

TANABE HAJIME AND THE HINT OF A DHARMIC FINALITY

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Abstract:

The Japanese philosopher, Tanabe Hajime (1885-1962) is taken up as an example of a thinker who, straddles intellectual histories East and West. Of all the Kyoto School philosophers, it was he who took history most seriously. He not only criticized Kantian, Hegelian, and Marxist notions of teleology and the modern scientific myth of «progress» on their own ground, but went on to counter these views of history with a logic of emptiness grounded in Buddhist philosophy. The essay concludes with an attempt to uncover the tacit assumption that allows Tanabe to make his arguments. It was originally delivered as a keynote address to a conference at the University of Leiden on the theme «Is there a Dharma of History?».

Key words: Dharma, Hege, Kant, Kyoto School, Tanabe Hajime, teleology, history.

To inquire into the «Dharma of history» is to face two distinct but interlacing questions. On the one hand, we want to know how the notion of Dharma can be applied to the unfolding of history writ large. Insofar as Dharma refers not only to an eternally valid norm for the behavior of individuals and societies in the historical world but also to the most fundamental principle governing the flow of human experience, and by extension the life story of all things that sense the world around them, it can hardly fail to take into account all forms of unity and disunity, continuity and discontinuity that are to be found in reality, both in their contemporary immediacy and in their passage from the past to the future. The question is not *whether* Dharma governs history—it does so by definition—but *how* and *to what extent*. In other words, if Dharma applied only to human behavior, it would not be a fundamental principle of history. The first question we put to the notion of a «Dharma of history,» then, has to do with seeing what history looks like when viewed through the Dharmic lens, as opposed to the variety of lenses that philosophies East and West have employed to describe the passage of reality through time. In this sense, it is a basically an archaeological question about the collective imagination of civilizations that used the notion of Dharma. For the answer to be true, it need only provide sufficient textual evidence and phenomenological data.

If this first question is basically descriptive, a second and more concrete question

asks how a Dharmic view of the unfolding of history affects the way one relates to the world. Laying out the evolution of the idea of Dharma over its two and a half millennia of recorded history is one thing. Asking whether, by and large, it has been and still is a reliable way of guiding history to change for the better is another. But there is no Archimedean ground from which to put such a question. We cannot abstract from history to talk about history, wrenching the idea of Dharma from the environment that produced and sustained it, and then appraise its moral utility. Inquiry into the «truth» of the idea, it seems to me, can only begin at the borderlands of philosophy East and West.

A Dharmic View of History as Purposeless

I should like to look at a Dharmic view of history cast in the language of Western philosophy from a perspective informed by Buddhist thinking, namely, that developed by the twentieth-century Japanese philosopher Tanabe Hajime. I choose Tanabe because he exemplifies the philosophical shift from the covertly Christian preoccupation with purposive history to a Buddhist rephrasing of the question.

Tanabe's first venture into the philosophy of history, as is often the case with young scholars, was not prompted by a particular problem he was wrestling with at the time but by a request from his teacher, Nishida Kitar, to compose a memorial lecture in honor of the two-hundredth anniversary of Kant's birth. Tanabe was not very happy about the imposition. It was 1924 and he was just returning from an extended stay Germany, where he had shaken the neo-Kantian dust off his sandals and all but lost interest in Husserl's phenomenology, the two primary resources from which he had hoped to clarify the relationship between philosophy and the natural sciences. His head was buzzing with ideas he had been discussing with the young Heidegger, which only further disposed him to compose a basically critical text. Tanabe's target was Kant's notion of teleology as laid out in the *Critique of Judgment*, which he recognized as the weakest point in Kant's philosophy of history and to which he offered, as he understood it, a fundamentally Buddhist response.

Kant's aim was to apply reason to the «idiotic course of things human» in order to provide a consoling view of the distant future and to demonstrate «how the human race finally achieves the condition in which all the seeds implanted in it by nature can fully develop and in which the destiny of the human race can be fulfilled here on earth.»¹ Whatever purpose there is to history, Kant recognized, will not be a function

¹ *Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. by V. L. Dowdell and H. Rudnick (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978), 11-12, 24-5. On the place of this work in Kant's thought, see the helpful essay by Leon Pompa, «Philosophical History in Kant and Hegel,» in Stephen Priest, ed., *Hegel's Critique of Kant* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 185-94.

of the forethought of individuals but will have to function often in spite of our efforts. In his terms, since no empirical investigation of history is likely to provide evidence of a progressive evolution, we need to look for an a priori «clue» of the «guiding thread» that drives individuals and nations towards their natural purpose. Our *telos* may be natural to us, but we can only guess at what it might be, or rather *must* guess if we are to reason about the «idiotic course» of human history at all.

