

## EXPERIENCE AND CULTURE: NISHIDA'S PATH "TO THE THINGS THEMSELVES"

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### *Four Concepts of Experience*

As Japan modernized under the Meiji Restoration, it enjoyed a sudden and massive influx of Western science and technology. For many intellectuals, it was as though traditional worldviews dissolved on contact. In philosophical circles early enthusiasm for empiricism and positivism soon gave way to anxiety in the face of change. Japan discovered that it had imported not only Western achievements but also Western problems. The dilemma of *Kultur* and *Zivilisation*, moral direction and material means, now confronted the newcomer to modernity, although in Japan it was experienced more as a loss of national identity than as a crisis of progress as such. But the way back was irrevocably closed; authentic tradition could not be replaced by factitious traditionalism.<sup>1</sup>

Philosophers were condemned to seeking solutions to Western problems in the West. There they found, in the early years of this century, a variety of responses to what was widely perceived as the hollowness of rationalistic materialism. The Western self-critique resonated with their own doubts about the course of modernization in Japan. It was no longer plausible to appeal to the authority of tradition against the universality of modern reason. In Japan, too, the individual subject insisted on its cognitive rights and no longer submitted blindly to a past that was rapidly disappearing in any case. Another type of universality compatible with spiritual values and carrying conviction on its own evidence was therefore required. The concept of experience lay at the center of many of these attempts at spiritual regeneration. It represented a richer and more inclusive universality than reason, and promised a specifically modern link to culture, tradition, and the religious and moral heritage. The move from rational to experiential justification seemed to preserve cognitive freedom, the essence of modernity, without sacrificing values.

Like many other terms, the word for "experience" (*keiken*) only acquires a philosophical meaning in the Japanese language in the nineteenth century. It soon became central to philosophical reflection in Japan, at first in connection with the prestige of Western science, said to be based on experience, and later through its employment as a conceptual bridge between modern Western thought and Japanese tradition, especially Buddhist enlightenment. This latter turn owed a great deal to Nishida Kitarō, whose theory of "pure experience" (*junsui keiken*), presented in *An Inquiry into the Good* (1911), marked the beginning of original philosophy in Japan.<sup>2</sup>

However, it would be a mistake to confound Nishida's concept of experience with a traditional religious notion. In fact it is far more complex and conserves all of the various meanings of the term in Western thought.

There are at least four concepts of experience implied in the word, each of which seems definable by an opposition.

1. *Experience as epistemological foundation: the empiricist idea of experience as the basis of knowledge versus dogma.* It is through this first concept that experience is linked to scientific and technological modernity. In this sense, experience means access to knowledge and, through knowledge, to power over external nature. This first idea of experience appears in Nishida's account as a claim to a unique kind of Japanese modernity. Nishida contested the Western monopoly on the rational pursuit of knowledge, that is, the reliance on experience rather than prejudice or tradition. He argued that Japanese culture already implied such an approach long before the opening of the country. After quoting Motoori Norinaga to the effect that the Japanese spirit "follows the path that leads to things," Nishida writes: "Going to the truth of things is neither to conform to traditions in a conventional manner nor to be guided by subjective feelings. It necessarily includes the scientific spirit" (Nishida 1991, p. 20). This explains why Japanese culture has so easily assimilated Western science. Nishida thus has a basically favorable view of modernity while rejecting its positivistic self-understanding. He believed it possible, starting out from a reevaluation of the concept of experience, to construct a spiritually richer framework for modern life.

2. *Experience as life: immediacy versus reflection.* The first, empiricist concept of experience is not as concrete as it seems. What is counted as experience in this sense is only the shared and, indeed, the measurable content of perception, that is, data. Left out of the account is the specifically "subjective" dimension of consciousness. Thus, by contrast with the empiricist identification of experience with data, there has always been a romantic conception of experience as life, as *Erlebnis*. Not sensation as an object of thought, but feeling comes to exemplify experience. These two concepts might be contrasted as experience known versus experience experienced. William James was the first to conceptualize this latter approach to experience as the "stream of consciousness."

Following James, Nishida writes, "What we usually refer to as experience is adulterated with some sort of thought, so by *pure* I am referring to the state of experience just as it is without the least addition of deliberative discrimination" (Nishida 1990, p. 3).<sup>3</sup> Nishida shared this concept of pure experience with D. T. Suzuki, who popularized the identification of enlightened consciousness with a kind of immediacy prior to all reflection. Suzuki's influence, in turn, is explicitly present in Nishida's later theory of Japanese culture where he writes that "No-mind (*mushin*) can be considered the axis of the Oriental spirit (Suzuki Daisetz)" (Nishida 1991, p. 72). "It is not in affirming the self that we become creators but in thinking and acting by

becoming the thing. Our true self is an intrinsically perfect expression of the world" (Nishida 1991, pp. 102–103).

