

# The Problem of Modernity in the Philosophy of Nishida

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"What we call the study of the Orient today has meant only taking the Orient as an object of study. As yet a profound reflection about the oriental way of thinking, in order to evolve a new method of thinking, has not been undertaken."

Nishida (1958a: 356)

## The Problem of Modernity

In the 1930s and early 1940s, Japanese philosophy reflected the political climate by becoming increasingly nationalistic and authoritarian. With a few honorable exceptions, the major thinkers, such as Kuki, Tanabe, and Watsuji defended Japanese imperialism.<sup>1</sup> Nishida's ambiguous stance was particularly significant since he was the first Japanese philosopher able not only to understand the major trends of Western thought, but also to employ the Western heritage to elaborate an original philosophy of his own. He is generally considered the founder of modern Japanese philosophy.

The association between philosophy and nationalist politics was not forgotten after the War and sometimes caused the one to be rejected with the other, especially on the Left. But philosophers' enthusiasm for government policy varied widely and Nishida was by no means the worst. As we will see below, his nationalism was primarily cultural, not military, and he was critical of racist and totalitarian interpretations of official policy. Nevertheless, his inner doubts about the War do not appear to have affected his theoretical conception until quite late, and his ideas were turned to account by thinkers far more enthusiastic about imperialism than he was.<sup>2</sup> So far as I can tell, he continued to hope until near the end that Japan would emerge from the War as the center of an original politico-cultural sphere. One of his chief political essays of the late 1930s summarized his cultural ambitions for Japan as follows:

"Up to now Westerners thought that their culture was superior to all others, and that human culture advances toward their own form. Other peoples, such as Easterners, are behind and if they advance, they too will acquire the same form. There are even some Japanese who think like this. But...I believe there is something fundamentally different about the East. They [East and West] must complement each other and...achieve the eventual realization of a complete humanity. It is the task of Japanese culture to find such a principle" (1965e: 404-405).<sup>3</sup>

Although there is much in this position that is still of interest, it gradually became so mixed up with the fate of Japanese imperialism that today it is difficult to extract its lasting significance from the circumstances of its formulation. The aim of this chapter is to explain Nishida's views, and so far as possible to identify his contribution to debates on culture that are far from resolved even to this day.

Recently, there has been a revival of interest in a key intellectual event of the War that sheds some light on Nishida's position. In 1942 the theme of cultural originality inspired several seminars, the most famous of which was titled "Overcoming [European] Modernity" (*kindai no*

*chokoku*).<sup>4</sup> The meeting represented a wide range of views, some irrationalist and anti-Western, others more moderate in their claims for Japanese culture. A number of Nishida's followers were present including Nishitani Keiji who argued that Japanese culture is an original and authentic spiritual dispensation, comparable with the Western heritage in its ability to support a modern civilization. He thus rejected the claim of European civilization to define modernity for the entire human race. As Harootunian notes, "The problem was to find a way to conceptualize a modernity that was made in Japan, not in the West" (Harootunian, 1989: 74-75; Najita and Harootunian, 1988).

Also in 1942 *Chuo Koron* published several roundtable discussions of Nishida's students on "The Standpoint of World History and Japan" ("*sekaishiteki tachiba to Nihon*").<sup>5</sup> These discussions reflect Nishida's simultaneous defense of traditional Japanese culture and affirmation of modern scientific-technical civilization. This is a pattern familiar from German reactionary modernism which, as Jeffrey Herf explains, succeeded after World War I in reconceptualizing science and technology as dimensions of a specifically German cultural heritage, and thus salvaged them from the traditional romantic critique of materialist civilization in the West (Herf, 1984). However, in Nishida's own writings the pattern remains abstract, unrelated to the Nietzschean and nihilist themes of his German contemporaries, and compatible with a variety of different political positions that were in fact explored by his students.

His students' comments in *Chuo Koron* concretize this pattern in terms of the ideas of Ernst Junger and other German reactionaries. They celebrate the fusion of "*moralische energie*" and modern technology that characterizes wartime Japan. Rather than worrying about the justification of the War, the participants express enthusiasm for the moral and aesthetic dimension of total mobilization. They see the struggle in China as a contest of cultures in which Japan will forcibly liberate Asia from the West. In their defense, it might be said that the participants were endorsing an imaginary war, but this is the common mode of engagement in real warfare in an age of ideology. It is fair to say that in these conversations, militarist nationalism acquired a paradoxically anti-imperialist aura from Nishida's philosophy of culture.

The idea of "overcoming modernity" foreshadows strangely the later attempts of other non-European intellectuals in the anti-colonialist movement to declare their spiritual independence from the European sources of their modernity. Today it is cited with increasing frequency as a precedent for the remarkable flowering of theories of Japanese exceptionalism (*nihonjinron*) in the 1960 and '70s. The *nihonjinron* owe a subterranean debt to these predecessors, but much of interest in the earlier formulations has been lost along with the more embarrassing traces of nationalism.

It is important to distinguish Nishida's rather complex dialectical universalism from the particularism of these various expressions of cultural nationalism. Writing before World War II, Nishida was one of many thinkers who attempted a positive philosophical expression of Japan's contribution to a world culture he experienced as still in the making. Optimistically, he believed that "a point of union between Eastern and Western culture can be sought in Japan" (1958a: 365). And he argued, against all forms of isolationism, "To become global Oriental culture must not stop at its own specificity but rather it must shed a new light on Western culture and a new world culture must be created" (1965e: 407).

