Japanese Philosopher Tetsuro Watsuji (1889-1960): His Cultural Anthropology and His Buddhist Thinking

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This paper explains how the Japanese philosopher Tetsuro Watsuji conceived his Buddhist anthropology of social existence in response to European philosophy. For this purpose, his *Climate* and his *Ethics* present the most instructive examples. Within his works, he criticizes Martin Heidegger's conception of man and points out Heidegger's incomplete understanding of 'spatiality'. He protests against one of the major trends of modern philosophy, the subjectification of space and time, and proclaims the place of nothingness in nature in the Buddhist sense. His criticism shows that Far Eastern philosophy could not accept the European anthropological approach to the theme of the human through individualistic and subjective characterization.

Before beginning my analysis, I will provide a brief biography of the philosopher. Watsuji was born in 1889 in Himeji, western Japan. In his childhood, he enthusiastically read English poets like Byron, Keats, and Tennyson. Even after he started his philosophical studies at the Imperial University of Tokyo, he never lost his ambition to become a poet. Watsuji wrote his *Nietzsche Studies* in 1912 as a graduate thesis. But his thesis was rejected because the academic atmosphere of the Imperial University was not tolerant enough to accept the poetic philosophy of Nietzsche. Watsuji had to change his theme to Schopenhauer and then finished his work. This episode proves that, as a young student, Watsuji was already very interested in the cultural aspects of philosophy. He continued with intensive research into European philosophers like Kant, Hegel, Schelling, Scheller, Simmel, Heidegger, and Bergson. Watsuji published his first work *Fudo 'Climate'* in 1935. This text analyzes the cultural characteristics of Western and Asian countries from the

viewpoint of climate. He based his research on a very simple intuition that the people of southern countries like Italy are apt to fall into idle habits, while northern peoples like the Germans are tough and capable of working hard without showing any signs of fatigue.[1] There is no doubt that physical conditions have a lot of influence on the mental conditions of human. This fact was not given enough regard as a philosophic theme by Western thinkers. Watsuji complained in the preface of his book:

> It was in the early summer of 1927 when I was reading Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* in Berlin that I first came to reflect on the problem of climate. I found myself intrigued by the attempt to treat the structure of man's existence in terms of time, but I found it hard to see why, when time had thus been made to play a part in the structure of subjective existence, at the same juncture space also was not postulated as part of the basic structure of existence. [...] I perceived that herein lay the limitations of Heidegger's work, for time not linked with space is not time in the true sense and Heidegger stopped short at this point because his *Dasein* was the *Dasein* of the individual only. He treated human existence as being the existence of a man.[2]

Martin Heidegger

In the 1920s, a great Heidegger cult had already sprung up among the Japanese. Aside from Friedrich Nietzsche, he is the most popular German philosopher in Japan. This can be seen from the fact that his *Being and Time* has been translated into Japanese no fewer than six times. Meßkirch, Heidegger's birthplace, is to this day an important place of pilgrimage for Japanese Heideggerians. It is therefore remarkable that in this situation Watsuji always kept his distance from these enthusiastic preferences for life philosophy (*Lebensphilosophie*).

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1 Tetsuro Watsuji, *Climate and Culture: A Philosophical Study*, trans. Geoffrey Bownas (Tokyo: 1961), p. 210.

2 Watsuji, *Climate and Culture*, p. v.

According to Watsuji, human existence consists of time and space. Because Heidegger did not consider this fact, his philosophy lacks historical perspective. Watsuji, in contrast, develops a spatial understanding of human existence in his *Climate* and his *Ethics*. He stands on the same ground as European philosophy, but he attacks transcendental thinking very hard. Human existence is directly given by the unconceptual, unmetaphysical experiences of the world which are fundamentally different from objective scientific cognition.[3] In this point, we can consider him to be a direct inheritor of the first-rank Japanese philosopher Kitaro Nishida, who tried to grasp the world through Zen Buddhist "pure experience". Nishida and Watsuji, while growing up in the Western scientific tradition, attempted to establish a new type of Buddhist philosophy. The former focused on the Zen Buddhism; the latter, on Mahayana. Both philosophers arrived at similar ideas concerning the spatial structure of human experience. In his ontological thinking, Nishida saw the being of humanity derived from the dialectic *basho* 'field', while Watsuji focused it in *fudo* 'natural climate', which originally meant "wind and earth".

