

TOWARDS WHAT CAN'T BE SAID

EXPLORING THE LIMITATIONS OF LANGUAGE IN ZEN PHILOSOPHY

This research project aims to explore the relationship between language and experience as understood by the Zen philosophical tradition. Specifically, I draw on the thought of Kyoto school philosophers Nishida Kitarō and Ueda Shizuteru, who pay close attention to the dangers and limitations of language, as well as Zen-informed strategies for overcoming language's tendency to "cage" or "sediment" experience into abstractions. Together, they provide a picture of philosophical dialogue that emphasizes the creative, the playful, and the poetic, often avoiding "literal" philosophical definitions in order to prevent linguistic illusions from taking hold. To illustrate how these principles may benefit philosophical dialogues even outside of Zen contexts, I consider Heidegger's "A Dialogue on Language" as a potential example of a philosophical exchange that uses a creative, Zen-informed approach in order to communicate ideas that would otherwise be "unsayable."

THE DANGERS OF LANGUAGE

Ueda Shizuteru warns that "[t]he power of language may allow us to approach reality, but it can also keel over to alienate us from it" ("Silence and Words" 2). In particular, Ueda is concerned with the way that, when we allow the linguistic layer of reality to occlude the immediate, experiential layer, "the linguistically constituted world [becomes] a net or a cage into which we are locked" (2). This point is well illustrated by the well-known Buddhist parable about the blind men and the elephant, which appears in the *Tittha Sutta*, *Udana* 68-69:



Encountering an elephant for the first time, one blind man grabs its ears, another its trunk, another its tail, and so on — each proclaiming they now know what an elephant is. In reality, they have only encountered a part of the bigger picture without understanding its relation to the whole. As a result, each will disagree about what an elephant is, despite the fact that each of their descriptions ultimately point to the same referent. This parable reminds us that one experience can lead to many conflicting linguistic expressions when filtered through each person's way of encountering the world - what Heidegger will call their "house of being."

ESCAPING THE CAGE

In order to prevent entrapment in the cage of language, **Nishida Kitarō** emphasizes the need to speak in two directions: both "from out of pure experience toward a discourse of philosophy, and from within the discourse of philosophy back toward pure experience" (Davis 720). In other words, we must be attentive in *not only* attempting to capture our experiences in language, but also in ensuring that our linguistic expressions point us *back* to their experiential source. When we all too easily forget to take this second step, we inevitably find ourselves in a layer of language that has lost its connection to the real world, and therefore lost its communicative power. To make use of another Buddhist parable, forgetting to make this return to language is like mistaking believing that a finger pointing at the moon is the moon itself:



"A finger pointing at the moon is not the moon. The finger is needed to know where to look for the moon, but if you mistake the finger for the moon itself, you will never know the real moon." —Thich Nhat Hanh (568)

Ueda echoes this idea of Nishida's when he stresses the importance of "exiting language and exiting into language" to return to the roots of experience, which he describes as a "silent expanse" where the referents of our linguistic expressions (in other words, the "moons" that we are attempting to "point at") can be encountered as they really are. To communicate in this way is ultimately to approach dialogue as a creative activity that embraces figurative and metaphorical expression. Of course, in order for this kind of communication to be possible, Ueda argues, we must embrace "a trust in our mutual ability to traverse the silent expanse" (Ueda, quoted in Davis 12). That is, in order to even *hope* to understand one another's creative linguistic expressions, we must be able to trust that they arise from the same wellspring of being as our own.

DIALOGUE AS CREATIVE EXERCISE

Operating from outside of the Zen tradition, **Martin Heidegger** was greatly influenced by the Kyoto school and took a particular interest in the role language plays in philosophical dialogue. This is reflected in his well-known statement that "language is the house of being." For Heidegger, a language is like a dwelling place that — despite arising from the same "wellspring" of experience as all other languages — idiosyncratically shapes our thought such that "a dialogue from house to house remains nearly impossible" (5).

Nonetheless, Heidegger's text "A Dialogue on Language" attempts to explore how a conversation between two houses of being might occur. Written as an exchange between a Japanese philosopher and a European "inquirer," Heidegger's dialogue refuses to define its subject matter in explicit terms, but rather proceeds by "hinting" and "gesturing towards" the key ideas that underlie the commentary of its two thinkers. The strategy here is that of "attending to that which is hinted in the conversation without being objectified" (Karamercan 44) — a delicate process that involves playing with the fluidity of language more so than battling against it. Throughout the dialogue, Heidegger's two speakers understand that it is only by conceiving of language as a kind of porous membrane — something that can be "exited" and "exited into" in the way Ueda describes — that a productive cross-cultural philosophical dialogue can occur.

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"We can emancipate ourselves from the danger of language only [when we] turn our speaking into a creative activity."

— Ueda Shizuteru
("Silence and Words" 2)

CONCLUSION

As Nishida and Ueda remind us, it is impossible to fully engage with our own experience — let alone shared philosophical questions — unless we are willing to probe beyond the false sense of certainty that language often gives us. Though the Zen tradition is far from being the only kind of philosophy that is aware of language's distorting power, it seems to have the most to offer in terms of strategies for coping with it. I suggest that philosophers from across traditions may benefit from Zen philosophy's concept of "exiting" and "exiting into" language, as well as its openness towards integrating poetic expression and metaphor into serious philosophical discussions. While some thinkers in the analytic tradition may see figurative expression as a barrier to philosophical precision, Nishida and Ueda remind us that such precision was likely illusory in the first place.

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