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Between Identity and Difference

Three Ways of Reading Nishida's Non-Dualism

The philosophy of Nishida Kitarō offers the reader today not only a paradigm for a comparative philosophy, but also a methodological framework to construct a Buddhist philosophy. The key and, at the same time, the obstacle to his philosophy is the concept of the “self-identity of the absolute contradiction.” This conceptual cornerstone of Nishida’s philosophy is as controversial among scholars today as it is central to his philosophy. Critics, such as Tanabe Hajime and Takahashi Satomi, argue that Nishida’s philosophy privileges the principle of identity over that of difference and falls into a monism; his supporters, most of all Nishitani Keiji and Ueda Shizuteru, to the contrary, claim that it comprises the key to philosophical non-dualism. In general, I am convinced that even his “self-identity of the absolute contradiction,” if it is read carefully within the context of Nishida’s philosophy, will render a paradigm that falls neither into a logical contradiction nor into a monism but that provides the foundation for a non-dualist philosophy. To this end, I will reread it first in the context of Nishida’s overall project and, then, on the background of Nishida’s debates with his critics.

KEYWORDS: Nishida Kitarō – Tanabe Hajime – Takahashi Satomi – Kyoto School – identity – difference – Absolute Nothingness

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THE PHILOSOPHY of Nishida Kitarō 西田幾多郎 offers the reader today not only a paradigm for a comparative philosophy or, as James HEISIG suggests (2001), a “world philosophy,” but also a methodological framework to construct a Buddhist philosophy. Unfortunately, as even the occasional reader of Nishida’s work knows, Nishida wrote in a style that seems to obscure more than it elucidates. A case in point is his concept of the “self-identity of the absolute contradiction” (*zettai mujunteki jiko dōitsu* 絶対矛盾の自己同一). This concept, which holds the key to his philosophy, constitutes a major obstacle for anyone attempting to figure out Nishida Philosophy. Not only is it barely intelligible in either the Japanese original or its English translation, its commentators fundamentally disagree on how it should be understood. Nishida’s critics, particularly Tanabe Hajime 田辺元 and Takahashi Satomi 高橋里美, argue that Nishida’s philosophy privileges the principle of identity over that of difference and falls into a monism. If everything becomes identical, as the concept seems to suggest, all distinctions are erased and language in general and philosophy in particular becomes meaningless. His supporters, especially Nishitani Keiji 西谷啓治 and Ueda Shizuteru 上田閑照, claim to the contrary that Nishida Philosophy is capable of solving all problems inherent in dualism and thus provides the key to a philosophical non-dualism. In short, they argue that Nishida does not dissolve all distinctions but rather counters the absurdity that self and world, subject and object are separated by an infinite abyss.

The reasons for these divergent interpretations of Nishida’s philosophy lie, I believe, in the popular misreading of Nishida’s most fundamental concept. In short, even though Nishida’s nomenclature may suggest so, his “self-identity of the absolute contradiction” does not imply an identity of the opposites in the sense of a *coincidentia oppositorum*. If it did, it would in fact render Nishida’s philosophy as illogical and absurd as his toughest critics, Hakamaya Noriaki 袴谷憲昭 and Nobechi Tōyō 野辺地東洋, have suggested. However, this does not mean that his critics are simply wrong. To the contrary, not only do they point to potential problems in Nishida’s nomenclature, but the criticisms of Takahashi and Tanabe in particular have made a crucial contribution to the development of Nishida’s thought and are thus pivotal for deciphering Nishida’s philosophy. In general, I am convinced that even Nishida’s concept of the “self-identity of

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the absolute contradiction,” if it is read carefully within the context of his philosophy, will render a paradigm that falls neither into a logical contradiction nor into a monism but that provides the foundation for a non-dualist philosophy. To this end, I will reread it first in the context of Nishida's overall project, and then against the background of Nishida's debates with his critics.

The Hidden Problem in Nishida's Philosophy

NISHIDA'S PROJECT

Nishida scholars generally agree that it was Nishida's main concern to overcome the subject-object dualism inherent in the Kantian legacy. In short, Kant proposed that the knowing subject and the world it knows are fundamentally separated and inhabit different spheres. The result of this dualism is not only that the self's knowledge of itself is impossible, in addition to a host of philosophical problems, it further implies the existential alienation of the self from itself and the world it belongs to. This dualism, Nishida believed, permeated all philosophical discourses. Even the various forms of monism within the philosophical tradition imply a dualistic framework and fall prey to binary thinking because they define themselves or are defined vis-à-vis dualism and thus imply a further distinction, namely that between monism and dualism.

Accordingly, from his first work, *An Inquiry into the Good* (*Zen no kenkyū* 善の研究) (NISHIDA 1988, 1: 1–200) to his last completed one, “The Logic of *Basho* and the Religious Worldview” (*Basho no ronri to shūkyōteki sekaikan* 場所の論理と宗教的世界観) (NISHIDA 1988, 11: 371–464), Nishida utilized a method devised to combat all forms of dualism. He divided all previous philosophical approaches into two basic categories. These are objectivism, which takes as its starting point the objects of our knowledge, and subjectivism, which commences its philosophical project with the knowing self.¹ The goal of Nishida's philosophy, then, was to show that neither standpoint was capable of rendering a satisfying philosophical system. In short, Nishida believes that both of these standpoints reduce the ambiguity of the human predicament of the self that conceives of itself as separate from the world to which it actually belongs to an easy formula by focusing on but one aspect thereof. The subjective standpoint results in what I call a theory of engagement and focuses exclusively on the self's interaction and connection with the world, its subjectivity and activity, and thereby excludes the possibility of reflection, which requires a detached, presumably disengaged, and objective viewpoint. The objective standpoint, on the contrary, proposes a disengaged standpoint that enables objective thought, but in the process separates the self

1. In NISHIDA's article “The World of Intelligibility” (*Eichiteki sekai* 叡智の世界) (1988, 5: 123–85), he refers to these two standpoints as the “universals” of “judgment” (*handanteki ippansha* 判断的一般者) and “self-awareness” (*jikakuteki ippansha* 自覚的一般者) respectively. I usually paraphrase these standpoints as the “worlds” of “knowledge” and “engagement.”

from the world. Moreover, focusing merely on the self's interaction with the world, subjectivism cannot but fall into a monism that proposes the underlying oneness of reality, while the self's detachment from the world, as it is proposed by objectivism, introduces an unbridgeable gap between self and world and results in a dualism. Both positions are, of course, untenable. Even a theory of engagement that excludes reflection constitutes a theory and therefore cannot but perform a reflection on this very engagement, while the assumption that the thinking subject is disengaged from the world it reflects upon oversimplifies and abstracts the complex relationships between self and world. This dilemma is nowhere as obvious, Nishida argues, as in the case of the historian. Nishida observes in his small treatise on history, "[s]tanding on the place where the present determines itself, we are simultaneously people living in history and historians" (NISHIDA 1988, 12: 55). Elsewhere, Nishida compares the human predicament with a play:

In the great play of life we participate as both actors and spectators. If we were simply spectators facing the unfolding of the play, our standpoint would be purely intellectual and aesthetical. Again, if we were simply performers we would sink into our roles and there would be no place from which the unfolding of the play could be observed. But since we are both actors and spectators, we act and, at the same time, observe the unfolding of the play.

(NISHIDA 1988, 15: 291)

In reality, Nishida argues, we participate in the world and are capable of reflecting upon it as if we were separate. To solve this dilemma, Nishida suggests a third standpoint, which not only includes the strengths and excludes the weaknesses of the former two, but, moreover, is designed to function as the most fundamental of all philosophical standpoints.

It is my conviction the challenge for Nishida always lay in negotiating the foundational paradigm of his philosophy between the Scylla and Charybdis of monism and dualism. This is especially evident in his lectures on metaphysics, which read for the most part like an epic battle between the monistic and the dualistic paradigm. It is possible to say that the meta-issue of how is it possible to oppose dualism without presupposing a dualistic framework that distinguishes between dualism and its opposite became something of Nishida's own personal *kōan*. To solve this conundrum Nishida spent most of his career producing his well known concepts such as "pure experience" (*junsui keiken* 純粹経験), "the logic of *basho*" (*basho no ronri* 場所の論理), and the "dialectical universal" (*ben-shōhōteki ippansha* 弁証法的一般者), only to name a few, until he ended up with his clumsy but more appropriate "self-identity of the absolute contradiction."²

2. I believe that there are fundamentally two versions of Nishida's "logic of *basho*": one he developed in *From Acting to Seeing* (*Hataraku mono kara miru mono e* 働くものから見るものへ; NISHIDA 1988, 4), written between 1924 and 1927, and the other he modified with the help of his "self-identity of the absolute contradiction" and presented in "The Logic of *Basho* and the Religious Worldview."

The question on how these concepts relate to each other divides Nishida scholars in roughly two groups; those who argue that all concepts express virtually the same paradigm, and scholars, such as Sueki Takehiro 末木剛博, who suggest separate stages within Nishida's development marked by these different versions of the non-dual paradigm. While Nishida's main concepts all reflect Nishida's quest to overcome dualism, they do disclose an ever-increasing complexity and depth. Moreover, a close reading of these concepts reveals that Nishida's original concern to bridge the subject-object dualism retreated further into the background as time went on, thus making room for another more fundamental, albeit related, concern. This indicates a major shift in perspective. In the following, I will show that in his later work, Nishida is no longer interested in the relationship between subject and object, but rather in the relationship between their identity and their difference and, implicitly, between identity and difference in general. This interplay of identity and difference provides, I believe, the key to Nishida's philosophy.