The "falling away" of body and mind in Zen Buddhism is thus the mode of experience characteristic of Japan.<sup>4</sup> And yet Nishida in no way calls for a return to the premodern past. He imagines a synthesis in which the moment of subjectivity suppressed by Western modernity will be recovered through a Zen-inspired Asian self-understanding.

3. *Experience as Bildung: the progressive construction of personality (or collective historical experience, "learning processes," and so forth) versus the cycles of nonhuman nature.* Both the empiricist and the romantic concepts of experience have in common a momentary, disconnected character. The dialectical concept of experience as *Bildung* introduces temporality and connection.<sup>5</sup> Here the contemplative point of view is left behind. As a practice engaging all the faculties of the subject, experience is a process that the subject undergoes rather than a sensation or datum that it receives. Experience results in neither knowledge nor feeling but in the construction of the subject itself. In Hegel this concept of experience served to eliminate the substantialist notion of subjectivity inherited from Descartes. The Hegelian subject is no cogito but a self-constituting interactive process.

Nishida was also influenced by this dialectical concept of experience, which is primarily associated with classical German thought. In his early work it is generalized in the notion of a cosmic unification of experience. Insofar as the separateness of individual experiences is relative to second-order processes of reflection, an underlying first-order unity is presupposed. Nishida optimistically proposes that this unity increasingly manifests itself in the world. "The self-development of a certain unifying entity is the mode of all realities, and God is their unifier" (Nishida 1990, p. 161). The later cultural theory, with its notion of global human development, also reflects a similar generalization of *Bildung*, now identified with the historical process. Nishida writes: "Each nation/people lives its own unique historical life and at the same time joins in a united global world through carrying out a world-historical mission. This is the ultimate Idea [principle] of human historical development" (Nishida 1996a, pp. 101–102).

Nishida's account of collective social development is centered on the nation. No doubt the subordinate position of Japan in the world system of his youth fixated Nishida on the problem of national identity. Unfortunately, that fixation later entangled him ambiguously in the imperialist politics of Japan. As I will argue below, Nishida greatly overestimated the significance of nationality for the solution of the problems of modernity.

4. *Experience as ontological foundation: the phenomenological-existentialist idea of experience as the unsurpassable horizon of being versus objectivity understood as a detached "view from nowhere."* This fourth definition of experience is the most important for the interpretation of Nishida, but also the most difficult and controversial. This notion promises a radical transcendence of the subject-object split. In the early

years of the nineteenth century, European thought reacted against the idea that experience could be explained by the interaction of an abstract cogito with an equally abstract realm of objective facts, nature, or noumena (concept 1). There was a call for a return to the concrete, or, as Husserl would later say, "To the things themselves" (*Zu den Sachen selbst*). The pursuit of the concrete in Bergson, Dilthey, Simmel, and phenomenology was reflected in Japan in Nishida's break with the positivist trend in Meiji thought. In Nishida's theory of pure experience, subject and object are not foundational categories but arise from reflection within an original unity, pre-reflective consciousness.

In the usual view, we conceive experience as "*in* the mind," presupposing that our innermost self exists beyond experience and independent of it. But Nishida argues, on the contrary, that the self that "has" experience is itself just an object in experience. We know the self only insofar as we bring it before ourselves experientially in reflection, and this experience is constitutive of selfhood. But if experience is prior to the self that knows, that self cannot really "have" it at all. On the contrary, it is experience that "has" a self. The "I" is not a spectator on the experienced world, but merely an aspect of it. Experience, not the self, is what is ultimately real.

There is a risk of confusion between this fourth conception of experience as the pre-reflexive foundation of the subject-object split, and the second concept of spontaneous lived experience since both refer to "immediacy." In the Western context, (2) is a protest against the reification of bourgeois culture and daily life with a strong subjectivistic tinge, while (4) strives to get beyond the opposition of subjectivism and objectivism altogether in response to philosophical difficulties in nineteenth-century neo-Kantianism and naturalism.

There is some historical connection between these two ways of understanding experience, but there are major conceptual differences. Lived experience as a momentary realization is an elusive ideal of unsullied immediacy that stands opposed to the excess of modern reflectiveness and calculation. But experience as ontological foundation is the always already present ground even of reflection itself. Russell called this latter nonpsychological version of pure experience a "neutral monism." As such, it is a *theory* about the commonality of being underlying the distinction between subject and object, not a *description* of a *mental event* suspending that distinction. This difference appears as an ambiguity not only in Nishida's theory of pure experience, but in James' original formulation as well. It persists in Suzuki in the paradox of enlightenment as the realization in a privileged moment of a prior unity with the world that was always already there.<sup>6</sup> In Husserl it appears as the potential for confusion between consciousness as a flow of elusive sensations "*in*" the mind, and as an ontologically distinct realm, coextensive with the real.