As we see in the third *Critique*, for Kant any principle of purposive causality in history would have to be regulative, not constitutive. This means that it can do no more than encourage us think *as if* there were a purpose when we examine the causes that actually constitute history; teleological thinking cannot yield a metaphysic of the empirical world, but it can serve as a heuristic tool for suggesting ways to unify the metaphysics of nature and morality. On this point Kant is clear: simply because we do not have the means to verify the hypothesis of a purposive causality is not sufficient reason to forfeit it altogether; if it were, it would drag all of reason with it into the abyss of meaninglessness. In a sense, Kant's problem with locating the *telos* of history relates to his conception of the human being as both phenomenon and noumenon—knowable in part by the senses as a datum given in space and time; and in part knowable only by reason as something that resides outside of space and time. To this latter, noumenal dimension of the human belongs the capacity for self-motivated, autonomous, free will, which seems to preclude any predications or expectations about how it will be exercised. In short, if there is such a thing as a «natural destiny» in human nature towards a better, more moral society, it would have to show up in actual, observable historical phenomena; but human free will, of which there is phenomenal evidence, would be compromised by anything that would incline it towards one end or another. Neither the noumenon of a blind causation bending our wills to its own, nor the phenomenon of the cumulative exercise of free will can justify an a priori argument for a *telos* to history. For all his insistence on «seeds of enlightenment» coming to flower and bearing fruit that can be «passed on from one generation to the next» as the human race moves towards «nature's purpose,» in the end Kant had no way out of the hobble in which his critique of reason has landed him.

This is where Tanabe steps in with his proposal of a third teleology that belongs neither to nature nor to free will but stands opposed to both—a «teleology of self-awareness.» He defines it in his all too familiarly snarled style:

The teleology of self-awareness begins with a shift from the formal teleology of seeing all things from the standpoint of the ego to the internal teleology of seeing all things as ends in themselves, and then returns to viewing the ego in its concrete stance of seeing all things as ends in themselves, to recognize that this corresponds to the purpose of the ego, which can thus for the first time become an end in itself. The sense in which we can speak of an awareness of a finality for the self wherein the will stands outside of and independent of the self, is what I call a teleology of self-awareness.... As a union of enlightenment and

rationality... the cognitive will at the ground of reflective judgment negates the self and then returns to the self to rediscover it under the guidance of concrete moral will... Of necessity morality includes a religious posture. The teleology of self-awareness and morality can be said to correspond to the static reflection and the dynamic productivity of one and the same concrete standpoint of will.²

To appreciate what Tanabe is trying to do, we need to leave aside the obvious resonances with Nishida's thinking at the time, and thus, indirectly, with Schopenhauer's and Bergson's ideas of «will» and «desire.» We need also to resist the temptation to trace the still brewing influence of Heidegger. We have also to allow him his own reading of what are very complex and far from univocal Buddhist terms.

Tanabe's strategy begins as a simple ascent from the opposition at one level of abstraction to the resolution of the opposition at a higher level, culminating in an idea of a «will» in which all things in the world, including the thinking, perceiving individual participate without owning or controlling it. To account for the wide varieties of «purpose,» Kant had introduced two pairs of distinctions between teleological judgments: they are *material* if they refer to existing things, otherwise they are *formal*; and they are *subjective* if they refer to the feelings or desires of the individual making the judgment, otherwise *objective*. Tanabe's «dialectics of will,» as he calls it, does not stop at a purely logical exercise of synthesizing Kant's opposites. It raises the question of how to reconcile the negating of the self in religious enlightenment (悟性) with the recovery of the self in rational understanding (理性). Having already acknowledged the pivotal role of morality and religion in culture,³ Tanabe agrees with Kant's position that any talk of the purposive exercise of freedom requires that we bring history into the picture, and that this includes not only the free will of individual persons but also the will of the natural order. The problem, Tanabe insists, is that Kant's critical philosophy remains stuck in a subjectivistic view of history that reduces the will of nature to the hidden background of the phenomenal world. He therefore proposes a corrective to Kant: «In the same sense in which freedom is a constitutive principle of morality, the teleology of self-awareness is the constitutive principle of history.»⁴

By Tanabe's own admission, he was too trapped in the formal logic of the neo-Kantians at the time to carry the intuition any further. It was only in his subsequent turn to Hegel and the logic of dialectics that this larger picture came to the fore.⁵ Hegel confirmed his suspicion that the *telos* of history can be viewed as an active, constitutive, intelligible phenomenon and not merely as a regulative, guiding assumption. Hegel

² 『田辺元全集』 [Complete Works of Tanabe Hajime, hereafter THZ] (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1963-1964), 3: 64-5.

