philosophic consideration, but it is also because there is a reading of their depictions of artistic practice, and this is the reading I develop in this book, which suggests that they share a belief that the artist has gone further toward cultivating a kind of faith that ought to inform philosophic methodology.

Their ontologies of flesh and *Basho* disclose limits to philosophic reflection and doubt and, I believe, compel their readers to consider forms of faith that are otherwise invisible within Western philosophy. The artist, the artwork, and the faithful person are not merely exemplars used to *illustrate* a philosophic position that would remain methodologically identical after simply appealing to "examples" from other disciplines for explanatory ends. Nishida and Merleau-Ponty articulate a demand immanent to philosophy itself to operate beyond itself, external to itself by taking up faith, not merely as an object of study, but as a procedure inherent to philosophy. Philosophy can only be philosophy if it is other than itself, if it exceeds itself. It must have a measure of "non-philosophy." Its self-identity lies in its being beyond itself, or not-itself, where it undergoes a productive disruption of its own domain. In this light, I explore the practices of artists such as Sesshū, Cézanne, Hasegawa, and Rodin, among others, to uncover how they enact a faithful bodily orientation within the motor-perceptual world. In so doing, they point the way to a more complex configuration between philosophy, religion, and art, East and West.

Artistic Expression East and West

The intercultural considerations and cautions noted above should also inform comparison between artists from different traditions. Scholars East and West have theorized about artists, artworks, and artistic expression in countless ways. While the art worlds in both traditions have often been closely linked to religious institutions, it is worth noting that in the East Asian traditions, it is much more likely that a painter or a calligrapher could be more than

a *religious* artist—working with religious symbols, images, or motifs—but an actual religious figure *qua* artist: one whose works do not simply depict religious subjects, but whose practice of expression is itself a religious discipline. This is the case with Sesshū. As a Buddhist monk and landscape painter, he embodied aspects of philosophic, religious, and artistic practice. Cézanne, on the other hand, despite remaining a devout Roman Catholic throughout his life, is not considered a religious artist. Yet, for a nonreligious and nonrepresentational painter, he makes an interesting comment that should give us pause when rushing to place him in simple categories: "When I judge art, I take my painting and put it next to a God-made object like a tree or flower. If it clashes, it is not art."[28] Certainly, it would be wrong to consider his self-proclaimed "devotion" to the sensible world as religious (at least in a Western religious sense), yet the way he moved his body through intense meditation on the visible world might allow us to think about his highly idiosyncratic form of expression as a bodily practice of faith, a practice that affords dialogue with the great landscape painters of East Asia. Indeed, when Cézanne's works first appeared in Japan, artists and scholars saw them as a "doorway between East and West."[29]

Reading Merleau-Ponty's portrayal of Cézanne together with Nishida's conception of artistic expression reveals how the French philosopher comes into proximity of foundational East Asian frameworks for understanding expression. Considering Cézanne in this light, this study consciously reads Merleau-Ponty's later idea of faith retrospectively into his earlier writings, in particular "Cézanne's Doubt" ("*le doubt de Cézanne*"). My contention is that the earlier works—in which Merleau-Ponty focuses on the intricacies of artistic expression—actually prefigure the later concept of "perceptual faith," thus providing a new line of continuity between his early and late work. At the same time, this approach works in the other direction; taking from the early to give to the later works, thus proposing a new means for extending his unfinished project and expanding its concept of faith by reading it through his depiction of artistic expression. I suggest that Merleau-Ponty's portrayal of Cézanne's expressive practice is a practice of faith: not faith in a transcendent being, scripture, or event, but faith as a body whose possibilities are given and constrained by the way it is woven into the motor-perceptual world. In casting Cézanne as an exemplar of a

---

28. Natalia Brodskaya, *Cézanne*, 3.

29. Yanagi Soetsu, *The Unknown Craftsman: A Japanese Insight into Beauty*, 93.

non-theistic, bodily form of faith, we can then place him in dialogue with Japanese landscape painters whose expressive practices likewise provoke us to think beyond the rigid distinctions between philosophic, artistic, and religious methodology.

Another interesting East–West feature becomes prominent when comparing Nishida and Merleau-Ponty. Not only do both develop original theories of artistic expression, likewise, both strive at such a remove from the conventions of their respective traditions with their unique modes of philosophic expression. At times, Merleau-Ponty's idiom proves to be a strong exception to his Western heritage insofar as he uses provocative, enigmatic, and poetic descriptions more typical of East Asian philosophy. When he writes that "it is the mountain itself which from out there makes itself seen by the painter,"[30] he is not far from Nishida's claim that "the mountains and rivers must also be expressive."[31] He also says that "the artist sees through a fusion of eye and hand,"[32] not unlike Nishida's idea that "there is an eye at the tip of the artist's brush."[33] We find similar expressions throughout "Eye and Mind" (*L'Œil et l'Esprit*) where Merleau-Ponty quotes Malebranche saying that the "mind goes out through the eyes to wander among the things,"[34] and that the artist paints by "adding to what *they* could see of things at that moment, what *things* could see of them."[35] In these cases and many more, Merleau-Ponty's thought and language places him significantly at odds with the conventions of his Western heritage.