I will just take a quick look at Watsuji's *fudo* in order to explain his unique view of European, Japanese, and Buddhist cultures. During his stay in Europe in 1927–28, he was much impressed by the differences between the European and the Japanese ways of life. He wondered that a lot of Europeans lived together in apartment houses. Such a type of living was at that time not usual in Japan. The life style in which people shared their lives in the common place was roof of the open and communal structure of the European city. The house was, according to Watsuji, so open to the public places that coffee shop equaled living room and street equaled hallway. A single room lay directly close to the public. This house structure corresponded to the social structure of Europe which directly linked individuals to society. Watsuji points out that there was no buffer area between private and common places in Europe, while in Japan the house stood as a distinct barrier between them. A Japanese man would take off his shoes upon entering a house and immediately realize that he had entered a private area and was no longer outdoors. But one could not regard him as an individualist, because, within the house, there was nothing of the independence of an individual room.

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[3] Graham Mayeda, *Time, Space and Ethics in the Philosophy of Watsuji Tetsurô, Kuki Shûzô, and Martin Heidegger* (New York and London: 2006), p. 5.

Japanese houses had long had no doors. *Fusuma* and *shoji*, wooden partition panels covered with paper, slide from side to side and can create a slightly separate space within a room, but they have no power to resist anyone desiring to open them and enter. Their function as partitions depends on the trust and good will of others. We can very clearly see the mental structure of the Japanese in this method of building homes. Unlocked partitions, the *fusuma* and *shoji*, show the unique construction of human relations in Japanese. They don't give a rigid definition to human relations; rather, they make them ambiguous in order to share both private and common roles with family members.[4] The house didn't allow the ancient Japanese to be individualists within a single organization.

Individuality is the key term for Watsuji's comparative cultural studies. Watsuji looks back to the European history of anthropology and discovers five types of human beings: first, creature; next, *homo sapiens*; then, *homo faber*; thereafter, suffering man; and finally, superhuman (*Übermensch*). According to Watsuji, every type of man denotes nothing but an individual human being trying to grasp his *raison d'être* by keeping his distance from society. Martin Heidegger follows this European tradition, too.

His early philosophy is based on a great hate of the anonymous masses and put the question: How can an individual recover the totality of being which threatens to disappear or has already disappeared because of modern civilization? Springboard to the totality is "death".

> The analysis of "one dies" reveals unambiguously the kind of being of everyday being toward death. In such talk, death is understood as an indeterminate something which first has to show up from somewhere, but which right now is *not yet objectively present* for oneself, and is thus no threat. "One dies" spreads the opinion that death, so to speak, strikes the they. The public interpretation of Da-sein says that "one dies" because in this way everybody can convince him/herself that

4 "A key indicates a desire for separation from the desires of others while fusuma and shoji show a unification of desires and are no more than a means of partitioning a room in this spirit of absence of separation." *Cf.* Watsuji, *Climate*, p. 164f.

> in no case is it I myself, for this one is *no one*. "Dying" is levelled down to an event which does concern Da-sein, but which belongs to no one in particular. If idle talk (*Gerede*) is always ambiguous, so is this way of talking about death. Dying, which is essentially and irreplaceably mine, is distorted into a publicly occurring event which the they encounters. Characteristic talk speaks about death as a constantly occurring "case".[5]

Heidegger criticizes that the everyday talk of publicity makes death ambiguous. It can occur every day and everywhere but never and nowhere to myself.

> Death is a possibility of being that Da-sein always has to take upon itself. With death, Da-sein stands before itself in its ownmost potentiality-of-being. In this possibility, Da-sein concerned about its being-in-the-world absolutely. Its death is the possibility of no-longer-being-able-to-be-there. WhenDa-sein is imminent to itself as this possibility, it is *completely* thrown back upon its ownmost potentiality-of-being. Thus imminent to itself, all relations to other Da-sein are dissolved in it.[6]

> Everydayness means the How in accordance with which Da-sein "lives its day", where in all of its modes of behavior or only in certain ways prefigured by being-with-one-another. Furthermore, being comfortable in habit belongs to this How, even if habit forces us to what is burdensome and "repulsive".