PURE EXPERIENCE

Nishida's first attempt to bridge the dualism he inherited from post-Kantian philosophy and to introduce a non-dual paradigm was his interpretation of pure experience, which he defines as that which "precedes the differentiation into subjectivity and objectivity" (*shukyaku mibun* 主客未分) and constitutes the "union point of subjectivity and objectivity" (*shukyaku gōitten* 主客合一点). In *An Inquiry Into the Good*, Nishida used this term to overcome the dichotomy between objectivity and subjectivity that pervades the various strands of philosophy. Nishida explains that pure experience mediates between thought (the method of reflection) and will (the driving force of the self's active engagement with the world; between nature (reality objectified by thought) and spirit (that which unifies reality); between heteronomy (an ethics relying on the authority of an external other) and autonomy (an ethics grounded within the self); theism (which separates god and the self) and pantheism (which unites them). To overcome these dualisms, Nishida did end up emphasizing, if not over-emphasizing the moment of unity, to be exact, the "unifying activity" (*tōitsu sayō* 統一作用) of pure experience.

Nishida struggled to maintain the importance of the principle of difference by introducing the notions of "differentiation" (*bunka* 分化) brought about by thought, manifested in nature, and symbolized by an external god as well as the notion of "difference in degree" (*teido no sa* 程度の差) to accommodate the plurality of the phenomena of consciousness and the use of binary categories. In this sense, Nishida already suggested in *An Inquiry Into the Good* that "unity and not-unity" are only "different by degree" (NISHIDA 1988, 1: 16). This claim he later extended to the observation, albeit in his lectures, that "in original experience,

purity and impurity, unity and lack thereof, are not different, but strictly speaking experience is entirely identical; difference is always a matter of degree” (NISHIDA 1988, 15: 91). This is an interesting philosophical move. Nishida apparently tried to maintain the aspect of difference by identifying it with oneness. However, the very identity of identity and difference still constitutes an identity and negates difference. In short, this phrase still privileges unity over plurality, but its introduction does reveal a slow shift in focus. At stake is no longer the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity but rather whether or not the primary principle of philosophy should be one of identity or one of difference.

In the end, however, his terminology cannot but betray a preference for unity, spirit, autonomy, and pantheism over their objectivistic counterparts. It was thus with clear justification that his critics lambasted him, as I will show in the second part of this essay, for proposing a monism and denying any moment of difference altogether.

LOGIC OF BASHO

This tendency to focus on the question of whether philosophy should take the notion of identity or that of difference as its most fundamental paradigm is even more evident in Nishida’s second major attempt at framing the non-dual paradigm, his so-called “logic of *basho*.” Nishida stratifies his “logic of *basho*,” not unlike his theory of pure experience, to develop a theory of knowledge wherein subject and object are neither identical to nor different from each other.

He thus suggests three layers of knowledge,³ the knowledge of the so-called objective world, the knowledge of the self, and intersubjective knowledge. Since Nishida’s language is extremely technical and limited to the epistemological project, I prefer to identify these three layers as the worlds of knowledge, the world of engagement, and the historical world. These three layers designate separate discourses of knowledge—to be exact two discourses and their relationship—which are characterized by their respective specific modalities and objects. Obviously, the world of knowledge refers to the knowledge constituted by the objectivist standpoint; its method is logic and thought, its content the phenomenal objects. The world of engagement designates the somatic knowledge that is created by the active self’s engagement with and in the world; its method is activity and practice, its content is what is habitualized in repeated practice. This somatic knowledge characteristic of the world of engagement is frequently exemplified in the process of learning a musical instrument or an athletic discipline. Through continuous practice, the musician will reach a state

3. In his essay “The World of Intelligibility,” Nishida develops a system of three worlds. He designates the world of objectivity as “the universal of judgment,” the world of subjectivity as the “universal of self-awareness,” and the world of non-duality as the “world of intelligibility.”

where the performance has become her “second nature” and she performs a given piece, to use Thomas Kasulis’s rendition of Dōgen’s *hishiryō* (非思量), “without-thinking.” The third layer comprises the historical world in which individual and reflective subjects participate; its method is the dialectic between the worlds of knowledge and the world of engagement, its content their relationship. This third layer simultaneously “transcends” (*koeru* 越える) and “envelops” (*tsutsumu* 包む) subjectivity and objectivity, identity and difference. The implications of this phrase are twofold: first, it clarifies the relationship between the historical world and the other two worlds; second, it explicates the ambiguous status of the historical world itself. The notion “transcending” describes the standpoint that posits and understands the world as an object; “enveloping” emphasizes the subjectivity of the performer who engages with the world. Consequently, the historical world envisions the standpoint beyond subjectivity and objectivity.

If Nishida had been merely concerned with the role subjectivity and objectivity play in philosophy he would have been content with this model. However, having framed the role of subjectivity and objectivity in three modes, a new problem arose, namely that of their relationship. Or, in other words, the question arose, how do these individual standpoints view the moments of subjectivity and objectivity respectively? The world of knowledge obviously treats both as mutually exclusive objects, and thus posits a subject-object dichotomy. The world of engagement negates this differentiation and rather manifests their unity. In self-awareness, subject and object cannot be distinct; or conversely, if subject and object cannot be unified, there is no self-awareness. The third layer encompasses both, identity and difference.

At this point of his argument, Nishida abandons the language of objectivity and subjectivity in favor of the terminology of noesis and noema and refers to the world of knowledge as the “noematic dimension” (*noemateki hōkō* ノエマ的方向) and to the world of engagement as “noetic dimension” (*noejisuteki hōkō* ノエジス的方向) of the historical world. This terminological shift indicates that Nishida is no longer interested in the relationship between subject and object but in the worldviews characteristic of the standpoint of objectivism and subjectivism respectively. In other words, Nishida explores not so much the nature of subject and object themselves, but rather how our understanding of them changes. In addition, Nishida utilizes the concepts of noesis and noema to further describe the relationship between the worlds of knowledge and engagement on the meta-level. In short, Nishida describes the world of engagement not only as the place where the self loses itself and becomes one with the world, but from this standpoint the worlds of engagement and knowledge are not distinct but one. In Nishida’s words, the “noema sinks into the noesis” (NISHIDA 1988, 5: 162). Concretely, this phrase indicates that the world of knowledge is not independent from but exists quite literally inside the knowing subject as the idea of the thinker. While this observation may sound counterintuitive on first sight, I

think the observation that the world that I know is nothing but the world *I* know is rather commonsensical. This absorption of the noema in the noesis Nishida, then, contrasts with the mutual opposition of both dimensions, that is, with the noematic aspect of the historical world. Concretely, the mutual opposition of subjectivism and objectivism signifies that the knowing self cannot but encounter public knowledge—including public and forensic knowledge—about itself and the objectively given reality Heidegger calls the “factuality” (*Faktualität*) as something external to its own will and beyond its own power. Nishida’s dialectic does not, or course, stop with the relationship between noema and noesis but can be applied to a third-level discourse as well. If the noematic dimension maintains a balance between identity and difference and the noetic one implies the priority of identity by postulating that difference dissolves in identity, Nishida’s system can be said to maintain both principles, the balance of identity and difference and their imbalance. Nevertheless, regardless of how long we pursue this dialectical process—Nishida suggests an “infinite deepening” (*eien teki ni shinka* 永遠的に深化)—its central point remains the same. Nishida does not dissolve difference, but, to the contrary, persistently asserts its necessity. In fact, the principle of difference designates the driving source behind this seemingly infinite dialectic.

Once Nishida suggests that his most central paradigm expressed as, for example, “absolute nothingness” (*zettai mu* 絶対無), reveals fundamentally two dimensions, the noematic and the noetic, he in fact concedes that it also includes the aspects of difference and identity.⁴ It is thus possible to say that the introduction of the Husserlian terminology of noesis and noema indicates a shift in focus in Nishida’s philosophy from the problem of subjectivity and objectivity to that of identity and difference. This shift becomes even more apparent if one examines the foundational concepts Nishida develops later in his career, the “self-identity of the absolute contradiction” and the “many in one, one in many” (*tasokuitsu, issokuta* 多即一, 一即多); the former can be paraphrased as the “identity of absolute difference” and the latter as “plurality in oneness, oneness in plurality.”

THE ONE AND THE MANY

In Nishida’s later works, the tension between identity and difference appears in the form of the relationship of the universal one with the many individuals as well as the relationship between the absolute and the relative. In the 1930s when his philosophical concern shifted towards the application of his non-dual paradigm to a philosophy of history,⁵ Nishida focused his energy on working out the relationship

4. By the beginning of the 1930s Nishida’s philosophy had developed into theory that no longer prioritized the noetic dimension over the noematic one but balanced the two.

