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, traditional worldviews seemed to dissolve 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 not only imported 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.[1]

Philosophers were condemned to seeking solutions to Western problems in the West. There they found 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, but they could no longer 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 19th 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, whose theory of "pure experience" (*junsui keiken*), presented in *An Inquiry into the Good* (1911), marked the beginning of original philosophy in Japan.[2] Nishida had 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. His approach to experience conserves all of the various meanings of the term in Western thought.

There are at least four such meanings, each of which is 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, power over external nature. This first idea of experience appears in Nishida's account as a claim to a unique Japanese modernity. Nishida contested the Western monopoly on the rational pursuit of knowledge, i.e. reliance on experience rather than prejudice or tradition. He argued that Japanese culture already involved such an approach long before the opening of the country. Nishida quotes Motoori Norinaga to the effect that the Japanese spirit "follows the path that leads to things," and comments, "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: 20). This explains why Japanese culture has so easily assimilated Western science.

2. *Experience as life: immediacy versus reflection*.

The first, empiricist concept of experience is not as concrete as it seems. What counts as experience in this sense is only the shared and, indeed, the measurable content of perception, i.e. data. Left out of account is the specifically "subjective" dimension of consciousness. Thus by contrast 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 "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: 3).[3] 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: 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: 102-103). Zen Enlightenment is thus the mode of experience characteristic of Japan.[4] 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," etc.) versus the cycles of non-human 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, leaving the contemplative viewpoint behind.[5] As a practice engaging all the faculties of the subject, experience is a process the subject undergoes rather than a sensation or datum 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 process.

Nishida was also influenced by this dialectical concept of experience which he encountered in German idealism and the writings of Josiah Royce. 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 a second-order process of reflection, an underlying first-order unity is presupposed. Nishida claimed 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: 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: 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 20th century, European thought reacted against the empiricist idea of experience (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 Meiji positivism. 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 which "has" experience is itself an object in experience. We know the self only insofar as we bring it before ourselves in reflection, and this experience is constitutive of selfhood. But if experience is prior to the self that knows, that self cannot really "have" experience at all. On the contrary, it is experience which "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. I will return to these paradoxes later in this chapter.

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 19th 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 modern reflectiveness and calculation. But experience as ontological foundation is an always already present ground of being, and therefore also of reflection as a form of being. Russell called this latter non-psychological 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.[6] 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 as ontological ground. 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, existential ontology, and Nishida's philosophy. These ideas are:

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

b) The death of God: the rejection as onto-logically absurd of the idea of a possible viewpoint on experience that is not located in experience.

c) Consequently, the rejection of 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.

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

f) But, this 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) Those 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)-(f). The contribution of James (see his "Does Consciousness Exist?" (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 transcendental subject.

Phenomenology finally took a decisive step beyond traditional philosophy. Husserl reconstructed the notion of consciousness non-psychologically and made James and Brentano's approach 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 20th 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, among others in William James's radical empiricism and in the first assimilation of 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 Husserl's, and is especially close to Heidegger's reconstruction of phenomenology outside the framework of philosophy of consciousness (point (g)).

After publishing *An Inquiry into the Good,* Nishida went on to struggle with the contradictions of the Jamesian "pure experience" he had posited in that work. If the self only arises in reflection, 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 an "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: 70). Beyond the subject-object split lies an act which posits them and which 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 with the Japanese word "*jikaku*".

This usage requires some explanation (Ohashi, 1987: 98; Weinmayr, 1987: 225). In ordinary speech, "*jikaku*" does not refer to the purely contemplative self-directed awareness for which the word "self-consciousness" is usually employed in English. Rather, it means the achievement of a deep realization or understanding of a matter, with the implication that such understanding effects 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: 4, trans. 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: 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: xxi, trans. modified). Nishida now begins to offer an explanation for the unifying functions of experience which he had simply postulated in his earlier work and described twice, once in Jamesian terms and a second time in Roycean religious language.

Is there not a certain resemblance between this position and Heidegger's non-substantialist account of subjectivity as transcendence (Ohashi, 1987: 103)? Of course fundamental differences remain. In *Being and Time* Heidegger developed an analytically precise answer to the question of the nature of the "various a priori," which he called existentiale, 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 against all cognitive representations. He eventually realized that insofar as the "absolute activity," is non-objectifiable, it makes little sense to identify it with an ego, even a transcendental one. This still objectifies it psychologistically. 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 obvious objections but they are difficult to understand because they undermine our usual associations with 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 which 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.

This interpretation finds support in Nishida's reply to Tanabe's charge 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: 366; letter 2077). 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 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: xxxiii).[7]

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. He seemed to reject as subjectivistic the experiential approach that began with James and continued through his teacher Husserl. And indeed, there are passages in *Being and Time* in which Heidegger explicitly refuses the standpoint of experience and apparently breaks any continuity with these predecessors.[8] Nevertheless, there is surely significant continuity.

