

BOOK REVIEW

Françoise Dastur, *Figures du néant et de la négation entre Orient et Occident*, Paris: Les Belles Lettres/Encre Marine, 2018, pp. 224

As its title indicates, *Figures du néant et de la négation entre Orient et Occident*, explores the concepts of nothing(ness) and/or negation across the boundaries of Eastern and Western thought, a kind of *philosophie sans frontières*. Heidegger and to a lesser degree Husserl provide the philosophical spine to the book - Françoise Dastur writes as well on them as anyone in the world today - because Heidegger famously deconstructed the Western ontological tradition from Plato and Aristotle onwards as focusing on beings (the things themselves) rather than the state of being *per se*. This means there was a tendency to see nothing as the negation of a pre-existing something rather than the nothing(ness) out of which the being of that something emerged. Heidegger spent his whole career evolving more and more subtle quasi-mystical but never irrational or illogical ways of thinking about the relationship between being and nothing(ness). What is especially important about him is that he does not simply debunk the Western philosophic tradition: he gives it a specific but legitimate character, which gives the space to non-Western philosophies to be equally specific in their way.

Husserl and Heidegger were both interested in Buddhist or related Far Eastern thought and had sustained contact with Japanese students and philosophers, and there seems to be a real affinity between Heidegger's exploration of nothing(ness) and the Buddhist concept of *sunyata* or emptiness, in particular as developed by Nagarjuna,¹ which was of central importance for Japanese Zen philosophers such as Dogen and members of the Kyoto School, who were themselves very strongly influenced by Heidegger. In fact, another pre-eminent Heideggerian, Joan Stambaugh, has devoted entire books to discussing Dogen, Hisamatsu and Nishitani, with frequent references to Western philosophers, such as Hegel, Nietzsche, Husserl and Heidegger.²

By contrast, Dastur only really deals at length with non-Western thinkers in one of her chapters ("Figure II"), where a sweeping historical narrative that leads from the origins of Indian philosophy to the Kyoto School via Buddhist philosophers provides the frame for a more focused look at Nagarjuna and Nishida Kitaro. Elsewhere, apart from a number of brief comparisons between Nagarjuna or Buddhist thought with Heidegger in her last chapter ("Finale"), references to non-Western philosophy are mostly limited to very detailed accounts of exchanges between East and West, in particular in relation to Husserl and Heidegger, but also in one of the richest chapters in the book ("Figure IV"), where nineteenth century European nihilism and the

¹ A recent excellent piece on Nagarjuna and *sunyata* is Jan Westerhoff, "Nagarjuna and Emptiness: A Comprehensive Critique of Foundationalism" in *The Oxford Handbook of Indian Philosophy*, ed. Jonardon Ganeri (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 94-109.

² Joan Stambaugh, *Impermanence Is Buddha-Nature: Dogen's Understanding of Temporality* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990) and *The Formless Self* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999).

contemporary interest in Oriental thought are the context for concentrating on another individual philosopher, this time Nietzsche. A subtle reading of how he "juggles" what he sees as the main qualities of Buddhism, Christianity and Hinduism as building blocks for his own philosophy, especially in *The Anti-Christ*, emerges from a precise knowledge of which Eastern texts he would have known in which translation and a nuanced understanding of how he is trying to overcome nihilism through nihilism itself: this discussion is then followed by Heidegger's critique of Nietzsche's approach to nihilism. However, because there has already been an extended examination of Buddhist thought in an earlier chapter, one is aware of the fact that it exists independently of its use as a source of ideas by Nietzsche or even Heidegger. Particularly important is the way in which Westerners have tended to project their own problems connected with nihilism on to Buddhism, when the latter is not nihilistic.

Dastur explicitly states that her book is not a work of comparative philosophy, which of course can be valuable. However, it tends to binarize and do its comparing and contrasting purely in the realm of ideas. Stambaugh's excellent books are not comparative philosophy either, but she tends to assimilate the ideas of Japanese thinkers to those of the Western thinkers she cites because she continuously uses the latter as a way of explaining the former, although there is some justification for this: the twentieth century Japanese figures she deals with were strongly influenced by Western philosophy.

Thought, however, is paradoxical: it can be used to transcend the material, and it can be communicated in a seemingly immaterial way from mind to mind, but it is actually produced by a mind that is an integral part of a body that is geographically situated in a specific spot on the earth's surface. In *What Is Philosophy ?*, especially the fourth chapter, "Geophilosophy", Deleuze argues for a complex relationship between ideas and the earth, but according to him, philosophy was invented by the Greeks, so this makes him Eurocentric and hegemonic, not seeing the possible encounters of different philosophies emerging from different parts of the world on an equal footing. He does not also understand Heidegger after the turning-point (*die Kehre*) and cannot detach Husserl's ideas thought from his moments of Eurocentrism, as in the Vienna *Krisis* lecture.³