5. See, for example, *The Fundamental Problems of Philosophy* (*Tetsugaku no konpon mondai* 哲学の根本問題; NISHIDA 1988, 7) as well as *Philosophical Essays Volumes 1, 2* (*Tetsugaku ronbunsho daiichi, daini* 哲学論文書第一, 第二; NISHIDA 1988, 8).

between the historical world, which he described in Hegelian terms as “dialectical universal” (*benshōhōteki ippansha* 弁証法的一般者), and the multiplicity of individual persons and moments that make up history. To frame this relationship, Nishida employed, among others, the terminology of “many in one, one in many.” This phrase indicates a significant shift from the primacy of the universal to one that balances the dimension of oneness or identity with that of multiplicity or difference. Prior to his opening essay in *The Fundamental Problems of Philosophy*, “Introduction to Metaphysics” (*Keijijōgaku joron* 形而上学序論) (NISHIDA 1988, 7: 5–215), Nishida use the terms “many” and “one” in two kinds of phrases. On the one hand, there are the phrases suggesting the identity of the many and the one, such as “the oneness of the many” (NISHIDA 1988, 2: 101), “one is many” (NISHIDA 1988, 4: 273), “many is one” (NISHIDA 1988, 5: 137), “the unity of the one and the many” (NISHIDA 1988, 5: 138), or at least their interrelatedness, as in “the many requires the one, the one the many” (NISHIDA 1988, 1: 343). On the other hand, there are multiple occurrences of the phrase “one in many.” Both types share an emphasis of the principle of oneness and identity, be it literally as “the one” or simply as the identification of one and many, over that of multiplicity and difference. By using the phrase “one in many, many in one,” however, Nishida affords the principle of multiplicity and thus difference an equal status in his system.

At this point it might be helpful if we take a step back to identify Nishida's reason for this seemingly never-ending accumulation of technical jargon. As I mentioned before, it is possible to identify as his overriding interest the formulation of a foundational principle that can accommodate and reconcile the worlds of knowledge and engagement. In order to express the ever-increasing complexity in his understanding of these worlds Nishida employed a series of conceptual pairs, such as thought and will, universal of judgment and universal of self-awareness, noema and noesis, individual and universal, and, then, many and one. It is thus safe to say that the term “many” indicates the world of objectivity, plurality, and difference, while “one” refers to the world of subjectivity, oneness, and identity. Their unity, if defined as “many in one,” errs on the side of objectivism and difference, while the subjectivist notion of “one in many” privileges the principle of identity. For this reason, Nishida felt it necessary to combine both phrases and, accordingly, the principles of difference and identity became “one in many, many in one.” While it is very obvious that Nishida never used the term “difference,” be it *kubetsu* 区別, used in the dialectical philosophies of Tanabe and Takahashi, or *sai* 差異, characteristic of the contemporary discourses on identity, as a technical term, his language does imply the necessity of preserving if not emphasizing the principle of difference. Such an interpretation of Nishida Philosophy becomes even more plausible when we examine the first occurrence of “one in many, many in one” in Nishida's writings. “When the absolute opposites form a self-identity as ‘one in many’ and the ‘many in

one,' an infinite amount of particulars are determined mutually vis-à-vis each other" (NISHIDA 1988, 7: 41). Here, the words "many in one" clearly emphasize the importance of the multiplicity, distinctiveness, and irreducibility of particulars and individuals of Nishida's philosophy. In section three of *The Fundamental Problems of Philosophy*, "The Logical Structure of the Actual World" (*Genjitsu no sekai no ronriteki kōzō* 現実の世界の論理的構造) (NISHIDA 1988, 7: 217–304), he identifies the characteristics of "the one in the many, the many in the one" as opposition, absolute negation, and contradiction. In addition, Nishida emphasizes that the many of the one should not be equated to the parts of a whole. While parts, ultimately, are subsumed in the whole, the many cannot be reduced to the one. Nishida corroborates this very sentiment when he observes that "the true one cannot deny the many, but, to the contrary, depends on them" (NISHIDA 1988, 10: 374).

Nishida uses the terms "one" and the "many" to indicate a relationship between the universal and individuals, the world and its constituents, that is not covered by the rhetoric of the whole and the parts, namely the irreducibility of either term. Most of all, however, he uses this phrase to undermine the very grounding principle he claims to propose, the "dialectical universal" (*ben-shōhōteki ippansha* 弁証法的一般者): "At the bottom of the self-determination of the dialectical universal exist the one in the many and the many in the one. Therefore, the words 'the self-determination of the dialectical universal' imply that the one determines the many and the many determines the one; in other words, the universal determines the individual and vice versa" (NISHIDA 1988, 7: 264). Not only does Nishida reject the privileged position of the universal that opposes the individual in general—even though he elsewhere asserts the priority of the universal to the degree that he calls his logic the "logic of the predicate" (*jutsugo no ronri* 述語の論理)—but he also subverts the primacy of the dialectical universal that he devised to ground the opposition of individual and universal, many and one in the first place. In some sense, he suggests that his dialectical universal declares the non-duality of the many and the one to be the foundational principle of his philosophy. This means that Nishida maintains that not only the principle of the multiplicity and the noematic dimension, but also the difference between many and one, noema and noesis stand on equal ground with the principle of identity. In other words, Nishida refuses to ground his philosophy on the principle of identity, or, for that matter, any principle that erases all traces of difference. He rather maintains that the multiplicity of phenomena cannot be reduced to a oneness, be it a self-identical being à la Spinoza's substance or a self-identical place à la the *basho* of *From Acting to Seeing*. However, it took Nishida one more concept to clarify what this non-duality could mean, namely and not without irony, the "self-identity of the absolute contradiction."

THE "SELF-IDENTITY OF THE ABSOLUTE CONTRADICTION"

While originally defined as the "self-identity of the absolute contradiction between the many and the one," Nishida develops the "self-identity of the absolute contradiction" as the non-dual principle that reconciles the aspects of identity and difference. Nowhere does Nishida use this concept to maintain the balance between identity and difference as forcefully as in his last completed work, "The Logic of *Basho* and the Religious Worldview."

The main idea of this volume is that the world as "self-identity of the absolute contradiction" reveals two basic dimensions, the absolute and the relative. However, these two dimensions are not separate and indicative of a dualism but rather they constitute two dimensions of the same world. In short, the absolute is defined by and expresses itself in its opposite, the relative, and the transcendence in the immanence. This reasoning motivated Nishida to make pronouncements that must be shocking for the traditional monotheist. Based on his famous definition of the absolute as that which "contains its own absolute self-negation inside itself" (NISHIDA 1988, 11: 397), Nishida applies this motif of the "absolute in the relative" to the religious language he was familiar with and arrives at the notion of a god that "must be evil in some respect" (NISHIDA 1988, 11: 404), a "transcendence in immanence" (*chōetsu soku naizai* 超越即內在), and an eschatology of the everyday (NISHIDA 1988, 11: 452). Nishida interprets these notions using the "logic of *sokuhi* 即非" from the *Diamond Sutra* (Jp. *Kongōkyō* 金剛經) as a heuristic tool. The term *sokuhi*, literally "is and is not" is a Buddhist term designed to express the non-dualism of affirmation and negation. This concept thus indicates that what seems to comprise two opposite realities, good and evil, transcendence and immanence, merely indicates two aspects of one reality. Similarly the duality of the two aspects and the oneness of the one reality constitute another set of two aspects of an even more fundamental principle. Nishida's use of these key terms further reveals the meta-layer of their complex relationship, namely the difference between difference and identity, on the one hand, and their identity, on the other. Therefore, I think that it is safe to say that the term *sokuhi* and Nishida's own "self-identity of the absolute contradiction" conceptually combine the principles of identity and difference.

Despite his rhetoric of "identity" or "self-identity," Nishida decided to forgo the reliance on any paradigm that could imply an underlying unity, such as his dialectical universal, for the dialectic between the two primary principles of identity and difference within his philosophical system. I thus think it is safe to say that at this point in Nishida's thinking the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity had receded into the background and the notions of identity and difference had come to mark Nishida's most central philosophical concern. However, there are two features that obscure the persistence of difference in Nishida's philosophy. First, as I mentioned before, Nishida himself never uses

the word “difference” in any technical sense. Second, Nishida’s own language of self-identity and his decision to call his philosophy “logic of the predicate” do distract from his concern to balance identity with difference. Nishida’s struggle to preserve the principle of difference and individuality without falling into the Kantian dualism is well reflected in the philosophies of his successors within the Kyoto school. To bring out the importance of the dialectic of identity and difference to Nishida’s philosophy, I will now shift the focus of my attention to a reading of the responses to Nishida’s work.

Nishida in Dialogue

I think it is possible to discern two basic attitudes towards Nishida’s philosophy among his disciples and students. One attitude is represented by Nishitani, Hisamatsu Shin-ichi 久松真一, and Ueda, the other by Tanabe, Takahashi,⁶ and Miki Kiyoshi 三木清. The former three support and develop Nishida’s rhetoric of identity, while the latter offer a stark criticism thereof. I believe that the difference in evaluating Nishida’s philosophy is due to variations in the primary philosophical paradigm Nishida’s disciples apply. While the philosophies of those sympathetic to Nishida’s approach are driven by a quest for self-knowledge, the primary motivating forces of his critics were social concerns and the religious standpoint of other-power. Or, seen from a different angle, the former emphasize the principle of identity, the latter otherness and difference. However, I would like to caution the reader at this point. Even though I will use this distinction of self-power and other-power philosophy and of identity philosophy and philosophy of difference to suggest two primary paradigms that motivated the different responses to Nishida’s thought, I would like to emphasize that I am not interested in suggesting subdivisions within the Kyoto School; to the contrary, I am neither sure that such a division would be tenable since the thought of the thinkers involved is too complex, nor am I convinced that such division would reap any benefits. In addition, when I, for example, mention similarities between Miki and Takahashi on some issues here, I do not want to imply that Miki’s philosophy shows a greater affinity—however one would go about to justify such a claim anyway—to Takahashi’s than to Nishida’s. My interest here is in finding a heuristic device that will enable me to highlight the non-dual paradigm embedded in Nishida’s terminology. I believe that Takahashi’s and Tanabe’s critique of Nishida’s philosophy as “identity philosophy” (*dōitsu tetsugaku* 同一哲学) provides such a device.

