



BREAKING BARRIERS IN INTERCULTURAL PHILOSOPHY: THE POWER OF EMPATHY AND INTERRELATIONSHIP

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Abstract: An important issue in intercultural philosophy concerns the methods employed to investigate thinking that has been developed in different cultural contexts. In a globalized world, it is increasingly necessary to incorporate diverse traditions of thought that are derived from distinct cultural, historical and linguistic backgrounds into academic philosophical work. However, the question remains: how can one learn from other philosophical traditions without falling into a dualistic or relativistic perspective? To address this, I analyze two concepts developed by Nishitani Keiji (1900-1990) in *Religion and Nothingness*, as well as his interpretation of "learning" (jap. *narau* 習う) and empathy as a tool for genuine mutual understanding. Additionally, I explore the concept of reciprocal interpenetration (jap. *egoteki sōnyū* 回互的相入), as a means to reassess intercultural philosophical methods. Thus, by applying the concepts presented by Nishitani in the intercultural aspect of philosophy, I believe we can avoid the problem of dualism and relativism, which ultimately hinder the approach and comprehension of philosophy in a pluralistic and inclusive way.


Keywords: Nishitani Keiji. Kyoto School. Dialectics. Dualism.

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Resumo: Uma questão importante na filosofia intercultural diz respeito aos métodos empregados para investigar o pensamento que foi desenvolvido em diferentes contextos culturais. Em um mundo globalizado, é cada vez mais necessário incorporar diversas tradições de pensamento que são derivadas de distintas origens culturais, históricas e linguísticas, no trabalho filosófico acadêmico. No entanto, a questão permanece: como alguém pode aprender com outras tradições filosóficas, sem cair em uma perspectiva dualista ou relativista? Para abordar isso, analisam-se dois conceitos desenvolvidos por Nishitani Keiji (1900-1990), em *Religion and Nothingness*, bem como sua interpretação de "aprendizagem" (jap. *narau* 習う) e empatia como uma ferramenta para compreensão mútua genuína. Além disso, explora-se o conceito de interpenetração recíproca (jap. *egoteki sōnyū* 回互的相入), como um meio de reavaliar métodos filosóficos interculturais. Assim, ao aplicar os conceitos apresentados por Nishitani ao aspecto intercultural da filosofia, acredita-se poder evitar o problema do dualismo e do relativismo, que acabam por dificultar a abordagem e a compreensão da filosofia de forma pluralista e inclusiva.

Palavras-chave: Nishitani Keiji. Escola de Kyoto. Dialética. Dualismo.

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BREAKING BARRIERS IN INTERCULTURAL PHILOSOPHY: THE POWER OF EMPATHY AND INTERRELATIONSHIP

Amanda S. Fernandes Prazeres¹

Abstract: An important issue in intercultural philosophy concerns the methods employed to investigate thinking that has been developed in different cultural contexts. In a globalized world, it is increasingly necessary to incorporate diverse traditions of thought that are derived from distinct cultural, historical and linguistic backgrounds into academic philosophical work. However, the question remains: how can one learn from other philosophical traditions without falling into a dualistic or relativistic perspective? To address this, I analyze two concepts developed by Nishitani Keiji (1900-1990) in *Religion and Nothingness*, as well as his interpretation of “learning” (jap. *narau* 習う) and empathy as a tool for genuine mutual understanding. Additionally, I explore the concept of reciprocal interpenetration (jap. *egoteki sōnyū* 回互の相入), as a means to reassess intercultural philosophical methods. Thus, by applying the concepts presented by Nishitani in the intercultural aspect of philosophy, I believe we can avoid the problem of dualism and relativism, which ultimately hinder the approach and comprehension of philosophy in a pluralistic and inclusive way.

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INTRODUCTION

The emergence of international integration, facilitated by the development of technology and the intensification of globalization, has created a context where it is easy to access the philosophical works of traditions with diverse cultural backgrounds, which may also be situated in different historical contexts and languages. Although the study of other cultural perspectives on reality is not a new phenomenon, the way in which we approach philosophy in these circumstances and the challenges that arise from this have been the subject of recent discussions within the field of intercultural philosophy.

The concept of intercultural philosophy emerged in the 1990s as an inclusive philosophical approach that, according to Ram Mall “[...] allows and encourages the spirit of philosophy to be realized in different cultural contexts” (Mall, 2014, p. 68). This implies that philosophy should be regarded as a universal product, a shared element among all human beings. However, since philosophy takes on different forms in various societies with distinct cultural characteristics, it cannot be viewed as a rigid and unified concept but, instead, it exhibits diverse manifestations. Essentially, adopting this intercultural perspective entails

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refraining from any form of centralism, uniformity, or absolutism based on an illusory and exclusive standpoint.

This raises the question that scholars might face: how to undertake an intercultural study of philosophical traditions, while avoiding any kind of centralism, be it European or not, and the problematic dualistic perspective that divides “me” and “the other,” West and East, philosophy and thought? To be able to practice philosophy in an intercultural way and help us go beyond this challenging problem, I analyze two key concepts of Nishitani’s Keiji philosophy: 1) his interpretation of the Japanese verb to learn (*narau* 習う) and 2) his understanding of an ancient Buddhist concept presented by him as reciprocal interpenetration (jap. *egoteki sōnyū* 回互的相入).

