

The Middle Voice
of Emptiness:
Nishida and Nishitani

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The following attempt to make fruitful a grammatical distinction in Classical Greek and its interpretation relative to the meaning of modern philosophical approaches in Japan is fraught with certain difficulties. In a preliminary fashion, the grammatical form of the middle voice in Classical Greek must first be introduced. In so doing, it will be necessary to interrogate the common interpretations of the middle voice in relation to their implicit philosophical assumptions. These considerations will serve as preparation for posing the question of the middle voice in Japanese. It will be demonstrated that, indeed, in a certain sense, one can speak of the middle voice in Japanese, although in a manner that in significant aspects differs from the one in Classical Greek. After the middle voice and the problem of its application in Japanese have been discussed, the question concerning the middle voice in the philosophy of Nishida, as well as in that of his student, Nishitani, can be posed. In conclusion, there will be a cursory examination of three Western thinkers—William James, Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida—who refer directly to the middle voice. In this manner, affinities in thinking between very distinctive philosophical traditions become clear as they cluster themselves around the question concerning the middle voice and its significance for the language of philosophy. Through the retrieval of a grammatical form and its interpretation, a horizon of understanding should open up for basic philosophical approaches that no longer allow themselves to be pigeonholed in the all too facile opposition of Western and Eastern thinking.

The Middle Voice

In the classical European languages, the middle voice as a complete grammatical form and as a descriptive form is found only in Classical Greek. In trans-

lations from the latter, the middle voice is for the most part only rendered if a reflexive form is possible, so that from the perspective of either German or English, it appears as a reflexive form. Accordingly, the standard example is *Ich wasche mich* or “I wash myself” (Gr. *louomai*). In this statement, I am simultaneously the subject and the object of the action. Provisionally stated, the middle voice is thus deployed as the form of an action whenever a process does not occur with a clear separation of subject and object.

The middle voice designates the enhanced internal and external participation of a subject in a process. Almost all of the apparent forms of the middle voice reduce to the following five fundamental types of application; however, a strict separation between them is not always possible. The *direct middle voice* designates an action, which the subject directs immediately toward her or himself (reflexive middle voice). The *indirect middle voice* designates an action, which the subject exercises for her or himself in his or her interest (dative middle voice). The *reciprocal middle voice* designates an action, which the subject performs with other persons with mutual devotion. The *dynamic middle voice* designates an action, which the subject executes with the mobilization of her or his forces and means or in an immediately practical action. The *causative middle voice* designates an action, which the subject lets happen either for itself or in itself. (Some verbs only appear in the middle voice, but do not have any immediately recognizable medial sense for us, for example, *epomai* (I follow) and *gignomai* (I grow).)¹

The author begins here with the definition as it originates in the action of the subject. The first sentence acts thereby like a fundamental definition of the middle voice. The explanations then all originate from a single subject, so that all of the example sentences can be cited in the first-person singular. But if one were, as an example of the middle voice, to enlist not *ich freue mich* (I am pleased)² (Gr. *terpomai*) but rather *wir freuen uns* (we are pleased) (Gr. *terpometha*), the explanation that in the direct middle voice the subject refers back to her- or himself would not be insightful, for the situation in which *wir freuen uns* (we are pleased) would hardly be able to be described in this way.

In the paragraph quoted above concerning the explanation of the middle voice, examples are cited in which it is not really clear why they could only be found in the middle voice. For the interpretation of these medial forms cannot be brought into congruity with the aforementioned explanations. But if one were to consider the Greek word *gignomai*, for instance, more closely, it indeed makes a lot of sense that this verb can only be used in the middle voice.

The two basic meanings of the word *gignomai* are: 1. To attain existence, to originate; (a) said of humans, being generated or born, (b) said of inanimate things, originate, become, happen, occur. 2. To attain a state, become something. Now both of these basic meanings, “originate” and “become,” indicate that whatever is to become something is something first of all only in origination and is consequentially not yet there. With reference to the subject, it can also consequently not be said what it is and what it will be. In the cases of “origination” and “becoming,” it is not yet clear at the beginning of the process what will finally come out of the process. It is therefore thoroughly illuminating to conceive this happening only in the middle voice, since there exists neither a clear center of activity, nor a merely passive one. For whenever a tree grows, it is itself the growing; it is simultaneously active and passive.

At this point, a further word can be introduced, which, in its verbal form, can only be found in Classical Greek in the middle voice, and which has a special meaning when considered in a philosophical context. This word is *aisthanomai*: “I perceive with the senses.” Why does it make sense to render the process of perception exclusively in the middle voice? In conventional explanations, perception is understood either as something purely passive in the sense of a mere taking-in of data or, in more modern times, as a purely active comportment, in which data is constructed by and as the perspective of the subject. If one pursues perception in its fullness more precisely, it indicates that it is neither a purely passive nor a purely active process. It is on the contrary the *founding of a relationship* between the perceiving and the perceived, in which both sides are as active as they are passive. For the perceived is always reflected in the perceiving and the perceiver takes it up and associates it with its context. A place of perception arises here, out of which both the perceiving as well as the perceived come to the fore in the subtlest interplay in the sense of the middle voice.

