

## Chapter One

# Nihilism as Existence

### 1. Two Problems

I have been asked to speak about nihilism, which has become something of a trend in the post-war era. The existential philosophies of Sartre, Heidegger, and others—which are major elements in contemporary intellectual history—also have connections with nihilism. I suspect that this accounts to a large extent for the desire to learn about the topic. But insofar as this approach to nihilism is not itself nihilistic, I sense that it may obstruct our understanding of the matter at hand. This fact itself is in some sense a symptom of nihilism—and particularly of nihilism in Japan. I shall begin, then, by focusing on these two points: the non-nihilistic nature of our way of inquiry, and the nature of nihilism in Japan which this reflects.

However appropriate a detached spirit of inquiry may be for other intellectual problems, in the case of existentialism and nihilism it is inappropriate. The attitude of wanting to know *about* nihilism, or the desire to know in order not to be left behind in conversation, means that from the start one is questioning from the standpoint of “society” and not from “the self itself.” In other words, the questioning is no more than a topic of conversation. But if nihilism is anything, it is first of all a problem of the self. And it becomes such a problem only when the self becomes a problem, when the ground of the existence called “self” becomes a problem for itself. When the problem of nihilism is posed apart from the self, or as a problem of society in general, it loses the special genuineness that distinguishes it from other problems. Thinking about the issue by surveying it as an objective observer cannot touch the heart of the matter. This is what makes the question of nihilism the radical question it is.

However, to go a step further, even when it is made an important issue intellectually and the self is seen as the locus of the issue, there is still the danger that nihilism will after all be transformed into an objective issue within the self. No matter how much it becomes a problem of one's own self, as long as the standpoint of "observation" is present, the self remains split in two: the observing self and the self that is observed. The standpoint of observation remains, and to that extent neither the existential way of being nor the issue of nihilism can become present to the self itself.

Essentially, nihilism and Existence<sup>1</sup> break down the standpoint of the observing self in which the self that sees and the self that is seen are separated. When the existence of the self becomes a question mark, an unknown X, and when nihility<sup>2</sup> is experienced behind the existence of the self or at its ground, one can no longer afford to have two separate selves—the questioning self and the self that is questioned. The self is *compelled* to become one, and the self itself *resolves* not to conceal or evade this. In this resolve of the self, the self *becomes* one—it *becomes* the self as such. Only here does the actual existence<sup>3</sup> of the self become the question of the self. To put it another way: "I" stand on the standpoint of actual existence, which makes my own self an X. This is entirely different from an objective or reflective mode of thinking. One can follow Kierkegaard and Nietzsche in calling it a matter of thinking "with passion" (*leidenschaftlich*), or else Heidegger, when he tries to understand being through moods or *pathos* (*stimmungsmässig*). Here subjectivity in the true sense appears for the first time: the standpoint arises in which one strives resolutely to be oneself and to seek the ground of one's actual existence. It is also here that nihility is revealed for the first time. By being thrown into nihility, the self is revealed to itself. Only in such encounters does nihilism (like death) become a real question.

In short, nihilism refuses treatment as merely an *external* problem for one's self, or even *contemplation* as a problem internal to each individual self. This is the essence of nihilism. This is the most primordial and fundamental of the various refusals that nihilism presents. Nihilism demands that each individual carry out an experiment within the self. So much, in broad outline, on the first point, to which we shall return later.

The second point concerns the relation of nihilism to our present situation in Japan. From what has been said above, it would seem that the roots of nihilism reach down into the essence of what it is to be human, and as such it represents an eternal problem transcending particular times or places. Still, what we call nihilism to-

day is a historical concept referring to a particular phenomenon, to something that arose in a place called Europe and in the spiritual situation of the modern era. It arose among Europeans in their attempt to understand the being of the self. Would it not then be a grave mistake for the Japanese, who are far from Europe and whose historical tradition and culture are different, to make an issue of nihilism only in personalistic terms? If so, can we do anything more than approach the issue from the outside and observe it, merely to satisfy our curiosity and intellectual desire?

The answer is relatively simple. While the spirit of nihilism has its origin in Europe, it is by no means unrelated to us in the modern era. We have been baptized in European culture, and European education has more or less become our own. The nihilistic mood of "post-war lethargy" and the vogue of existential philosophy and nihilistic thinking are no mere curiosity about new ideas in the world. Nihilism is also our own problem. But it is also true that behind this nihilistic mood and the vogue of nihilistic thinking there lurks the *unique* character of the issue of nihilism in Japan. This does not mean that we can dismiss the problem as the inevitable outcome of our appropriation of European ideas. This second issue is at once the point of departure and the final destination of our inquiry.<sup>4</sup> Let us now look more closely at the implication of these two points.