³ 文化の概念」 [The Notion of Culture], THZ 1: 423-47.

⁴ THZ 3: 71.

⁵ Tanabe himself acknowledges this in a 1948 reprint of the essay (THZ 3: 8-9).

helped him to take the will of the individual moral subject off the pedestal on which Kant had placed it, and to locate it in a «dialectical» relationship with a will that precedes the distinction between subject and object, universal and particular. Hegel's problem became Tanabe's own: Although the work of nature's will in history can neither be blind, random happenstance (in which case we would speak of «necessity» rather than «will»), nor direct, causal agency (in which case it would become a kind of super-subject whose freedom compromises the freedom of the moral individual), its pursuit of a *telos* must allow for something of both.

Hegel's solution was to see the finality of history as the self-unfolding of absolute spirit towards full consciousness of its own freedom. Insofar as individuals become conscious of a rhythm in history that transcends their own will, they are free to actualize that process in themselves by recognizing that its aims are at bottom identical with their own. Tanabe took this idea, already in germ in the passage cited above, and carried it in a different direction. Unlike Hegel, however, he never made any attempt to demonstrate the activity of spirit in history with actual analysis of the concrete means by which particular human cultures and histories have advanced towards a higher purpose. Rather, he stopped where his Buddhist roots (or at least, his Buddhist roots as he had inherited them from Nishida) disposed him to stop: the goal towards which culture and history advance, when they are in fact advancing and not declining, is self-awareness. Put the other way around, the more self-aware individuals are, the more they actualize the purpose of the world at large and human societies within it.

At this point we may pause to paraphrase the question, «Is there a Dharma of history?» in terms suggested by Tanabe's critique of teleology: If human existence is subject to a universal Law of necessity that determines the inevitable consequences of free action, and if the proper exercise of freedom is identical with the achievement of a state of awareness in which the attachment of the individual subject to self-determination is seen to be illusory, does history itself, as the arena in which both the attachment to self and detachment from the illusions of selfhood are realized, in any sense «will» compliance with that Law? Does the history of the world of becoming and impermanence contain within it a purposive dynamic purposive, conscious submission to which signals the culmination of human existence?

Granted, Tanabe, like Nishida before him, had already disassociated the notion of «will» from its exclusive connection with the individual willing self to include the broader meaning of a purposive orientation, drive, dynamic, or even «desire» within reality itself, there is no hint of a transcendent, provident divinity bending history to its own ends. If anything, the entire question as just paraphrased is mooted by Tanabe's eventual elimination of the notions of will and *telos* altogether from the idea of history while maintaining a sense of intelligibility or lawfulness. In other words, what is interesting about Tanabe's Dharmic view of history is precisely that he turned his back on the Christian assumptions that influenced Kant and Hegel in posing the question of

historical teleology, orienting his thinking towards a more explicitly Buddhist posture. Rather than answer the question his study of Western philosophers had faced him with, he changed the question.

I will not attempt here to rehearse the whole length and breadth of Tanabe's writings to catalog his remarks on purposiveness in history, but as a terminus ad quem we may note his insistence in his 1948 work, *The Dialectics of Christianity*, that freedom needs the unfreedom of necessity, the freedom for evil, and the «freedom to negate freedom in order to be completely self-aware»; or again, that reason is «arrogant and self-deceptive» insofar as it «clings to the standpoint of being and pursues human liberation through the teleological integration of reason itself.» On the face of it, this sounds like a fall into skepticism, or at least a retreat from philosophy into a sort of mysticism.⁶ In fact, it is altogether consistent with that pursuit of «the union of enlightenment and rationality» that had led him earlier to propose a teleology of self-awareness. The critical turn, at least philosophically, hinges on his break with the Hegel's absolute of being:

The rational character of Hegel's philosophy turned the God of his «absolute spirit» into a rational, systematic unity and turned the whole of the course of history into something that unified it from within. This comprehensive and universalizing quality lured him towards seeing God as absolute being rather than as absolute nothingness, as a self-sufficient and perfect totality embracing all relative beings in an unmediated fashion. Because philosophy reached its zenith in this absolute notion of God, the whole of the history of philosophy became a thing of the past. The unmediated world-integrating system that aimed at unifying existence could not avoid, simultaneously and as if by dialectical necessity, collapsing into its opposite—self-alienation.⁷