Nishitani Keiji² (1900-1990) is one of the most relevant philosophers of the Kyoto School. He studied philosophy academically and was a professor at the University of Kyoto. Nishitani’s religious-existential philosophy itself is a broad example of the continuous exercise of intercultural philosophy. I can state this because his religious philosophy is influenced not only by Buddhist doctrines, but also by certain Christian medieval philosophers, such as Master Eckhart and Thomas Aquinas. Additionally, his existential philosophical approach to reality has been influenced mainly by Nietzsche, Heidegger and Sartre, among other important European philosophers. Considering Nishitani’s practice of intercultural philosophy, his concepts may be relevant or revealing for discussing intercultural problems (Heisig, 2016).

However, before analyzing Nishitani’s philosophical ideas, I will investigate, in the next section, whether intercultural philosophy is a preferable approach compared to comparative philosophy. In the third section, I will explore the challenges that scholars may encounter when studying philosophies from foreign contexts. Then, I will discuss the nature of the relationship that we must create within the context of intercultural practice.

Furthermore, with regards to Nishitani’s philosophy, I will investigate the potential impact that his concepts of learning and *reciprocal interpenetration* may have on the intercultural practice of philosophy. I will examine how learning through empathy can alter the way we acquire knowledge and engage in philosophical investigation. I posit that this transformation can result in an effective philosophical approach by shifting the focus of knowledge from the individual subject to an understanding of reality, based on reciprocal interpenetration.

Regarding the concept of reciprocal interpenetration, I emphasize how this non-dualistic understanding of reality resonates in personal relationships. Thus, by applying the concepts presented by Nishitani in the intercultural sphere of philosophy, I believe we can develop a method or approach to philosophical practice that avoids the problems of dualism

² Throughout the text, the traditional Japanese order of names has been used for Japanese philosophers and authors, placing the surname before the first name.

and relativism. This approach can ultimately facilitate a more pluralistic and inclusive understanding and engagement with philosophy.

1 COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY OR INTERCULTURAL PHILOSOPHY

Firstly, it is essential to clarify that there is a significant methodological difference between the available approaches when studying various traditions of thought. Intercultural philosophy and comparative philosophy are two distinct approaches that share certain similarities, but also include significant differences. This section will provide a general understanding of both methods and clarify why intercultural philosophy is the preferable approach.

In general, while comparative philosophy focuses on the comparison of different philosophical traditions, intercultural philosophy emphasizes the need to engage with diverse cultural perspectives in order to broaden and enrich our philosophical discussion of an issue. Comparative philosophy involves the systematic comparison of different philosophical traditions or schools of thought with the aim of identifying similarities, differences and possible areas of convergence or divergence. This approach emphasizes the need to examine the historical and cultural contexts in which different philosophical ideas and practices have emerged, and to consider the implications of these contexts for our understanding of the nature of philosophy and other philosophical problems. However, comparative philosophy is a problematic approach, as David Wong highlights:

Doing comparative philosophy well can be very difficult because of the vast range of texts and their intellectual and historical contexts it requires its practitioners to cover. Oversimplifications, excessively stark contrasts, and illicit assimilations count as the most frequent sins (Wong, 2020).

Comparative philosophy has faced significant criticism, including concerns about essentialism, privileging Western philosophical traditions and *exoticizing* non-Western traditions. One of the most significant critiques of comparative philosophy is that it risks essentializing different philosophical traditions and cultures, thereby reinforcing cultural stereotypes and biases. As a method, comparative philosophy must be aware of the propensity to propagate cultural stereotypes and perpetuate essentialism, treating each tradition, culture, or civilization as monolithic and immutable. This can be seen in the tendency to reduce all the different philosophies, diverse movements and schools of philosophy in the vast Asian continent to a set of characteristics that make them *Eastern* in opposition to their radical other: the *West*. This artificial separation is ineffective for analyzing and understanding different cultural thoughts since it disseminates stereotypes (*cf.* Said, 1978).

Another criticism towards comparative philosophy is that it may unintentionally prioritize Western philosophical traditions over non-Western ones, despite aiming to take a “neutral standpoint” for comparison. This critique highlights the potential for comparative philosophy to perpetuate power imbalances between different philosophical traditions and cultures. Daya Krishna has highlighted this critique concerning comparative philosophy. According to her, the fundamental contradiction, inherent in the field of comparative studies, is often obscured by appeals to the universal nature of knowledge and by identifying knowledge with the privileged perspective of the *we* that evaluates and judges all other societies and cultures. The origins of this privileged position usually stem from the society’s political and economic power to which the *viewer* belongs. A political and economic power that has extended to the world from some European countries in the last centuries through colonization, military power and cultural influence. In her words (Krishna, 1986, p. 59): “‘Comparative studies’ thus, meant in effect the comparison of all other societies and cultures in terms of the standards provided by the Western societies and cultures both in cognitive and non-cognitive domains”.

However, it must be questioned whether these problems are inherent to the method of comparative philosophy or if there are means of avoiding them. Wong argues that comparative philosophy is “a sound and sensible strategy” and emphasizes that it is helpful to explore a variety of well-established ideas concerning a problem. However, according to him, it is indispensable to remain cautious about the possibility of comparing traditions that might not be addressing the same problems or may only be addressing part of a problem. Additionally, the impulse of declaring a tradition as completely right and the other as completely wrong should be avoided when both address a common philosophical issue. As said before, that would likely result in essentialisms and stereotypes. In Wong’s words, it is possible that each tradition has valuable insights to offer about different aspects of the problem, and it is possible that each tradition can benefit from incorporating ideas from the other one (Wong, 2020).