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5 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time: A Translation of* Sein und Zeit, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: 1996), p. 234.

6 *Being and Time*, p. 232. Watsuji criticizes this Heidegger's conception of death: "Because of his emphasis on the total possibility (*Ganzseinkönnen*) of individual being, Heidegger focuses on the phenomenon of death. But his endeavor to gain access to totality through the medium of the phenomenon of death indicates that he is stuck fast to an atomistic individuality in defiance of the spatiality of *ningen sonzai*. We can have access to the totality of *ningen sonzai* only through death as an end. This totality is, first of all, to be found beyond the totality of individual being and only in and through the infinite oppositions and unites of these latter totalities. Therefore, the totality of *ningen*, although inclusive of 'being in its death,' is also that totality that goes beyond death. [...] Hence, the total possibility of *ningen sonzai* must be found not in 'being in its death', but in the non dual relationship between the self and other as disclosed in the direction of absolute totality" (Watsuji, *Ethics*, p. 224).

> The tomorrow that everyday taking care waits for is the "eternal yesterday". The monotony of everydayness takes whatever the day happens to bring as a change. Everydayness determines Da-sein even when it has not chosen the they as its "hero".[7]

According to Heidegger, in the everyday world unique existence appears merely as an indifferent "one". Being comfortable in habit, it drifts along from day to day.[8] Habit as results from repeated actions reduces real existence to routine work. From it, decadence of being results, which Heidegger calls idle talk (*Gerede*), curiosity (*Neugier*), and fallenness (*Verfall*). His philosophy is totally convinced of the skepticism about the spatiality with which our daily routine life is concerned.

Heidegger absolutely separates human temporal being-in-the-world from space and ascribes the spatial life style of human to "being at hand" (*Vorhandensein*). Useful things are completely distinguished from extended corporeal things. While taking care of the circumstances our Dasein discovers a "region" (*Gegend*) in which these useful things at hand belong.[9] Man becomes aware of the world when it stands at his disposal as a "tool" (*Zeug*). Heidegger understands living space in very teleological sense.

> Beings "at hand" have their various proximities which are not ascertained by measuring distances. Their nearness is determined by the handling and use that circumspectly "calculate." [...] The structured nearness of useful things means that they do not simply have a place in space, objectively present somewhere, but as useful things are essentially installed, put in their place, set up, and put in order. Useful things have their place, or else they "lie around," which is fundamentally different from merely occurring in a random spatial position.[10]

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7 *Being and Time*, p. 339.

8 Magda King, *A Guide to Heidegger's* Being and Time (New York: 2001), p. 291.

9 "The things at hand of everyday association have the character of *nearness*. To be exact, this nearness of useful things is already hinted at in the term which expresses their being, in 'handiness'" (*Being and Time*, p. 95).

10 *Being and Time*, p. 95.

"Being-in-the-world" is demanded to behave voluntarily within the space in order to discover its usefulness. Through "directionality" and "de-distancing", the "region" can be revealed and come close to us. Heidegger's subjective spatiality gains significance only by being associated with future projects, namely with history.[11] This makes a great contrast to Watsuji's world view.

We realize the world neither as future time nor as a tool, but in the first sense of the word as a living space. Watsuji criticizes Heidegger's negligence of the living sense of ordinary people. He does not agree with Heideggerian pragmatism which separates individual and society, useful and useless things, time and space. Watsuji presents instead a Japanese human concept *ningen* (人間), because it implies the individual as well as the social character of man. As is well known, the Japanese word *ningen* means 'between persons', which did not mean the human, but originally only the 'world'.[12] Another word for man, *hito*, actually denotes others or foreigners. This proves that the ancient Japanese were not conscious of the individual substances of man. They understood themselves in the relationship to the society and the others. However, Watsuji regards this human conception neither as undeveloped nor as harmful, but as an advantage. It shows both the public and private aspects of human existence.