6. Given, for example, FUJITA Masakatsu’s narrow definition of the Kyoto school as “direct disciples” of either Nishida or Tanabe (2001, p. ii), Takahashi could not be considered a member. However, like KOSAKA (1997), I am more interested in the philosophical systems than sectarian politics, and it is without a doubt that Nishida, Tanabe, and Takahashi had a tremendous influence on each other’s thought.

PURE EXPERIENCE

One of the most interesting phenomena within Nishida scholarship is that the notion of pure experience is still taken as one the most representational concepts of Nishida's philosophy.⁷ This is all the more interesting insofar as Nishida not only admitted that the notion of pure experience as formulated in *An Inquiry Into the Good* was "imperfect" and "immature" (NISHIDA 1988 1: 316), he also refrained from using the term almost immediately after he received Takahashi's rather severe criticism, despite feeling that he had been fundamentally misunderstood. By the same token, Nishitani, who responded to Takahashi's criticism of Nishida's later philosophy and, in the same book, dedicated his exposition of Nishida's philosophy in *Nishida Kitarō: The Man and his Thought* (*Nishida Kitarō: Sono hito to shisō* 西田幾多郎—その人と思想, NISHITANI 1987, 9) to the notion of pure experience fails to answer the challenges Takahashi put forward to that very concept. So how central is the concept of pure experience to Nishida's thought? The truth of the matter is that Nishida was right about its shortcomings and, if nothing else, the fact that Nishida abandoned this term for more appropriate incarnations of his non-dual paradigm stands in support of this hypothesis. What makes the concept of pure experience so appealing to the proponents of Nishida's philosophy is that, especially when read against the background of his later philosophy, it illustrates nicely Nishida's project and, to Nishitani, Nishida's contribution to philosophy. At the same time, however, it equally clearly demonstrates the possible traps inherent in Nishida Philosophy, particularly the proposition of an underlying unity in general; to my knowledge, no one has raised this criticism as succinctly as Takahashi. Since the debates concerning his later concepts are driven by the same basic rationale, the controversy surrounding the concept of pure experience provides the perfect entry to an exploration of the tenability of the non-dual paradigm.

The positions in support of the notion of pure experience can be summarized by Nishida's own, later reflection on his earlier terminology. In the preface to his *Philosophical Essays Vol. 3* (NISHIDA 1988, 9), written at a time when he had long forsaken the notion of pure experience, he reminisces that "[w]hat I call pure experience possesses a psychologistic feel, but nevertheless it does enable me to think the objective world from a standpoint that transcends the subject-object distinction" (NISHIDA 1988, 9: 3). Nishitani takes the assertion that the notion of pure experience introduced a new and non-dual paradigm one step further to argue that pure experience constitutes the philosophical formulation of the Zen experience—or, at least, a concept influenced by Zen insight—and offers the solution to the most fundamental problem of philosophy. Nishitani argues that ever since the Greeks, and especially since the advent

7. NISHITANI (1987, 9: 125–89) and FUJITA (1998) are examples of this tendency to treat pure experience as one of the most central concepts of Nishida's philosophy.

of modernity, Western philosophy has been plagued by a rampant dualism he refers to as the “two-world theory” (*nisekaisetsu* 二世界説), distinguishing between a sensible and an intelligible domain, between experience and the real. Nishitani explains the fundamental problem of this standpoint as follows. “The two-world theory makes it almost impossible to establish a standpoint of transcendence without abandoning experience or fact. If one bases philosophy in experience and fact, transcendence is reduced to a construct of idealism; conversely, those who search transcendence abandon the world of actuality and negate the standpoint of experience and fact” (NISHITANI 1987, 9: 101). Nishitani argues that a philosophy that aims at overcoming the dichotomy of immanence and transcendence, experience and thought, existence and knowledge, must fulfill certain criteria. It must reject the two-world theory, reclaim the religious standpoint that acknowledges that “god is awakened as the fundamental core of the world and as what gives directions to humans” (NISHITANI 1987, 9: 108), and return to the direct experience devoid of all conceptual constructions. Nishitani contends that the only philosophy to succeed with framing such a philosophical paradigm is a philosophy of pure experience, to be exact, Nishida’s version thereof.⁸

According to Nishitani, pure experience unites the object and subject, empirical and the transcendental, the self and the universe, and the temporal and the atemporal. Thus he asserts that what seem to be opposites, such as subject and object, in fact form an “identity” (*dōitsu* 同一, *Identität*) wherein differences disappear. At other times, Nishitani suggests that these opposites are “neither-one-nor-two” (*fuitsu funi* 不一不二). Despite the rather non-dual connotations of this phrase, however, Nishitani is quick to emphasize the priority of the principle of identity over difference:

Unity and contradiction ‘constitute two aspects of the same identity;’⁹ because of unity there is contradiction, because of contradiction unity. Now, the difference between self and other as well as the opposition between subject and object constitute the most fundamental difference and opposition respectively from which all other distinctions and oppositions arise. However, the infinite unifying power transcends even these. (NISHITANI 1987, 9: 138)

In other words, Nishitani interprets the strength of the concept of pure experience to lie in the fact that it overcomes and, ultimately, fuses what seems separate. This reading, of course, reflects his general interest in overcoming the separation

8. Nishitani follows Nishida’s lecture “Pure Experience” in delineating Nishida’s notion of pure experience against the “psychologies” of William James and Wilhelm Wundt and Henri Bergson’s “pure duration” (pure *durée*). While both Nishida and Nishitani think that Bergson came closest to Nishida’s pure experience, Nishitani suggests that Bergson’s philosophy of life is too subjective and voluntaristic (NISHITANI 1987, 9: 114).

9. Nishitani borrows this phrase verbatim from *An Inquiry Into the Good* (NISHIDA 1988, 1: 69).

of the empirical and the transcendental in this particular essay, and the alienation created by nihilism in some of his other writings in order to counter the dualism characteristic of Western philosophy with Buddhist non-dualism. While it is rather difficult to uphold the rhetoric that “the West is dualistic and the East is not” these days, Nishida was, to my knowledge, the first one to frame a non-dualistic paradigm in philosophical language¹⁰ and to maintain that such a non-dualistic philosophy, if formulated properly, will constitute a major contribution to the philosophical discourse. The question rather is, does the concept of pure experience facilitate a tenable, non-dualistic paradigm.

Takahashi answers this question with a resounding no. In the meticulously written essay “The Facts of Conscious Phenomena and Their Meaning” (*Ishiki genshō no jijitsu to sono imi* 意識現象の事実とその意味) (TAKAHASHI 1973, 4: 153–82), he contends that despite his efforts to design a non-dualism Nishida errs on the side of identity, and that this philosophy of identity is, quite simply, philosophically untenable. In short, in *An Inquiry Into the Good*, Takahashi argues, there is a stark if not irreconcilable tension between the plurality of conscious phenomena and Nishida’s claim to their underlying unity. In the case whereby the former is over-emphasized unity is impossible. If, on the other hand, the latter is assigned a privileged position, as is the case in *An Inquiry Into the Good*, the plurality of conscious phenomena becomes difficult to uphold. To demonstrate his point, Takahashi examines four cases where Nishida, in his mind, erases any trace of difference and plurality: (1) Nishida’s epistemological categories of thought, will, and intellectual intuition; (2) the differentiation between different points in time, mostly beginning and end, without which Nishida’s concept of a “development” (*hatten* 発展) of pure experience would be meaningless; (3) the multiplicity of conscious phenomena in general; and (4) the distinction between pure and impure experience. While the topics are diverse, the key issue remains the same: how can Nishida reconcile the plurality of different phenomena with their supposed oneness?