Additionally, Krishna (1986, p. 69) defends that comparative studies can be advantageous because the study of other traditions of philosophy reveals alternative possibilities in thought that have already been realized. Therefore, comparative philosophy can function as a mutual liberator of all philosophical traditions, freeing them from the limitations imposed by their own past, rather than serving to impose the standards of a single dominant culture on all others and evaluate their philosophical achievements based on those standards.

Comparative philosophy and intercultural philosophy are distinct approaches. However, despite the criticisms that have been directed at comparative philosophy for the reasons mentioned earlier, both approaches share the common goal of fostering a deeper

understanding of different philosophical traditions. Additionally, they both recognize that philosophy is not limited to a particular cultural or geographical context and that there is value in exploring the diversity of philosophical thought around the world. However intercultural philosophy has focused on seeking to expand the scope of philosophical inquiry beyond traditional Western philosophical frameworks, besides it has denounced how biased philosophy and comparative one have been.

Moreover, intercultural philosophy is characterized by a commitment to mutual learning and exchange among different philosophical traditions. It emphasizes the importance of dialogue and interaction between different philosophical traditions and pursues to develop a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of philosophy. Intercultural philosophy recognizes the importance of cultural context in shaping philosophical thought and emphasizes the need to understand philosophical traditions within their broader cultural context. The positive aspects of intercultural philosophy are valuable in the practice of analyzing and understanding different cultures. This approach excludes the demand for comparing the worth of different philosophical traditions and provides a deeper and more nuanced understanding of philosophical thought across cultures. Intercultural philosophy fosters effective dialogue that enriches the analysis of philosophical issues. By emphasizing the importance of cultural context and mutual learning, intercultural philosophy promotes a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of philosophy. As such, it is a valuable approach for those seeking to engage with diverse cultural perspectives and broaden their philosophical horizons.

Although intercultural philosophy is recognized as a more inclusive and pluralistic approach, especially in highlighting the power asymmetries that limit recognition and dialogue among the world's diverse philosophies, it is not without its challenges. One of the main obstacles is achieving true mutual understanding within this approach, which requires a conscious effort to overcome cultural and epistemological barriers. Furthermore, it is essential to identify and criticize the philosophical and political structure that supports any hegemonic perspective on reality. Only in this way, we can ensure that philosophical reflection is not exclusively tied to a dominant cultural center, promoting a genuine and equitable dialogue among different philosophical traditions.

The personal interrelationship is particularly important if we apply it to the problem of the practice of intercultural philosophy. It would be possible to consider an effective intercultural philosophy practice in the context of a reciprocal interpenetration. If the elements of absolute harmony and mutual understanding of the interpersonal relationship are seen as constitutive aspects of reality, we are able to avoid or overcome the dualistic and absolutist outlook in the exercise of philosophy. In adopting this point of view as a method of doing philosophy, any hierarchic differentiation among traditions that can be expressed by

the opposition between East and West, philosophy and thought, etc., would be considered illusory.

2 THE PROBLEM OF INTERCULTURALITY AS RELATIONSHIP

To understand the challenge of encountering diverse intellectual analyses of reality that arise from the interplay of various traditions, cultures, religions and languages, the following section focuses on the human aspect of these interactions. Additionally, the issue is contextualized with reference to previous discussions by prominent scholars in the field of intercultural philosophy.

Ram Mall highlights that, in the context of the wake of modernity and its global technological development, the interaction among different cultures, philosophies and religions has demanded an intensive and reciprocal dialogue (Mall, 2014, p. 74). He argues that, in this challenging circumstance, is imperative to avoid any *a priori*, metaphysical, or ideological conclusion, since it can prevent the main goal of intercultural practice, i.e., the possibility of genuine understanding. In short, for Ram Mall, the key to a mutual understanding is to construct a mutual dialogue preventing any kind of essentialism and absolutism.

Thus, to attain a genuine interrelation that allows an authentic mutual understanding, it is imperative, in Mall's words, to fight back theoretical forms of absolutism. Therefore, it is crucial to present arguments against exclusive ideologies and advocate for pluralistic approaches in epistemology, methodology, ethics and morals. Furthermore, he argues that we must identify practical methods of confronting the violent practice of absolutism. Since, in order to enable a peaceful cultural encounter, it is imperative to challenge and reject any form of exclusive ideology that may hinder it. This is particularly relevant in cases of human rights violations, where diverse reactions are crucial to object such practices (Mall, 2014, p. 75).

Mall considers the issue of intercultural relationships an ethical matter that must be addressed to achieve a “[...] peaceful and fruitful cultural encounter” (Mall, 2014, p. 75). This ethical aspect is rooted in the advocacy of a cooperative, inclusive and pluralistic philosophical practice that transcends a one-sided perspective of reality. His primary argument is that, adopting such a practice, is essential to facilitate the effective practice of intercultural philosophy.