> Oneself and the others are absolutely separated from each other but, nevertheless, become one in communal existence. Individuals are basically different from society and yet dissolve themselves into society. *Ningen* denotes the unity of these contradictories. Unless we keep this dialectical structure in mind, we cannot understand the essence of *ningen*.[13]

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[11] Mayeda ascribes Heidegger's spatiality to a horizontal nature: "this direction, is given to the world by the horizontal nature of Dasein's temporality, i. e., the horizon of possibilities opened up by Dasein's orientation toward multiple possible future projects" (p. 69).

[12] The Sino-Japanese character *nin* (人) signifies two men supporting each other, while *gen* (間) implies 'between' or 'among'; *ningen* (人間) therefore signifies "men, who are supporting each other, exist in the world". *Cf.* James M. Shields, "The Art of *Aidagara*: Ethics, Aesthetics, and the Quest for an Ontology of Social Existence in Watsuji Tetsurō's *Rirgaku*", in *Asian Philosophy* 19 (2009), pp. 265–83; here p. 267.

[13] *Watsuji Tetsuro's* Rinrigaku: *Ethics in Japan*, trans. Yamamoto Seisaku and Robert E. Carter (New York: 1996), p. 15.

This concept of the human is completely different from modern European ideas that sociality is the negation of individuality. As a unifying entity of contradictories, the human becomes aware of himself and the public, but, paradoxically, this process of awareness develops not in any affirmative act, not by relaxing the tension of both opposites, but by negation. The dialectical structure in mind in the sense of Hegel makes it possible to unify the opposites while denying the both sides and affirming them in a higher level of being. Watsuji says that the human existence (*ningen sonzai*) is absolute negation.

> Now, that ningen's sonzai is, fundamentally speaking, a movement of negation makes it clear that the basis of ningen's sonzai is negation as such, that is, absolute negation. The true reality of an individual, as well as of totality, is 'emptiness', and this emptiness is the absolute totality. Out of this ground, from the fact that this emptiness is emptied, emerges ningen's sonzai as a movement of negation. The negation of negation is the self-returning and self-realizing movement of the absolute totality that is precisely social ethics (i.e., *Sittlichkeit* in German). Therefore, the basic principle of social ethics is the realization of totality (as the negation of negation) through the individual, (that is, the negation of totality).[14]

Even though he says that the negation itself makes its appearance in the form of individuals and society,[15] society can only consist of the relations among the individuals constituting it, and individuals are individuals only within society. This negativism of being maintains a distance from the Heiddegerian "being toward death". Heidegger's ontology focuses on the phenomenon of death,[16] but his endeavor to access the totality of being through death indicates that he clung to an atomistic individuality and neglected the spatiality of *ningen sonzai*.

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[14] Ibid., p. 23.

[15] Ibid., p. 102.

[16] Ibid., p. 224.

> We cannot have access to the totality of ningen sonzai only through death as an end. This totality is, first of all, to be found beyond the totality of individual being and only in and through the infinite oppositions and unities of these latter totalities. Therefore, the totality of *ningen*, although inclusive of "being in its death", is also that totality goes beyond death.[17]

Watsuji emphasizes so-called *jita fuji sei* (自他不二性), the "non-dual relationship between the self and the others", which can only be obtained through the negative dialectic. This annihilation is much different from the selflessness of Heidegger. *Das Man* (the They) as selfless public is characterized in *Being and Time* merely as collapse of individuality. Heidegger's self-conquest and self-sacrifice are not based on self-denial. In contrast, spontaneous abandonment of the self in the Buddhist way comes about through the activity of benevolence (*jihi*), great love. Watsuji stands, in this sense, in the tradition of Mahayana Buddhism.

His adherence to Buddhist thinking appears most clearly in the Japanese pantheistic worldview. The spatial ideas allow every existence to inhabit the world. Man and animals, creature and nature, living and not living things are equally invited into the everyday world. It must be very difficult for such a pantheistic worldview to accept the Heideggerian philosophy that regards the relation between an individual and the world as a relation between person and tools.[18] For Heidegger, the everyday world appears to be no more than something standing at disposal of human beings. In that teleological thought, in which achievements are most required, a human being is always supposed to be moving toward a goal. A lot of Heidegger's conceptions—like *Sein zum Tode* 'being-toward-death', *Entwurf* 'thrownness', *Verfall* 'fallenness', etc.—thus denote direction or movement toward something for which we have to struggle or not to struggle. Even the term *In-der-Welt-Sein* 'being-in-the-world' implies movement, because we are constantly threatened with falling down to the

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[17] Ibid., p. 224.