It is perhaps because of these ambiguities that Heidegger and the later Nishida abandon the language of consciousness for other ways of signifying experience in terms of the fourth concept. In what follows I will show how experiential philosophy carried to its limit tends to cancel the concept of experience itself.

*Nishida and Phenomenology*

I would like now to lay out schematically the chief ideas involved in the fourth concept of experience, as they developed into the basis of phenomenology and existential ontology, as background to the discussion of Nishida's parallel evolution. These ideas are:

(a) Facticity: the subject is not a conscious substance, a knowing thing or rational animal, but a localized actor/seer, and as a first person point of view it cannot be objectified or reduced to the determinations of a rational system or science.

(b) The death of God: the idea of a possible point of view on experience that is not located in experience is rejected as ontologically absurd.

(c) Consequently, the Kantian thing-in-itself, which seems to presuppose at least ideally an independent access (e.g., by a hypothetical God) to the original of which human experience would be the distorted reflection, is rejected.

(d) Further, there is the reinterpretation or abandonment of the causal interaction of subject and object or of synthesis by the constructive activity of the subject, since, again, the transcendent object supposedly "worked up" in the mind has no reality prior to its givenness in experience.

(e) Hence there is a return from Kantian criticism to immediacy, to the acceptance of givenness or presence as an unsurpassable and ultimately unexplainable ontological foundation (Husserlian "pure consciousness" or Heideggerian "clearing," *Lichtung*, for example.)

(f) This, however, is not a return to objective "things" in the usual substantialist sense, but to a new type of being organized according to the structures of experience of finite subjects.

(g) These structures are finally understood as relative to an acting rather than a contemplative subject.

Something like point (a) first appeared in the Kierkegaardian notion of individual existence as irreducible to any rational system; however, Kierkegaard stuck for the most part to the ethical and religious implications of the concept. Nietzsche's "death of God" had epistemological implications sketched in his perspectivism, but because he had no conception of facticity, his doctrine had limited ontological significance.

William James, Brentano, and then, far more elaborately, Husserl, developed points (c) through (f). The contribution of James (see his "Does Consciousness Exist?" in James 1958) to establishing points (c) and (d) is often overlooked today. He was an effective critic of Cartesian substantialism and contributed to its downfall. James tended to ontologize experience by treating it as irreducible, not as an event *in* the world but as an alternative description of the world, paralleling the realistic account. Like Brentano, he rejected atomistic empiricism (a version of concept [1] above), which assumes that immediate experience consists of inherently meaningless sense data represented in the mind. Brentano substituted an intentional account of the intrinsic connection between subject and object for the usual causal account,

and James argued that experience already contains meaning and relationship and thus need not obtain coherence from the synthetic activity of a preexisting subject.

Phenomenology finally took a significant step beyond traditional philosophy. Husserl reconstructed the notion of consciousness nonpsychologically and made the approach of James and Brentano methodologically fruitful in the phenomenological description of reality. According to Husserl's critique of psychologism, Descartes and his successors presupposed a traditional substantialist ontology in which consciousness was a thing rather than a logical "correlate" of objective being. Husserl introduced the term "pure consciousness" to refer to this correlated dimension, which is not a perceiving thing but a redescription of objectivity in the structures of its givenness (see point [f] above). Eventually Heidegger brought these innovations together in a new ontology with decisive consequences for later twentieth-century thought and, I will argue below, for our understanding of Nishida as well.

Despite his awareness of the exciting work of Husserl and Heidegger, and their evident influence on his thinking, Nishida did not follow their lead and develop a phenomenological ontology. His formative intellectual experiences lay somewhat earlier than their influence in, among other sources, William James' radical empiricism and in the first assimilation of and reaction against neo-Kantianism in Japan. Thus, Nishida's intellectual development took a different course. Nevertheless, I think it can be shown that his approach has certain similarities to phenomenology, and is especially close to Heidegger's reconstruction of phenomenology outside the framework of philosophy of consciousness.

At first Nishida was preoccupied by the theoretical difficulties of defining the Jamesian "pure experience" he had posited in *An Inquiry into the Good*. He had difficulties providing a philosophical account of the self. If the self only arises in reflection, then who or what is it that reflects and thereby brings it into being? Nishida thought he had found an answer in Fichte, who posited an all-encompassing transcendental self prior to the splitting up of being into consciousness and object, I and not-I. In any case, Nishida interpreted his own concept of pure experience in terms of this transcendental "absolute activity" of Fichte.

We can infer the existence of this "absolute activity" from the fact that the first-person position of thought is ultimately unsurpassable and yet constitutive of objectivity: "If knower and known are represented as separate realities . . . the individual thus objectified cannot be the real subject, for as the constructive unifying activity of consciousness, this cannot be made an object of reflection" (Nishida 1987a, p. 70). Beyond the subject-object split lies an act that posits them and that is not itself a possible object. This act bears a striking resemblance to Husserlian "pure consciousness" in its constituting function.