Today, every philosophy ought to cooperate with others and form part of a larger whole, thus making every philosophy a cross-cultural phenomenon. We should accept and recognize more than one genuine Gestalt of philosophy. We should not err in thinking that our own way of doing philosophy might be the only possible way of doing philosophy at all. In this regard, a conceptual clarification, which is to say a philosophical grounding of interculturality becomes very pertinent (Mall, 2014, p. 76).

In essence, the intercultural approach in philosophical inquiry is a pressing matter for individuals with a broader comprehension of philosophy and who strive for a pluralistic viewpoint in examining the universal issues that humans encounter. Ram Mall's analysis of intercultural philosophy provides a precise assessment of the issues that must be addressed to attain genuine mutual comprehension within an intercultural philosophical approach. Nevertheless, to surmount these obstacles and achieve an intercultural practice of philosophy, it is imperative to identify the philosophical framework that underpins a hegemonic perspective of reality.

Raúl Fonet-Betancourt (1994, p. 10), another prominent scholar in the early studies and development of intercultural philosophy, argues that intercultural philosophy is innovative due to its “[...] eminently polyphonic process where the syntony and harmony of the different voices is achieved by the continuous contrast with the other and the continuous learning of their opinions and experiences”³. He further emphasizes the importance of this process, highlighting that intercultural philosophy involves a continuous exchange of ideas and experiences, which allows for the development of unbiased dialogue among diverse perspectives.

It [intercultural philosophy] decentralizes philosophical reflection from any possible dominant center. It is not just anti-Eurocentric, it not only frees philosophy from the shackles of the European tradition, but also, going further, criticizes the exclusive dependent linkage of philosophy with any other cultural center. In this sense, she equally criticizes any Latin American-centric or Afrocentric tendencies, etc. Its vision is rather to place philosophical reflection in the moment of interconnection, of intercommunication, and thus pave the way for the emergence of an interdiscursive reason (Fonet-Betancourt, 1994, p. 10-11).

Fonet-Betancourt emphasizes the issue of the traditional centralism of reason, which tends to reject the critical knowledge characterized as *mythological* or *religious* or related to *mystical* aspects. He also argues that the historical measurement of reason is connected to an illusory division between categories, such as philosophy and thought, West and East, and exotic and traditional. Concerning intercultural philosophy, a particular perspective that undermines the development of a balanced epistemology is associated with modern rationalism and a cultural hegemonic way of thinking. This raises the question of how to overcome centralism or essentialism in the process of understanding and learning from the other. However, this issue is not merely confined to the intellectual or philosophical relationship among cultures. Rather, it is a multifaceted matter that encompasses the very definition of the *self* and the nature of the connections we establish with others.

Considering the preceding discussion, it is my contention that effective intercultural practice requires the establishment of a genuine connection with the other party in the

³ All translations included in this paper are my own, unless otherwise noted.

philosophical relationship. This entails challenging centralism that disconnects the *self* from the material world and from others. This viewpoint generates a dualistic outlook on reality, placing the *self* at the center and holding it solely responsible for acquiring knowledge

Nishitani Keiji, in *Religion and Nothingness* (宗教とは何か *Shūkyō to wa Nanika*), highlights the need to question the subject's atomic perspective, which underpins the dualistic perception of reality (subject-object) and obscures our awareness that reality is composed of infinite interdependent relationships. This illusory dualistic perception has profound epistemological, ethical and ontological implications. It shapes the way modern society has pursued knowledge by assigning the ego the ultimate responsibility for determining the nature of things. This perspective has led to a mechanistic view of the world, where nature is seen merely as an object or resource to be exploited. This utilitarian perspective has significant implications for how we approach science and technology and has negative effects on the achievement of a mutual understanding. Importantly, it also affects the quality of intercultural relationships that we establish. To foster genuine intercultural dialogue and understanding, it is necessary to challenge this dualistic perception and embrace an interconnected perspective of reality. This entails recognizing all beings' interdependence and embracing a more sustainable and ethical approach as well as an empathic relationship with one another.

To move beyond those problematic circumstances, the next two sections will explore Nishitani's concepts of learning and reciprocal interpenetration. These concepts have the potential to shed light on a possible approach to practicing intercultural philosophy through the exercise of empathy. This involves recognizing all beings' interdependence and adopting a more sustainable and ethical approach, as well as cultivating empathetic relationships with one another.

3 LEARNING AS EMPATHY

In this section, I aim to analyze the possibility of mutual understanding in intercultural philosophical practice through Nishitani's interpretation of the Japanese verb *to learn* (*narau* 習う). Hiraga Masako K. (2008) conducts an analysis of the customary metaphors, employed in Japanese culture, to describe the process of learning. According to him, the study of the origin and history of the verbs and nouns, associated with learning in modern Japanese, reveal primary attitudes ingrained in the fundamental vocabulary of learning, which are characterized by passivity, repetition and imitation. To understand the association of these attitudes with *Narau* 習う, Hiraga proceeds examining the Chinese characters connected to notions of leaning that later influenced the Japanese language.

Figure 1 illustrates four basic notions of learning represented by the Chinese characters: 学、習、倣、慣. Both 学ぶ *manabu* ('to study') and 習う *narau* ('to learn'), connote 倣る *maneru* ('to imitate'). [...] The Chinese character of 習う *narau*,

on the other hand, originally represents a bird practising flying by repeatedly flapping its wings; hence, it means to learn, to study, to imitate, to get accustomed, and to repeat. It becomes clear that the basic processes in learning apparent in the above Chinese characters are: imitation, practice, and repetition, which lead to 慣れる *nareru* ('to get accustomed'). Namely, these are the values implied in the etymology of the basic terms for learning (Hiraga, 2008, p. 61).