[18] Watsuji criticizes that Heidegger's "spatiality inherent in 'a being there' is, in the final analysis, attributed to the relationship of concern between *I* and tools and has nothing to do with the relationship of communication among human beings." *Cf.* Watsuji, *Ethics*, p. 174.

world and have to escape from corrupt everyday life. Watsuji's philosophy aims to define the world as a space of the interconnection of acts. The Japanese preposition *naka* (中), which corresponds to English *in*, not only has a spatial meaning but also expresses human relationships and hence understanding; being-in-the-world can signify subjectively "maintaining good relationships with others" or "knowing a lot about the world". The real corruption of human beings occurs not by falling down in the everyday world, as Heidegger said, but by making the world a conglomerate of objective tools and escaping from it. In this sense, Watsuji considers human existence to be a historical, climatic, and social complex that allows him to understand the world from the pantheistic viewpoint, namely, from an "I and Thou" relationship.

> [...] the natural environment, consisting of such things as mountains and rivers, grass and trees possesses a "Thou" characteristic in its primitive features. [... W]hen we love or think fondly of a double row of maple (ginkgo) trees, we deal with them as "Thou". Hence, it is not that we first find mere "things" about us, infer another ego existing among them, then apply the relationship between "I" and trees, and finally reach a stage in which we actually love trees. Instead, when we see trees, they are already trees that are characterized on the basis of our human existence as a double row of trees.[19]

Watsuji points out here two dimensions of perception. He says: Our world perception does not emerge from chronological process, but from a confidence that "I" share the living space with "You". This "I and Thou" ontology inevitably requires spatiality.

Kitaro Nishida (1870–1945) shared Watsuji's Buddhist way of thinking, but he wasn't interested in a pantheistic view of nature. Nishida's *Logic of Field* presents a critical reflection of space, time, and self. He understands space as a cognitive field in which two absolutely different elements, the self and the other, synthetically encounter each other.

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[19] Watsuji, *Climate*, p. 178.

> In order for the self-awareness of an entity (mono) to emerge, it has to be exposed (taisuru) to the absolute Other. I think that the mutual determination of entities that are facing each other is what makes them explicit. When people think about things (butsu), they base their thoughts on the logic of objects, but in fact we think from the standpoint of the mutual expression of entities facing each other.[20]

Nishida, influenced by Hegel, goes beyond European dialectic thinking. The thinking self and perceived things can constitute their world not by objective logic, but only in an interactional *basho* (場所) 'field' lying between subject and object. The interaction constitutes, however, an absolute contradiction. The field does not indicate self-consciousness in the usual sense.

> In Nishida's terminology the Field includes not only cognitions of declared objects, but also the cognition and recognition of the thinking and acting anthropos as itself. The thinking and acting self joins with the phenomena of nature, so that an absolute dimension of oneness enters the field, in which cognitions and the whole being of nature are included as itself.[21]

Nishida unfolds this concept of field to the body in which time, space, and self can be combined in unity.

> Space is grasped as a dimension of being something; time is grasped as a period of being something. Our self as a thinking and living subject performs this recognition. Things that can be recognized include not only objects of cognition outside our bodies, but also our self-consciousness itself. The

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[20] Kitaro Nishida, *Bashoteki ronri to shukyoteki sekaikan* ['*The Logic of Field and the Religious World-view*'] in *Nisida Kitaro Zenshu* ['*The Complete Works*'], vol. 11 (Tokyo: 1979), p. 399, as cited in Rein Raud, "'Place' and 'Being-Time': Spatiotemporal Concepts in the Thought of Nishida Kitaro and Dogen Kigen", *Philosophy East and West* 54 (2004), p. 33.

[21] Thorsten Botz-Bornstein, "From Community to Time-Space Development: Comparing N. S. Trubetzkoy, Nishida Kitarō, and Watsuji Tetsurō", *Asian Philosophy* 17 (2007), p. 274.