In this context, Western culture means, of course, the specific forms of rationality associated with modern science and technology; the cultural synthesis at which Nishida aimed involved investing these with new meaning derived from the Eastern tradition. But for the *nihonjinron*, written after the War, the historical possibilities have been foreclosed. The highest expression of Japanese culture is now the production of difference, particularity, in those regions of life still untouched by scientific-technical rationality. Thus what was originally put forward as a hypothesis about the formation of modern world culture, in which Japan would be Europe's equal and assimilate its science and technology, is today expressed in terms of the

ethnically unique deviation of Japan from universal European models. That less ambitious project has less sweeping implications.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the obvious questions that can be raised about the culturalist enterprise of the *nihonjinron*, they bring into focus the inadequacy of theories that uncritically identify modernization with Westernization. This aspect of his philosophy is quite contemporary, and has brought about a "return" to Nishida on the part of some Japanese intellectuals who have found anticipations of a Japanese "post-modernity" in his thought, while others worry about the renewal of nationalism this return appears to imply.<sup>7</sup>

## Experience and Science

Like other literate non-Western peoples, the Japanese were easily able to understand scientific-technical rationality and the material advantages it gave the West. The contradiction between that form of rationality and their own cultural tradition troubled them deeply. Should they resist modernity altogether and remain loyal to their past? Would they, on the contrary, have to abandon their way of life to acquire the technical means of resistance to the West? Or could they adopt science and technology for practical purposes such as defense while retaining their traditional spiritual values?<sup>8</sup>

Each of these questions implies a naive exteriority, in the first case, of a nation to its history and the encounters that irreversibly mark its destiny; in the second of a people to its culture, which cannot be dropped like an old glove; and in the third, of a spiritual tradition to the material life of society. Nishida rejected all these illusory solutions and argued instead that Japan could forge a specifically Japanese modernity out of a synthesis of Eastern and Western elements. He hoped to accommodate modernity to Japanese tradition not by rejecting Western science but by encompassing it in a concept of experience that grew naturally out of his culture.

Nishida understood modernity on fairly standard modern terms as the emergence of rational inquiry in opposition to doctrine-bound traditions and prejudices. Since Western thought advanced through rigorous attention to facts, any similar Japanese characteristics would constitute an indigenous potential for modernization. Accordingly, Nishida believed that the Japanese orientation toward "the true facts of things"--experience in its pure state--was proto-modern even before the encounter with the West (1958a: 352).

But Nishida's understanding of experience was radically different from the prevailing Western view. As Yoko Arisaka has argued, the Japanese idea of experience is neither empiricist nor romantic (Arisaka, 1993). Empiricism eliminates the "secondary qualities" of the object and abstracts purified conceptual entities such as "sense data" or "brute facts" from the immediate content of experience, while romanticism calls for a return from conceptual activity to pure immediacy. But for the Japanese, experience is a paradoxical return to a kind of *cultural* immediate. It involves refining the web of associations to a universally shared remainder. *Haiku*, for example, are often said to be concerned with the experience of nature. But in fact they articulate the natural world poetically in all its rich emotional and historical associations without distinguishing a purely material content from the contributions of culture and the subject.

This concept of experience is incompatible with Western naturalism. It makes sense to consider nature, abstracted from culture and history, as the foundation of experience only if the object can be conceived outside of any connection to a subject. Nishida claimed, on the contrary, that not nature but experience is the ontological basis of reality. In his account, the original "pure" experience is "as yet neither subject nor object" and in it "knowledge and its object are one" (1965a: 1). Undifferentiated into subject and object, it does not consist in material things, but nor is it individual and psychological. Experience in this sense forms a shared realm of intersubjective meanings. It is exterior and culturally specific, "a kind of public field," not inward and universal like the idea of experience in the West (1970: 186). Yet like the latter, it

retains a unique foundational pathos in the context of an absolute historicism such as Nishida was eventually to elaborate (1965e: 410).

Nishida's fame dates from the publication in 1911 of his first book, *An inquiry into the Good*.<sup>9</sup> It was in this remarkable book that he proposed his concept of an all-embracing field of experience. Nishida's later writings suggest that this concept and its various successors in his thought express a peculiarly Japanese approach, not in any exclusive sense, but simply as products of the natural sequence of development of Japanese culture. He believed that Japanese philosophy was destined to raise this feature of Japanese culture to universality much as the natural sciences had universalized Western culture.

In what did this universalization consist? In fact, in the presentation of Japanese ideas in Western dress. This becomes clear from the first page of Nishida's maiden effort, for he begins by appropriating William James's concept of "pure experience" to explain his own idea. But despite this similar starting point, real differences divide Nishida and James. For example, while pure experience for James was simply an explanatory category, in Nishida it also sometimes appears to signify a version of Buddhist "no-mind," a particular way of relating to experience. Here pure experience risks regressing to a special psychological attitude, a kind of secular enlightenment (Feenberg and Arisaka, 1990: 183-185).

Although Nishida's borrowings from James call into question the authenticity of his notion of a specifically Japanese culture of experience, his procedure is less absurd than it seems. For Nishida James represented a quasi-universal logic of modernity with which Japanese philosophy would have to come to terms in its break with traditional oriental modes of discourse. Yet the goal was not indiscriminate Westernization. It was precisely James's critique of Western metaphysics that made his thought a suitable vehicle for modernizing Japanese philosophy. As Whitehead remarked, James did not so much continue the Western philosophical tradition as introduce a sharp break in its continuity comparable with the Cartesian revolution in scope and significance: he "clears the stage of the old paraphernalia" in harmony with profound transformations taking place throughout European culture (Whitehead, 1925: 205). Nishida believed that these innovations opened the doors to a broader international participation in modernity. In the early 20th century, James was not a bad place to look for access to this emerging world culture.