The Chinese language has had a significant impact on the Japanese language. According to Leo J. Loveday (1996, p. 06), the Japanese originally lacked a native writing system and, instead, utilized the Chinese character script. Although the oldest known examples of Chinese character writing discovered in Japan are from the fifth century, the introduction of these characters to Japan happened approximately a century earlier. The Chinese characters were incorporated into the Japanese writing system, where they are referred to as Kanji. Consequently, a large part of Japanese vocabulary includes characters derived from Chinese, and many of these Kanji are still in use in Japanese writing today.

In modern Japanese, according to Hiraga, the verbs for learning are 学ぶ *manabu* (to study) and 習う *narau* (to learn), which the analysis of its parts, according to him, implies a passive and receptive attitude of learning supported by diligent repetition of practice. The Kanji 習 is composed of the elements 羽 (wings) and 白 (white). It evokes the image of a young bird learning to fly by repeatedly flapping its wings, imitating its parents. Additionally, the character 学 *manabu* (to study) originally signifies the act of teaching a child to imitate (jap. 倣う *maneru*) hand gestures in line with societal norms. Consequently, it conveys the meanings of learning and studying.

Hiraga examines metaphorical expressions, proverbs and the origin of educational terminology to explain three primary conceptual metaphors in Japanese: “learning is a journey,” where the teacher guides the student on a path; “teacher is a father,” which utilizes the structure of familial systems; and “learning is imitating the model,” an interpretation that can be linked to Nishitani definition of learning. In *Religion and Nothingness*, Nishitani describes learning as “[...] making an effort to stand essentially in the same mode of being as the thing one wishes to learn about” (Hiraga, 1982, p. 128).

To attain a deeper understanding of Nishitani’s interpretation, it is useful to consider the metaphor “learning is imitating the model.” As Hiraga notes in his analysis of Japanese cultural metaphors for learning, the verb 習う *narau* conveys the idea of diligently and repeatedly imitating or practicing the model (Hiraga, 2008, p. 65), as reflected in the mentioned Japanese metaphors. Another proverb illustrating the concept of learning as imitation, repetition and receptivity, as cited by Hiraga, is 門前の小僧習わぬ経を読む (*monzen no kozoo narawa-nu kyoo o yomu*), which translates to “A boy working before the gate of the temple can recite a sutra [even though he had no chance of learning it formally]”

(Hiraga, 2008, p. 63). This proverb emphasizes the passive acquisition of knowledge through observation and repetition, even without formal instruction. Hiraga's analysis thus underscores how Nishitani's interpretation of learning is embedded in common metaphorical expressions within Japanese tradition. This connection extends to the linguistic analysis of the verb, demonstrating a deep resonance with the idea of learning as an embodied and experiential process.

By emphasizing the importance of imitation and repetition, this view of learning challenges the notion of knowledge as successfully achieving a being's substance through the subject's rational analysis. Instead, it suggests that learning involves a kind of embodiment and internalization of the form, which is then assimilated. Nishitani's interpretation of learning, as striving to adopt the same state of being as the object of study in order to truly understand it, can be better examined through his analysis of a poem attributed to the haikai master Matsuo Bashō (1644-1694). This poem is reproduced by Nishitani in *Religion and Nothingness* as follows:

From the pine tree
learn (the koto) of the pine tree,
And from the bamboo
(the koto) of the bambo. (Bashō *apud* Nishitani 1982, p. 195).

Nishitani's analysis of Bashō's poem underscores an epistemological construction concerning substance and subject. Substance refers to every being's identifiable nature that remains unchanged despite the variations in its accidental properties. The subject, equipped with rational faculties, places itself at the center of knowledge, ultimately responsible for defining the beings' substance. According to this perspective, the beings' substance is considered representationally, exclusively from the subject's viewpoint. In contrast, Nishitani argues that Bashō's sentence, "From the pine tree learn of the pine tree," illustrates that the center of knowledge in the learning process is not the subject, but the object that has been studied. This perspective implies a particular type of relationship must be developed between the parts to achieve the final purpose of learning from the pine tree. This interrelation considers the pine tree or bamboo as neither objects nor ontologically inferior things.

In Nishitani's epistemological perspective, the act of learning should not be perceived as "careful observation," "scientific analysis," or "methodical study." Rather, in order to truly learn from something or someone, it is essential to cultivate a relationship in which one strives to adopt the same mode of being as the object of study. In Bashō's poem, the process of learning through the relationship between the parts should not be understood as a complete assimilation, where two become one. Rather, it should be viewed as an interrelation in which

each preserves its unique identity while actively emulating the other's suchness. Nishitani describes the characteristic of this relationship as follows:

He [Bashō] means for us to enter into the mode of being where the pine tree is the pine tree itself, and the bamboo is the bamboo itself, and from there to look at the pine tree and the bamboo. He calls on us to betake ourselves to the dimension where things become manifest in their suchness, to attune ourselves to the selfness of the pine tree and the selfness of the bamboo (Nishitani, 1982, p. 128).