The Middle Voice in Japanese

The Japanese language possesses a grammaticalized form for the middle voice, which in modern grammars, presumably under the influence of Latin-centric grammar paradigms, is no longer described as such. It is, however, consistently accepted for the grammar of Classical Japanese:³

The middle voice in Japanese in a formal and semantic sense is very close to the passive, in which it indicates a verbally designated process or state, by which the subject is affected, without, however, being caused by an agent, no matter

whether through their own intuition or not. . . . The medial forms of Japanese are ancient and are detectable since the beginning of the literary tradition.⁴

This description of the middle voice, cited from a German Japanologist, shows that here the explanation of the middle voice from the Classical Greek is in effect. The being-affected of the subject in a process or state is explained as the semantic content of the middle voice. The final part of the sentence, however, brings a turnaround in the description, which is not found in Classical Greek. With the statement that the middle voice in Japanese occurs “without being caused by an agent,” that is, without subject and/or actor, it coalesces the explanation of the middle voice in Japanese with the question concerning the subject in the sentence. As is generally known, in Japanese, the subject can be dropped without further ado, for it does not stand in the center of the sentence. On the contrary, the happening and/or situation appears in the foreground, in a happening and/or situation in which the subject is not central, but rather the quality of the happening itself. Is there not consequently a contradiction between the part of the explanation in which an affected subject is spoken of and the part in which the middle voice occurs without being caused by an “agent”? The description suggests that a “subject” is presupposed, even when it does not appear in the sentence.

In order to clarify the implications of this manner of interpreting the middle voice in Japanese by way of starting from Classical Greek, a short comparative translation using an example from Classical Japanese literature will be conducted.

In the *Tsurezuregusa*, we find the following phrase: *fude wo toreba, mono kakare*. Taken separately, the individual words here mean the following: *fude* = a “brush” used for writing; *wo* = an accusative particle; *toreba* = “to grasp” or “take” in the conditional form; *mono* = “the matter at hand” (Gn. *Sache*), a thing; *kakare* = “to write” in the grammatical form of the middle voice. No grammatical subject is named in the sentence.

The Japanologist cited above translates the sentence with explicit reference to the description of the middle voice in Classical Greek: “When I clasp the brush, I (for myself) jot something down.”⁵ In this translation, the reflexive in relation to the subject of the writing is added parenthetically. Presumably, the translator thought of the direct or indirect middle voice in Classical Greek, in which an activity refers back to an actor and/or is performed in the interest of the actor. The “I” as subject is inserted into the first clause, and it is added as well to the verb “to write.”

The following sentence provides another translation: “One grasps the brush, and the desire to write sets itself into action.”⁶ In the first part, instead of naming an “I” as subject, the indefinite pronoun “one” is moved into the subject position, so that the sentence becomes a more universal statement. In the second clause, the middle voice is interpreted in the sense of the dynamic middle voice because the “desire,” which is not named in the Japanese sentence, is supposed to bring to expression a particular stake of the process via the subject. The “matter at hand,” which is written, drops out of the sentence in the translation.

Before an alternative translation can be given, the middle voice in Japanese must first be explained from the perspective of the Japanese language itself. The following citation comes from a Japanese grammarian, who does not interpret the middle voice of Classical Japanese within the horizon of Classical Greek. Accordingly, the middle voice in Japanese is said to have four distinctive levels of meaning:

1. Spontaneity, an action which occurs without prior intention. (In this sense *ru, raru* shows that a certain action occurs naturally, or a certain condition naturally arises. The original meaning of *ru, raru* was spontaneity, and the other meanings developed from it.)
2. Passive voice. (This passive shows that a certain action is suffered from another person and as a general rule it is used only for people and animals.)
3. Potential. (In this sense the ending shows that a certain action is possible. In the Heian Period *ru, raru* was used with the negative auxiliary verb *zu*, when it expressed potential; but with the arrival of the Kamakura period it was used independently. It is important to note that the potential meaning also includes the sense that a condition naturally arises (spontaneity).)
4. Respect. (It is used to show respect with regard to the action of the person who is the topic of a sentence. . . . *Ru, raru* did not express respect until the Heian Period when many respectful usages were developed.)⁷

The basic meaning of the middle voice, according to this explanation, is the “spontaneity” of an action that occurs in a natural fashion. In the explanation, no word is lost concerning the subject that is affected by the action or something similar. The description puts the quality of the action itself directly in the center and stresses that it is from this basic meaning that the three other meanings are derived. Consequently, the middle voice in Classical Japanese

combines in itself four distinctive levels of meaning, all of which interplay and which still obtain today.⁸ The first and oldest meaning of the middle voice is an action that acts from itself and in this sense arises naturally. In Japanese, this level of meaning is designated by *jihatsu*, literally, “to come forward from itself.” With this explanation, in the description of the middle voice, above all, the self-referentiality of an action appears in the center, and no explicit reference is made to a subject that is affected in the process.