The oxymoron, "quasi-universal," is thus appropriate in describing Nishida's evaluation of contemporary Western philosophy. While he recognized its cultural limitations, he nevertheless rejected the idea of an external critique of modernity from the standpoint of a construct of a supposedly Eastern alternative. Instead he chose to plunge into Western philosophy in the confidence that the originality of his peculiarly Japanese insight would shine through. As Shimomura explains, he took "Western philosophy as a mediation to be used in challenging Western philosophy itself" (Shimomura, 1966: 16).

Nishida's confidence was not misplaced, but the operation in which he was engaged was far more difficult than he imagined in 1911. For over thirty years he was occupied in the construction of one after another version of his system, none of which ever satisfied him. In any case, his choice enabled him to steer a new course between both imitative Westernization and Eastern exoticism.<sup>10</sup>

In Nishida's later work, his already cultural concept of experience became the basis for a historicist ontology. He argued that insofar as the knowing subject is a human individual, it is not only a knower but also an actor, related not only to things but also to history. If one sees knowing as more than a contemplative encounter of a *cogito* with truth, but also as a practical social activity, then it is plausible to ask *what else* this activity entails besides pure knowledge. In question is not merely the validity of theory nor the goal of the activity it orients, but even more its place in a lifeform. Nishida called this his "fundamental idea":

"Ordinarily, we think of the material world, the biological world, and the historical world as being separate. But in my view the historical world is the most concrete, and the

material and biological worlds are abstractions. Thus, if we grasp the historical world, we grasp reality itself" (1965e: 408).

Today such formulations resonate with the notion that the universality of Reason is an illusion. Following Foucault, feminist theory, and constructivist sociology of knowledge, a case can be made that our science is really only one "ethnoscience" among others (Harding, 1994). However, in his historical situation, Nishida could not simply call for a full scale return to ethnoscientific traditions without surrendering to reactionary obscurantism.<sup>11</sup> Nativist ideas of "Japanese science" seemed to him an excuse to resist the sincere confrontation with the cultural achievements of the West required by the globalizing process of modernity. Instead of proposing a return to an ethnically rooted "local knowledge," Nishida attempted to put science in its "place" in a historical framework that reflected the values of his culture. Science was to be given a new meaning in this context, not merely employed to secure material wealth and national independence. Such ideas were widely accessible to Japanese writers and intellectuals, caught in the midst of a modernizing movement they lived simultaneously as a response to both the Universal--scientific truth--and the Particular--Western power.

Nishida sought the principle of an absolute historicism in the underlying assumptions of Eastern culture. However, in turning to these Eastern sources, he believed himself to be advancing forward rather than backward in accordance with the tendencies of modern science. This apparent paradox makes sense if we share Nishida's view of the revolutionary character of modern science along lines already anticipated less self-consciously in his earlier appropriation of James. He believed that recent physics and mathematics had already broken with the West's own most parochial limitations, such as Christian transcendentalism and the substantialism inherited from the Greeks. But these traditional views hung on in the historical sciences where they would inevitably be overcome as other cultures appropriated modernity.

Eastern thought was uniquely qualified to contribute to this revolution in historical understanding. Like Greek thought it defined reality in this-worldly terms, but it lacked the substantialist prejudice of the Greeks. Through its intervention, the historical world was to be swept up in the same sort of whirlwind as nature; not Aristotelian "things" or Cartesian "cogitos," not even Newtonian "laws," but tumultuous processes of conflictual structuration operate over the abyss of nothingness. To Nishida, Japanese modernity promised just such an up to date vision.

## **Dialectics of Place**

Under Hegel's influence, Nishida's argument for this approach took the form of a dialectical system. As a good Hegelian, he believed that "the truth is the whole." Isolated parts are "abstract moments" of the "concrete universal," i.e., the totality to which they belong. His system began with the abstract parts and worked toward the reconstruction of the whole by continually shifting point of view to broaden the context of explanation, moving from abstractions to the lifeforms that animate them. This method yielded a dialectical progression of levels of knowledge, reflection, action, and experience, each of which represented a more or less abstract dimension of the concrete totality of experience; that totality itself was conceptualized, however, in a more Heideggerian than Hegelian style as the absolute activity of presence.<sup>12</sup> At this highest level, Nishida located something he called the "place of absolute nothingness," a philosophical concept derived from his earlier concept of pure experience and retaining its Buddhist allusion.

Here, schematically presented, are the four basic levels of Nishida's dialectic:<sup>13</sup>

1. Judgement, or knowledge of nature: the known abstracted from the knower.
2. Self-consciousness, or the psychological self of knowledge and action: the knower/doer abstracted from culture.

3. The world of meaning or values as ground of action: the self considered in its cultural significance.
4. "absolute nothingness": experience as a field of immediate subject-object unity underlying culture, action, and knowledge and making them possible as objectifications of this prior unity.

Nishida called each level a "*basho*," a "place" or "field." Within the various *basho*, he distinguished between an objective and a subjective aspect. What is subjective at one level appears as objective at the next level, and vice versa. For example, the subjective side of the level of judgement is the "field of predicates," the universal concepts employed in describing things. To these predicates corresponds the specific objectivity of the Aristotelian thing of which they are predicated. But what is this thing? Its individuality is inconceivable from the standpoint of a judgement that works exclusively with universals.

Only an individual can relate to an individual. An adequate approach to the thing known requires us to go beyond the horizon of logical predication to identify a knowing thing, a subject that knows. This transition marks the passage to self-consciousness, the next level of the dialectic. The objective side of the dialectic of predicates--the thing--is now thematized as the knowing subject which transcends its predicates through embracing them on the field of knowledge. The predicates which first inhered in the thing now inhere in the consciousness that knows them. We have in a sense moved from Aristotle to Kant.