> existence of our body as being here and the existence of time as being now are displayed in a contrasted relation. Simultaneously we can say that this contrast is issued as a united recognition of time and space, in which we recognize the form and the contents of our self-consciousness as itself. There is a unity which includes the three contents of existing space, existing time and existing self, which recognizes this unity in various directions: space-time, time-space, unity of space and recognizing self, unity of time and recognizing self.[22]

Three opposing components, space–time–self, are combined in an absolute contradictory identity. We see here the two Japanese philosophers holding the same view of the negativity of the space and regarding the world as a selfless objective field. Their negative valuations of space have nothing to do with the Heideggerian precedence of time over space; however, this negativity comprises the dialectic moment which unifies self, time, and space into cognitive self-consciousness for Nishida and, for Watsuji, into a "I and Thou" relationship. Both Buddhist dialectics discover spatiality in a way quite different from Heideggerian *umsichtiges Entdecken des Zuhandenseins* 'circumspective discovery of the being-at-hand'.[23]

Watsuji emphasizes space, because it provides the conditions for living together. The world can consist only in this "I and Thou" relation. The *and* of "I and Thou" is not a distinction; rather it is a conjunction that unites people in a trustworthy partnership. In addition to forming a rough partition, the *fusuma* separates and binds family spaces.

While Heidegger insists on the subjective aspect of human existence, Watsuji regards the experience of climate, the geographical uniqueness, as

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[22] Kitaro Nishida, "Basic Principles of Mathematical Philosophy" and "The World of Physics", as cited in Hisaki Hashi, "The Significance of Einstein's Theory of Relativity in Nishida's 'Logic of Field'", *Philosophy East and West* 57 (2007), p. 460.

[23] "Space, which is discovered in circumspect being-in-the-world as the spatiality of useful things, belongs to being themselves as their place. Bare space is still veiled. [...] The fact that what is at hand can be encountered in its space of the surrounding world is ontically possible only because Da-sein itself is 'spatial' with regard to its being-in-the-world" (*Being and Time*, p. 96).

objective definitions thereof. This also shows the difference between the two philosophers' understanding of history. Heidegger seeks to overcome spatial facticities by subjectively focusing intention on history and conceives the idea of *Sein zum Tode* 'being-toward-death'. In contrast, Watsuji sees climate itself demanding the creative response of culture and history. He describes cultural and historical differences between Europe and Japan from the viewpoint of art and nature as follows:

> Thus we see that there are marked artistic differences which depend on whether it is the rational or the irrational aspect of nature that stands out most strikingly. Such artistic differences also reflect precisely what it is that man demands of nature. In Europe, nature, with its docility and its discipline, was treated as something to be mastered, as something in which laws were to be discovered. We are astonished, for example, as Orientals, by Goethe's passionate zest for nature as a naturalist. Man addresses prayers for eternal life not to nature but to god, and, even when honour is paid to nature, it is at best as god's creation or as something in which either god or reason is embodied. In the East, however, because of its irrationality, nature was treated not as something that is to be mastered but as the repository of infinite depth. Man sought consolation and assistance from nature; the poet Basho, who was typically Oriental, evinced an aesthetic, moral, and even religious association with nature, but he showed not the slightest trace of an intellectual interest. His concern was to live, to live with nature; so his view of nature was directed to religious salvation. This could only come with the protean fecundity of nature in the East. Seeing his own reflection in nature, man felt that he was being shown the way to infinitely deep abstractions and the best artists tried through their experience to seek out and express this.[24]

[24] Watsuji, *Climate*, p. 206.

Watsuji has never lost his poetic spirit even during his professorial activities at universities. He was firmly convinced that the philosophical essence of man must be grasped in a creative relation between art and nature. Art does not require atomic individuals isolated from their living space, nor does it need individuals exploiting and enslaving nature as a disposable tool. Watsuji insists that art and nature, individual and society, time and space can be unified only through the negation of oneself, "by making a detour of nothingness only on the ground of the subject in which the self and other are not yet disrupted."[25] Influenced by non-egocentric Buddhist doctrines, Watsuji's negative dialectic of nothingness won anthropological significance.

[25] Watsuji, *Ethics*, p. 225.