While in the explanation of the middle voice within the framework of European traditions, the subject and its affectivity stood foremost in the center, in the explanation of the middle voice within the horizon of the Sino-Japanese traditions, self-referentiality in the form of a natural happening clearly stands at the center of attention. This difference arises because the middle voice itself, through linguistic habits, and, most of all, through the use of the subject (both grammatical and logical), receives a different emphasis in the respective languages. It is, above all, the status of the subject that the verbal form of the Japanese middle voice can cast new light on.

Proceeding from this explanation of the middle voice in Japanese, an alternative translation of the phrase from the *Tsurezuregusa* can be attempted: “Clasping the brush the writing of something sets itself into action from itself.” The word *kakare* designates an attunement of the writing in which, without clear intention, something writes itself down, and by which the writer her- or himself can be afterwards surprised. If one takes the description of the middle voice in the sense of a spontaneous occurrence seriously, then on the one hand, the naming of a subject should be avoided, and on the other, the “from itself” of the occurrence should be stressed. Since in this translation the writing person does not become the subject, which is rather the writing, at least the occurrence of the writing itself can be moved into the foreground.

It belongs to the ironies of linguistic history that the middle voice up to today remains very lively in Japanese, but under the influence of European grammar studies since the Meiji Period, it is hardly ever still described as the middle voice. It is still in linguistic usage and, above all, it is very vital in one’s feeling for the language (Gn. *Sprachgefühl*). Matters are exacerbated by the fact that the grammatical category “middle voice” too comes from Europe. Here linguistic usage, grammatical explanation, and philosophical interpretation seem to be hopelessly entangled. In order still to press ahead with the philosophical explanation of the middle voice in Japanese, it now appears sensible to bring contemporary Japanese philosophy into play.

The Middle Voice in Contemporary Japanese Philosophy: Nishida and Nishitani

The thinking of Nishida and Nishitani can be read in a certain respect as a thoughtful development of the middle voice, even though neither thinker speaks explicitly about this grammatical form. This is the central thesis that will be pursued in what follows.

Already the opening passage in Nishida’s *An Inquiry into the Good* can be read as a description of the form of an action that comes very close to the middle voice in the sense of *jihatsu*.⁹ Nishida here characterizes the basic form of experience, out of which all further conscious determinations first emerge. It is a matter of a form of experience that does not assume the division of subject and object. As paradigmatic situations for this experience, Nishida mentions the seeing of a color and the hearing of a sound. If one hears a sound without any intentions or interpretations, then only the sounding of the sound enters the foreground. In the sounding, an animated space of reference spreads out in which the hearer and the source of the hearing are encompassed. For Nishida, it is important that in this form of experience the ego has not yet emerged. From the perspective of Europe and a conventional explanation of experience, this is rather extraordinary. Is it not precisely the “I,” proceeding from which all experience is made, that must accompany all of my representations? What was only suggested by the explanation of the small example from the *Tsurezuregusa* can be comprehended in many literary testimonies in Japanese—namely, the possibility of grammatically correct *subjectless sentences*. Hence, the Nishida passage just referred to does not concern mystical ecstasy, but rather a form of experience that is suggested by the Japanese language. In the latter, the subject can be dropped without further ado and, moreover, the middle voice can determine the expression at multiple levels. The omission of the subject is actually nothing special, but rather the *normal case* for the perception of a happening. Nishida proceeds from this form of experience and develops a philosophizing that time and again links itself back to this “subjectless” action in the sense of the middle voice.

We find a similar constellation in the thought of Nishitani Keiji. He developed Nishida’s thinking further in a certain direction, particularly against the background of Zen Buddhist experience, and describes “pure experience” on the concrete level of sensibility. In the essay “On Awareness” (*kaku ni tsuite*), he writes the following about seeing and hearing:

In the ordinary place that so-called sensibility brings about, that is, in the place of appearing wherein sensibility in its pure simplicity first originates just as it is, there is no distinction between the sensing “something” and the sensed “something.” The activity of seeing is immediately one with the being visible [*mieru to iu koto*] of the thing and the activity of hearing is immediately one with the being audible [*kikoeru to iu koto*] of the sound. As said earlier, subject and object are undivided, or thing and ego forget one another, and this refers to this place. We say, “the sea is visible” or “the bell is audible.” In these cases, “visible” [*ga mieru*] is something other than either “to see” [*wo miru*] the sea, or the sea “is seen” [*ga mirareru*]. On the contrary, it expresses both sides as inseparably unified. (NKC 13: 106)

Nishitani can, in order to bring his thoughts to expression, refer directly to the medial forms *mieru* and *kikoeru*, presumably without its thereby being known to him that he is using the middle voice. Similar to the opening passage in the Nishida text, it is a matter of describing a place in which the seeing and the seen would arise in an action without the occurrence of a subject-object split.