Takahashi’s criticism is threefold. First, he argues that if everything qualifies as pure experience, the term “pure experience” is overextended to the point that it becomes meaningless. For example, if Nishida identifies every cognitive function as pure experience—in this case, thought, will, and intellectual intuition—

10. While Nishida published his first work, *An Inquiry Into the Good*, in 1911, his non-dual philosophy only reached its maturity between 1933 and 1939. At the same time, Indian philosophers of the Vedanta tradition, especially Sri Aurobindo Ghose, were equally involved in formulating an alternative to what they conceived to be the “Western” philosophical paradigm. In *The Life Divine*, first published in the journal *Arya* in fifty-four installments between 1914 and 1919 and republished in book form in 1940, Sri Aurobindo Ghose develops a non-dualistic philosophy based on the insights of Rāmanujā. While this philosophy shares quite a few similarities with Nishida’s thought—ironically their political philosophies show surprising affinities—Aurobindo never seemed interested in developing a “logic” or a formal philosophical framework, but focused rather on his analysis of what he called “integral yoga.”

there is no reason to use the term “pure experience” in the first place. By the same token, one could argue that Nishida’s rhetoric of pure experience makes the distinction between three cognitive faculties irrelevant since it reduces all three to the “unifying activity” of pure experience. Second, Takahashi points out what he sees as Nishida’s failure to properly distinguish between the “pure” and the “impure,” “unity” and the lack thereof. A philosophy that fails to acknowledge an essential difference between these terms, not only falls into the very monism Nishida openly rejects,¹¹ moreover it renders the very project of a philosophy of pure experience irrelevant. Without an essential distinction between pure experience and impure experience it is impossible to distinguish between a philosophy of pure experience and other approaches in particular as well as true and false in general. Third, Takahashi sees this problem illustrated in Nishida’s notion of difference in degree. Specifically, Takahashi responds to Nishida’s above-cited claim that the difference between unity and not-unity constitutes a matter of degree rather sardonically by saying that “[i]f we follow Nishida’s lead and assume that the essence of pure experience is a unity and this unity is defined by degree, pure experience itself is a matter of degree” (TAKAHASHI 1973, 4: 160). In this case the unity of the pure experience disintegrates into differences by degree. If, on the other hand, one were to suggest that the difference by degree between weak unities and strong unities is secondary to the fact that both constitute a form of unity, the opposite dilemma arises. In short, if the principle of difference comprises merely a smokescreen that hides the underlying unity, all differences would ultimately disappear as would any basis to either argue in favor of or against this proposition. Given such a definition of pure experience, or lack thereof, Takahashi concludes that in Nishida’s system “even the standpoint of opposition constitutes a pure experience and the consciousness of unity an impure experience” (TAKAHASHI 1973, 4: 168). There is, quite literally, no difference between them.

While Nishitani did argue that a radical difference engenders alienation and prevents knowledge—after all Nishida did develop the notion of pure experience as an epistemological category—Takahashi rebuts that an equally radical notion of identity dissolves any distinction between true and false, reduces philosophy to a gratuitous exercise, and prevents the possibility to err. In some sense, Nishida’s rhetoric of the difference by degree recognizes the dilemma created by the terminology of unity, but cannot resolve the problem. Moreover, Nishida’s attempts at fixing this problem within the terminology of pure experience while introducing the notion of difference by degree comprises nothing but a red herring that distracts from the underlying issue. In his response to

11. Takahashi argues that Nishida’s observation that “even if pure experience is complex...it always constitutes a simple singularity” (NISHIDA 1988, 1: 11; TAKAHASHI 1973, 4: 157–8) reintroduces monism through the backdoor.

Takahashi, Nishida suggests that the difference between pure and impure experience constitutes “two aspects of one consciousness” and a “difference in viewpoint” (NISHIDA 1988, 1: 300). However, while Nishida takes more care here to include the principles of the impure and the relative, whose dissolution he explicitly rejects, his philosophy still privileges the notion of identity over that of difference.

As discussed above, this shortcoming motivated him to look for greener pastures promised by his subsequent versions of the non-dual paradigm. The criticisms of Tanabe and Sōda Kiichirō 左右田吉一郎 have amply demonstrated, Nishida's “logic of *basho*” is equally liable to fall into a monism and be identified as a philosophy of selfhood or identity, even though it is more sophisticated than the notion of pure experience. Therefore, I will directly move on to the debates surrounding the key conception of Nishida's mature philosophy, the concept of absolute nothingness.

ABSOLUTE NOTHINGNESS

As it is well known, Nishida frames his theory of absolute nothingness in two steps. First, it constitutes the third term, the non-dual principle, if you will, that reconciles and envelops the fundamental opposition of affirmation and negation, as well as their metaphysical equivalent being and non-being. The term “absolute” distinguishes “absolute nothingness” from “relative non-being” that is opposed to being. Nishida's purpose here is to undermine any metaphysical and methodological or phenomenological dualism—if one considers the principles of affirmation and negation—without falling into any form of reductionism, be it monism of being or nihilism.

In his “The Logic of *Basho* and the Religious Worldview,” Nishida takes this rhetoric a step further and defines the absolute as the principle that includes its own opposition inside itself. In an often-cited passage, Nishida explains that “[t]he absolute contains its own absolute self-negation inside itself. To include its own absolute self-negation inside oneself, it becomes absolute nothingness. Insofar as it becomes absolute nothingness, that which negates itself opposes itself and includes absolute negation inside itself” (NISHIDA 1988, 11: 197). Practically, for Nishida this means that while the absolute constitutes the ontological foundation of the world it does not exist separate from the world of binaries but is expressed by it and develops through it. In other words, the absolute constitutes the relationship between the opposites. Secondly, Nishida argues that this absolute discloses the characteristic of nothingness, actually, absolute nothingness, in that it neither proposes a form of being, nor simply stands relative to such a conception. To Nishida, it embodies the non-dual principle insofar as it incorporates all binaries such as being and non-being, absolute and relative, without falling into a dualism that reifies the distinctions between them.

At first sight, Nishida's definition of the absolute as that which contains relativity as its own opposite certainly seems as if it fulfills the criteria in order to function as a non-dual paradigm. At the same time, however, Nishida's own formulation raises two fundamental questions: (1) Does it not simply collapse the difference between the relative and the absolute within the absolute and, subsequently subsume the world of relativity within the absolute?; or (2) does it relativize the absolute vis-à-vis the relative? Tanabe's criticism thematizes the former problem, Takahashi's the latter.

In his essay, "Nishida in Controversy" (*Nishida o meguru ronten* 西田をめぐる論点) (1987, 9: 191–224), NISHITANI suggests that Takahashi criticizes Nishida's "absolute nothingness" from two standpoints, that is, "the standpoint of the determinate realm" and the "vantage point from above" (1987, 9: 211). In some sense, this observation summarizes Takahashi's argument perfectly. Takahashi rejects Nishida's conception on two grounds; it is neither absolute enough nor reconcilable with human experience. Of course the question arises as to what does Takahashi mean when he says that Nishida's absolute does not really deserve to be called absolute. Did Nishida not define the absolute carefully as that which neither excludes nor is identical to or on the same level as the relative? If such a definition does not designate the absolute, what are the necessary and sufficient criteria of the absolute? Takahashi's point of attack here is once again what he suspects to be the monism within Nishida's thought. Analogous to his argument against Nishida's stratification of pure experience on the grounds that Nishida's notion of the unity implies that either the pure absorbs the impure or the impure corrupts the pure, TAKAHASHI contends in "On Nishida" (*Nishida ni tsuite* 西田について) (1973, 4: 183–220) and in "Fundamental Potentiality and Systematic Potentiality" (*Konpon kanōsei to taikei kanōsei* 根本可能性と体系可能性) (1973, 1: 201–43) that it is impossible to reconcile nothingness with being and the absolute with the relative. This contention radically undercuts the very foundation of Nishida's absolute. The reader will recall that Nishida argued, as I have discussed above, that the absolute in order to be absolute manifests and, to use dialectical terminology, determines itself in the realm of relativity and absolute nothingness, subsequently, in being. Takahashi bluntly rejects this definition. "Absolute nothingness," he argues, "does not determine itself in being. A nothingness that determines itself in being is not absolute nothingness, but, ultimately, is nothing but a nothingness relative to being. Rather...the system of existence, which embraces relative being and non-being as entities, determines absolute nothingness" (TAKAHASHI 1973, 1: 238).

How does Takahashi then define absolute nothingness? Like all dialectical thinkers Takahashi suggests a three-layered world. According to Takahashi, "foundational nothingness" (*konponteki mu* 根本的無) marks the beginning of the world and all events; "systematic nothingness" (*taikeiteki mu* 体系的無) constitutes the totality that provides the context of history and includes all existents

and developments including their opposites as its part.¹² Even though Takahashi identifies systematic nothingness with the totality, he insists that it is not absolute insofar as it is different from the beginning and the historical process of the world in the same way in which the totality of the world differs from its parts. The advent of totality marks at the same time the end of history. Once the totality of reality is manifested, there is nothing left to say or happen. However, since this *eschaton* is separate from the historical process and the totality from its parts, Takahashi introduces the notion of absolute nothingness as the principle that envelops and transcends both principles, totality and its parts, and transcendence and immanence. As heuristic device Takahashi employs the notion of *hōetsu* (包越). *Hōetsu*, the Japanese translation of Karl Jaspers' *das Umgreifende*, combines the characters for "to envelop" (*tsutsumu* 包む) and "to transcend" (*koeru* 越える). This is important to Takahashi since the totality envelops and transcends the infinite particulars that constitute the phenomenal world, and absolute nothingness envelops and transcends this totality and its parts.