I define as empathy the attempt to take after or *attune* us to the *suchness* of what we wish to learn from. Empathy is a term that has become increasingly prominent in recent discussions of ethics and psychology. While its definition can vary depending on the context, the word *empathy* itself probably comes from the ancient Greek $\mu\pi$ (*empátheia*), which is formed from $\epsilon\nu$ (en, in, at) and π (*páthos*, “feeling”). According to the commonsense interpretation and even psychological one, empathy is often defined as the ability to understand and share the others' feelings. This can involve both emotional and cognitive components, including the capacity to recognize and interpret the others' emotions, as well as the ability to respond appropriately to those emotions. The term was reintroduced into modern usage, in the early 20th century, by Theodor Lipps (1851-1914) through the German word *Einfühlung*, which was later translated to empathy.

With this in mind, I approach “empathy” by removing it from its common psychological interpretation, which views it as the ability to understand someone by sharing their emotions and reframing it philosophically. In my understanding, empathy involves the act of making an effort to *comprehend* another being's suchness. To achieve this, the person seeking to *understand* must allow the being to *appear* fully and genuinely, without any judgment. Through this process, the empathizer can gain a profound understanding of the other being.

Therefore, I aim to explore how empathy can serve as a foundation for an authentic and successful method of understanding others. However, the question remains as to how one can truly achieve empathy and stand in the same mode of being as the thing they wish to apprehend. In other words, how can one share the experience of being the bamboo or being from a particular culture through empathy?

The practice of empathy should not be mistaken by the attempt to rationally communicate who one *essentially* is. Neither should be taken as the metaphorical expression of being in *somebody's shoes* to emotionally understand the situation they face. Additionally, empathy is not a rhetorical or rational exercise, but it is rooted in the *existential practice* of relating to the other by practicing or *imitating* something/somebody's elemental way of being. In this sense, empathy is an experimental process, not merely an intellectual one. It involves adopting an attitude of actively experiencing and realizing the other's unique

being. According to Nishitani, this realization involves both actualization-manifestation and appropriation-apprehension, signifying a phenomenological perspective on “understanding” in which the thing purely and simply exists in its own suchness, without any additional interpretations.

This critical viewpoint has two main structural implications for both parts in the process of learning: (1) it affects the nature of the relationship by breaking with the difference between the subject (*self*) of knowledge and the object (being/bamboo/concept/other); in a more elemental level, (2) it invites us to reconsider the ontological construction of reality. Moreover, the development of another kind of relationship among beings in the world is only possible if we philosophically reconsider the importance of absolute nothingness at the bottom of reality. In short, both processes are interrelated and interdependent.

According to Nishitani, the field of emptiness is the unique point of view where all beings, the *self* and the world, are free to express and realize their suchness apart from the limitations imposed by the substantial and rational philosophical perception of reality. In *Religion and Nothingness* Nishitani presents the standpoint of emptiness as the affirmation of an original way to achieve reality, a non-substantial perspective of reality. However, it is important to clarify that the defense of the realization of nothingness, in the foundation of reality, doesn't imply a total annihilation of being or negation of existence. It is, as sustains Nishitani, the place of absolute affirmation of reality in its suchness.

To say that being makes its appearance as something in unison with emptiness at the bottom—or that on the field of emptiness each thing that is becomes manifest according to its own mode of being—means that [...] Each thing is restored anew to its own *virtus*—that individual capacity that each thing possesses as a display of its own possibility of existence. The pine tree is returned to the *virtus* of the pine, the bamboo to the *virtus* of the bamboo, man to the *virtus* of his humanity. In that sense, emptiness might be called the field of “be-ification” (Ichtung) [...]. To speak in Nietzschean terms, this field of be-ification is the field of the Great Affirmation, where we can say Yes to all things (Nishitani, 1982, p. 123-124).

From a substantial philosophical perspective, the subject relates to things through concepts and representations, which are based on the subject's viewpoint. In contrast, from the point of view of emptiness, the *self*, and things, as well as the *self* and others, share the same home-ground. According to Nishitani, this field transcends even the realm of reason where concepts are constituted, and it also transcends any separation between the knower and the object of knowing. In this point of view, reality has become manifest in its suchness. Moreover, because everything that exists stands in the field of emptiness, it is indispensable to consider the role of relationships and the character of dependence among the elements of reality.

To achieve a genuine understanding of intercultural philosophical practice, it is essential to establish a mutual connection among individuals with different cultural backgrounds. As we have analyzed, the quality of the relationship and the epistemological approach to the other are limiting factors in intercultural philosophy. In this context, cultivating ontological empathy can help us build relationships based on experiencing and understanding the same way of being as what we seek to comprehend. By engaging in this process, we can overcome limitations and achieve a more effective philosophical practice.

Thus, the practice of empathy can prove to be valuable to attain effective intercultural learning in philosophy. It can help transform the problematic dualistic rational relationship that interferes with intercultural understanding. As mentioned earlier, the dualistic perspective places the emphasis on the self and considers the subject's viewpoint as absolute. Nishitani (1982, p. 123) argues that, by reinforcing this problematic dualistic dynamic, "[...] we can go on thinking of ourselves as incapable of coming within the hand of things, and of things in themselves as forever unknowable and out of our reach". This historical approach of reason creates a perception of an insurmountable division among traditions of thinking, which compromises the possibility of dialogue. In the context of intercultural philosophy, this notion proves to be a hindrance in achieving effective intercultural learning.

