

# Between Foundationalism and Relativism

## *Locating Nishida's "Logic of Basho" on the Ideological Landscape*

Gereon KOPF

*Visiting Research Fellow, Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture*

THE IDEA OF place or *basho* is central to the thinking of Japan's leading twentieth-century philosopher, Nishida Kitarō. His "logic of *basho*" is generally interpreted by critics and disciples alike as a way of locating human existence in the absolute, in the "place of absolute nothingness," or in "absolute contradictory self-identity." Nishida's followers hail his philosophy as the solution to the most urgent epistemological dilemma (Ueda Shizuteru, Robert Wargo), as a philosophy that grounds human knowledge in the religious experience (Nishitani Keiji, Robert Carter, Yusa Michiko), or as a philosophical elaboration of the Zen logic vis-à-vis Western philosophy (Abe Masao). His critics, on the contrary, accuse him of misleading word games (Nobechi Tōyō, Tanabe Hajime),<sup>1</sup> dialectical entanglement (Takahashi Satomi), sloppy philosophy, or uncritical foundationalism (Hakamaya Noriyaki).

In this paper, I will argue that Nishida's philosophy does not require an absolutist or foundationalist position, but rather reveals clues towards what I would call "transcendental relativism." The term *transcendental relativism* is used to define a philosophical position that recognizes the need to postulate a transcendental ground of human knowledge, while at the same time acknowledging both the elusiveness of this ground and the fundamental epistemological limitations of human existence that condemns philosophical discourse to an inherent historicism and relativism.<sup>2</sup> To demonstrate this, I will examine Nishida's logic of *basho* and his

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<sup>1</sup> Nobechi characterizes Nishida's conception of "nothingness" as "abuse." 野辺地東洋 (Nobechi, Tōyō), 『西田哲学批判: 高橋里美の体系』 [*A criticism of Nishida philosophy: The system of Takahashi Satomi*] (Tokyo: Daimyōdō, 1991), 21.

<sup>2</sup> Gereon Kopf, "Buddhist Non-Dualism and Transcendental Phenomenology," Bina Gupta, ed., *The Empirical and the Transcendental: A Fusion of Horizons* (Rowman & Littlefield, June 2000).

definition of it as “absolute contradictory self-identity.” I will argue that Nishida not only adopts *basho* as a foundation for philosophical discourse—albeit a foundation conceived of as “absolute nothingness”—but also includes a critique of the concept of *basho* itself. My argument is based on the belief that an interpretation of Nishida’s logic of *basho* in terms of transcendental relativism can help clarify the dialectical side of his philosophy, in particular, his notoriously difficult ideas of “affirmation-qua-negation” and “absolute contradictory self-identity.” In this way I hope to highlight Nishida’s contribution to a non-substantialist philosophy insofar as his logic of *basho* represents a critique not only of the notion of substance itself, but of every philosophical claim to ground experience, including his own philosophy of *basho*.

### *The Logic of Basho*

The basic tenet of Nishida’s logic of *basho* is summarized in the *dictum* that every “thing that exists” (*aru mono*) has to be located in a place (*basho*). This implies both that individual objects (*kobutsu*) are located in physical space, and that “to know things... is to assume a field of consciousness.”<sup>3</sup> Language in general and interpersonal communication in particular presuppose the field of intersubjectivity that Nishida refers to as “I and Thou.” All human activity—and here Nishida draws particular attention to knowledge, art, and morality—is located in the “historical world.” What is more, he insists, the comparison of ideas, the opposition between individual objects, and the I-Thou encounter between independent individuals require such a common ground. In formulating his logic of *basho*, Nishida distinguishes two elements, which Ueda identifies as “the place of containment” (*oite aru basho*) and “that which is located” (*oite aru mono*); or in other words, that which exists from the *basho* that encompasses that which exists and gives it meaning. I will refer to these two elements here as “containing” and “being in.”

Nishida appeals to subsumptive judgment as the prototype of his idea of “being in.” In order to be known, the grammatical subject has to be “located” in a predicate. For example, one cannot conceive of a red object without locating it in the universal of “redness.” Thus the judgment “the rose is red” attributes the predicate “red” to a particular object, the “rose,” or more precisely, to the particular color red of the rose. Similarly, a comparison of the colors “red” and “blue” requires that both be located in the same universal of “color.”

Analyzing the structure of the subsumptive judgment, Nishida notes three characteristics of what he calls “predicate logic.” First, the predicate takes priority

<sup>3</sup>『西田幾多郎全集』[*The collected works of Nishida Kitarō*] (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1988); hereafter abbreviated as NKZ), IV: 210.

over the grammatical subject because it is “contained in” and “sinks into” the subject: the particular redness of the rose is subsumed under the universal of redness. Second, the grammatical subject functions as a “particularization” of the predicate, without which it would be merely abstract and lack meaning. In other words, without a particularization in red objects, the universal “redness” would represent an empty concept. Third, the subsumptive judgment ends up as a “unity of grammatical subject and predicate,”<sup>4</sup> insofar as it postulates an identity of the grammatical subject and the predicate by means of a copula. Defined in this way, Nishida argues, the subsumptive judgment is seen to have an inherently self-contradictory structure in that it posits the identity of two opposites, grammatical subject and predicate, particular and universal.<sup>5</sup>

This “contradictory unity” of subject and predicate leaves the philosopher with an interesting conundrum. On the one hand, the predicate subsumes the grammatical subject into itself in order to bestow meaning on it; on the other, the predicate and the grammatical subject “mutually determine” one another as opposites, and hence are finally unified in the judgment itself. In addition—and this makes Nishida’s analysis still more difficult—both the grammatical subject and the predicate empty themselves in the subsumptive judgment.<sup>6</sup> Insofar as the subject constitutes the particularization of the predicate, the predicate depends, in some sense, on the grammatical subject, without which it would not be able to assume a concrete form. In other words, the particularization of the predicate deprives the predicate of its inherent universal character, and at the same time the predicate negates the grammatical subject by having it sink into the predicate and thereby forfeit its particularity. Nishida is therefore compelled to conclude that, in more than one sense, the structure of the subsumptive judgment is of necessity self-contradictory.