While Takahashi's descriptions of this absolute nothingness sound at times like Nishida's version, Takahashi's absolute nothingness differs, as Kosaka Kunitsugu observed, from Nishida's in two significant ways. Firstly, Nishida's absolute nothingness "subsumes" (*hōsetsu* 包摂) being and non-being while Takahashi's "envelops and transcends" them (KOSAKA 1997, p. 169).¹³ In some sense, Takahashi finds it necessary that these two realms of relativity and of the absolute are mediated by a third term in an almost Neo-Platonic¹⁴ fashion in order to preserve the absoluteness of the absolute and the limitations of the relative. Secondly, the distinction between Nishida's *hōsetsu* and Takahashi's *hōetsu*, however small it seems, is rather significant; it is reflected in their respective and divergent conceptions of absolute nothingness. Nishida's absolute nothingness is not separate from the relativity of not only this world but also that of the immanent and the transcendent, whereas Takahashi's is. To Takahashi, absolute nothingness is twice removed from and transcendent to particular objects and individual selves: the totality of the world transcends the individual, and absolute nothingness, which mediates between the totality of the world and its part, transcends this totality. Nishida, on the contrary, suggests that its second transcendence returns absolute nothingness to the realm of the immanent. In Nishida's philosophy, the mediation of absolute nothingness is transcendent insofar as it is

12. Takahashi defines systematic nothingness as follows: "What I call the concrete system constitutes the highest and unmoving totality which simultaneously envelops the process from the foundation to the end and the reversed process from the end to the beginning" (TAKAHASHI 1973, 1: 218).

13. There is a second distinction between these two thinkers, which is not directly related to the present discussion. While absolute nothingness is determined by systematic nothingness to Takahashi, Nishida rejects the very idea that the absolute could be determined at all.

14. As Kosaka has pointed out, Takahashi's philosophy resembles that of Plotinus in that it separates the absolute from and privileges it over the relative. In addition, he includes a third principle to mediate between both.

different from either the totality of life or the multiplicity of individuals that inhabit it, and immanent insofar as it does not exist separate from them. To Takahashi, however, such a view would imply that the absolute can be grasped, verbally or non-verbally, within the realm of relativity when, in fact, the absolute is ungraspable and absolutely transcendent.¹⁵ It even transcends the opposition between the world of history and the totality that discloses itself at the end of time.

Takahashi's second route commences at the opposite end of his first one in that it takes human experience as its starting point; nevertheless, it leads him to the same conclusion. One of Takahashi's strongest and most frequently recurring criticisms of Nishida, one he shares wholeheartedly with Tanabe and Miki, is that Nishida undervalues the historicity and temporality of human existence. All three thinkers reject Nishida's emphasis on "discontinuity" even if it is couched in terms of a "continuity of discontinuity" (*hirenzoku no renzoku* 非連続の連続). It seems that while Nishida imported the principle of discontinuity into his philosophy of history, he never even so much as suggested the reversibility of time and history. Nishida rather reiterated in an almost mantric fashion that "time cannot return to what was prior to the individual moment" (NISHIDA 1988, 6: 183, 234, 240). Moreover, he employed the principle of discontinuity primarily to undermine a causal-mechanistic approach that denied the possibility of free will and creativity, and to accentuate the dimension of the world of engagement. It thus seems rather improbable that Nishida indeed intended to deny the continuity of history or to propose the reversibility of time or the synchronicity of past, present, and future. But the three so-called Marxist critics of Nishida Philosophy are right on target when they observe that Nishida simply failed to give credence to the radical historicity that characterizes human existence and, obviously, philosophy; a lack even Nishitani could not fill in his famous *What is Religion?* (*Shūkyō to wa nanika* 宗教とは何か) (NISHITANI 1987, vol. 10).

More than any of his colleagues Takahashi translates the radical implications of this criticism into his general philosophy and expresses them in, among others, the following observations: "[A]s being-in-the-world, human existence cannot be disconnected from the surrounding world." In other words, human beings are determined by the "social and natural environment and the historical condition" (TAKAHASHI 1973, 5: 120). In his treatise on religion he is even blunter in his rejection of any claims that the transcendence or the absolute can manifest itself in the historical world when he announces that "limited beings cannot become infinite" (TAKAHASHI 1973, 5: 9) and religion is not a matter of "becoming a Buddha in this body, but of not becoming a Buddha in this body" (TAKAHASHI 1973, 5: 28). Tanabe's writings echo this sentiment when he observes that "insofar as we live in the present world, rebirth in the Pure Land

15. This difference is also reflected in their varying approaches to the problem of the one and the many; NISHIDA affirms their identity (1988, 11: 447), TAKAHASHI does not (1973, 4: 196).

and nirvana cannot be attained" (TANABE 1963, 9: 151). The message embedded in these statements is loud and clear. Human beings are determined, relative, and limited, ontologically, epistemologically, and soteriologically. Anyone who suggests otherwise misses the point. It is the belief that human existence is ultimately limited and relative that motivates Takahashi to clearly demarcate the parts that make up the historical world and their totality. In Takahashi's worldview, the parts inhabit the imperfect since changing historical world and the totality marks its end and perfection. The relativity between the totality and its parts, however, is enveloped and transcended by the absolute, a necessary but unknowable principle. In the end, Takahashi admits that concepts such as "eternity," "infinity," and the "absolute" must have some connection to the historical world, but since they do escape human cognition, he is convinced that they are best "left behind" (TAKAHASHI 1973 4: 214). In some sense, this ambivalence Takahashi exhibited towards the non-dual principle provides the key to his philosophy. In short, while Takahashi saw the need for the non-dual principle, he expelled it from his system.

Compared to the other critics of Nishida Philosophy, Takahashi's strength does not lie in developing his own alternative philosophical system, such as Tanabe did, but in amplifying the strengths and weaknesses of Nishida's philosophy. Takahashi admits, at least in his later writings, that Nishida's non-dual paradigm and even his absolute nothingness constitute the principle necessary to make sense of the binaries characteristic of human experience. However, while the systematic formulation of this paradigm constitutes Nishida's primary contribution to philosophy, it took Takahashi to point out that if this paradigm lies outside the world of knowledge and self-awareness, as even Nishida admits, the conception of it poses an immense epistemological and methodological problem: we cannot know what lies outside of the world of knowledge! According to Takahashi, the very fact that this paradigm has to be expressed by means of contradiction, such as Nishida's "self-identity of the absolute contradiction" or the *sokuhi* of the *Diamond Sutra*, illustrates that it actually cannot be thought. If we were to imagine a conversation between Takahashi and Nishida on this matter, it would probably read as follows. Takahashi accuses Nishida of trying to express in words a transcendent principle that cannot be known or thought. Nishida would respond to this challenge that we can know the absolute because it manifests itself in the realm of relativity analogous to god who manifests itself in nature and humanity. "True enough," Takahashi would concede, if we continue this imaginary conversation between these two philosophers, but not without adding that this process constitutes "the determination of the indeterminate, the temporalization of the eternal" (TAKAHASHI 1973, 4: 214), and not the indeterminate, eternal, or the absolute. In other words, my thought or manifestation of the absolute is no longer absolute, but relative, determined, and, ultimately, fallible. Takahashi is strikingly consequent in his thought. Not only does he reject Nishida's pure

experience and absolute for not allowing the possibility of error, he acknowledges the relativity and fallibility of his own position as well. This sounds like an extraordinary move for a philosopher whose guiding principle is, as most scholars agree, the “one totality” (*zettai itsu* 絶対一). But there is a second facet to his philosophy, emphasized by Nobechi Tōyō, namely a standpoint of radical relativity. According to Nobechi, Takahashi’s main interest is not to construct a new absolutist system but to undermine the one suggested by Nishida. These two approaches are not in conflict because Takahashi places the latter in the present and defers the former to the end of time. But this chiasm between history and totality, which of course obliterates Nishida’s whole effort to overcome dualism, should not concern us here; what is of concern is his observation that the absolute, when manifested in the world of relativity, ceases to be absolute and so does our knowledge of it.

THE PRINCIPLE OF MEDIATION

In his 1936 article “On Nishida,” Takahashi suggested that Nishida’s dialectic of the universal and the particular has to be mediated.¹⁶ This does not seem to be too radical an idea given the fact that Nishida filled numerous pages of his writings between 1933 to 1937 with little graphs presumably explaining the mediating function of the absolute and Tanabe had already released in 1934 his “Logic of the Specific”¹⁷ (*Shu no ronri* 種の論理) (TANABE 1963, p. 6), which laid the foundation for his notion of “absolute mediation” (*zettai baikai* 絶対媒介). However, there is a significant difference in the respective stratification of “mediation” (*baikai* 媒介). Nishida’s is the most straightforward. His writing indicates that since a strict separation of the universal and the particular renders knowledge, such as, for example, the judgment “the rose is red” which is established by the identity of the particular “rose” and the universal “red,” impossible and suggests the absurdity that individual beings are separate from nature, these opposites have to be grounded in and mediated by his non-dual paradigm, absolute nothingness. Insofar as this absolute nothingness is different from the universal, the particular, and their opposites—it encompasses all elements plus their multiple relationships—it can be called transcendent; insofar as it does not exist separate from the world of the universal and its particular members, it is immanent. Nishida consequently calls the relationship between this all-encompassing meditative principle and the constituents it mediates transcendence-in-immanence. Takahashi agrees with the necessity of such a mediating principle but argues that

16. One puzzling aspect about this criticism is, however, that it was published in 1936, two years after Nishida had introduced the notion of mediation into his philosophy in *Fundamental Problems of Philosophy*.

17. James Heisig’s introduced the “specific” rather than the traditional and literal “species” as the translation of *shu* (HEISIG 1995, p. 189).