There were two ways Heidegger could have developed his new approach out of the experiential background, either by redefining the notion of experience to strip it of the reference to concept (2), *Erlebnis*, i.e., its subjectivistic aspect, or by rejecting it entirely for a new conceptual framework. Heidegger takes the latter path in *Being and Time,* and it is this choice which gives the impression that he is doing something far more original than his actual, quite significant, accomplishment. 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, e.g. the human animal. Consciousness is no longer the essence of subjectivity. More fundamental than consciousness is the "circumspection" (*Umsicht*) with which *Dasein* moves amidst 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 a tenuous link to the experiential background sketched above even as the concept of consciousness is rejected. 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 which seems to, but which surely cannot refer us to an objective quality of a thing called *Dasein* (Heidegger, 1962: 67-68 (41-42)). What is it then? In Heidegger's language it is an existentiale, 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 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: 51 (28)). It seems unlikely that Heidegger regresses to dogmatic naive realism, 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, there is a suggestive 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.[9]

Heidegger's thought can be plausibly interpreted as an implicit non-mentalistic revision of the concept of experience.[10] 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 the conception of *Dasein* as finite being-in-the-world. 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. This is also the position at which Nishida arrived in his later work.

The Paradoxical Logic of Place[11]

The experiential standpoint demands that we grant fundamental ontological significance to a finite, detranscendentalized subject firmly located in the world (concept 4). Only such a subject can have experience in the full sense of the term, as an active being engaged with other beings (point (g)). This is the return to the concrete through the transcendence of the subject-object split promised by early 20th Century philosophy and finally achieved in the thought of Heidegger and Nishida.

But the notion of experience as an ontological foundation is profoundly paradoxical. Paradox haunts Heidegger's concept of the ontological difference: how can the merely ontic individual being in the world have ontologically general significance? Another related paradox, very differently handled, inspires Nishida's last essay on "The Logic of the Place of Nothingness and the Religious Worldview" ("*Bashoteki ronri to shukyoteki sekaikan*," 1945). This essay can be seen as an attempt to work through the most puzzling implications of experiential ontology in a world of multiple subjects.

The concept of God in this final essay offers a starting point for analysis. This concept enables us to think the universe as a whole under a single transcendent glance. But Nishida argues that the "true absolute" is absolute precisely in standing unopposed to any other being. Insofar as it is beyond all opposition, it is not even relative to the relative and cannot be conceived as transcendent. He concludes that the true absolute (God) "must possess itself through self-negation. The true absolute exists in that it returns to itself in the form of the relative. The true absolute One expresses itself in the form of the infinite many. God exists in this world through self-negation" (Nishida, 1987b: 125).

This appears to be a pantheistic position, but Nishida rejects pantheism which, he argues, is objectivistic and treats being as unproblematic. His own doctrine, he claims, follows the "negative theology" of Nagarjuna which calls into question all positings of being (Nishida, 1987b: 70-71). In precisely what sense Nishida is really a follower of this eminent predecessor, we must leave to scholars of Buddhist metaphysics. The important point for the argument here is that Nishida offers an original way of thinking his paradoxical dialectic in which the passage from the one to the many takes place not through a positing of being but through an absolute negation: the affirmation of things is the denial of God.

Pantheism represents a mythological solution to a real philosophical problem, the problem of how to explain the logical fact that we are able to refer to the unity of being, the totality, as a being. Modern philosophy addressed this problem through correlating being with a God-like "divine intuition" which Kant postulated as the hypothetical subject corresponding to the thing-in-itself. Secularizations of this solution replace divine intuition by our own hypothetically disincarnated glance, the "view from nowhere." It is precisely such easy solutions which Nishida rejects: God enters his dialectic not as a logical *deus ex machina*, but rather to disperse His own function qua absolute spectator into the world.

If we cannot legitimately refer to being as a whole as an object that exists passively in the eye of God, or a pure *cogito*, then this unity must emerge somehow from a process of interaction among the many finite existences. But to make matters still more complicated, these finite existences no longer fall under the glance of the now dispersed deity and so cannot be conceived objectivistically. They are not primordially objects but subjects, but nor are they "souls" *à la* Bishop Berkeley. Rather, they are centers of pure

experience, without objective content or substantiality prior to the experiential act in which they have their entire being. The whole thus rests on the conscious individuals who themselves rest on the whole they constitute in their experience of it. The world process is confounded with that "vision" in which the act of being is realized and which Nishida now analyzes as a dynamic field of forces, a "self-transforming matrix" (Nishida, 1987b: 50).