Pure experience was now understood as the undifferentiated field of immediate awareness, an ultimate subjectivity that cannot become an object because all objects appear before it, a kind of untranscendable first-person standpoint. This self would be a pre-reflective, non-objectifiable realm of being rather than an object in the world. As in Fichte, the individual consciousness emerges from this original act

of awareness through "self-consciousness," which Nishida refers to by the Japanese word *jikaku*.

This usage requires some explanation (Ohashi 1987, p. 98; Weinmayr 1987, p. 225). In ordinary speech, *jikaku* is not precisely inward looking and does not refer to the purely contemplative self-directed awareness for which the word "self-consciousness" is usually employed in English and German. Rather, it means the achievement of a deep realization or understanding of a matter, with the implication that such understanding affects and alters the self. The self-reference involved is therefore performative or existential rather than merely cognitive; it is not the empty mirroring of the self in the self but constitutes the self through a real relation. Accordingly, Nishida writes that "Reflection is an event within the self by which the self adds something to itself, a self-knowledge which is also an operation of self-development" (Nishida 1987a, p. 4; translation modified). Nishida's concept of *jikaku* overcomes the undialectical opposition of immediacy and reflection of *An Inquiry into the Good* and the associated psychologistic tendency to identify the Absolute with a particular state of mind (Maraldo 1989, pp. 479–480).

Nishida concludes, in sum, that selfhood is not a thing but a process, a process that is not separate from the experienced world but is a reflexive dimension of it through which it obtains its unity. Experience is "based on various a priori, whose unifying function is thought of as subjectivity, while that which it unifies is thought of as objectivity" (Nishida 1987a, p. xxi; translation modified). Nishida now begins to offer an *explanation* for the unifying functions of experience that he had simply postulated in his earlier work and described twice, once in Jamesian terms and a second time in religious language.

Is there not a certain resemblance between this position and Heidegger's non-substantialist account of subjectivity as transcendence (Ohashi 1987, p. 103)? Of course, fundamental differences remain. Heidegger's efforts in *Being and Time* were bent on supplying an analytically precise answer to the question of the nature of the "various a priori," which he called "existentials," to which Nishida refers. Nishida, on the other hand, having established the general principle, moves on to carry out his ambitious speculative program in a new type of systematic philosophy. Nevertheless, like Heidegger, at this point in his development Nishida turned away from his sources in the philosophy of consciousness toward a new position.

#### *Beyond Experience*

It is out of this background that Nishida developed his concept of "place" (*basho*), which aims to restore the world in its concreteness as against all cognitive representations. He eventually realized that insofar as the "pure act" is non-objectifiable, it makes little sense to identify it with an ego, even a transcendental one. This is still to objectify it and to fall therefore into psychologism. By a startling reversal that has a certain similarity to Heidegger's break with Husserl, Nishida came to see that the foundation of experience is not a kind of super-self but the "place" of the self. This place Nishida further qualifies as "absolute nothingness."

What is this mysterious concept of "nothingness?" Does it mark a regression from philosophy to mysticism? Isn't it "something" by the mere fact that we talk about it? Nishida had answers to such objections, but they are difficult to understand because they eliminate all the usual meanings of the word. The only way I can make sense of his concept of nothingness is as an attempt to grasp the first-person standpoint from the first-person standpoint itself, an attempt that leads to its depersonalization and identification with the given in its givenness. As such, first personhood loses the character of a present-at-hand thing in the world and becomes a horizon that cannot be directly thematized. All experience, including the experienced self, falls under that horizon, which is "nothing" insofar as it is not a being in the world, not a cogito, but a field of appearance in something like Husserl's sense.

Thus, in reply to Tanabe's criticism that his notion of place is a mere object of thought or mystical intuition, Nishida writes: "'Place' is not contemplated objectively. Rather, is it not the 'wherein' of the self? The self and the world do not merely oppose one another as coordinates, rather they correspond to one another in a contradictory self-identity" (Nishida 1965, p. 366; letter 2077). The self cannot exist in angelic purity but must be "somewhere." That somewhere cannot be conceived merely spatially because only objects exist in objective space. The self, grasped from the first-person standpoint, has its own kind of place, and it is this which Nishida calls absolute nothingness. This original identity is presence itself as an absolute foundation, posited prior to subject and object. This is the "daytime" perspective "in which truth is things just as they are, as opposed to the colorless and soundless perspective of night found in the natural sciences" (Nishida 1990, p. xxxiii).<sup>7</sup>

The comparison between this position and Heidegger's raises significant questions and suggests interesting answers. There have always been disagreements about the interpretation of Heidegger's relation to the phenomenological tradition. His reworking of the experiential approach that began with James and continued through his teacher Husserl seemed to reject the concept of experience itself as subjectivistic. And indeed, there are passages in *Being and Time* in which Heidegger explicitly refuses the standpoint of experience and seems to break any continuity with these predecessors.<sup>8</sup> In support of his new approach, Heidegger must either redefine the notion of experience in a way that strips it of the reference to concept (2), *Erlebnis*, that is, its subjectivistic aspect, or reject it entirely for a new conceptual framework.