## 2. Nihilism and the Philosophy of History

On the one hand, nihilism is a problem that transcends time and space and is rooted in the essence of human being, an existential problem in which the being of the self is revealed to the self itself as something groundless. On the other hand, it is a historical and social phenomenon, an object of the study of history. The phenomenon of nihilism shows that our historical life has lost its ground as objective spirit, that the value system which supports this life has broken down, and that the entirety of social and historical life has loosened itself from its foundations. Nihilism is a sign of the collapse of the social order externally and of spiritual decay internally—and as such signifies a time of great upheaval. Viewed in this way, one might say that it is a general phenomenon that occurs from time to time in the course of history. The mood of post-war Japan would be one such instance.

When these two viewpoints are integrated, and nihilism as a general historical phenomenon is investigated right down to its

philosophical ground, it becomes the object of the *philosophy of history*. This third step is unavoidable. As soon as the ground which has supported historical life both within and without begins to be perceived as something unreliable, an immense void<sup>5</sup> begins to open up within history. Profound anxiety shakes the foundation of human being; and the more foundational the supporting ground had been, the greater the void and the deeper the anxiety. If the ground is an ultimate one—if it has to do with a goal for human existence, a direction for life, a doctrine on the meaning of existence, or any similarly basic metaphysical issue—then its loss ushers in an abyssal nihilism at the basis of human history.

In this kind of nihilism, “being” itself is now transformed into a problem. Up until this point human existence had a clear and eternal meaning, a way in which to live. To follow that way or not was a matter of personal choice. But now existence is deprived of such meaning; it stands before nihilism as having been stripped naked, a question mark for itself. And this in turn transforms the world itself into a question. The fabric of history is rent asunder, and the “world” in which we live reveals itself as an abyss.<sup>6</sup> From the bottom of the self the world and the self together become a question—at the same time a historical and a metaphysical question.

Such a fundamental question belongs to the philosophy of history, but in such a way that the very nature of the philosophy of history and its previous standpoint itself becomes part of the problem. In seeking the reasons for the occurrence of nihilism as a historical phenomenon, the philosophy of history must dig down to its ultimate ground. There it will question the metaphysical and to this extent transcendent ground of history that is essentially rooted in human existence. And with this the metaphysical foundation of history becomes a problem. The nihilism of various epochs is “experientially understood”<sup>7</sup> as the problem of the self, and thus the issue of nihilism becomes the issue of the philosophy of history by way of philosophical anthropology. Here nihilism is disclosed as a universal phenomenon—appearing, for example, at the end of the ancient period or the medieval period in the West, and in Japan in the *mappō* thinking of the Kamakura period.<sup>8</sup> Karl Jaspers categorizes various stages and forms of nihilism in his book *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*, and some aspects of his treatment correspond to my discussion above.<sup>9</sup> But does this approach do the question full justice?

The philosophy of history understands nihilism as a historical *phenomenon*, its approach being by way of *historical-philosophical* understanding. But it also has to do with the nature of human exist-

tence within history, and thus displays features of *philosophical-historical* understanding. The way the philosophy of history understands nihilism means that these two aspects are one in the *self* of the philosopher of history, who experiences the problem of the essence of "humanity" as a problem of the self, and thereby understands both history and humanity philosophically. The philosopher of history pursues historical problems to their philosophical ground as problems about the essence of being human. The metaphysical essence of human existence and its historical manifestations are correlatives, whose connections are gradually opened up with the "self" of the inquirer. In spite of this, inquiry in the philosophy of history has remained within the standpoint of reflective observation: the one who observes and the one who is observed have been separated. Even though traditional philosophy of history may approach its subject matter from out of the lived experience of the self, its standpoint remains one of *observing*. The habit of separating essence and phenomenon is a residue of just this approach. Even when life is taken as the central problematic of history, there is still a chance that one is not yet questioning in a truly *historical* way.

Thus, in the fourth place, there must be a way of inquiring into history that is fundamentally different from the way the philosophy of history has been conducted up until now. The questioning itself must be *historical* and the inquirer unified within history. What is more, the inquiry must be conducted "with passion" and existentially, so that the relationship between essence and phenomenon in history and humanity is realized existentially and thoroughly within historical Existence. In other words, the great historical problems need to become a problem of the self. In Nietzsche's terms, the history of humankind has to be made the history of the self itself, and history has to be understood from the standpoint of Existence. The great problems of history must find a place of "passionate" confrontation within the self.

In such an existential understanding of history the fundamentally historical nature of human existence, or what Nietzsche calls its essentially temporal nature, discloses itself for the first time, and the true significance of history as the locus of the "transhistorical" and metaphysical comes to be realized. What we call "history" becomes an encounter with external problems, and this encounter constitutes historical Existence.

In shifting away from a standpoint of observation to one of Existence, history becomes a locus of existential encounter with the metaphysical, and the philosophy of history makes genuine contact

with history. Only in this context can we ask after the meaning of nihilism; and only with the emergence of nihilism is this standpoint of philosophical-historical inquiry as Existence realized.