But the dialectical progression continues. As we saw in the last section, the knowing subject is more than a knower; it is a human being necessarily situated in a cultural world. "'Knowing' itself," Nishida wrote, "is already a social and historical event" (1970: 96). Paradoxically, although knowing is a culturally situated activity, culture appears arbitrary to it. Mere facts cannot determine the values that move the person to action, nor discriminate between the good and the bad, the beautiful and the ugly. This is the function of culture, which can only be explained by a theory of the will in its relation to meanings. At that level consciousness appears to be determined by moral and aesthetic values which embrace it and provide the wider context for its actions. The subject--consciousness--becomes object in the framework of the cultural system of which it is a manifestation or "self-determination." This notion refers us not to a scientific theory of culture, but to a cultural theory of action.

At each level, Nishida's dialectic moves toward greater concreteness, away from abstract knowledge toward "existence," toward an experience so familiar we constantly overlook it in our attempts to categorize and explain. That experience is the immediate unity of subject and object in action. In most Western thought this unity is regarded as the effacement of consciousness in mere reflex. Philosophy, as a form of knowledge, quite naturally considers the objects of knowledge to be the primary reality. But for Nishida, the reverse is true: the engagement of the actor with the environment is more fundamental than cognition. Knowledge must dethrone itself and learn to see through the eyes of action.

That vision is not thoughtless, but the concept of self-consciousness is inadequate to represent it. This is another reason why Nishida's cultural theory moves beyond the stage of self-consciousness to a unifying intuition that is neither a knowing nor a doing as we usually conceive them, but the knowledge implicit in action itself. At that level, we find ourselves again in the world of pure experience, in which meaning and being are joined in cultural immediacy prior to the abstract distinction of fact and value, situation and will.

This "action-intuition" is similar to Heidegger's concept of "circumspection" ("*Umsicht*") in that it too aims to liberate the subject-object relation from the limitations of rationalistic models. That means, among other things, overcoming a voluntaristic view of action as mere implementation of preconceived plans in pursuit of subjective ends. And like Heidegger, Nishida rejected the privilege of knowledge over the culturally defined world of action in which it finds its roots, and instead asserted the relative priority of culture over knowledge.

However, Nishida believed that Heidegger's approach was insufficiently dynamic. He claimed that "Even though Heidegger's idea of existence is historical, it is without movement or action" (1970: 40). Here Nishida is at least partially unfair. Heidegger undoubtedly attained the standpoint of action, but it is true that he concerned himself only with the circumspective understanding of things as objects of practice and failed to grasp the self-constitution of the human subject in interaction with the Other. Nishida's philosophy, unlike Heidegger's, focussed on the objectivity of the acting subject, its essential situatedness in a "place" (*basho*) out of which it must act and in which it is acted on and shaped.

This focus points beyond hermeneutics toward dialectics. But here too Nishida was unsatisfied with Western formulations. He believed that Hegel, while developing all the basic categories of dialectics, had remained stubbornly at the level of self-consciousness.

"Hegel sought reason behind reality rather than seeking reality beyond reason. In this his dialectical method was subjective and fell into mere formalism in trying to understand concrete reality.... We should not understand reality through logical formulas. Rather, reason must be interpreted historically as one aspect of our lives. Instead of understanding Hegel's logic in terms of its developmental process, it should be understood as an abstraction from concrete life as the self-determination of nothingness" (1965f: 80).

In sum, Nishida introduced action-intuition into Hegel's dialectic and reconceptualized it from the standpoint of practice, while introducing dialectics into the hermeneutics of historical practice he had found in Dilthey and Heidegger. As he put it elsewhere: "In the true historical world, the world of true objectivity, the approach to things and the approach to the Thou have become one" (1970: 95 (trans. modified)).

The concept of history that emerges from this unusual synthesis is a kind of anticipation of systems theory summed up in the notion of a process in which the "formed" becomes the "forming." Nishida deconstructed the history into various circular processes of self-production and self-transformation. The subjects whose actions create history are themselves historical products. Values are at once objective historical givens and dynamic principles of action. So understood, history cannot be reduced to a concatenation of stable nature-like things, because it is composed ultimately of actions. Knowledge of the natural scientific sort cannot comprehend this historical world, which must be grasped instead by dialectics (1970: 216ff).<sup>14</sup>

So far in this exposition of his system I have emphasized the relationship between Nishida and the Western thinkers who influenced him and through whom his ideas become comprehensible. However, as with James, here too Nishida's thought cannot be reduced to its Western sources because the Eastern tradition to some extent shaped his use of them. This is especially apparent in the final stage of Nishida's dialectic. This stage, the "place of absolute nothingness," is not some sort of mystical intuition, but it is indeed difficult to understand without reference to Buddhism.<sup>15</sup> It was here that Nishida most clearly attempted to validate his notion of a unique contribution of the East to modern culture. I can only sketch an approach to this difficult concept, taking off from the historical and cultural problems that are my principal concern.

There is a dimension of Nishida's view of history that transcends mere theory of practice toward existential realization. In Nishida, actors necessarily posit an environment against which they must assert themselves to live, yet as they express their life they objectify themselves in the struggle and become the environment of each other. This is 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" (1958b: 171). "Acting," in sum, "is essentially 'being acted'" (1958b: 186).

The Leibnizian image of a community of monads each reflecting the world in itself suggested a model of this dialectic of self and other.

"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" (1987: 58).

The objectivity of history thus arises from the mutual perceptions of the individuals engaged within it. Put another way, its objectivity is simply the necessarily reciprocal relations of these actions because actor and object have become perspectives on each other rather than distinct species.