At this point it could be objected that the form of experience in which the middle voice comes to expression constitutes an important point of departure for Nishida’s philosophy and Nishitani’s philosophy, and therewith their thinking itself is described, but not yet as philosophy. The question posed is thus whether the middle voice and the form of action therewith coming to expression are of central meaning for both of their philosophies and perhaps for the determination of philosophy itself. In order to pursue this question, some further information concerning the Japanese language will first be pursued.

Today there is a still common Japanese word that is in the middle voice: *omoeru*. Its translation into either German or English does not come easily. In the end, we must rely on the reflexive and an “it” so that it can thus be translated: *es denkt mir* or “it thinks to me.”¹⁰ This form is clearly distinguished from the form *omou*, which is translated in a context-dependent fashion as “I think” or “you think,” etc. But what can the medial form “it thinks to me” mean? If one proceeds from the determination of the middle voice in Japanese given above, then several levels can be in play in the word *omoeru*. Firstly, a thought can emerge in me entirely “of itself,” without it being the case that “I” would have “thought it up” in me. In German there is the phrase *mir kommt ein Gedanke* (to me a thought comes), which is used whenever I have a good

idea that rather unexpectedly surfaces. A thinking that emerges from itself can consequently even be a creative thinking. Secondly, if a thought comes in this form, then a possibility in thinking becomes clear that heretofore had not yet been thought.¹¹ These considerations are certainly not known in quotidian linguistic usage, but they indicate a possible action quality of thinking that is critical to the further interpretation of Nishida’s thinking.

In the text *Poiesis and Praxis*, Nishida speaks about the phrase *mono to natte kangae mono to natte okonau*. Here it reads:

The phrase, “to become the matter at hand and think, to become the matter at hand and act,” is taken by many people to be something intuitive and illogical. This happens because the Eastern spirit is explained as something illogical. We think, on the contrary, that “to become the matter at hand” must mean to become a state of affairs of the historical world. . . . To become the matter at hand and think, to become the matter at hand and act, must mean to act simultaneously poetically and practically, historically and naturally. (NKZ 10: 158)

Nishida means that when we “become the matter at hand” we thoughtfully and actively enter into the process of historical formation. But this entering is neither simply passive nor simply active. One could here say, in the sense of the logic of place, that it is a process that, above all, comes to expression in the first meaning of the middle voice. The place of historical formation is a process that comes to the fore from out of itself (Jp. *jihatsuteki*), in which all of the moments of the historical formation mutually drive each other forth into expression. Nowhere is an absolute center to be found, because everything is simultaneously in the reciprocal resonance of becoming determined and determining. The shared interpenetration of every moment is called a medial field; and this is what Nishida dubs the “logic of place” (*basho no ronri*). At this point, the question can be posed concerning the manner in which Nishida’s own thinking is ordered. Is Nishida *thinking* in the middle voice?

There is, crucially, a word in a certain form that Nishida, already in *An Inquiry into the Good*, often employs and which he uses with increasing frequency in his later texts: *kagae-rare-ru*.¹² This word appears in various phrases: *kangae-rare-ru no de aru*, *kangae-rare-nakereba naranai*, *kangae-rare-ru mono de nakereba naranu*, etc.¹³ The grammatical form of the words is usually explained either as potential (“to be able to think”) or as passive (“is thought”) because both possibilities evince the same grammatical suffix. If one looks back at the provenance of both forms, then, first and foremost, the Classical Japanese form of *jihatsu* lies in the background of both meanings. More than

anything else, the following is valid for the potential form: "It is important to note that the potential meaning also includes the sense that a condition naturally arises (spontaneity)." Since the description of the modern Japanese language in, for example, German or English does not invoke the middle voice, all words, in which medial meanings still resonate, are assigned to either the potential or the passive form. In Nishida's texts, one cannot really decide if he always means the potential form or the passive form or always both together. But if one wants to disentangle oneself from this decision, then at least the perspective can be considered that Nishida's deployment of *kangae-rare-ru* also resonates in a medial meaning in the first sense. This explanation can perhaps be supported by the previously introduced example. Should that be the case, then this frees one up to see the action of thinking that characterizes Nishida's thought. *In this sense, Nishida does not think "something," but rather a thinking enables itself in him that comes to the fore of itself from out of the place of thinking.* This would precisely be the meaning of the middle voice with regard to thinking. "Thinking thinks itself in the place of thinking" (*Das Denken denkt sich selbst im Ort des Denkens*). Thinking thinking from itself has the consequence that thinking develops itself unremittingly. For without movement, thinking is not the thinking of thinking.