Nishida's version of it is untenable if not logically unsound. First of all, the relationship among two particulars or between a particular and the respective universal is a "contrary" (*hantaiteki* 反対的) not a "contradictory" (*zettaiteki* 絶対的) one. The distinction between both is small but significant. In short, a contrary opposition indicates a conflict between two items and marks an alternative, a contradiction suggests a mutually exclusive relationship and thus marks the one and only alternative. For example, two red objects as well as one red object and the universal of redness constitute a contrary opposition; in either case the two elements in question form an opposition but not an exclusive one since there is always the possibility of a further red object. A contradiction would require the opposition between the universal and an infinite number of particulars.

Interestingly enough, Nishida follows Takahashi even along this line of argument when he suggests in 1937 that the mediation of the universal and the particular is facilitated only and exclusively by the "self-identity of the absolute contradiction between the many in the one and the one in the many" (*tasokuitsu issokuta no zettai mujunteki jiko dōitsu* 多即一一即多の絶対矛盾的自己同一) (NISHIDA 1988, 8: 561). The difference between these two thinkers lies in the fact that Nishida allows for this contradiction and Takahashi does not. To Takahashi, the contrary opposition among two particulars or between a particular and the respective universal is facilitated by the systematic nothingness which provides the context of the historical world; the contradiction, however, falls into the realm of absolute nothingness and lies beyond the grasp of human intellect. Nishida hints at the distinction between these two types of mediation when he differentiates between a "simple self-identity" and an "absolute self-identity." He parts ways with Takahashi, however, when he suggests that this "absolute self-identity" between the totality of life and its numerous members is not different from but rather manifested in the simple opposition between two objects, two individuals, or the encounter of one individual with the final universal, the totality in the religious experience. Takahashi, on the contrary, as it should be clear by now, defers this contradiction, quite literally, to the end of the world. Each of these two positions has its strength: Nishida consistently rejects any possibility of dualism, while Takahashi is eager to protect the philosophical method from its corruption through mysticism and religion.

Incorporating Nishida's non-dualistic paradigm and Takahashi's sensitivity for the problems the postulate of a contradiction entails, Tanabe suggests a third solution. Not unlike Hegel and Nishida, Tanabe sets out to overcome the dualism caused by Kant's *Ding an sich*. He even follows the method of his mentor, Nishida, and commences his investigation with an analysis of the formal judgment as discussed by Aristotle and Kant. However, he does not only reject Aristotle's "logic of the subject" as Nishida does, but Nishida's "logic of the predicate" as well. His reasoning is that formal judgments, such as the above-mentioned example of "the rose is red," not only presumes the unity of the subject and the

predicate but their difference as well. Tanabe explains that “[t]he copula ‘is’ neither implies the identity of the concepts of subject and predicate nor presumes the identity of reality and thought.” A judgment in which the subject, such as a rose, “sinks into” the predicate, here redness, is as untenable as is one that bases its criteria on a transcendent reality. The former denies the reality of the external object; the latter prevents the possibility of formal judgments in which individual objects are assigned a quality altogether. The problem, according to Tanabe, lies in the fallacy of trying to privilege one aspect over the other. The copula of the judgment—in the case of the example “the rose is red,” “is” functions as the copula—unites two distinct constituents, both of which are equally necessary ingredients of the formal judgment. Similarly, knowledge in general neither depends on an external criterion, such as Aristotle’s substance or Kant’s *Ding an sich*, nor does it subsume the subject under the predicate as Nishida did in his early version of his “logic of *basho*.”¹⁸ Rather, “it takes as its content the unity of the negative opposition that is rooted in existence and speculation, reality and the concept. This must have as its essence absolute mediation. Such a logic does not constitute a form of rationalism but a logic of the irrational that constitutes a feature of the logic of absolute mediation; only such a logic can lay the foundation of a rational logic” (TANABE 1963 6: 178). Tanabe thus extends his logic of mediation from the confines of the formal judgment to a general theory of knowledge and argues that the formation of knowledge cannot be based solely on either external objects or internal objects, but requires both. By the same token, it also involves thought and speculation. As the last citation demonstrates, Tanabe is willing to take the logic of mediation even one step further and concludes that the establishment of knowledge implies even the mediation of rationality and irrationality. To be exact, even the most logical system assumes a standpoint and a set of rules, the proof of which lies outside the rules themselves. In other words, even logic is grounded in some leap of faith. To Tanabe this means that differentiation between binaries is as important to the epistemological and ontological discourses as their unity.

This is where Tanabe departs from Nishida. While, to Tanabe, the strengths of Nishida Philosophy lie in pointing out the failure of dualism, its lack can be found in a terminology that suggests monism, namely the terminology of self-identity and its derivatives, such as “unifying activity,” *basho*, and “universal,” on the one hand, and the notion of the absolute nothingness on the other. The former denies difference explicitly, the latter implicitly. Tanabe argues that to conceive of negation as absolute nothingness is paramount to reifying the principle of negation into an entity and ultimately, implies the oneness of the absolute.¹⁹ To Tanabe, opposites are not mediated by an absolute nothingness, as Nishida suggests, but

18. I refer here to the version Nishida developed in *From Acting to Seeing* (NISHIDA 1988, 4) between 1924 and 1927.

19. The fact that Takahashi’s absolute nothingness ends up as the “one totality” illustrates this mechanism.

by an “absolute negation” (*zettai hitei* 絶対否定). From Tanabe’s perspective, the term “absolute nothingness” signifies a form of existence and ultimately, an entity, while “absolute negation” rather refers to an infinite process in which reality evolves in the field of tension between two ever changing opposite poles. The former implies perfection, stasis, and permanence, the latter imperfection, transition, dynamic activity, and constant change. Like Nishida and Takahashi, Tanabe contends that in order to function properly, mediation must include a double negation. However, Takahashi interprets this double negation as a twice-removed transcendence of absolute nothingness, Nishida as an affirmation of absolute nothingness in the phenomenal world. To Tanabe, on the contrary, absolute or double negation implies that the absolute constantly negates itself; it is neither eternal nor permanent but changes perpetually. In criticism of Nishida’s early logic of *basho*, Tanabe proposes that the mediating principle does not constitute an unchanging place but mediates itself.

Tanabe’s conception of absolute mediation discloses two fundamental implications. First, in a manner not unlike Takahashi’s, Tanabe asserts that there is no fulfillment in the historical world but infinite openness and constant change. Secondly, there is neither absolute certainty nor absolute truth. On the one hand, and this obviously follows from his doctrine of historicity, Tanabe introduces a new variable into the discussion, the notion of discourse. Showing the influence of Heidegger, who was his mentor in Freiburg, Tanabe reminds the reader that the absolute that philosophers talk about is an absolute mediated by logic and, one could add, language. Even if there were an absolute, it could never be the object of the philosophical discourse. This kind of thinking, which drove Takahashi to defer the absolute to the end of the world, leads Tanabe to introduce another concept, the notion of the “absolute critique” (*zettai hihan* 絶対批判). While he does not seem to define the term properly, it is clear that it implies a constant self-reflection and self-correction of philosophy as absolute mediation. In Tanabe’s system, the concepts of “absolute mediation” and “absolute critique” indicate that because the absolute is manifested in this world, it is subject to the laws of temporality and change. In a move similar to Takahashi, he declares that concepts such as the absolute constitute “limit concepts” (*kyokugen gainen* 極限概念) and thus indicate that the absolute in the sense of totality can never be reached. In short, limit concepts are logically and epistemologically necessary but, because they can never be grasped, merely indicate a limit which conceptual language approaches asymptotically.

Insofar as Tanabe refrains from severing the absolute from the historical world and the resulting dualism, presumably exactly because he agrees with Takahashi that there must be a connection between the absolute and the historical world, his philosophy seems to edge closer to Nishida’s non-dualism in that he prefers the ambiguity of the “absolute that is not an absolute” over Takahashi’s utter transcendence. However, the comparison to Takahashi does bring to light a

point often forgotten. Tanabe criticizes or corrects the belief that absolute knowledge as well as the knowledge of the absolute are possible. It is sometimes said that Nishida intended to accomplish just that in *An Inquiry Into the Good* and his “logic of *basho*” as developed in *From Acting to Seeing*. And it is true that the three thinkers discussed here agree on three fundamental points: (1) The non-dual paradigm is necessary to make sense of the binary structure of our experience and knowledge; (2) This paradigm lies outside the world of knowledge; (3) It lies in the realm of religious experience. However, they differ in their response to these observations. Since it is absolutely fundamental to understanding the standpoint and philosophical agendas of Nishida, Tanabe, and Takahashi, I will repeat this distinction again: Takahashi banishes this non-dual paradigm from the philosophical discourse, Nishida makes it the absolute ground of all philosophy, and Tanabe the self-corrective ground of philosophy. While it may be possible to recognize a rapprochement between Nishida’s later philosophy and Tanabe’s philosophy of absolute mediation and to identify postmodern tendencies—namely a reliance on the principles of difference and otherness to undercut the modernist project of searching for universals—in Nishida’s “self-identity of the absolute contradiction,” his earlier language clearly privileges unity and subjectivity over difference and objectivity. Even his “self-identity of the absolute contradiction” seems to err on the side of identity. Be that as it may, however, I do not think it is possible or constructive to speculate what Nishida intended when he formulated his final philosophy of self-identity in his later writings; on the contrary, the workability of his concept seem to be a more pressing issue. The criticisms of Takahashi and Tanabe have demonstrated where Nishida’s thought is lacking the most, and by doing so they have implicitly suggested strategies to strengthen his philosophical attempt at framing a non-dual paradigm.