The inner realization of this truth is the existential discovery of the "field" (*basho*) on which self and other deploy their identity and difference. When the self identifies concretely with that field, it "discovers the self-transforming matrix of history in its own bottomless depths" (1987: 84). That field is a scene of struggle understood in traditional Buddhist rather than Western individualist terms: one plays one's role without reserve but also with an immediate sense of the system formed by one's interactions with other individuals. The more one identifies with the system as a whole, the more one is properly in one's own place within it and vice versa. This peculiar double structure of action, operating as an ontological postulate, provides an original image of the concrete totality as the "place of nothingness."

Nishida's conclusion is profoundly paradoxical. He founded an absolute historicism that encompassed modern science in an account of experience derived from the Eastern tradition. That account is itself modern in the sense that it responds to the thoroughgoing epistemological atheism that underlies 20th century science and philosophy. Yet in demonstrating that history is the ultimate reality, Nishida brought back the science question from a different angle. As I will argue in the next section, his own Eastern logic forbade a nativist regression. Scientific knowledge, as the culture and action of the West, cannot be dismissed, but must be encountered authentically in the struggle for modernity. The dialectical system was intended to engage Japan in that struggle.

In sum, Nishida grasped the cultural connections that threaten scientific self-certainty and the social reciprocities that undermine subjective autonomy, and yet affirmed science and subjectivity. He refused the transcendence of culture in knowledge without adopting a comforting relativism that would at least allow disengagement from the hegemony of Western science. Nishida seems to have been determined to leave himself no resting place. This ambivalence is related to Japan's difficult place in the system of world culture.

## **Cultural Self-Affirmation**

Nishida's philosophy of culture attempted to vindicate the self-assertion of Japan as an Asian nation against European world hegemony. The new order emerging from the War would restore Japan's historic "world mission," lost so long as "Asian nations were suppressed by European imperialism and viewed from a colonial standpoint" (Nishida, 1965d: 429).

All modern cultures, including the Japanese, are equal, according to Nishida, in the sense that each has a contribution to make to an emerging world culture (1965b: 267-268). There can be no single universal replacement for national culture, for "when they lose their specificity they cease to be cultures"; but nor does the uniqueness of each culture authorize "a merely abstract advance in an individual direction" (1970: 254). "A true world culture will be formed only by various cultures preserving their own respective viewpoints, but simultaneously developing themselves through global mediation" (1970: 254). All modern cultures must participate in a fruitful intermingling and mutual contamination. World culture consists in a field of dialogue and conflict rather than a specific substantive way of life, comparable to the existing cultures.



"Each people stands on its own historical ground and has its own world mission, and that is how each nation possesses a historical life. When I say that each nation must realize itself while transcending itself and creating a world culture, I mean that each nation must realize itself through its own particular culture. It is in this way that particular cultures emerge from the foundation of history and constitute a world culture. In such a world each national culture expresses its own unique historical life and, at the same time, through their worldhistorical missions they all unite to form one world" (1965c: 428).

This dialectic of world culture is consistent with Nishida's conception of action. The oriental engagement with the West embraced a deeper collaboration under the surface conflict; it was to be a productive transformation of modernity with global consequences.

Because modern cultures all share science, they now subsist generally in the "truth" and can no longer be described as mere errors or divagations. But what then explains their multiplicity? Nishida's historicist ontology promised a "multicultural" bridge between national particularity and rational universality. The categories of the various stages of his dialectic can each be employed to describe the unique emphasis of a cultural type. Cultures consist in horizons of thought and action, paradigms or "archetypes," in which one or another category is unilaterally absolutized (1958a: 353-354). National struggles manifest conflicts between the diverse conceptual frameworks of social ontology at the level of whole peoples and their ways of life. In sum, ontological and cultural categories are mutually translatable. Presumably, cultures communicate and complete each other through the processes of exchange and discussion in which ontological visions are elaborated.

This view certainly owed something to Hegel's *Phenomenology*, although Nishida refused the final synthesis at which Hegel was traditionally said to aim. In this regard, Nishida was actually closer to contemporary Hegel scholarship, which argues that the ultimate "*Begriff*" does not resolve contradictions metaphysically in a substantive totality but embraces them methodologically, maintaining the opposition between its terms. Such anti-metaphysical readings of Hegel respond to sceptical and neo-Kantian currents in contemporary thought (Pippin, 1991: 66-79).

Nishida's reasons for rejecting synthesis were quite different: his emphasis on action excluded a purely conceptual resolution of the contradictions. This would explain why his writings do not offer third terms but rather endlessly alternating emphases among the fragmented field of historical and cultural contradictions and their corresponding action positions in the world system.

Alongside this affirmation of multiplicity, Nishida defended the apparently contrary notion that Japanese culture has a global character. Since modern culture is scientific in character, Japan's global mission cannot be merely religious or aesthetic as is sometimes supposed, but must include a unique intellectual content, a "logic," with the sort of universal value attributed to other achievements of modern thought (1958a: 363). This logic was Japan's culturally specific appropriation of modernity in terms of the "identity of contradictions" as described in the previous section.

This is the same logic that underlay Japan's long history of flexibility and assimilation of alien influences. In ancient times, Japan absorbed Chinese culture, and so today will it assimilate Western culture, serving thereby as a global point of junction (1965e: 417). According to Nishida, the "formlessness" or "emptiness" of Japanese culture enables it to harbor unresolved contradictions in itself. This formlessness reflects at the historico-cultural level the philosophical notions of pure experience and absolute nothingness. Here these apparently abstruse philosophical categories turn out to signify a unique cultural identity and role.

It is difficult to be sure what Nishida thought of the function of philosophy in modern life, but it seems to serve as a cultural crossroads, an essential point of translation and communication in an era characterized by intensifying interactions between peoples. Nishida saw his own thought as the product of the confrontation of cultures in the new era of world

culture. It did not offer a final synthesis but a language in terms of which the philosopher can be at home in a multiplicity of forms of thought. Nishida's ambition was not to resolve these contradictions, but to devise a method for thinking each moment in its relation to its Other. In this his philosophy reflected the emptiness which opened Japan to universal experience (1965e, 407).