This peculiar ontological conception is based on the radical historicism of Nishida's work in the 1930s. Amidst the political turmoil of that period, Nishida reinterpreted the concept of place in social and historical terms. He continued to conceive of it as a non-objectifiable foundation, but in relation to a more concrete concept of action. In this phase 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 that 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 transindividual ontologized pure experience. But place is no longer the horizon of experience of an isolated subject of knowledge but is reinterpreted in relation to "action intuition" (*kôiteki chokkan*), the form of awareness which belongs to subjects engaged in mutual interaction. Action intuition resembles Heidegger's "*Umsicht*," modified to take into account 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 "contradictory self-identity": "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: 171).

Nishida attempts to avoid objectivistic representationalism through this concept of "mutual expression" of self and world. The individual is a self-determining system in which the world is "expressed," and which thereby expresses itself in a world. "I am," he writes, "an expressive monad of the world" (Nishida, 1987b: 52). Like Leibniz's monads, each of which reflects the world in itself, so in Nishida's last essay objective reality arises from the mutual perceptions of the individuals engaged within it. Here actor and object have become perspectives on each other. Reality is essentially social and as such it 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.

The reference to Leibniz suggests both Nietzschean perspectivism and the Heideggerian concept of transcendence. It is interesting that like Nishida, Heidegger found the "monad" an illuminating metaphor to his own conception of the self. Heidegger writes, in a passage which helps to understand Nishida's intent:

> "As a monad, the *Dasein* needs no window in order first of all to look out toward something outside itself, not because, as Leibniz thinks, all beings are already accessible within its capsule, so that the monad can quite well be closed off and encapsulated within itself, but because the monad, the *Dasein*, in its own being

(transcendence) is already outside, among other beings, and this implies always with its own self" (Heidegger, 1982: 301).

Or, in Nishida's language:

> "The world that, in its objectivity, opposes me is transformed and grasped symbolically in the forms of my own subjectivity. But this transactional logic of contradictory identity signifies as well that it is the world that is expressing itself in me. The world creates its own space-time character by taking each monadic act of consciousness as a unique position in the calculus of its own existential transformation" (Nishida, 1987b: 52).

The individuals do not mentally represent a pre-existing world but rather organize their own identity through the transactions in which the world "expresses" itself within them, or, more precisely, *as them*. There is then nothing more than the mutual identity-shaping interactions of the individuals. The world is thus not a preexisting thing but a "place" of interactions that resonate together in the construction of a dynamic unity that stands in for "objectivity" in the usual substantialist conception.

> "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. Conversely, the concrete matrix of historical actuality that exists and moves through itself enfolds these monadic perspectives within itself....
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> "A conscious act is a dynamic expression. It is a self-determination of a concrete transpositional matrix, a structure of mutual revealment of self and world. Our selves, the expressive monads of the world, constitute points of the world's own expression in and through our self-expression "(Nishida, 1987b: 58-59).

Nishida substitutes this concept of mutual expression for the objectivistic dualism of knowledge and being; expression is "a contradictory identity, the dynamic equivalence of knowing and acting" (Nishida, 1987b: 84). To know the world is not to escape beyond objectivity to the *cogito* but is rather a world constituting intervention just insofar as it is a modification of the subject. The subject is thus an autonomous self-referential being, but conversely, the very process of its self-reference, along with that of other subjects, is precisely what we mean by a world in the first place.

Nishida's conception of being resembles Escher's print of the self-drawing hands which exist only through producing each other, and which produce each other as their only activity. For Nishida, this structure is, strictly speaking, all there is. He thus understands reality as a self-referential process, a kind of infinite recursive self-production.

Escher's self-drawing hands are emblematic of the concept of the "strange loop" or "entangled hierarchy" introduced by Douglas Hofstadter in his book *Godel, Escher, Bach*. The strange loop arises when moving up or down in a logical hierarchy leads paradoxically back to the starting point. Thus in the Escher print, the hierarchy of "drawing subject" and "drawn object" is "entangled" by the fact that each hand plays both functions with respect to the other (Hofstadter, 1979: 689-690). As Heraclitus

wrote at the origins of philosophy, "The way up and the way down are one and the same" (Wheelwright, 1964: 90).

On Hofstadter's terms, Nishida's ontology is an entangled hierarchy. An ontological strange loop is already implied in the notion of pure experience. We can represent the loop in two movements. First, "the way down": in purely logical terms, the concept of experience implies a hierarchy of observer and observed, meta-position and object-position. Second, "the way up": experience, as a totality, is situated hierarchically with respect to things which appear "in" experience as mere parts, including the subject of experience itself.

Experience thus refers us to a subject, which would be situated hierarchically in the position of observer, but the subject refers us back to experience within which it itself appears as an observable object. Experience is both that which is "drawn" by the subject, and that which "draws" the subject. The subject "has" experience, but is also "in" experience, and both propositions are equally true. Merleau-Ponty calls this paradoxical form a "chiasmus": a totality which unites two inverse structural orders of the parts (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 138).