If one looks at Nishida's texts with this in mind, then the thesis begins to emerge that Nishida does not cover over this movement of thinking in his texts, but rather that he made the process-character of thinking itself the central *form* of his texts. In this sense, his predilection for the verb *kangae-rare-ru* allows itself to be understood from out of the manner of thinking and its literary realization. To put a finer point on it, the thesis can now read: Nishida thinks and writes in the middle voice.

It may indeed appear bold, but the phrase *fude wo toreba mono kakare*, cited above from the *Tsurezuregusa*, could be enlisted in order to interpret Nishida's manner of thinking and the forms of his texts. For Nishida's texts evince a form that scarcely has a parallel in the West. The fact alone that certain theses that are included at the beginning of a text in the thought process transform themselves by the end of the text demonstrates that it did not matter to Nishida to publish smooth and unitary texts in which the process of thinking could no longer be traced. Consequently, in his texts themselves, how the thinking and the thoughts originated can be followed and reproduced. This seems to me to be a central dimension of Nishida's thinking. For in this sense the texts are, as little as possible, objectifications in the form of propositions. They are rather exercises and traces of *thinking in its coming*

to the fore. Moreover, the special quality achieved thereby is that at the beginning of a text its end cannot really be anticipated. The process of writing (and of reading) thus remains open, even in the sense that during the course of a text new words are introduced that had not yet belonged to Nishida's vocabulary at the beginning of the text. In this sense, the texts themselves are exercises of *jihatsu* and at the same time of *jikaku* (self-consciousness or becoming self-aware).

If the middle voice plays an important role for Nishida predominantly in relationship to the action of thinking, then for Nishitani the emphasis is shifted. Above all for Nishitani it is the realm of sensibility, in which the middle voice plays an important role. As has already become clear in the above quotation, *mieru* and *kikoeru* are medial forms of the verb *miru* (to see) and *kiku* (to hear). In his essay "On Awareness," Nishitani develops an interpretation of sensibility that simultaneously leads to the "place" (*tokoro*) out of which "I" here and now come to the fore as originary experience.

In the place [*tokoro*] of the opening [*hirake*] in which the activity of the seeing of something and the self-showing [*miete kuru*] of something [that is, the being visible (*miete iru*)] are one, there is also included a kind of pattern of interconnection [*ri*]. In this place only the uniqueness and the unitary accord of the "here and now" prevails, both in relationship to the activity of the sense organs and in the states of affairs that correspond to them. It is the fully and concretely located [*kyokushoka*] place [*tokoro*]. The position that is always absolutely determined in the "here and now" is the position of the one-and-not-two. Sensory knowing originates in such a fully and concretely located place. For this reason, this knowing is an immediate knowing. It is a knowing that already knows before the origination of a concept or a representation, both of which are dependent on the "intellect." The state of affairs that originates in this position is "experience." This is what is at issue in so-called pure experience [*junsui keiken*] or immediate experience [*chokusetsu keiken*], which are the originary sense of experience. (NKC 13: 104)

Similar to the Classical Greek word *aisthanomai*, sensuous perception comes to expression exclusively in the middle voice, in which Nishitani evinces a vital and concrete place in which seeing and hearing eventuate as originary experience. At this level of experience, the ego and its intellectual capacities do not yet play a role. Rather, the intellectual ego develops from out of this level of experience, which in itself is already a form of knowing. The latter is in the highest sense concrete and always originating in the here and now. Nishi-

tani emphasizes that this level of experience is not simply free of contextual interconnectedness, but rather itself contains a pattern of interconnection (Jp. *ri*). This pattern of interconnection can be described and it is not inferior to objective knowing. On the contrary, this level of experience grounds all of the others, and is, moreover, always and everywhere given.

We catch sight of a beautiful and fragrant flower, and in the moment in which we forget ourselves and see the flower, we forget “ourselves”—in the flower. At the same time, the flower loses its manner of being as a mere thing or object before our eyes [cf. Heidegger’s “objectively present”: *vorhanden*] and it appears just as it is. This is the meaning of the saying, “The thing and I forget one another.” From a quotidian perspective this experience is a special moment, but only because for us the form “I see a thing” has become the normal form of the perception of a thing. But in the case at hand, it is really sensibility that lies at the ground of perception, having already originated as immediate knowing in the original non-duality of subject and object. Only occasionally are we touched by the “beauty” of visible [*miete iru*] things, in which we leave the usual realm of perception behind us and turn towards the ground. Only there does sensibility emerge into appearance [*arawarete kita*] in its originary manner. In sensibility, the forgetting one another of ego and thing is really entirely natural and nothing special. Whenever we see something, we really always forget our “I” and see. (NKC 13: 107–108)

Nishitani emphasizes that our sensibility actually always occurs in the manner in which I and the thing have forgotten one another. Even though we almost constantly, through our intellect and will, combine other motives with this level of experience and overlay the latter with them, it remains for the most part concealed to us that we are always acting in this place and that we come to the fore from out of it. This place opens a world to us, for sensibility in its original manner is the standing-open of the world.¹⁴ This standing open cannot be explained as either active or passive. On the contrary, the world opens itself beyond such crude lopsidedness. If originary sensuous openness is actually experienced, then it shows that I and thing, in this place of sensuous standing open, are empty. The emptiness that is experienced in the place of sensuously executed action is simultaneously both a concrete “here and now” and the highest insight into my own being as emptiness. The highest concretion here connects itself with the highest insight.