The passage is telling on several counts. First, it rejects the idea of history as a single, organic whole driven by a higher rationality. Second, it sees the association of God with being as entailing the contradiction of exempting one being from the dialectic of mutually mediating interdependency, which Tanabe insisted is characteristic of all beings. Third, it accuses Hegel's notion of the absolute of rendering the history of philosophy—West as well as East—into no more than stepping stones to a higher mode of thought. And finally, the irony of Hegel's system of integration of the individual self into a greater whole is that it was bound to disintegrate into a contraction of the self-awareness it had set out to expand. The alternative, as this passage only hints at but as Tanabe's work makes explicit again and again, is to see the absolute not as a being po-

⁶Though accused of mysticism, Tanabe argued consistently that it is only one aspect of religion. It is on this basis that he rejects the view that Schleiermacher's *Universumsgefühl* is in any sense «Eastern,» arguing that it is more a fruit of Kant's teleology. In this connection, he explicitly concurs with Karl Barth's critique of Schleiermacher as tending to pure mysticism or aestheticism (THZ 11: 561).

⁷THZ 10: 282, 290, 321.

sitioned outside of the world, untouched by the world and directing it providentially to its own ends, but as an absolute nothingness that can only become manifest in the actual workings of history.

Of course, Tanabe realized that the idea of an absolute spirit coming to self-consciousness in history, or its underlying paradigm of a provident deity willing towards salvation in accord with its own plan, are not the only models of teleology. Marx had made the leap from the «kingdom of necessity» to the «kingdom of freedom» by defining true freedom as the alignment and expansion of personal will through the acceptance of the necessities of social progress. At the level of formal logic, however, Marx had failed to bring into the dialectic the full impact of the freedom for evil.⁸ This was the very point at which Kant felt impelled to introduce religion into the picture, and with it the basically Christian model of salvation history. Marx did not. On the contrary he recognized that the only real finality in history would have to function as a *constitutive* principle.⁹ Kant's capitulation to the regulative principle, a sort of guiding fiction for those in search of patterns to the story of human progress and decline, Tanabe argued, failed not because he acknowledged that reason had reached its limits in trying to reconcile necessity with free will, but because he clung to reason by diluting the demands that reason makes on us and yielding too soon to Christian theology.

This is not the point to assess Tanabe's reading of Kant, Hegel, and Marx. The important point is that each of them represented to him something crucial to the «present task of philosophy, the mutual definition of the historical relative and the eternally absolute,» a task that requires the «mutual mediation of Christianity, Marxism, and Japanese Buddhism.»¹⁰ The shift to God as absolute nothingness, as useful as it is for adjusting the idea of God to a more Eastern absolute, had still to take into account the concrete engagement in history and human society that Christianity, in both its theological and philosophical forms,¹¹ as well as Marxism, represent. In this sense, rather than liberate history from the Western preoccupation with finality, the introduction of the Eastern, Buddhist notion of nothingness is meant to transform it by relocating history in a new perspective.

Tanabe states his position clearly in the third volume of his *Introduction to Philosophy*. The distinguishing mark of the Buddhist approach to history lies in its logic of

⁸ I assume that Tanabe considered the same argument to apply to the teleologies expressed in various forms of social Darwinism, though I cannot put my finger on passages where he makes the point with specific textual references.

⁹ THZ 10: 285-7. It is interesting to note how closely Nishitani's posing of the problem of «fundamental evil» in *Religion and Nothingness* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982) follows Tanabe's statement of the problem.

¹⁰ THZ 10: 269. By Christianity he means to include both Catholic and Protestant insights, and by Japanese Buddhism he seeks an amalgam of Pure Land and Zen.

¹¹ Tanabe is clear on the point that the collapse of religion into «existential philosophy» overlooks the «inseparable relationship of theology to religion.» THZ 10: 255.

«emptiness» or «absolute nothingness» (the «absolute» serving to forestall the impression that «nothingness» is to be understood as a mere negation of «being»). The approach to history of science and common sense, and dominant in the philosophy of history, particularly in Hegelian and Marxist dialectical views, «thinks of history as possessing a kind of destination that orients its development. Its goal is not necessarily one we arrive at with our arms folded... but something we are engaged in making.» He calls it a kind of «becoming-in-action» [成即行] wherein our historical praxis is at the same time the goal of historical becoming. It thinks of history in terms of being and its goal in terms of «existence,» but actually its goal is emptiness, «From the standpoint of emptiness, the destination is a temporal convention [仮] based on a temporal convention.» This is the basis of Tanabe's regard for Ranke's relativistic view of history with its critique of the Hegelian and Marxist rationalist impositions of «progress» and «advance» on history which, in effect, are no more than history viewed from the perspective of history.¹² Any goal affixed to history from the standpoint of being, Tanabe goes on, is given the lie by the complex meanderings and radical relativity of actual history:

The very idea of viewing history as necessarily progressing down a path fixed on a goal in effect goes against the spirit of dialectics and is therefore is unacceptable to a standpoint of emptiness. On the standpoint of emptiness everything is interdependent and relative [相依相待]. The positing of an unmovable foundation of the sort that grounds everything else in itself as an autonomous, independent principle in the full sense that it is basic, ultimate, and completely without reliance on anything else, is disallowed on a standpoint of emptiness. Even if one conceives of a clearly defined destination as a relative halfway mark, the very fact that it is a fixed goal is enough to disqualify such a view as a *radical* relativism.

Put in terms of the logic of a dialectics, any affirmation not mediated by a negation is a vestige of the domain of being. «Clearing away this residue of being can only be accomplished by a radical relativism like that of the standpoint of emptiness.»¹³

That said, the grounding of history on emptiness runs the risk of falling into a passive resignation that eclipses the need to risk life and limb in historical praxis:

History may be a nothingness, a temporal, convention brought into being on a ground of emptiness, but there is no denying the fact that such a way of thinking is in danger of sapping history of its gravity history and not taking politics and above all, morality, as a serious part of the regulative activity of historical praxis. The problem is... how to link a Buddhist approach of emptiness that thinks in terms of the mediation of absolute

¹²Tanabe discusses Ranke's argument in some details in THZ 11: 221-36.

¹³Here again, Tanabe gives Nishitani one of his most central terms.

nothingness with the moral seriousness that is normative in the formal praxis of history within the realm of being. This is the central issue for the philosophy of religion and the heart of the religious charge of our times.

The structure of Tanabe's dialectic is not an abstract play of ideas but the pursuit of «concrete truth in human life» by «appropriating through religious experience» the opposing demands that are made on us: on the one hand, a moral seriousness towards acting in the historical world; on the other, «a liberating concentration that transcends this empty, provisional world of ours.» The tougher the opposition is perceived to be, Tanabe says, the more likely we are to awaken to the unity of those two demands as the only path that is open to us.

If even Tanabe's straining toward the concrete ends up sounding abstract, and indeed it is, Tanabe's ideas of history, as critical as they were of those who ignored concrete praxis, were only tested once in the concrete and that was during his brief flirtation with the intellectual foundations of the war effort. Once burned, he shied away from *actual* concrete in the attempt to salvage the formal logic of his view of history.¹⁴ Here, again, in somewhat tortured prose, he reiterates the challenge to engage with history as our «common affliction»:

Difficult though it be, in order to awaken to and appropriate not only the necessity and moral *ought* of the practical reality of history but also the opportunity that it invariably holds, it seems to me that we require the Buddhist standpoint of an empty, absolute nothingness, a standpoint that can plead the cause of a Hegelian or Marxist dialectic and yet shake free of the determinative shackles of being that accompany an inflexible aim or destination of history along with the necessity of the process such a goal regulates, a standpoint of being determined without being determined, of transforming the necessity of each moment into autonomous freedom through an act of absolute negation.¹⁵

In one sense, the logic of mutually defining affirmation and negation seems to distill the particularity of any problem it is applied to into a heavy, bland syrup. Insofar as Tanabe's Dharmic view of history is that of an aimless dialectical struggle between reason and the negation of reason, necessity and free will, praxis in the here-and-now and religious liberation from the world of becoming, the basic question that teleology asks has not so much been addressed as swept aside. Not even his adoption of «love» as

¹⁴ I have spelled this out in an essay on «Tanabe's Logic of the Species and the Spirit of Nationalism,» James Heisig and John Maraldo, *Rude Awakenings: Zen the Kyoto School, and the Question of Nationalism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994, 255-88; later I argued that Tanabe's logic of the specific can still be of use as a philosophical concept in «Tanabe's Logic of the Specific and the Critique of the Global Village,» *The Eastern Buddhist* 28/2 (1995): 194-224. Although the «logic of the specific» is needed to fill out Tanabe's position, it is peripheral to the argument of this paper and has therefore been omitted from the discussion.