But unfortunately, Nishida's conception of cultural self-affirmation seems to have gone well beyond the search for fruitful dialogue and embraced military struggle as a positive moment. In conclusion, I must discuss this disturbing aspect of his thought. This discussion is, however, limited by the confusion that surrounds Nishida's role in the War; he does not appear to have had any official or even semi-official post, and the texts from the period are so abstract they might be accommodated to rather different political positions. Hence the inconclusive controversy between those who hold Nishida, as a leading intellectual, in some measure responsible for Japanese imperialism, and those who see him as a moderate who dissociated himself from the worst ideological excesses of the time (Hiromatsu, 1990: 207-208; Lavelle, 1994; Yusa, 1991). Nevertheless, I will argue that his late texts point at least to provisional conclusions which I put forward below in the hope of provoking further research and discussion.

## Greeks or Jews?

Hegel argued that war is a means of spiritual self-affirmation for modern nations. Today this view has become shocking, but for several generations Hegel's doctrine merely articulated the common sense of nations in Europe and North America. Recall, for example, the vulgar Hegelianism of our own concept of "Manifest Destiny." In a later time, conservative Japanese philosophers defended war on just such Hegelian grounds without understanding that it was too late in the day to launch a colonial enterprise and carve out a sphere of influence of the old type.

It seems that Nishida shared this view. Several future national leaders (Konoe, Kido) attended his classes and in 1941 he was even invited to give a speech to the Emperor (Nishida: 1965b).<sup>16</sup> It is not surprising then that he was consulted by the government. He opposed war with the U.S. and he emphasized the importance of cosmopolitan cultural interaction to an unusual degree, but otherwise his occasional comments on world politics appear to follow the conventional opinion of the day (Nishida: 1965c). Although he never explained how to achieve it, he supported Japanese leadership in Asia and he was an enthusiastic advocate of the emperor system. Indeed, for Nishida the imperial house lay at the center of both the political and cultural systems. As such, he called it the "identity of contradictions," situating it mysteriously beyond the reach of his own concept of action as a system of reciprocities (1965d: 336).<sup>17</sup> This would seem to absolutize the state as an expression of the emperor's will; only the sustained ambiguity of politics and culture in Nishida's thought distances it somewhat from the crude statist nationalism of the day by signifying that will as a place (*basho*) of nothingness without particular content.

The flavor of his position, and much of the reason for our difficulty in evaluating it today, is clear from the following thoroughly symptomatic passage from his speech to the Emperor.

"Today, due to the extensive development of global transportation, the world has become one. Today's nationalism must be conceptualized from this standpoint. It is not a nationalism in which each nation turns in on itself, but rather in which each nation secures a position of its own within the world, that is to say, each nation must become globally aware. When diverse peoples enter into such a worldhistorical (*sekaishiteki*) relation, there may be conflicts among them such as we see today, but this is only natural. The most worldhistorical (*sekaishiteki*) nation must then serve as a center to stabilize this turbulent period. What do I mean by a nation having a global character? It means that this nation embraces holism yet at the same time does not deny the individual and, indeed, takes individual creation as its medium. Today we usually conceive of individualism and

holism as opposed to one another, but by itself, individualism is outdated, and any holism which denies the individual is also a thing of the past " (1965b: 270-271).

In the context of the ongoing War these remarks can, but need not necessarily, be read as a euphemistic defense of Japanese imperialism, yet at the same time Nishida also appears to contest totalitarianism in the name of the creativity of independent individuals and cultures.

On reading Nishida's war writings, the comparison with Heidegger immediately springs to mind. But this comparison is misleading. It is true that like Heidegger in his Nazi phase, Nishida could be heard repeating imperialist slogans. But unlike Heidegger, whose "private National Socialism" was expressed for a time in the official language of the Nazi state he represented as a government official, the private thinker Nishida always qualified offensive expressions of nationalism from his own culturalist standpoint. Here, for example, is a passage in which, without actually questioning the Imperial Way ideology that justified the Pacific War, Nishida attempted to reformulate it culturally.

"Japan's formative principle must become the formative principle of the world as well....But it is most dangerous to subjectivize Japan. That merely militarizes the Imperial Way (*kodo*) and transforms it into imperialism (*teikokushugika*)....In contrast we must contribute to the world by discovering our own principle of self-formation in the depths of our historical development; that principle is the identity of contradictions. This is the authentic...Imperial Way. This is the true meaning of 'Eight Corners of The World Under One Roof'" ("*hakko ichiu*") (1965d: 341).<sup>18</sup>

There is an even deeper distinction to be made between Nishida and Heidegger in terms of their historical situation. Although Heidegger claimed to look toward the future, he was unable to give any positive content to his notion of a distinctively authentic modernity, and eventually he fell victim to the deluded hope that Germany could be the agent for his reactionary program of affirming man against technology and mass society. This was the basis of his Nazi adventure to which he never counterposed another comprehensible, much less credible, alternative (Herf, 1984: 109ff). Heidegger's later thought of Being offers an oracular discourse that strives nobly to reenchant the world but it falls far short of a concrete alternative.<sup>19</sup>

By contrast, as a non-Westerner in a newly developed country Nishida seems to have experienced no particular anxiety about scientific-technical progress. He was untouched by the gloomy mood fostered by Weber, Junger, and Spengler, and looked hopefully to the emergence of an alternative modernity defined in the rich terms of his own living Japanese culture. Accordingly, he had no need of a "politics of being" to break with a despised present.