Neither for Nishida nor for Nishitani is the middle voice brought into play in a conscious manner as the linguistic form of philosophizing. Rather, it insinuates itself in their thinking because it has been available as a form of

expression for ages in the Japanese language without needing to be explicitly problematized. But if one considers the central content of their thinking, then one can get the impression that it concerns the direct description of the middle voice. Even if, in what has been said above, an attempt has been made to highlight the middle voice as the central form of expression in the thinking of Nishida and Nishitani, the task still remains to expand this consideration to include other authors from older times as well as contemporary times. Furthermore, it is necessary to discuss the middle voice in Japanese in greater depth, developing both a grammatical and a philosophical perspective. The last section of this essay will show that these discussions could be meaningful for more than just the Japanese language and Japanese philosophy.

The Middle Voice in Contemporary Western Philosophy

In the following it will be shown, on the basis of three examples from philosophy in the English, German, and French languages respectively, how, in European and North American philosophy since the end of the nineteenth century, the middle voice has been increasingly rediscovered as a form of speech. William James, Martin Heidegger, and Jacques Derrida each happen upon, through specific ways of thinking, linguistic forms that, according to Heidegger and Derrida, are explicitly linked to the form of the middle voice.

The first example comes from James. At the end of the nineteenth century, in a time when psychology had still not decisively separated from philosophy to become a self-standing discipline, James wrote in the opening passage of his first main work, *Principles of Psychology* (1890), the following words, which are quite critical for the development of his own thinking:

We now begin our study of the mind from within. . . . *The first fact for us, then, as psychologists, is that thinking of some sort goes on. . . . If we say in English “it thinks,” as we say “it rains” or “it blows,” we should be stating the fact most simply and with the minimum of assumption. As we cannot, we must simply say the thought goes on.*¹⁵

James struggles here to bring to expression in as simple terms as possible the simple fact that in us humans thoughts emerge and again disappear. He does so in order to make this the point of departure for the observation of and research into the human spirit. He uses the possibility “it thinks” to bring to language, in the simplest form of expression thinkable, the process which

occurs more or less uninterrupted in us. James indeed names this possibility, but he rejects it with the argument that one could not say that in the English language. In the short quote just given, it becomes clear how certain thoughts and observations, should they be brought into language, demand again and again new grammatical rules and linguistic forms of expression. James wants to bring a level to expression that he dubs “pure experience,”¹⁶ a state in which thoughts simply flow, without specifically being controlled by a subject. Hence, it is important to him in his formulation to avoid the subject in the statement, for the subject is not yet constituted, in the actual sense of the word, in the level he is naming here. James still did not have a special grammatical form for his thoughts, yet he sensed a lack and implied that he considered an “it phrase” to be fitting.¹⁷

In his epochal work *Being and Time*, Heidegger, in the wake of Classical Greek philosophy, attempts to move phenomenology, founded by Husserl at the beginning of the twentieth century, into a new perspective. For our present concerns, the derivation of the meaning of phenomenology from the Classical Greek language is above all significant. Concerning this, Heidegger writes:

The Greek expression *phainomenon*, from which the term “phenomenon” derives, comes from the verb *phainesthai*, meaning “to show itself.” Thus *phainomenon* means what shows itself, the self-showing, the manifest [*das Offenbare*]. *Phainesthai* itself is a “middle voice” construction of *phainō*, to bring into daylight, to place in brightness (§7, 28). . . . Hence phenomenology means: *apophainesthai ta phainomena*—to let what shows itself be seen from itself, just as it shows itself from itself. (§7, 34)¹⁸

Heidegger traces the word *phenomenon* back to its Classical Greek origin, where the *genus verbi* of the middle voice can still be found in its complete function. With the middle voice *phainesthai*, there is the middle voice that underlies Heidegger’s explanation of the *whole of phenomenology*. “To show itself” and the “self showing” are structures that pertain to the level in which the subject as the one who knows an object has not yet been constituted. In the coming to the fore of the “self showing,” there first originates a context out of which the various differences arise. Heidegger thereby begins not with the presupposition of subjects and objects, but rather attempts to show that this separation proceeds from “self showing” understood in the middle voice. It is from here that subjects and objects can receive their meaning. With Heidegger, the grammatical form of the middle voice becomes explicit as the ba-

sic form of his phenomenological thinking. But it cannot be decided at this point if the much-asserted proximity of Heideggerian thinking to East Asian traditions of thinking has any serious grounds.¹⁹