These two problematic areas are covered very well by Dastur in the opening few and final sections of her book, where she demonstrates an exceptionally detailed knowledge of the work of Heidegger and Husserl and explores these two philosophers

³ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie ?* (Paris: Minuit, 1991), esp. 82-108, and *What Is Philosophy ?*, trans. Graham Burchell and Hugh Tomlinson (London/New York: Verso, 1994), esp. 85-113. The book was published under both Deleuze and Guattari's names, but it is now known to have been written by the first author on his own. That said, it very much shows the influence of the intense collaboration with Guattari on Deleuze. "Deleuzian connectivity" and "work of the surface" are indeed very compelling, but they are linked to a free-wheeling Western entrepreneurial self who does the "backward races", both non-Western and within the West, such as Spaniards and Italians, no favors. *What Is Philosophy ?* is saturated with ethnocentric remarks.

with immense profundity. As has already been said, she also goes through their contacts with the East, in particular Japan. These two types of approach - penetrating analysis and historical description - are skilfully intertwined in the main body of the work within this "frame". On the one hand, there are dense Heideggerian/Husserlian deconstructions of Greek, German and French philosophers, with the readings of Parmenides, Kant, Nietzsche (already mentioned) and Merleau-Ponty,⁴ being especially rich. Indian and Japanese philosophy are treated in a very thorough, competent, but ultimately descriptive way, mainly in the two chapters already alluded to. This makes for a kind of disjunctive structure in which the latent possibilities of Western thought are examined in the context of an Eastern one which develops very similar possibilities much more fully, without however tending to fuse the two, as Stambaugh does.

Dastur's approach to East-West relations is epitomized by her movement from her discussion of Pyrrho - scepticism was very important for Husserl - to Jain *anekantavada* at the end of her "Greek chapter" ("Figure I"), which leads to Nagarjuna in her "Buddhism/Kyoto School chapter" ("Figure II"). Pyrrho was one of the philosophers who accompanied Alexander on his way to India, where they are said to have encountered the naked Indian gymnosophists,⁵ who Dastur very reasonably identifies with *Digambara* Jains. There is a beautiful crossing of physical boundaries and multi-cultural blending in the description of Alexander's journey and a suggestive jump-cutting or montage juxtaposition of Pyrrho, Jain thought and Nagarjuna, all seen in the light of Husserl's *epoché* (suspension of judgement), which can have a mystical quality to it. Dastur avoids certain problems (in a sort of *epoché*): how much the Greek and Indian philosophers could have seriously debated philosophic ideas and what the precise differences are between sceptical thought and Nagarjuna. Richard Bett and Jonardon Ganeri have dealt excellently with these problems from different perspectives, both however operating within the context of analytic philosophy.⁶

⁴ Françoise Dastur, *Chair et langage: Essais sur Merleau-Ponty* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres/Encre Marine, 2016) is an excellent book on this philosopher. Dastur is particularly good at valorizing his late thought, which was ignored in France because of the rise in anti-humanism in the sixties and seventies. She refers mainly to Foucault in this respect, but one could also make the same argument in relation to Deleuze (with or without Guattari).

⁵ *Gymnos* means naked in Greek.

⁶ Richard Bett, *Pyrrho, his Antecedents, and his Legacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 169-78 is a very judicious examination indeed of the affinities between Pyrrho's ideas and Buddhism in particular. Bett is a Western classical philosophy specialist and remains open-minded but agnostic about the depth of exchange between the Greek philosopher and his Indian "colleagues". Jonardon Ganeri, *Philosophy in Classical India: The Proper Work of Reason* (London/New York: Routledge, 2001), 43-70 is a superb discussion of a whole range of problems in Nagarjuna, which does subject the parallels between the Buddhist philosopher and Sextus Empiricus' account of sceptical thought to a rigorous analysis (55-7). Ganeri's overall approach very much concentrates on the rational side of Indian philosophy, assumes that rationality is the same cross-culturally and avoids all soteriological aspects. He is fully aware of what he is doing and has a perfect right to do it, and his work has been exceptionally fruitful. It

Dastur is not, and her subtle blend of rationality and mysticism illuminates Eastern thought in a way that can at the very least richly supplement work of a more analytic kind.⁷ She uses Indian and Japanese thought almost intuitively to go much more deeply into her own philosophy, while respecting them as irreducibly other and therefore not appropriating them as if she had a right to own them. This is how she does *philosophie sans frontières*.

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was also necessary as it comes out of an Indian tradition of analytically-trained philosophers who were trying to revalorize their philosophy, which had often been denigrated as religious or irrational. However, non-Western philosophies are *sui generis*, not necessarily analytic or Continental in Western terms.

⁷ Françoise Dastur, *Heidegger: La Question du logos* (Paris: Vrin, 2007) is an excellent book on Heidegger's subtle critique of Western reason and formal logic, which could well prove illuminating for exploring the more mystical dimensions of Buddhist logic.