### 3. European Nihilism

It was in modern Europe that the question of historical reality and its metaphysical ground, the philosophical ground of historical life, came to be asked *historically*. The reasons for this are manifold. First of all, what is called *historical consciousness* emerged largely from the modern spirit of Europe. The connection between metaphysics, the inquiry into the ground of being, and historical consciousness had been made since the eighteenth century through the philosophy of history, and subsequent metaphysical inquiry into the ground of being came to be conducted within the explicit context of history. Principles such as nature, reason, *idea*, and so on came to be seen as concretely realized only within history. This approach, needless to say, reached its consummate expression in Hegel. But both before and through Hegel these metaphysical principles, historically concrete though they were, were still considered fundamentally trans-historical—whether derived from a transhistorical God or, as in the case of Spinoza, through nature's being equated with God. Beneath it all lay the old metaphysics handed down from the Greeks, with its emphasis on contemplating the world of true, transtemporal Being that lay concealed behind the world of temporal becoming. As long as this view held sway, the questioning of the ultimate metaphysical ground of history could not become genuinely historical.<sup>10</sup> Historical consciousness required a second stage of development.

After Hegel, there began the rapid collapse of metaphysics and moralities based on God or a world of "true Being." The worldview that had supported the spiritual life of Europe for more than two thousand years was all at once thrown into question. Faith in God and the eternal world and their accompanying conceptions became no more than historically conditioned ideas. What had once been considered transhistorical now began to be seen as products of history. With this an abyssal nihilism opened up at the ground of history and self-being, and everything turned into a question mark. Sincerely to acknowledge this kind of despair as despair and at least to try to live in sincerity without avoiding or diverting it—or, like Nietzsche, to carry out its consequences voluntarily and thoroughly on one's own, and to seek to confront the spirit that had controlled all of history up until then—this would be nihilism.

In other words, nihilism is the transition from the standpoint of observation to that of "passionate" Existence. It means taking the entirety of history upon oneself as a history of the self, shifting the metaphysical ground of that history to the ground of the self, and saying "No" to it in this ground. It is at the same time to deny oneself the ground of the being of the self given by history and voluntarily to demolish the ground which has become false, turning the being of the self into a question mark. To disclose the nihility at the ground of the self is to live in sincerity, and within such sincerity the self becomes truly itself. When the idea of a transhistorical world of "true Being" has become a mere chimera, then the passion for the "nihility" which negates that world points to sincerity and the standpoint of Existence.

When nihilism took the place of transhistorical true Being, fundamental inquiry into history became possible for the first time. It also became possible for the self that questions the ground of history and the self to overcome its reflective duality and to be unified in full existential *pathos*. This kind of self-conscious and resolute nihilism appears in its greatest and profoundest form in Nietzsche, and is represented in Stirner before him and Heidegger after him. Philosophy of history from the standpoint of Existence became possible only when it had arrived at nihilism by way of the two-stage development of historical consciousness discussed above. The disclosure of nothingness<sup>11</sup> at the deepest transcendent ground of history and the self makes a metaphysics of history from the standpoint of Existence possible.

Nihilism as we understand it today is the product of a particular epoch, the modern period in Europe. It represents the current achievement of the European spirit, a provisional outcome of the whole of history in a modern European expression that set itself up against everything that had gone before. The problem of how to live came to be fused with the problem of how to interpret history, in particular European history. The point at which the two questions converged became the historical-existential standpoint. The inquiry into history was wholly metaphysical and yet in no way detached from history. Metaphysics itself became a problem of history and of the epoch itself. The eternal inquiry into what it means to be a self was transfigured into an inquiry into historical actuality, and Existence became *fundamentally* historical. Such was the state of affairs that came to light in nihilism, whose standpoint is philosophical not in spite of its being entirely historical but because of it.

The historical-existential standpoint also gave European nihilism its dual quality as a nihilism that overcomes nihilism. On the

one hand, it was an "active" nihilism whose basic critique undermined the very ground of history and the self. On the other, this "Nothing," without God or Truth actually harbored within itself the seeds of a turn to a great affirmation in which existential nothingness replaced God as the creative force.

It seems to be in Dostoevsky and Nietzsche that European nihilism was first articulated in this full and fundamental sense, with all its historical and a metaphysical implications. Nietzsche in particular pursued the consequences of nihilism relentlessly and without faltering—an achievement in which he took considerable pride. In the Preface to *The Will to Power* he speaks of himself as "the first consummate nihilist in Europe, who has himself already lived nihilism through to the end in himself—who has it behind him, beneath him, outside of him" [WP, Preface, § 3]. Accordingly, it is with Nietzsche that our account of nihilism's rise to consciousness will begin.