¹⁵ Quotations and paraphrases taken from THZ 11: 477-80.

the unifying medium of human existence and historical praxis succeeds in recovering the question.¹⁶

The Hint of a Dharmic Finality in History

Seen in a broader perspective, however, the problem is not simply one of Tanabe's own making but touches on something within the Buddhist worldview itself. His strategy of incorporating the missing ingredient of engagement with actual history *formally* recognizes the problem but does not respond to it with any concrete normative guidance. Filling that lacuna requires a bigger talent than I can bring to the question, but there is one step in that direction I would like to suggest, namely that the very way the dialectic is set up suggests that in fact history is not pure and simply an aimless affair, either for Tanabe or for the Japanese Buddhist standpoint he intends to align himself with.

We recall that Kant had set up a contrast between the ideal progress of history as cultivating our innate «seeds of enlightenment» and harvesting them for succeeding generations, on the one hand, and the chaotic and idiotic record of what we have made of nature's gift thus far, on the other. Tanabe's initial response was to suggest that history's goal was «self-awareness,» a union of reason and enlightenment in which the individual subject appropriates the fact that all things, just as they are, are ends in themselves. This set the stage for viewing history, with Hegel, as the advance of selfhood willing its own self-awareness, the individual subject being free either to participate in the process or to measure history in terms of its own egoistic desires. When he came to see that the logical consequence of such a position was to view the absolute as a supreme being with rational designs on the course of history, he abandoned it in favor of a view of history as the manifestation of an absolute nothingness that, in itself, is neither rational nor irrational, but can only be known as a dialectic of the two. In the end, he capitulates to Kant's dilemma and relieves philosophical reason of the obligation to seek a purpose in history derived from universal principles.¹⁷

The consequence of Tanabe's Dharmic view of history is that we are left with no measure to assess the advance or decline of civilizations as they course through time.

¹⁶The best account I have read of Tanabe's late work, 伊藤益 Itō Susumu 『愛と氏の哲学——田辺 元』 [A Philosophy of Love and Death] (Tokyo: Hokuju Shuppansha, 2005), argues that Tanabe's blend of Buddhism and Christianity as an «absolute nothingness-in-love» posits a kind of «intentionality» towards self-sacrifice implied in awakening to the Buddha nature within the self. Nevertheless, it is hard to extract anything in his argument or in the texts he works with approaching a concrete ethical norm for historical praxis.

¹⁷The logical form of this dialectic comes close to Kant's idea of the teleological judgment peculiar to pure mathematics, that is as a teleological connection between synthetic *a priori* principles and *a priori* constructions—a connection that Kant called a «purposiveness without purpose» (*Critique of Judgment*, 364). As far as I have been able to determine, however, Tanabe never mixed his affections for mathematical logic with his philosophy of history.

There may be a certain wisdom in renouncing the question as beyond the reach of reason, but the wisdom comes at a price, namely, forfeiting the right to judge the particular historical movements as morally acceptable or not. His complaint that Buddhist thinking tends to leave us as detached bystanders, arms folded as we watch things working themselves out for good or for ill, survives his shift to absolute nothingness—unanswered.

It is altogether too simplistic to accuse Tanabe's philosophy of withdrawing into the rarefied heights of dialectical logic, and then turn elsewhere for an answer. I am persuaded there is genius to be rescued from Tanabe's lifelong struggle to find a place to stand and view the world that is both fair to the ideas that lie within the reach of reason and fair to the enlightenments that lie beyond the reach of reason. But to do so means restoring to grace the question of a purpose to the Dharma of history.

My suggestion is that, his own strictures to the contrary, Tanabe *did* subscribe to a rational teleology throughout, and further, that this teleology is consistent with a view of history implied in the Buddhist notion of enlightenment itself. I do not mean to recommend a correction to Tanabe's philosophy or presume to take his thinking to its next stage of development, but only to reclaim an assumption without which I am at a loss how to make sense of Tanabe's position. In a word, the goal of history—both in the normative sense of providing a measure for assessing the advance or decline of history, as well as in the constitutive sense of ascertaining an actual orientation to the accumulation of events—is clarity of insight. The point may seem so obvious as to be empty of content, a mere reupholstering of an already abstract notion of history in still more abstract language. In any event, it merits a closer look.

The capacity for «enlightenment» that Kant reckoned our very human nature to be seeded with from birth was an *Erklärung*, an illumination of sight, a clear-headed understanding of the world as it is. Its opposite was resignation to the vision of the world we are instructed to believe in, the renunciation of the freedom to know all we can know in favor of the «balls and chains» of dogmatic and rational formulae. Clarity of thinking is the mark of maturation not only of the individual but of societies, and all indications point to «the obstacles to universal enlightenment... gradually becoming fewer.¹⁸ Kant's optimism regarding the future of civilization—tempered, admittedly, by the more sanguine reflections of his *Idea for a Universal History*, penned in the same year, 1784—is not at issue here, only his conviction that the goal of human history is to see clearly.