Heidegger takes the latter path in *Being and Time*. He rejected Husserl's language of consciousness, even purified of psychologism, for a new language of facticity, practice, and being. Facticity becomes ontologically important, as a finite subject is essentially in the world, in a time and place, acting out of its concerns (*Sorge*). These determinations become ontologically general once they describe the special type of being to which being is revealed, and not a mere thing, for example the human animal. Consciousness is no longer the essence of subjectivity. More fundamental than consciousness is the "circumspection" (*Umsicht*) with which *Dasein* moves amid its objects and grasps them in action.

But this new approach is difficult to work out in a way that avoids falling into



either subjectivism or objectivism once again. Escape from these twin perils requires maintaining the link to the experiential background sketched above. And indeed, it is possible to interpret Heidegger's thought as an implicit non-mentalistic revision of the concept of experience.<sup>9</sup> On this interpretation, if Heidegger largely avoids open references to experiential ontology, this is only because he worries that such references would seem to imply his continued loyalty to a philosophy of consciousness for which he now wants to substitute a broader conception of *Dasein* as a finite being-in-the-world.

Take, for example, the difficult "Introduction" to *Being and Time*. There Heidegger makes several moves that are only understandable from an experiential standpoint, but which he presents in quite other terms. For example, he attributes "mineness" (*Jemeinigkeit*) to *Dasein*, an attribution that seems to, but which surely cannot, refer us to an objective quality of a thing called *Dasein* (Heidegger 1962, pp. 67-68 [41-42]). What is it then? In Heidegger's language it is an existiale, a structure of being-in-the-world. But again, what is the status of such structures? Are they Kantian transcendental conditions? The Kantian interpretation brings back the whole subject/object paradigm that Heidegger is attempting to escape. With an eye on the parallel problem in Nishida's retreat from the concept of experience, I would suggest that we understand "mineness" as the irreducibility of first personhood, the fact that it cannot be dissolved into objective determinations, that it is not present-at-hand like ordinary things.

A similar problem arises with respect to Heidegger's definition of the phenomenon as "that which shows itself in itself" (Heidegger 1962, p. 51 [28]). It seems unlikely that Heidegger intends a dogmatic naive realism by this, for on the terms of such realism the subject is itself an ordinary thing in the world. Instead, he must implicitly refer us to something like the Husserlian notion of appearance. However, he now interprets this notion as a "clearing" in which being is disclosed rather than as conscious experience. That clearing cannot be conceived in objectivistic terms, because, like Nishida's parallel concept of the place of nothingness, it is the horizon of the world. Again, the similarity between the way in which Heidegger and Nishida attempt to avoid the subjectivistic implications of the concept of experience without abandoning the experiential ground won at an earlier stage is suggestive.<sup>10</sup> Heidegger himself might well have rejected this interpretation, but unless one is prepared to accept uncritically his own self-understanding, it is difficult to make sense of his analyses except as ontologized structures of the practical experience of a finite subject (point [g]). This is also the position at which Nishida arrived in his later work.

#### *The Paradoxical Logic of Place*

In the 1930s, Nishida reinterpreted the concept of place in historical terms. He continued to conceive of it as a non-objectifiable foundation, but in relation to a more concrete concept of action. At this point the connection with experiential philosophy becomes more remote, but it is still there, mediated by the idea of culture as historicized experience.

On the one hand, Nishida interpreted place as the identity in contradiction (and literally in conflict) of acting subjects. This change is necessary once action is considered not merely abstractly as a potential of the subject, but as the field on which subjectivity is constructed in history. More fundamental than move and counter-move on this field is the field itself as the "place" in which the acting subjects have their being. In some diffuse sense this place is still identified with a kind of trans-individual, ontologized pure experience. But now it is not the experience of an isolated subject of knowledge but "action intuition" (*koiteki chokkan*), the form of awareness that belongs to subjects engaged in mutual interaction. Action intuition resembles Heidegger's *Umsicht*, modified to take into account Nishida's emphasis on the interactive character of the subject.

This approach has a surprising resemblance to systems theory. Historical actors find themselves in an environment against which they assert themselves, yet as they act they objectify themselves for others for whom they now become the environment. Nishida calls this the "identity of opposites": "Action means negation of the other, and means the will to make the other [an expression of] oneself. It means that the Self wants to be the world. But it also means, on the other hand, that the Self denies itself and becomes a part of the world" (Nishida 1958, p. 171).