With Jacques Derrida one also finds a direct relationship to the middle voice in a central position. In his famous lecture “La différance,” he connects the theme of the whole lecture, and thereby a very deep current in Derrida’s philosophy, with the middle voice:

In a conceptuality adhering to classical strictures “*différance*” would be said to designate a constitutive, productive, and originary causality, the process of scission and division which would produce or constitute different things or differences. But, because it brings us close to the infinitive and active kernel of *différer*, *différance* (with an *a*) neutralizes what the infinitive denotes as simply active, just as *mouvance* in our language does not simply mean the fact of moving, of moving oneself or of being moved. No more is resonance [*résonance*] the act of resonating [*résonner*]. We must consider that in the usage of our language the ending *-ance* remains undecided *between* the active and the passive. And we will see why that which lets itself be designated *différance* is neither simply active nor simply passive, announcing or rather recalling something like the middle voice [*voix moyenne*], saying an operation that is not an operation, an operation that cannot be conceived either as passion or as the action of a subject on an object, or on the basis of the categories of agent or patient, neither on the basis of nor moving toward any of these *terms*. For the middle voice [*voix moyenne*], a certain nontransitivity, may be what philosophy, at its outset, distributed into an active and a passive voice, thereby constituting itself by means of this repression.²⁰

Derrida seeks an alternative to the simple active and passive modes of expression. He thereby has a happening in mind that cannot be grasped with these categories. What is at issue is nothing less than breaking through the traditional European conceptual language, which is based on the active-passive distinction. Even if at this point Derrida does not pursue the grammatical form of the middle voice any further, he nonetheless clearly refers to it as another possible perspective in which to get around the unwelcome dichotomy of active and passive.

Because the German language, like all other contemporary European languages, does not recognize the grammatical form of the middle voice, event forms that are neither subject-centered nor object-centered are difficult to bring to expression. They are not suggested in the German language as the central forms of experience. If the matter at hand requires it, they are

sometimes brought to language only through a disregard of grammar. So by means of the reclamation of a semantic space of language, through which the grammatical form of the middle voice is developed, certain thoughts—for example, those that attempt to describe sensuously and corporeally executed acts—could probably be more essentially and precisely grasped. Furthermore, mystifications, which all too quickly refer to an all-encompassing unity, could be avoided through the medial linguistic form.

The middle voice is a linguistic form that is still found in many living languages, and so middle voice usages can be researched within an intercultural perspective. This can even contribute to the dialogue between European and Asian philosophical approaches. Preoccupation with the grammatical form of the middle voice allows us, above all, to be consequently more attentive to the particular qualities of actions. Through the shifting of attentiveness, something else emerges in the analysis of processes. Above all, the too-facile distinction between the simply “subjective” or “objective” is thwarted and a new processual level becomes accessible for explication.²¹

Translated from the German by Jason M. Wirth

NOTES

1. E. Happ, F. Maier, and A. Zeller, *Organon: Griechische Grammatik* (Bamberg: Bayerischer Schulbuch-Verlag, 1995), 147.

2. [The English translation of *sich freuen* (to be pleased, happy, or glad) is not reflexive, so I have also preserved the German to keep the thread of the author's example.—Trans.]

3. At this point I cannot go into the various forms of grammar and grammar theory. The present essay can in this respect only go so far as to thematize comparatively a grammatical form in its explanation between two very different languages and make it fruitful for a specific philosophical question.

4. Bruno Lewin, *Abriss der japanischen Grammatik* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1996), 152–53.

5. *Ibid.*, 152. [The German reads: “Wenn ich den Pinsel ergreife, *schreibe ich (so für mich) etwas hin.*”—Trans.]

6. Yoshida Kenkō, *Betrachtungen aus der Stille*, trans. Oscar Benl (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1991), 100. [This is a translation of the *Tsurezuregusa*; the German here reads: “*Greift man zum Pinsel, stellt sich die Lust zum Schreiben ein.*”—Trans.]

7. Ikeda Tadashi, *Classical Japanese Grammar Illustrated with Texts* (Tokyo: The Toho Gakkai, 1975), 112.

8. The *genus verbi* is designated in Japanese through the verbal suffix. The active form is not formally designated. The middle voice is designated and it diffuses itself in various meanings. The factitive is also designated, and it expresses a “bringing to” and/or “letting be.” In Classical Japanese, the verbal suffixes for the middle voice since the Heian Period (here the variations cannot be gone into) are *ru* and *raru*. In modern Japanese one finds, above all, the suffixes *reru* and *rareru*.