It was this hopeful conception that became entangled with Japanese imperialism in his 1943 response to the War Cabinet's request for a paper on the New World Order. There he can be found telling the old Hegelian story of national identity. According to this text, the Pacific War would lead to the appropriation of modernity by Eastern cultures that had so far participated in the modern world only as objects of Western conquest. The War was interpreted here as a kind of struggle for recognition out of which a new form of global community should emerge.

Nishida did not explain why Japan would have to mimic Western colonialism to achieve this laudable goal, and his understanding of events appears strangely anachronistic. He naively compared the War to the Greek struggle with Persia, as the military precondition of a triumphant cultural self-affirmation of worldhistorical significance: "Just as the victory of Greece in the Persian War long ago set European culture on a path it has followed up to this day, so too the contemporary East Asian war determines a path of development for the coming epoch of world history" (1965c: 429). From that standpoint Japan's defeat would seem to represent the destruction of a cultural universe, indeed of the very possibility of cultural plurality in the modern world.

There is something of the Meiji man in this position. In the Meiji period Japanese militarism had a much clearer anti-imperialist content than later on. It is easy to sympathize

with Nishida's enthusiasm for Japanese victories against the Russians in 1905, when Japan was still subject to national humiliation by the Western powers. It is not so easy to understand his apparent support for the War with China in the 1930s and 1940s when Japan was a great power.

Perhaps Nishida's understated position reflected awareness of this difference. No doubt he hoped that emphasizing Japanese cultural rather than military leadership in Asia would contribute to an early end to the War. But he continued to think in terms of power blocks; his writings do not reflect until quite late a clear understanding that Japanese colonial policy was not simply a normal mode of participation in global politics, but the very death of his own cultural program.<sup>20</sup> In our time freedom, equality and trade have cultural implications, not the military conquest of weaker neighbors.

We can hardly miss this point today given the post-war experience of decolonization. Had Japan won the Pacific War, it would have founded an immense Asian empire at precisely the moment when Europe was giving up on colonialism. As honorary Europeans, the Japanese would have arrived too late at this banquet table to enjoy the fun. One imagines the consequences: Japan would have spent the next generation fighting guerilla wars all over Asia; fascism would have remained in power for another generation. Far from the conquest of Asia fulfilling Nishida's cultural program, it would have resulted in a terrible cultural catastrophe.

Toward the end of the War, Nishida seems to have understood his epoch better. He and his circle engaged in intense discussions of post-war policy in view of national-cultural survival. Several months before the surrender, he wrote a final essay entitled "The Logic of *Basho* and the Religious Worldview," which hinted at a very different understanding of Japan's situation.

This extraordinary essay sharply distinguishes between the political and the religious dimension of human experience. The nation is an ethical-political unity in the Hegelian sense of *Sittlichkeit*, but as such it belongs to the "corrupt" world of everyday existence. Hence "the nation does not save our souls" (Nishida, 1987: 122). Yet by the logic of the "identity of contradictions," immanence is transcendence and national life therefore also relates to the absolute. "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, 1987: 116). The religious essence of nationality is both cultural and global and as such it contains the secret of international co-existence in the modern age.

These ideas represent a radical break with contemporary Japanese nationalism. Nishida's earlier political writings had followed conventional opinion in over-estimating the philosophical significance of the state, a natural enough tendency given the centrality of the state in reshaping Japan from the Meiji period on. However, this state nationalism had proven a false path, and Nishida's attempt to infuse it with his own culturalism was a disastrous failure as he would no doubt have conceded had he survived the War.

As imminent defeat clarified the situation, Nishida innovated a new nationalist discourse based not on the state but on culture. That discourse was still continuous with the old state nationalism in many particulars, and may, through the post-war influence of his followers, have helped to provide the basis for the conservative reconstruction of Japan as an unarmed culture-nation. The important point is the shift to a principled affirmation of ethnic identity, not of course on a primitive racist basis but in terms of a global cultural mission that excluded militarism. This shift shows up in a change in historical metaphors for Japan's position in the world.

The implicit point of comparison was no longer the Greeks, but the ancient Jews. Their defeat and occupation by the Babylonians is recorded in the Bible, particularly in the prophetic book of Jeremiah. Nishida noted that despite their conquest, the Jews maintained their "spiritual self-confidence" and transcended their merely ethnic limitations to create a world religion (Nishida, 1987: 116).<sup>21</sup> Just so, he argues, "the Japanese spirit participating in world history...can become the point of departure for a new global culture," but only if Japan

overcomes its "insular" and "vainly self-confident" outlook (1987: 112). Then Japan would no longer have to compete with the West by violence to make its cultural contribution, but could, like the Jews, learn to defend and spread its values from inside a system defined and dominated by the Other.

Nishida found in the Biblical texts a coded way of referring to the impending defeat he predicted more openly in his letters of the period. One easily understands the appeal of the prophecies in the midst of the bombing attacks of 1945: "For I have set my face against this city for evil, and not for good, saith the Lord: it shall be given into the hand of the king of Babylon, and he shall burn it with fire." Astonishingly, as MacArthur's ships approached, Nishida cited Jeremiah's warning that Nebuchadnezzar is also a servant of Yahweh (1987: 116). Even the enemies of the chosen serve God's ends by chastening his people. In this bizarre passage Nishida seemed to anticipate a *meaningful* Occupation, which indeed it proved to be.

And none too soon! Japan's role in the modern world could not possibly conform to the old Hegelian model, but required a new one the outlines of which were only barely visible in the months preceding the defeat. The Jewish example indicated a way out through cleanly separating cultural from politico-military self-affirmation. Nishida's surprising reference to the Jews suggests that he wanted Japan to accept its defeat and choose its fate. He seemed to promise that if it did so Japan would rise from the ashes as a great cultural force in the post-War world.