Nishida's later theory enriches the original strange loop by reinterpreting the subject of experience in more complex ways, as an active historical being, but it does not fundamentally change the structure. The individuals are both acted on by the world, which expresses itself in them, and producers of the world, expressing themselves in it, in the inextricably entangled relationship of the "self-transforming matrix." But the fact that Nishida interprets this matrix as the totality of being requires him to confront the full force of its paradoxical structure in a way that Hofstadter does not.

Hofstadter's strange loop is never more than a partial subsystem in a consistent, objectively conceived universe. He evades ultimate paradox by positing an "inviolate level" of strictly hierarchical relations above the strange loop and making it possible. He calls this level "inviolate" because it is not logically entangled with the entangled hierarchy it creates. In the case of the Escher drawing, the paradox only exists because of the unparadoxical activity of the actual printmaker Escher who drew it in the ordinary way without himself being drawn by anyone.

Hofstadter's conception invites a response from Nishida's standpoint. Nishida would no doubt point out the impossibility of transferring this intramundane resolution of the paradox to the ontological level, the level of God's relation to the world. At that level the "inviolate" actor would be God Himself. But God, considered as a being in the world, is no longer a legitimate object of philosophical speculation. The evacuation of the last theological ghosts is the chief work of philosophy since Nietzsche. The aim is to overcome deep assumptions about the world which arose originally in a religious context, where the existence of God was taken for granted, but which continue to have force today in the guise of an objectivistic world view that does not know its own theological origins. Nishida participates fully in this new form of epistemological atheism, which is not incompatible with a certain religious vision.

What is that vision? Paradox is the final form in which the sacred manifests itself in a disenchanted world. Insofar as the self participates in the dynamic process of world-production through its transcendence as absolute nothingness, its deepest self-awareness is identified with that process. Yet the self is also lost in the world as an object and indeed only exists as a self in that loss. This contradiction is not overcome in special

observances or mystical states, but is lived in experience itself. Here is the ultimate strange loop in Nishida's theory: the pursuit of the sacred leads not to an otherworldly domain, above existence, but back to the heart of the everyday. Insofar as the self is or belongs to the absolute, "ordinary human experience is eschatological in character" (Nishida, 1987b: 109). The dialectic of the sacred and secular returns us to pure experience, which acquires new validity exactly "as it is" through the relativization of the system of abstractions in which it was displaced.[12] Therefore, in the words of a Chinese sage, "Even to set upon the quest for awakening is to go astray" (Nishida, 1987b: 115).

From Experience to History

The similarity between Nishida's concept of nothingness and Heidegger's concept of being has often been noted, but Nishida's philosophy of history suggests another less attractive analogy between their thought. 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.[13]

Nishida's cultural concept of place was intended to transcend Eurocentric universalism in a pluricentric worldview. For universalism, 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 a merely contingent historical accident in contrast with the universal and necessary truths of natural science.

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: 101-102).

East and West, as cultural monads, each 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 20th 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: 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 would play the central role in the coming historical era. This 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 (*kokutai*) in world affairs (Nishida, 1996b).[14]

Nishida claimed that the imperial house, as the living form of Japan's "contradictory self-identity," could pacify the world by uniting it "under one roof" (*hakko ichiu*) (Nishida, 1996a: 102).[15] The historic neutrality of the emperor, who rarely took 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 Asian Co-Prosperity 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 distractions such 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: 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 at least about the means. Several months before his death, and the surrender of Japan, 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: 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, yet 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: 426). There was still hope, he concluded, that a chastened "Japanese spirit participating in world history...can become the point of departure for a new global culture" (Nishida, 1987b: 112).

Conclusion

Like 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 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.

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NOTES

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: 202-208.) More ominous was the establishment of State Shinto as a pseudo-native religion. 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 of 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): 226 (181-182).

9 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.

10 This seems to be the position of Hubert Dreyfus (1991): 68, 134.

11 This section is based on Feenberg and Arisaka (1990).

12 A similar argument is made with reference to the "problem of completion" in Wittgenstein and Russell by Wargo, 1972: chapter IV, pp. 342-343, 356-358.

13 For a discussion of the problem of nationalism and technology, see Feenberg (1991) and Feenberg (1995a), chap. 1.

14 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 world political order to which, as a citizen of a non-Western country, he was particularly sensitive. Unfortunately, German thinking on these questions was racist and obscurantist. See Herf (1984).

15 For a more thorough discussion of Nishida's politics see Arisaka (1996). Cf. articles by Feenberg, Ueda and Yusa in Heisig and Maraldo (1994).