In Buddhism, the notion of enlightenment finds itself in surroundings very different from Kant's, but the fundamental idea of liberating the mind to achieve the greatest clarity of insight holds the same the place of honor. Tanabe himself prefers Buddhist

¹⁸This is spelled out concisely in his well known essay, «What is Enlightenment?».

expressions like *satori*, awakening, or self-awareness,¹⁹ but he uses them in a way that tries to incorporate Western philosophy's concept of reason as well as his critique of it. In the book that reoriented his later thinking, *Philosophy as Metanoetics*, he argues that the task that reason sets itself in trying to make sense of history can only be carried out by achieving a self-awareness that breaks free of reason. Given the fact of historical contingency, freedom cannot be achieved through the discovery of invariable principles of the natural order but only by the individual subject «turning this lack of principle into principle by taking over the determination (destiny) of contingency as its own will, changing it into its own decision... and submitting itself it... History is the trail of footprints made by this freedom.»²⁰

In order to say this, Tanabe has to assume that the pursuit of self-awareness is a *normative* goal for the exercise of freedom, and this in turn implies that there is such a thing as progress in the life of the individual who exhausts the powers of reason for what they can do and renounces them for what they cannot. At the same time, even though he rejects a linear view of the advance of history in favor of a circular one that turns on the axis of present moment as the manifestation of an absolute nothingness in which past and future mediate each other,²¹ he continues to speak of an «unfolding of reality itself» through the «dialectical unity of absolute and relative, ...the basic principle that shapes history.»²²

If we can therefore speak of a *constitutive* goal at work in the history of the individual subject as it affirms and negates its relativity and thus achieves the clarity of insight it was born to achieve, the idea of a collective *telos* would require an impulse that transcends individual history and orients historical existence itself towards a community of awakened subjects. The emergence of such a community of the awakened would not be not merely a contingent fact that either happens or does not happen, depending on the degree of freedom with which reason is understood and exercised. It would be a principle of self-determination within history itself to which the individual awakens and bends its own will.

On the one hand, the idea runs counter to Tanabe's rejection of a *telos* to history:

Unlike nature, history has no structure... within which a self-identical universal can regulate all phenomena according to its own laws, or within which all things can be

¹⁹The simile of light does not figure directly in Buddhist terminology for «enlightenment» (aside from associated terms like 照 and 明) any more than it does in Kant's. To be fair, the imposition of imagery of «enlightenment» on Buddhism is matched by the Sino-Japanese translation of *Erklärung* as 啓蒙主義, introducing a fitting but no less forced image of opening up what is covered in darkness.

²⁰*Philosophy as Metanoetics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 66-7.

²¹*Philosophy as Metanoetics*, 96.

²²*Philosophy as Metanoetics*, LII.

directed towards the realization of their essential nature; it lacks a *telos* for things to progress from the possible to the real, from the potential to the actual. All these things belong to the substratum or substance of being, and the logic that regulates them is the logic of identity. It is otherwise with history, which has no permanent and unmediated substratum.²³

On the other hand, if self-awareness is the natural fulfillment of human existence, and not something inflicted on human existence by those individual prepared to defy their natural impulses; and, further, if the conscious subject in whom this inclination to awakening is manifest came into being in the course of history without the interference of a higher will, it is not something that can be explained merely in terms of individuals exercising freedom in a completely contingent world. The more individuals achieve clarity of insight, the more human existence itself becomes what it in fact is. I believe this is what attracted Tanabe to the Christian notion of the *communio sanctorum*, an idea he felt it necessary to keep distinct from specific religious structures but also to liberate from the realm of pure myth.²⁴ Although not subscribing to the full eschatological context of a community of saints, which implies another world than this one ruled over by a supreme being, Tanabe is attracted to the ideal of a social order whose «present» is oriented to the self-awareness of all its members, and from which the preoccupation with self-deliverance is viewed as an impediment and an offense against the fullness of life:

To seek existence for oneself alone by destroying all others is to forfeit one's own existence as well. Only by giving life to those who exist as others, by seeking co-existence despite the tension of opposition, and by collaborating for the sake of mutual enhancement can the self find life in its fullness.²⁵

Either the absolute disassociation of history from nature breaks down, or the idea of «life in its fullness» through «mutual enhancement» has to be classified as an illusion. Even if we grant, with Tanabe, that specific human communities are not an end in themselves but an *upaḥya* that mediates the way to liberation from ignorance, this does not disqualify all collective social progress from attesting to a real, constitutive *telos* to history.