The Difference between Self and Other

In general, Tanabe and Takahashi reproach Nishida for having developed an identity philosophy that excludes the notions of difference and otherness or, at least, reduces them to a “difference in degree” and subsumes them under the underlying oneness. They develop this criticism for the most part vis-à-vis Nishida’s pure experience and logic of *basho*.²⁰ Whether or not this criticism applies to Nishida’s later philosophy presents a difficult issue; nevertheless, it seems to me that this criticism and, moreover, the implicit distinction between an identity philosophy and a philosophy of difference provides a helpful device to interpret Nishida Philosophy. To understand this distinction, it will be important to return to Tanabe’s and Takahashi’s criticisms of Nishida.

20. Tanabe criticizes Nishida for subsuming the noema under the noesis and, subsequently, promoting a monism of subjectivity not unlike Plotinus (TANABE 1998, pp. 72–4).

In general Takahashi and Tanabe base their interpretation of Nishida Philosophy as identity philosophy on two basic features; Nishida's predilection for the concept of contradiction, and what they interpret to be his monism. Tanabe's argument to this effect is rather simple. Nishida's contradictions establish a universal oneness by collapsing irreducible opposites, such as being and non-being, many and one, and rationality and irrationality. As Tanabe observes with regard to the former pair, "even when we assert the direct unity between being and non-being, these two are originally absolutely opposed to each other" (TANABE 1963, 6: 466). Contradictions are incompatible with logical reasoning and identity philosophy cannot accommodate the phenomena of change and multiplicity that are fundamental to human experience. To resolve this problem both Takahashi and Tanabe suggest including the principle of otherness, in their terminology "other-power" (*tariki* 他力), as a new paradigm (see TAKAHASHI 1973, 5: 29).

Regardless of the fact that other-power constitutes an explicitly religious concept, both thinkers borrow from the religious rhetoric of True Pure Land Buddhism (Jōdo Shinshū 浄土真宗), and both employ the term to indicate a philosophy of difference rather than a Pure Land Buddhist theory. This is especially true in the case of Takahashi who commences his essay on religion, "My View of Religion" (*Watakushi no shūkyōkan* 私の宗教観; TAKAHASHI 1973, 5: 5–56), with the confession that he is not religious at all. Yet it also applies to Tanabe who, despite the fact that his *Philosophy as Metanoetics* (*Zangedō toshite no tetsugaku* 懺悔道としての哲学; TANABE 1963, 9) does evoke Shinran's thought explicitly, is more interested in a philosophy of absolute critique than a theory of the Pure Land or Amida Buddha. While the notion of radical difference makes sense in the context of Takahashi's writings that identify absolute nothingness as an absolutely transcendent other, it is more difficult to find traces of an other-power in Tanabe's system beyond the occasional rhetorical effect²¹ and his call for a conversion that admits personal fallibility and defers to something transcendent. On the contrary, both assertions seem to be without connection to Tanabe's larger philosophical system.²² I think it is safe to say that

21. HEISIG observes that "[e]ven the repeated referral to himself with the words 'sinful and ignorant as I am' so rarely touches down on the solid ground of particular historical facts that the reader cannot but slide over the phrase after a while" (2001, 161).

22. In addition, TANABE even concedes that "absolute other-power...is actualized only in relationship to self-power" (1963, 9: 150). While this, of course, seems to be suspiciously close to Nishida's neologism "self-power-and-other-power" (*jiriki tariki* 自力他力) and his observation that the notion of "self-power religion" constitutes a "contradictory concept" (NISHIDA 1988, 11: 411), the difference between those position becomes more apparent when one compares the respective explanations. While Nishida comments that "[o]ther-power religion in its extreme is identical to self-power-religion" (NISHIDA 1988, 15: 330), Tanabe suggests that the very notion of "non-discrimination" is abstract and the notion of "self-power-in-other-power, other-power-in-self-power" (*jiriki soku tariki, tariki soku jiriki* 自力即他力, 他力即自力) results in an untenable monism. In short, Nishida emphasizes the moment of identity, Tanabe that of difference.

Tanabe uses the rhetoric of other-power to introduce the moment of difference into the non-dual paradigm. This is important since, to Tanabe, identity marks rest and mystical knowledge, while difference marks change²³ and the epistemic and soteriological limitations of the self.

The function of the principle of difference in his system is nowhere as obvious as it is in his analysis and eventual subversion of the concept most central to the early philosophies of Nishida and his proponents, Nishitani and Ueda, self-awareness. According to Tanabe, “[e]ven what we call self-awareness does not imply that the self that is self-aware should be conceived of as self-identity. On the contrary, as the mediation of nothingness it becomes nothing.... The self-awareness of nothingness constitutes the nothingness of self-awareness” (TANABE 1963, 9: 54) and “the self-awareness of the self is nothing” (TANABE 1963, 9: 158). While the mediation of absolute nothingness to Nishida enables a unity of subject and object, the self as knower and the self that is known, and, ultimately, self-awareness, Tanabe argues that the mediation of absolute nothingness, which upholds both aspects, that is, subject and object, and being and non-being, does not establish but rather subverts and negates self-awareness. The preservation of the difference between subject and object not only breaks open the very unity self-awareness necessitates, it also demonstrates the philosophical implications of the paradigm of difference. As difference and change cannot be resolved, absolute self-awareness, which is, to Tanabe, the symbol of identity and permanence, is not possible. Concretely, Tanabe uses the rhetoric of other-power to counter the project of identity philosophy to describe his philosophy beyond philosophy with religious symbolism, and to identify a philosophy that preserves the tension and ambiguity of the opposites and does not resolve difference into oneness. Rhetorically, this terminology marks a clear criticism of what he perceives to be Nishida’s philosophical standpoint. Conceptually Tanabe delivers an invaluable insight in the respective significance of the paradigms of identity and difference. The moment of difference is necessary to theorize not only history and individuality but to theorize in general, because without difference, that is without the ability to distinguish a good philosophical position from a bad one, and one idea from its opposite, any philosophical discourse is rendered meaningless.

This thought deserves a much more in-depth treatment than I can offer here, not the least because Tanabe, Takahashi, and Miki stylize their philosophies in opposition to Nishida’s as philosophies of other-power, while Nishitani and Ueda developed what can be called philosophies of self-awareness. Despite my emphasis here on the criticisms of it, this latter standpoint is necessary due to

23. This shift from a static to a dynamic worldview can be also seen in Tanabe’s rejection of Nishida’s “mutual opposition” (*sōgo tairitsu* 相互対立) for the “transformative mediation” (*tenkan baikai* 転換媒介).

two fundamental characteristics of the human condition. First, even the solid arguments of Tanabe and Takahashi cannot conceal the fact that my knowledge of the world is always *my* knowledge of the world. A philosophy that rejects the moment of subjectivity deludes itself. Second, the moment when subject and object, identity and difference collide is, despite the validity of Tanabe's criticism, self-awareness. It is for those reasons that Nishitani and Ueda constructed their philosophies as philosophies of identity and of the self. Nishitani choose as the place of his philosophy human existence beyond the alienation of nihilism and Ueda the self-awareness of the self where not only subject and object but also microcosm and macrocosm coincide. These perspectives are invaluable for contemporary philosophy because they thematize the very standpoint of the philosopher, which is always that of the self-reflective subject, and, at the same time, correct the shortcomings of the three great philosophers of the subject, René Descartes, Immanuel Kant, and Edmund Husserl, who all fell into subjectivism, dualism, and, to some degree, solipsism. In addition, the case of Takahashi demonstrates the difficulty of a pure philosophy of difference whose notion of a radical transcendence recreates the very problems Nishida set out to solve. The solution to this conundrum thus seems to lie in what may be called a middle way philosophy that contains a self-corrective principle understood in the sense of Tanabe's absolute critique. Such a philosophy will have to start simultaneously from two separate points, the paradigms of identity and of difference, which are to be read against each other. This approach is actually warranted by Nishida's philosophy itself, which, as I have shown above, never dissolves but, to the contrary, strives to maintain the principles of difference and change despite its rhetoric of self-identity and the logic of the predicate. In addition, Nishida himself implies in his "The Logic of *Basho* and the Religious Worldview" that philosophy presents a process of infinite deepening.

Such a philosophy would use the standpoint of difference as a corrective to identity philosophy to prevent the latter from collapsing into a monism, while the standpoint of identity would prevent a philosophy of difference from disintegrating into a dualism. In other words, a non-dual philosophy would take as its starting point Nishida's "one in many, many in one," albeit not in the form of a self-identity but one mediated by the principle of absolute criticism. Concretely, the philosopher would not see her/himself as separate from the totality and would thus commence from a standpoint of self-awareness while, at the same time, be in dialogue with the opposite standpoint, the standpoint of the other. In the case of Nishida scholarship, such a method would treat Nishida's absolute nothingness not only as the self-awareness of the mystic totality expressed in the religious experience of the individual but also as the self-corrective hermeneutical principle. Using such a hermeneutic, Nishida's absolute nothingness would render interconnectedness and its ethical and soteriological implications without implying a formal identity, the dissolution of difference,

or a rejection of logic. If such a philosophy could be developed it would not only elaborate the non-dual paradigm introduced by Nishida into the language of mainstream philosophy, but also constitute a unique contribution to the philosophical discourse.

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