

This book offers a comprehensive account of Tanabe Hajime's thought. It aims to show the coherence of his divergent inquiries by tracing two key themes: "religio-ethics" and "social ontology."

Alongside his senior colleague, Nishida Kitarō, Tanabe laid the philosophical groundwork for the Kyoto School. Even so, his work remains understudied within Japan and abroad. This is understandable, given Tanabe's dense style and daedal approach. Roving over mathematics, the natural sciences, epistemology, logic, social theory, and religion, Tanabe thinks by commuting between different registers, and often at dizzying speeds. Accordingly, where researchers do broach his thought, the general strategy is to bracket the whole for clarity on the part. Still, this defers to the question of how Tanabe's thought is to cohere overall. Considering Tanabe's historical contributions, a way of answering this question would serve well, not only Tanabe studies, but our broader understanding of the Kyoto School itself.

To that end, the themes of "religio-ethics" and "social ontology" provide us with an opening. First, ethics served as a central concern for Tanabe from his earliest writings until his last. Since those early writings, ethics meant something more to Tanabe than its customary conception. Ethics, in Tanabe's favored sense, is based on the individual's contiguity with the Absolute and thus intersects with religion. It is this religio-ethics that provides the focal point at which the rays of Tanabe's inquiries converge. Second, from 1934, Tanabe's inquiry into religio-ethics gained theoretical complexity by developing a framework for addressing the interplay between the individual, society, and the Absolute. Tanabe's social ontology, and the ternary relationship that it lays out, firmly distinguished Tanabe from his now intellectual rival, Nishida. A comprehensive account of Tanabe's thought thus demands a coherent reconstruction of this social ontology, and that is what this book attempts to offer.

This task is carried out in two parts. The first presents Tanabe's account of the relationship between the individual and the Absolute, clarifying the basic philosophical principles of Tanabe's thought. The second brings the full ternary relationship together by tracing the evolution of Tanabe's social ontology.

Part I: Tanabe's Basic Philosophical Principles: Absolute Turnover, Absolute Critique, and Absolute Mediation

Individuals per se are not ethical but become ethical through contiguity with the Absolute. This, in a word, is Tanabe's basic position. The early Tanabe, closely following Nishida, held that the individual's ethical transformation required an experience of unity with the Absolute. By 1931, however, Tanabe developed an approach to dialectic that occasioned a complication in his thinking and a new fissure between himself and his colleague. According to Tanabe, in limit situations, the individual is confronted by the antinomy of reason and, sublated by the Absolute, therein undergoes an "absolute turnover." For the individual to become ethical is for the individual to undergo this absolute turnover. While this scheme would remain in place throughout the inter- and postwar periods, an important reorientation took place. Where the interwar period emphasizes the rationality of ethical transformation, in Tanabe's postwar philosophy of religion, what gains prominence is the love and great compassion of the Absolute, on the one hand, and the role of religious salvation in ethical transformation, on the other.

Tanabe comes to refer to the saved as "Open-Being," who, he claims, undergo a transformation, not only in their ethical status, but also in their thinking. Limit situations make them cognizant of rational thought's limitations, facilitating an understanding of the imperfections of self-reliant reasoning. This understanding is evinced in, what Tanabe calls, "absolute critique," through which genuine philosophical thought comes to be seen as possible only through the wisdom bestowed by the Absolute. This wisdom, in turn, serves as the source of true ethical praxis.

With the imparted wisdom of the Absolute, "Open-Being" has the responsibility of transmitting this wisdom through one's own ethical practice. In this way, the Absolute saves humanity through the mediation of the saved. This, Tanabe contends, is the "absolute mediation" of salvation. "Open-Being" establishes the truly ethical community, which Tanabe terms "existential communion," wherein the saved make a place for the workings of the Absolute within their social groups, transmitting its wisdom by putting it into practice. Tanabe's philosophy of religion thus leads to his idiosyncratic social ontology, which is a *religious* social ontology.

Part II: Religious Social Ontology

Tanabe's social ontology aims to comprehend the human world by refashioning the Aristotelian logic of genus, species, and individual into the dual ternary relationships of "humankind-society-individual" and "Absolute-society-individual." This framework, completed in substance by 1937, would remain in use until Tanabe's final years.

Under the banner of the “logic of species,” Tanabe’s interwar thought investigated rational state-building, that is, the construction of states capable of coexistence. At this time, rational state-building was held to be initiated by the individual’s rational (or ethical) transformation through absolute turnover, but in the postwar era and in response to the social realities of the war, Tanabe’s views shifted. Absolute critique, and its claim for the imperfections of self-reliant reasoning, barred holding a rationally founded state as a social ideal. So while his social ontology’s basic categories of genus, species, and individual remained in place, his conception of the social ideal evolved. In short, the state based on reason grew into the existential communion based on the wisdom of the Absolute.

Just for concentrating on rational state-building, the interwar social ontology did not substantively address international relations, which forestalled the development of a social theory that could handle problems at a global scale. The postwar, religious social ontology, by contrast, was better positioned to account for a broader coordination of human efforts. Individuals, saved by the Absolute and putting its wisdom into practice, could form a network whose sociality transcended the borders of states. Such a collective human endeavor, the realization of existential communion, was Tanabe’s vision and the highest idea guiding his religious social ontology.