Like Leibniz' monads, each of which reflects the world in itself, so in Nishida the objective reality of history arises from the mutual perceptions of the individuals engaged within it. Here actor and object have become perspectives on each other. History is not something independent of the experience of the actors, nor is it merely their subjective "point of view." Rather, it has become the peculiar contradictory structure of mutual perception and mutual expression. Nishida writes:

Each existential monad originates itself by expressing itself; and yet it expresses itself by negating itself and expressing the world. The monads are thus co-originating, and form the world through their mutual negation. The monads are the world's own perspectives; they form the world interexpressively through their own mutual negation and affirmation. (Nishida 1987b, pp. 58-59)

This structure resembles Martin Escher's print of the self-drawing hands. Recall that the hands seem to exist through drawing each other in a paradoxical mutual interdependence. For Nishida, this would be a good description of reality itself, considered as a self-referential process, an infinite recursive self-production. In his book

*Gödel, Escher, Bach*, Douglas Hofstadter referred to Escher's self-drawing hands to illustrate the concept of the "strange loop" or "entangled hierarchy." In a strange loop, moving down in a logical hierarchy at some point leads back to the top and vice versa. In Escher's print, the "drawing subject"—which is hierarchically situated as creator with respect to its creature, the "drawn object"—is itself the creature of the very object it has created. No wonder Hofstadter chose the term "entangled" to describe such a relationship (Hofstadter 1979, pp. 689-670)!

Nishida's ontology, like Escher's print, is an entangled hierarchy. The subject "has" experience, but is also "in" experience, and both propositions are equally true. Similarly, an ontological strange loop is implied in Nishida's notion of historical

action. The acting subject is situated hierarchically in relation to the objects on which it acts, but insofar as the subject acts it becomes an object for other subjects, which are thus situated hierarchically with respect to it. History is both that which is "drawn" by the subject and that which "draws" the subject. This is what Merleau-Ponty calls a "chiasm," a whole composed of parts that relate in two inverse orders.<sup>11</sup> Place might be thought of as the ontological precondition of the chiasmic totality.

#### *From Experience to History*

The similarity between Nishida's concept of nothingness and Heidegger's concept of being has often been noted, but there is another less attractive analogy between the thought of Heidegger and Nishida: Heidegger's rejection of rationalistic universalism issued in a positive reevaluation of tradition, no longer transcendable in objectivity. Tradition, as living national experience, was the foundation of thought, not its dead adversary. But how was this view to be reconciled with modernity, based as it is on science and technology? Rather than identifying modern science and technology with rational universality and rejecting them, Heidegger argued during the early 1930s for their appropriation within a national framework. He was deceived by the similarity between this position and Nazi ideology, with the consequences we know.<sup>12</sup>

Although Nishida did not explicitly present his early theory of pure experience in the context of an attempt to save Japan from Western cultural imperialism, it is difficult not to see a connection in the light of the historical situation. The cultural relevance of this concept is still implicit but it is surely significant that Nishida's maiden work ends by affirming the identity of Buddhism and Christianity as doctrines of love beyond knowledge. In any case the notion of pure experience was later to reappear in a clearly national form in Nishida's theory of Japanese culture.

Nishida's cultural concept of place was intended to transcend Western-biased universalism in a pluricentric worldview. On the terms of the rationalist universalism of the principal Western doctrines, culture is nothing more than a subjective investment in a more fundamental objectivity that is presumably identical for all human beings. The fact that this objectivity is defined in terms of characteristically Western achievements such as natural science is viewed as a historical accident where it is not taken as evidence of the superiority of the European cultural tradition or the white race. But if, as Nishida argued, experience rather than nature is foundational, and meaning inheres in experience itself, culture—the repository of meaning—takes on an entirely different status. The multiplicity of cultures, like the multiplicity of individual experiences, can no longer be dismissed as merely contingent with respect to a universal and necessary truth.

Nishida asserts the equality of cultures—in particular of East Asian and Western culture. Now that modern transportation and communication have brought them into constant contact, they must work out new egalitarian relations. The solution cannot be a single world culture that would replace national cultures, but is, rather,

a mutual "mediation" of the various cultural worlds, each of which will develop through the encounter with the others. World culture will thus arise as a place of dialogue in a sort of planetary *Bildung*. Nishida writes:

Every nation/people is established on a historical foundation and possesses a world-historical mission, thereby having a historical life of its own. For nations/peoples to form a global world through self-realization and self-transcendence, each must first of all form a particular world *in accordance with its own regional tradition*. These particular worlds, each based on a historical foundation, unite to form a global world. Each nation/people lives its own unique historical life and at the same time joins in a united global world through carrying out a world-historical mission. (Nishida 1996a, pp. 101-102)

East and West, as cultural monads, both make the other in making themselves in a productive transformation of modernity.