## Conclusion

For Nishida the globalization of world culture challenged philosophy and science to recognize the contributions of non-Western peoples. He believed that oriental culture could offer a new paradigm of historical understanding that would respond not only to the theoretical problems of the times, but also to the pressing need for a new mode of coexistence between nations and cultures. That paradigm was based on the notion of the identity of contradictions, global conflict grasped as a process of self- and world-formation. Japanese culture seemed to Nishida exemplary in this regard and capable of representing the new paradigm as a specific national instance, much as Europe represented the universal achievements of natural science to the world at large. The contemporary relevance of these ideas is clear. The gradual decentering of the world system calls for renewed reflection on the equality of cultures. But it is not easy to reconcile that moral exigency with the powerful cognitive claims of the hegemonic science and technology. This is the dilemma Nishida faced. In responding to it, he showed that world culture is plural not simply in the variety of its dying traditions but in the very spirit of its distinctive modern experiments.

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## NOTES

1. For the imperialist background to Japanese philosophy before the War, see Dale, 1988.
2. For an example of Nishida's doubts, see his letter to Harada of June 1942 (Nishida, 1965g: 199-200).
3. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the Japanese by Yoko Arisaka.
4. The "Overcoming Modernity" seminar papers were published in *Literary World*, July 1942. The participants included, among others, several writers, a famous literary critic (Kobayashi) and three of Nishida's students (Shimomura, Suzuki Shigetaka and

- Nishitani). For contemporary Japanese evaluations, see Hiromatsu, et. al. (1989) and Hiromatsu (1990).
5. Participants included Kosaka, Koyama, Suzuki Shigetaka and Nishitani. For these meetings see Sakai (1989), 105ff.
  6. As Naoki Sakai writes, "Contrary to what has been advertised by both sides, universalism and particularism reinforce and supplement each other; they are never in real conflict; they need each other and have to seek to form a symmetrical, mutually supporting relationship by every means in order to avoid a dialogic encounter which would necessarily jeopardize their reputedly secure and harmonized monologic worlds" (1989: 105).
  7. For an accessible example of these new approaches, see Yujiro Nakamura's interesting article in *Critique*, 1983. For the major survey of Nishida and his school in a Western language, see Ohashi, 1990.
  8. The latter position characterized forward looking thinking in the 19th century in China under the slogan, "Chung-hsueh wei-t'i, Hsi-hsueh wei-yung" ("Chinese learning for fundamental principles, Western learning for practical applications"); but the balance at which these progressives aimed was never achieved. For this earlier experience see Ssu-yu Teng and John K. Fairbanks, 1954, Part 3.
  9. See *Zen no Kenkyu* (1965a), translated by Masao Abe and Christopher Ives as *An Inquiry into the Good* (1990).
  10. This aspect of his achievement is lost, however, in much recent scholarship. Because Nishida attempted to reformulate a putatively Japanese worldview in the language of Western philosophy, students of his thought often read it as an elaborately encoded version of traditional Mahayana metaphysics (Carter, 1989). While decoding Nishida's writings in Eastern terms can be useful, unfortunately this approach has also contributed to the widespread impression that Nishida was an anti-modern, traditionalist thinker; but in fact, like most of his generation, he evaluated modern science and civilization positively on the whole (a view, be it said, that is not incompatible with a sympathy for Buddhism).
  11. A Western reader who wants to understand the liberating impact of modern science in Japan (as opposed to the fear of its military technology) should look at Genpaku Sugita's famous book, *Dawn of Western Science in Japan* (1969). Sugita recounts his experience (in 1771!) examining the dissected body of an executed criminal while comparing Chinese and Dutch anatomy books. All that he had been taught as a doctor was suddenly overthrown, and he devoted the rest of his life to translating the Dutch book in which he had found the truth his eyes confirmed. Naturally, this does not exclude a later recovery of a different level of meaning from Chinese anatomy once it is no longer taken literally as an image of bodily organs.
  12. That this similarity is no accident is argued in Parkes, 1992.
  13. The originator of this sort of systematic interpretation of Nishida is Koyama, 1935. See also Abe, 1988.
  14. For a different reading of Nishida's conception of history (and the only other one I have found in English), see Huh (1990).
  15. Although he does not cite Nishida in this connection, Nishitani's interpretation of Sunyata could almost be a commentary on the Buddhist background to his concept of absolute nothingness (Nishitani, 1982). For further explanation, see also Nishitani (1991).
  16. This was a great honor but not quite the union of philosopher and statesman a Straussian might imagine. Other prominent intellectuals were given a similar opportunity to educate the Emperor in what was essentially a ceremonial occasion.

17. In Heideggerian terms, this is to ignore the ontological difference and to identify Being itself with a particular being. As we know, Heidegger himself was not above making a similar mistake.
18. Lavelle (1994) dismisses this apparently anti-war statement and assimilates Nishida's views to the moderate ultra-nationalism of the Konoe faction on the grounds that anti-imperialist rhetoric was common even in the military at the time. I believe this goes too far toward disambiguating the ambiguities Nishida appears to have purposely introduced into his public statements.
19. Unbelievably, Heidegger's last interview expresses his conviction that "Only a God can save us" from modern technology. For a thorough study of Heidegger's views on technology, see Zimmerman, 1990.
20. Power block thinking was not of course confined to Japan. As late as 1949, George Kennan could write that "realism will call upon us not to oppose the re-entry of Japanese influence and activity into Korea and Manchuria" to hold back Soviet expansion in Asia (quoted in Cummings, 1989: 16).
21. Cf. Nishida's letter to D.T. Suzuki of May 1945 (1965g: 426): "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.

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