As Ram Mall suggests, it is crucial to shift the way philosophy has traditionally been approached in order to achieve a pluralistic perspective of reality that is grounded in mutual understanding. True understanding cannot be attained if knowledge is centralized solely in the subject of learning, be it a scholar or philosopher, as this hinders the relevance of the concepts and philosophical perspectives one wishes to learn from. To prevent such a scenario, it is necessary to critically examine the nature of the relationship that is formed among the parts involved in the practice of intercultural philosophy.

4 EMBRACING MUTUALISTIC CONNECTIONS

As mentioned previously, the ability to practice empathy and cultivate genuine mutual relationships stems from the realization of the field of emptiness at the foundation of reality. Nishitani favors the concept of emptiness (*śūnyatā* in Sanskrit and *kū* in Japanese) to avoid the negative connotations traditionally associated with the word nothingness. By selecting this terminology, the Japanese philosopher seeks to convey that emptiness and being are not opposing forces, but rather exist in harmony. Emptiness serves as the common ground that all things share, and reality is sustained by a dynamic network of reciprocal connections among its constituent elements in this transontological perspective. The term "transontology" (Cf. Prazeres, 2019) has been employed to convey the notion of going beyond the conventional ontological structure. The use of the prefix "trans" underscores the concept of surpassing any duality assumed by the European theoretical framework, including

the separation between subject and object in the epistemological perspective. In conclusion, Nishitani's understanding of reality, based on the notions of emptiness and reciprocal interpenetration, cannot be regarded as an "ontology" in the traditional sense.

It is crucial to clarify that advocating for the "realization of the field of emptiness at the bottom of reality" is not an endorsement of a religious encounter based on Buddhist dogma that seeks enlightenment through nirvana. It would be counterproductive to examine an intercultural philosophy method and argue that only those, who have experienced nirvana, can effectively engage in intercultural philosophical practice. Nevertheless, Nishitani's philosophy draws inspiration from some Buddhist concepts. However, he extracts these concepts from their religious contexts and applies them in a new philosophical way. Therefore, when Nishitani defends the emptiness at the foundation of reality, he postulates that everything that exists lacks substance, and its existence is possible due to a distinct arrangement of reality in which all elements are interconnected. In my opinion, Nishitani's philosophy, particularly the concept of learning, as "entering into the mode of being" of what we want to learn from and the idea of reciprocal interpenetration, can help us question the problematic separation between knower and known in the process of intercultural philosophy.

Nishitani describes this cosmological outlook as reciprocal interpenetration (jap. *egoteki sōnyū* 回互の相入). It can be characterized as a mutualistic and dynamic connection where the elements of reality sustain one another's existence. In the reciprocal interpenetrational relationship, neither the subject nor the object assumes the position of the protagonist. Furthermore, in this conception of reality, the human being recognizes their suchness, the reality reveals itself in a manner that precludes the subject from serving as the center of knowledge and the material world's objectification is deemed absurd.

The suchness, expressed by the identity or *virtus*⁴ of an element of reality, is supported by its dependence on everything else. The *self* forms the foundation of every other being, and likewise, every other being is a constitutive element of the *self*, creating conditions for the *self* to realize its suchness. In this sense, my selfness is not dictated by some intrinsic fundamental element of my being. Rather, my identity as a unique person is established solely by the network of connections I have with things, beings, people, concepts and all the elements of reality. This *web* of relationships is capable of producing an immediate visual understanding of what Nishitani intended with his view of reality. Through this perspective, Nishitani highlights the problem of the illusory isolation of the self. In the objective reality, one's existence is never completely independent; at the very least, the human beings' existence depends on specific material conditions of their surroundings.

⁴ Nishitani (1982, p. 12) define *virtus* as "[...] that individual capacity that each thing possesses as a display of its own possibility of existence".

Thus, that a thing is—its absolute autonomy—comes about only in unison with a subordination of all other things. It comes about only on the field of śūnyatā, where the being of all other things, while remaining to the very end the being that it is, is emptied out. Moreover, this means that the autonomy of this one thing is only constituted through a subordination to all other things. Its autonomy comes about only on a standpoint from which it makes all other things to be what they are, and in so doing is emptied of its own being (Nishitani, 1982, p. 148).

This fundamental reciprocal interpenetrational is also applicable to the relationship among individuals. It is evident when we consider that any human being's existence depends on their parents' existence. Once born into the world, a newborn is entirely dependent, unable to survive without supervision. Moreover, as adults, the connections among people define the social conditions that characterize the communities', societies' and cities' formation. Additionally, when developing a new concept or an innovative interpretation of a concept, it is essential to read and learn from all the philosophers who have written about it in the past. Such approach is necessary to avoid overlooking critical aspects of the topic and to build upon previous philosophical knowledge. Based on this, it is reasonable to conclude that having a completely isolated existence would be a difficult and unnatural endeavor. On the other hand, the reciprocal interpenetrational relationship is more elemental than a mere social dependence between the self and the other. In *The I-Thou Relation in Zen Buddhism*, Nishitani analyses the character of dependence and the dynamism of the interrelation among people in terms of I-Thou relation— terminology found in the Diamond Sutra of Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition and as well as in Buber's philosophy.