So far so good. This theory is cosmopolitan without sacrificing national particularity. But Nishida's concept of place became reflexively involved in his new interpretation of culture with disastrous consequences. According to Nishida, the twentieth century is marked by a global clash of cultures that will take military form so long as the contradictions of the European Enlightenment are not transcended. Japanese culture, because of its unique combination of East Asian nothingness and Western science and technology, can supply that transcendence. Nishida's goal was therefore to vindicate the self-assertion of Japan as a free and equal Asian nation against European world hegemony. The new order emerging from the War would restore Japan's historic "world mission," lost so long as "East Asian peoples were oppressed under European imperialism and regarded as colonies" (Nishida 1966a, p. 102). That mission consisted in bringing about world peace through a new relation to cultural diversity. Nishida's own theory of history, which explained the world dialectic, also appeared as a product of Japan's special place in the world.

Nishida thus believed that his multiculturalism was compatible with the apparently contrary notion that Japanese culture had a unique mission. There was no contradiction because what made Japan unique was precisely its long history of flexibility and assimilation of alien influences. Japanese culture retained its integrity while absorbing Chinese culture, just as it reproduced itself in intimate contact with the West. Japanese culture was thus a model of the sort of cultural mediation needed to resolve the crisis of modernity. Its East Asian "formlessness" or "emptiness" enabled it to live with unresolved contradictions and to draw resources from them. Cultural formlessness is the politics of nothingness corresponding to the philosophical notions of pure experience and place.

At this point the Western reader would like Nishida to show how, in the light of Japanese culture, we are to live in peace with each other in a redeemed modernity. But instead something went seriously wrong with his attempt to historicize his doctrine of place. He applied the categories he had developed not to the problems of alienation and anomie, the contradiction of *Kultur* and *Zivilisation*, the struggle for meaning and balance in a global technological order, but to the role of the Japanese body politic (*kokuta*) in world affairs (Nishida 1996b).<sup>13</sup>

Nishida claimed that the imperial house, as the living form of Japan's "identity of contradictions," could pacify the world by uniting it "under one roof" (*hakko ichiu*) (Nishida 1996a, p. 102).<sup>14</sup> The historical neutrality of the emperor, who did not often take sides in the struggles of his nobles until they were over, was interpreted as a kind of gathering of meaning in history. The state, personified in the imperial house, became that moment of the political order through which events go beyond mere accident and become destiny, go beyond mere force and become legitimate. It introduced an epic temporality, a temporality of the heroic and the unique, into the otherwise banal and contingent flow of time. (Of course, a skeptical observer might bluntly call it a consecration of the victors.) Projected on a global scale, one sees more or less what Nishida had in mind: a passive principle of global unity that, presumably, would be more successful because historically more concrete than the ineffectual League of Nations based on Enlightenment ideals of freedom and equality.

Even apart from the irrelevance of this claim to the crisis of modernity, such an interpretation of the emperor system is deeply problematic. In the context of a well-established constitutional monarchy, it would be conservative but not alarming. However, in the foreign affairs of a nation with a newly minted and fairly undemocratic polity, it was disastrous. Although Nishida rejected militarism and old-fashioned colonialism, it is difficult entirely to dissociate his idealization of the imperial house from the deeds of the government ruling in its name. He seemed to take it for granted that in a warlike world, Japan, too, would have to fight, if only to end fighting once and for all. Even if this were so, it would show that the Japanese nation could not be passive in history, nor could it consecrate the outcomes of the struggles in which it was itself engaged. It thus made no sense to attempt to generalize the imperial model of passive power.

Perhaps Japanese culture can be conceived as a "place of nothingness," formless and receptive to global influences, unifying the contradictions between them peacefully. I believe Nishida came to this view in his last essay. But how, in the early 1940s, can one make sense of the "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere" without reference to Japanese imperialism? Unfortunately, this is exactly what Nishida attempted to accomplish in his notorious paper on "The New World Order," prepared at the invitation of the War Cabinet in 1943 (Nishida 1996a). Nishida recast the world conflict in cultural terms, ignoring such apparently insignificant events as the Japanese conquest of China and Southeast Asia. Culturally considered, Nishida argued, the Pacific War resembled the Persian War of antiquity: "Long ago, the victory of Greece in the Persian War determined the direction of development of European culture up to this day, and in the same way the current East Asian war may determine a direction for world history to come" (Nishida 1996a, p. 102). Nishida was caught in a generational lag that blinded him to the full implications of the rapid transformation of Japan from a victim nation into a victimizer on the historical scene.

In any case, impending defeat seems to have changed his ideas, if not about the goal then at least about the means. Several months before his death, and the surrender of Japan, he wrote a last essay in which he hinted at a very different vision of Japan's future. He adopted a position closer to that of his friend D. T. Suzuki, for

whom Japan was preeminently a religious example to the world rather than a historical actor. Nishida now wrote that "The reason that a nation is a nation lies . . . in its religious character as a self-expression of historical life. A true nation arises when a people harbors the world-principle within itself and forms itself historically and socially" (Nishida 1987b, p. 116). Cultural rather than state nationalism now appeared as the solution to the problem of Japanese survival and international peace.