Such a poetic style with its underlying, sometimes paradoxical logic is not completely without precedent in the Western tradition, yet it is a mainstay of East Asian modes of expression. Interestingly, although Nishida comes out of that tradition, his style is also a significant exception to the modes of expression typical of his heritage. By adopting the terminology and style of European and North American academic philosophy, his prevailing idiom is closer to the conventions of Western philosophy. He seeks to cast

---

30. Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, 128.

31. Nishida, *Fundamental Problems of Philosophy: The World of Action and the Dialectical World*, trans. D. A. Dilworth, 35.

32. Nishida, *Art and Morality*, 389.

33. Ibid., 156.

34. Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," 128.

35. Ibid., 130.

the enigmatic language of Zen experience in transparent terminology and arguments, in large measure eschewing the suggestive and poetic style typical of Buddhist writings. When he does employ paradoxical or poetic statements such as those above, he often clarifies them through plain-language exposition.

These expressive features of the philosophers' writings cannot be considered in isolation from their own theories of expression, as informed by artistic practice. Accordingly, Nishida writes that "just as art demands philosophy, so, too, does philosophy demand art."[36] Merleau-Ponty, likewise, looks to artists to challenge philosophic method as it is limited by reflection and doubt. Certainly, there are various reasons why each chose to focus on artistic expression. Yet, because they both maintain that the world is first disclosed through the body, not the reflective intellect, and that this is a moving and perceiving body, it is not surprising that the practices of the artists they studied informed their methods of philosophic expression. Where Nishida develops his ontology of *Basho* (場所), and Merleau-Ponty his ontology of flesh (*chair*), both are interested in commencing philosophic investigation at the moment when the body is first open to the world, prior to the intervention of the discriminating intellect.[37] This is the moment before ethical, epistemological, or metaphysical questions interpose, the moment of prior encounterability that precedes all question asking and position taking. This starting point for phenomenology, the body's pre-reflective openness onto the world is our first truth but it is not initially a philosophic, religious, or an aesthetic truth. The artist, especially the painter, Merleau-Ponty thinks is able to "draw upon this fabric of brute meaning," and "only art does so in full innocence." The "writer and philosopher" is hindered because from them

> we want opinions and advice. We will not allow them to hold the world suspended. We want them to take a stand; they cannot waive the responsibilities of [humans] who speak . . . Only the painter is entitled to look at everything without being obliged to appraise what he sees.[38]

---

36. Nishida, *Art and Morality*, 97.

37. Nishida explains how our "direct experience" (直接経験) of the world is like the experience of "one melodious sound," which we encounter before the discriminating intellect performs its abstractions analyzing the sound as physical vibrations (Nishida, *An Inquiry into the Good*).

38. Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," 123.

Opinions and advice, as they arise from philosophical reflection, can obstruct the openness to the realm of brute meaning. In developing approaches to explore this moment of experience, the philosopher's methodologies thus face the limits of doubt and reflection and the demands of faithful expression. Artists can teach us something about how to properly orient this pre-reflective moment, yet this raises a conundrum for philosophy: How do we reflect upon the pre-reflective without transforming it into reflection? How do we represent the nonrepresentational? These riddles intimate a series of contradictions and paradoxes that are not easily dealt with within the confines of Western philosophy strictly defined. The logic necessary for analyzing the artist's relation to the world, as an appropriate relation to the pre-reflective, in many respects exceeds the logic handed down by Merleau-Ponty's Western tradition, and its attendant grammar, which adheres to substance ontology and respects the laws of non-contradiction. Yet, this is why he turns to Cézanne: the artist has developed bodily practices, which overcome the logical impasse that plagues the philosopher. Describing the artist's practice therefore requires grammar outside of the laws of substance ontology. Artists have found a productive orientation to primordial experience not hindered by the self-undermining attempt to reach the pre-reflective through reflection. By embracing these problematics, artists such as Cézanne enable dialogue with those in China and Japan who grappled with similar paradoxes in striving toward comparable forms of expression.

I would like to be clear that I do not claim that Cézanne or any artist is better understood within another culture's art historical tradition, nonetheless regarding *Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of Cézanne's practice*, I suggest that his use of artistic expression as a philosophic exemplar, and as a site for questioning philosophic methodology, is exceedingly unique in his Western tradition. Moreover, in several instances, it is much closer to the long tradition of aesthetic theory and practice in East Asia, where it would not have been so unusual that artistic practice would inform philosophy or even ontology. Admittedly, this is a broad claim, but Merleau-Ponty's challenge to equally broad aspects of his Western tradition demands beginning at such a scale. As we will see, from this starting point we quickly arrive in more precise concerns regarding foundational principles of Nishida and Merleau-Ponty's ontologies, theories of expression, and concepts of faith.

In undertaking this dialogue, we must also be careful not to paint all of Japan with the same brush, nor assume that there is a monolithic