Let me try to put this another way, in terms applicable both to the Buddhist idea of enlightenment and to the way Tanabe applies it to philosophy of history. The notion of liberation from illusion cannot stand if *everything* in the conventional world is illu-

²³ *Philosophy as Metanoetics*, 291.

²⁴ THZ 10: 249, 13: 576.

²⁵ *Philosophy as Metanoetics*, 290-1.

sion, just as the snuffing out of all desire cannot eliminate suffering if it entails snuffing out the concrete desire to be liberated from suffering.²⁶ We cannot speak of a transformation of perspective without retaining our ability to see. In order to speak of enlightenment at all, we must assume a clarity of insight and the native capacity to reach it. As long as we speak of a subject, no matter how far we extend the reach of selflessness, we cannot dispense with the idea of a conscious, seeing individual. In other words, there is one thing in human existence that that does not need rescuing or liberating or saving: insight itself. The only alternative is some form or other of nihilism in which consciousness itself, and not just particular forms of consciousness, is rejected as a worthless daydream.

Insight is at the heart of Dharma, the empty suchness of things, even if the objects of insight invariably belong to the concrete so-and-so-ness. This means that all our talk of history advancing or declining, of having a goal or being aimless, is always only half of the picture, the half that is marked by being and becoming. It provides us with the congenial fictions without which consciousness could not function. To claim that the picture is complete only when all our engagements with history, rational as well as practical, are seen to be grounded in emptiness may change the way we look at the things of life, but does not change the fact that throughout it all we are still seeing. For this reason, admittedly a very simple one, I find nothing inconsistent with Buddhist teaching in general or with Tanabe's philosophical applications of it, in concluding that the choices I make concerning the way I look at the world can, and should, be aimed at seeing and thinking as clearly as I possible can; and that in so doing I neither reduce myself to a simple constellation of genes and tutelage nor elevate myself to a position outside of time and history. I am simply doing a better job of what Dharma—call it nature, history, reality, as you will—has equipped me to do. Being only becomes manifest on a ground of emptiness: the truth of the *telos* of insight can only be found in the exercise of insight that integrates reason and enlightenment.

Those familiar with Tanabe's writings, even if only what exists in translation, will recognize how much I have omitted from the picture in order to focus attention on one aspect of his thought. Each time I picked up one of his books in search of a faint memory of having read something there relevant to the topic of this essay, I found myself entangled in a web of idea far more complex than I could handle in the space of a short essay. In the end, I settled on a small selection of conclusions, omitting the full fabric of his argument.

In a sense I trust is obvious, the «assumption» about the normative and constitutive goal of history that I have argued is implied in Tanabe's philosophy of history, and in

²⁶ I am in complete agreement with 長谷正謔當 Hase Sho'to, 『欲望の哲学——浄土教世界の思索』 [The Philosophy of Desire: Speculations from the Pure Land World] (Tokyo: Ho'zo'kan, 2003), when he insists that desire is transformed but not eliminated by liberating it from its concrete objects. See, e.g., 215, 293-4.

the Buddhist ideas he draws on, rests on a middle ground that is more than the simple logical conclusion that I have painted it to be. To be sure, the truth of the assumption that human existence, in concordance with what is deepest in its nature, desires clarity of insight, can only be demonstrated by acting on it. Put the other way around, its untruth entails negating the bulk of accumulated wisdom of the Buddhist and philosophical heritage. Leaving the assumption tacit—or what is worse, retreating to a high ground of detachment from all assumptions about the relationship between who we are and what we ought to become—cripples intellect from stretching itself to its limits and is therefore, when all is said and done, unreasonable and unenlightened.

The paleoanthropologist and mystic Teilhard de Chardin recognized the importance of such a middle ground that straddles the borderlands of science and religion, philosophical reflection and common experience. His Foreword to *The Phenomenon of Man* opens with words that echo a refrain as familiar to the Buddhist sutras as they are an expression of his own conclusions. I cite them as a final, more elegant answer to the question of the Dharma of history:

Seeing. We might say that the whole of life lies in that verb—if not in end, at least in essence.... The history of the living world can be summarized as the elaboration of ever more perfect eyes within a cosmos in which there is always something more to be seen.... To try to see more and better is not a matter of whim or curiosity or self-indulgence. *To see or to perish* is the very condition laid upon everything that makes up the universe.²⁷

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²⁷ Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (New York: Harper and Row, 1959), 31.