As bombs rained down on Japan's cities, the emphasis of Nishida's reflections on history shifted and he switched analogies. Not the Greeks but the ancient Jews offered a parallel. Although they were conquered, they maintained their "spiritual self-confidence" and founded a world religion. In May of 1945, Nishida wrote Suzuki, "Lately, reading the history of the development of Jewish religion has made me think a lot. The Jews built the foundation for the direction of the development of their world religion in the Babylonian captivity. The true spirit of the people must be like this. The nation which combines self-confidence with militarism perishes when the military power perishes" (Nishida 1965, p. 426). There is still hope, then, that a chastened "Japanese spirit participating in world history . . . can become the point of departure for a new global culture" (Nishida 1987b, p. 112).

#### *Conclusion*

As did Japan's prewar adventure with modernity, Nishida's philosophy of experience prepared its own downfall. It is unfortunate that so many interesting ideas have been discredited in the catastrophe. As a historical figure, at least, Nishida is surely worth study. Despite its problematic conclusion, his geopolitical concept of place draws together the many strands of the Western concept of experience in an original combination based on a concept of nothingness that he identifies with the essence of Asian thought. Nothingness as pure experience is reinterpreted simultaneously as modern openness to the facts and as enlightened consciousness that achieves a unity beyond reflection. The developmental concept of *Bildung* explains the struggle to unify the world on the field of cultural nothingness. And the ontological priority of the non-objectifiable place of nothingness over all objectivity grants the culture it defines a mysteriously passive hegemony in the shaping of a redeemed modernity.

#### Notes

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- 1 - One of the most interesting attempts at such artificial restoration was Okakura Tenshin's neo-traditional painting school called Nihon-ga (see Rosenfield 1971, pp. 202-208). More ominous was the establishment of State Shinto as a pseudo-native religion. Of course the inauthentic reinvention of tradition is easily confused with the authentic cultural continuities that tie modern nations to their traditional past. Such continuities are apparent in synthetic philosophies, of which Nishida's was the most important, that attempted to express "Eastern" insights in modern philosophical language rather than returning to the past. For more on the problem of tradition and modernity, see Feenberg 1995c, chap. 9.
- 2 - For a more detailed presentation of the author's views on the theory of pure experience, see Feenberg and Arisaka 1995, and Feenberg and Arisaka 1990.
- 3 - It is an interesting question why Nishida did not use the term *taiken* to refer to such immediate experience.
- 4 - On the relation of Nishida to Suzuki, see the unsympathetic but informative article by Scharf (1993). But cf. Kirchner's reply (1966).
- 5 - This limitation as it applies to *Erlebnis* is more characteristic of the use of the term in phenomenology than in Dilthey, for whom the concept blurs into *Bildung*.
- 6 - In the case of Japanese thought, the ambiguity is linguistic as well as theoretical: the word usually translated as self-consciousness or self-realization, *jikaku*, does not sharply distinguish between the mental and the real.
- 7 - For a more elaborate explanation of these concepts, see Feenberg and Arisaka 1990.
- 8 - See, for example, Heidegger 1962, p. 226 (181-182).
- 9 - This seems to be the position of Hubert Dreyfus (1991, pp. 68, 134).
- 10 - This line of thought has been fruitfully pursued in relation to Heidegger's theory of space by Yoko Arisaka (1995). She argues that for Heidegger, spatial indexicals such as "right" and "left," "near" and "far" are irreducible to either subjective experience or objective determinations.
- 11 - Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 138.
- 12 - For a discussion of the problem of nationalism and technology, see Feenberg 1991 and Feenberg 1995a, chap. 1.
- 13 - A similar turn to national identity as a solution to the problems of modernity is to be found in contemporary German thought, although in Germany the issues include the social crises Nishida ignored as well as the crisis of the world political order to which, as a citizen of a non-Western country, he was particularly sensitive. See Herf 1984.
- 14 - For a more thorough discussion of Nishida's politics, see Arisaka 1996. Cf. articles by Feenberg, Ueda, and Yusa in Heisig and Maraldo 1994.

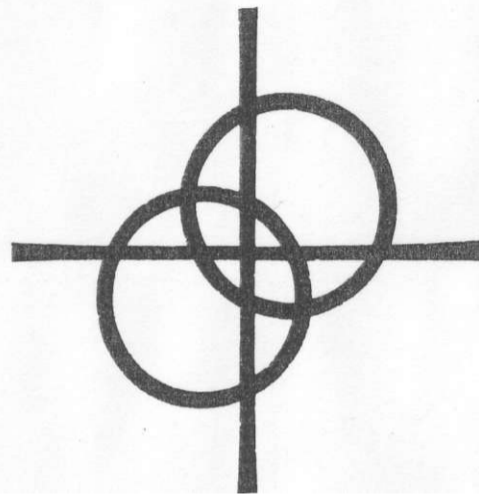
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