According to Nishitani's interpretation, in the field of emptiness, the I and the Thou express their suchness as I and as Thou, i.e., as identifiable unique beings. However, fundamentally, they are dependent on each other by being absolutely relative. The suchness of the self is affirmed in the relationship with the Thou. The I and the Thou maintain their identity as I and Thou, but with regard to the type of relationship they have, there is no distinction between them.

I can be I, and Thou can be Thou as absolute individuals because each of them is grounded on the absolute identity in which I am Thou and Thou are I, and every form of relation and relativity is superseded. Here, I am with you in no way discriminated from you, and you are with me, equally undiscriminated from me (Nishitani, 1969, p. 48).

This contradictory perspective can only be affirmed in the standpoint of emptiness, where the traditional ontological concept of substance is seen as illusory and an obstacle to realizing reality in its true suchness. Nishitani often refers to emptiness as a *standpoint* to highlight that it is not a universal *fixed* concept. Rather, it refers to a particular perspective

or position from which one can view and understand reality. The standpoint serves as a framework that shapes the way one interprets the self and the connections with everything that exists. The field of emptiness can be understood as a field where all elements of reality encounter one another and connect in harmony. It is a perspective where the true nature of something is not an absolute feature determined *a priori* and achieved by the subject's reasoning. Once the self is not seen as the central element of reality, the truth is revealed to us through the experience of connecting and relating to things.

Furthermore, Nishitani argues that the interpersonal relationship cannot be reduced to a mere dualistic connection between two completely opposed beings. The reciprocal interpenetrational relationship cannot be understood as the union of A with B since they were never truly separated beings. From this perspective, A has always been elementarily interpenetrated by B, and the relationship between them is more fundamental than a simple merging of two isolated entities.

For Nishitani, the integration among people, in interpersonal relationships, made possible through the web of reciprocal interpenetration. It necessarily expresses the dissolution of the ego, whereby "I am the Other, the Other is Me." He asserts that "[...] the source of the conflicts that cut mankind in two, will be found to have their roots in self-attachment which puts one's 'self' at the center and so discriminates between 'self' and 'other'" (Nishitani, 1969, p. 50). According to Nishitani, unless the relations between individual and individual, between nation and nation, among all factions, all groups return to this condition of essentially undifferentiation in the field of emptiness, "[...] there remains only the battle between wolves in the wild" (Nishitani, 1969, p. 50). Thus, Nishitani proposes a cosmivision of reality that has ethical implications applicable in approaching philosophies from different cultural backgrounds.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The practice of genuine intercultural philosophy presupposes the challenge and overcoming of the problem of properly apprehending philosophical concepts that were shaped by a different understanding of reality, associated with distinct cultural, historical and linguistic aspects. Nishitani addresses the problem of the possibility of understanding the other by advocating for the necessary overcoming of the analytical and rational theory of knowledge imposed by modernity.

As I have explained, Nishitani's interpretation of the process of learning implicates assuming the same way of being as the thing one wishes to learn from, which implies the exercise of mutual understanding through the practice of empathy. To be able to learn from each other, it is necessary to destroy any barriers that might separate the self and the other.

In other words, it is essential to avoid any dualism between the subject and the object of knowledge, as well as any self-centralism. Regarding the practice of intercultural philosophy, exercising empathy means avoiding absolutism and perspectivism by giving back the central stage to the philosophical topic. To achieve this, it is necessary to follow a process that involves several stages. First, one must acknowledge and deconstruct pre-existing biases and assumptions, both cultural and philosophical. This stage is crucial for setting a foundation free from preconceived notions that could distort understanding. Second, an active engagement with the philosophical perspectives of different cultures is required. This involves a deep and empathetic immersion into the worldview and existential concerns of the other, without imposing one's own framework. This stage is crucial for fostering mutual understanding and for breaking down the barriers that separate different perspectives. Finally, the focus must be redirected to the philosophical topic itself, allowing the insights gained from this intercultural dialogue to illuminate the subject in a way that transcends unique perspectives.

Furthermore, another important aspect to be considered in achieving mutual understanding is to question the kind of relationship developed among the parts involved in the practice of intercultural philosophy. In this regard, I discussed Nishitani's concept of reciprocal interpenetration, which involves building an interrelationship where the elements, while preserving their identity, are connected in a relationship characterized by elemental dependence on one another.

When considering Nishitani's standpoint of emptiness, there is no substantial differentiation between *self* and others, you and me. This can be affirmed only by recognizing that there is no substance and, also, there is no *self* who analyzes the substance through concepts and representations. By overcoming the notion of a substantial self within the field of emptiness, genuine connections can be made, and everything that exists is allowed to reveal its suchness.

For instance, it may be obvious that I am connected with this paper because I created it. However, less noticeably, based on the same principle, I can assert that my being has been interpenetrated by the Japanese philosophy I study, as well as by my Brazilian family's moral lessons that I have grown up listening to. Going even further, my being and your one are also interpenetrated in elemental dependence with an isolated civilization in a remote region of the globe that we may have never heard of. Everything that exists is interconnected in a web of reciprocal interpenetration. As a result, we are able to create mutual understanding by attuning to the other's way of being through empathy and creating a genuine practice of intercultural philosophy.

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