9. “To experience means to know facts just as they are, to know in accordance with facts by completely relinquishing one's own fabrications. What we usually refer to as experience is adulterated with some sort of thought. So by *pure* I am referring to the state of experience just as it is without the least addition of deliberative discrimination. The moment of seeing a color or hearing a sound, for example, is prior not only to the thought that the color or sound is the activity of an external object or the one sensing it, but also to the judgment of what the color or sound might be. In this regard, pure experience is identical with direct experience. When one directly experiences one's own state of consciousness, there is not yet a subject or an object, and knowing and its object are completely unified. This is the most refined type of experience.” (IG 3–4)

10. In a South German dialect, the phrase “*es denkt mir, dass . . .*” is today still common.

11. The passive form and the respect form play no particular role at this point, so I do not go into them.

12. In Nishida's *Mujunteki jiko dōitsu* this word appears over a hundred times.

13. In Nishida's writing additional words appear frequently like *serareru*, *mirareru*, *iwareru*, etc.

14. See my essay on the interpretations of sensibility in an intercultural perspective, “Sensory Dimensions in Intercultural Perspective and the Problem of Modern Media and Technology,” in Peter Herschok, Marietta Stepaniants, and Roger Ames, eds., *Technology and Cultural Values: On the Edge of the Third Millennium* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003), 478–92.

15. William James, *The Essential Writings*, ed. Bruce Wilshire (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), 44.

16. As is well known, Nishida adopts this term from James as a key concept in his work, *An Inquiry into the Good*.

17. It would be its own task to describe the various “it phrases” as substitute forms for the middle voice in the German and the English languages, respectively. When Lichtenberg and Nietzsche say that one should prefer to say, “it thinks” rather than “I think,” a clear need for the middle voice as a philosophical linguistic form shows itself.

18. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* [1927], trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 25 (“The Concept of Phenomenon”) and 30 (“The Preliminary Concept of Phenomenology”), respectively.

19. Cf. Rolf Elberfeld, “Heidegger und ostasiatisches Denken: Annäherungen zwischen fremden Welten,” *Heidegger-Handbuch* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2003), 469–74.

20. Jacques Derrida, “Différance,” *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 8–9.

21. I have tried to make this bear fruit in terms of a phenomenology of time. See my *Phänomenologie der Zeit im Buddhismus: Methoden interkulturellen Philosophierens* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 2004).

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**Japanese and
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Philosophy**

Conversations with the Kyoto School

EDITED BY

Bret W. Davis, Brian Schroeder,
and Jason M. Wirth

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*In memory of the generous spirit of two
extraordinary cross-cultural bridgebuilders:*

Jan Van Bragt (1928–2007) and Horio Tsutomu (1940–2006)

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Abbreviations of Works by the Kyoto School

Ch.	Chinese
Fr.	French
Gn.	German
Gr.	Greek
Jp.	Japanese
Sk.	Sanskrit

HISAMATSU Shinichi

ZFA *Zen and the Fine Arts*, trans. Tokiwa Gishin (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1971).

MIKI Kiyoshi

MKZ *Miki Kiyoshi zenshū* [*The Complete Works of Miki Kiyoshi*] (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1966–1968).

NISHIDA Kitarō

NKZ *Nishida Kitarō zenshū* [*The Complete Works of Nishida Kitarō*], 19 vols. (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1988).

AM *Art and Morality*, trans. David A. Dilworth and Valdo H. Viglielmo (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1973).

FP *Fundamental Problems of Philosophy*, trans. David A. Dilworth (Tokyo: Sophia University Press, 1970).

IG *An Inquiry into the Good*, trans. Masao Abe and Christopher Ives (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1990).

xii | Abbreviations of Works by the Kyoto School

- IN *Intelligibility and the Philosophy of Nothingness*, trans. Robert Schinzinger (Honolulu: East-West Center Press, 1958).
LW *Last Writings: Nothingness and the Religious Worldview*, trans. David A. Dilworth (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1987).

NISHITANI Keiji

- NKC *Nishitani Keiji chosakushū [The Collected Writings of Nishitani Keiji]*, 26 vols. (Tokyo: Sōbunsha, 1986–1995).
NK *Nishida Kitarō*, trans. Yamamoto Seisaku and James W. Heisig (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).
RN *Religion and Nothingness*, trans. with intro. Jan Van Bragt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).
SN *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, trans. Graham Parkes with Setsuko Aihara (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990).

TANABE Hajime

- THZ *Tanabe Hajime zenshū [The Complete Works of Tanabe Hajime]*, 15 vols. (Tokyo: Chikuma Shōbō, 1964).
PM *Philosophy as Metanoetics*, trans. Takeuchi Yoshinori (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

UEDA Shizuteru

- NKY *Nishida Kitarō o yomu [Reading Nishida Kitarō]* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1991).
USS *Ueda Shizuteru shū [The Ueda Shizuteru Collection]* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2002–2004).

WATSUJI Tetsurō

- WTR *Watsuji Tetsurō's Rinrigaku: Ethics in Japan*, trans. Yamamoto Seisaku and Robert E. Carter (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996).

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