Nishida adopts the same category of “being in” to investigate the logical structure of the formal syllogism.<sup>7</sup> More precisely, he introduces the terminology of the

<sup>4</sup> Nishida argues that “to some extent the grammatical subject and the predicate unite,” although “this self-identity does not suggest a simple unity between subject and predicate, since both have to unite by constituting a contradictory unity.” NKZ IV: 277, 282.

<sup>5</sup> Takahashi argues that universal and particular, predicate and subject should not be treated as logical “contradictions” but as “opposites.” While acknowledging his point, I will continue with Nishida’s terminology here for two reasons. First, my aim is to present Nishida’s thought in his own words. And secondly, his definitions of “subject” as “a subject that cannot become a predicate” and “predicate” as “a predicate that cannot become a subject” can be interpreted as including the mutual exclusivity that Takahashi demands of elements constituting a contradiction.

<sup>6</sup> Nishida maintains that the “grammatical subject and predicate can become one another” (NKZ IV: 336). Elsewhere he argues that the “grammatical subject sinks into the predicate” and the predicate particularizes itself: NKZ IV: 261, 375.

<sup>7</sup> The contemporary Japanese term for “syllogism” is 算段論法 while the term 推論 denotes inferences in the wider sense. The context of these passages makes it clear that Nishida is using this latter term in the sense of the former with its three terms: major, minor, and middle.

sylllogism to solve the tension between the priority of the “predicate that encompasses the grammatical subject”<sup>8</sup> and the need for the predicate to particularize itself in the grammatical subject. The latter makes it difficult to maintain a position that privileges the predicate over the subject. Nishida seems to suggest that the subject-predicate structure of the subsumptive judgment requires a third term, signaled by the central role of the copula. Wargo has argued that Nishida is not really interested in a logical analysis of the logical syllogism at all, but only uses the form of the syllogism as an example of a logical structure that formalizes the third term.<sup>9</sup> As a result, his discussion of the syllogism focuses on the relationship between its three terms, the major, the minor, and the middle.

In an essay entitled “Knowing,”<sup>10</sup> Nishida argues that in the “form of the syllogism” the major functions as the universal and thus expresses the predicative dimension; the minor, as the particular in the sense of the grammatical subject; and the middle, as “the relationship characteristic of [subsumptive] judgment.” For him, the dichotomy of grammatical subject and predicate, and the opposition between the symmetry of the two (“the subject vis-à-vis the predicate”) and their asymmetry (“the subject included in the predicate”) are located in the “universal that takes the form of a syllogism.” This basic universal, which Nishida also refers to as the “universal of universals,” is constituted by the middle term of the syllogism whereby the minor and the major oppose each other as grammatical subject and predicate.

To illustrate Nishida’s point, consider the classic form of the syllogism

Major premise:	All humans are mortal
Minor premise:	Socrates is human
Conclusion:	Socrates is mortal

The major term here is “mortality,” “Socrates” is the minor, and “humanity” is the middle. The conclusion shows the way in which subsumptive judgment attributes a predicate (mortality) to a grammatical subject (Socrates). We might also say that the syllogism combines the two subsumptive judgments of the major and minor premises (all humans are mortal and Socrates is human) into one (Socrates is mortal). The conclusion is only possible because the middle term, “humanity,” includes “Socrates” as its particularization and “mortality” as its predicate. In Nishida’s words, the middle term “unites with the major and encompasses the minor.”<sup>11</sup> This bi-directionality allows the middle term to unite the major and

<sup>8</sup> NKZ IV: 261.

<sup>9</sup> Robert J. J. Wargo, *The Logic of Bashō and the Concept of Nothingness in the Philosophy of Nishida Kitarō* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1972), 268.

<sup>10</sup> NKZ IV: 314–87.

<sup>11</sup> NKZ IV: 356.

minor.<sup>12</sup> Thus defined, the middle, which both differs from the major and minor, and at the same time encompasses them as polar extremes, reveals itself as radically contradictory,<sup>13</sup> and this contradiction in turn is seen as a “true self-identity.” The character of the syllogism is contradictory in the sense that the middle term not only determines and encompasses the major and minor, but at the same time is determined by them insofar as the major (mortality) elevates the middle (humanity) to an *abstract universal* (all humans are mortal), while the minor (Socrates) particularizes the middle (humanity) in the form of a *concrete universal* (Socrates is mortal).

I will return to this transformation of the middle term into a concrete universal later. For now, suffice it to note that Nishida uses his analysis of the logical syllogism to supplement the first definition of the *basho* as “that which contains what exists” with the further postulate that the “universal of the universal” functions as a third term and lays bare a fundamental contradiction at work. In other words, the *basho* of individuals, of self-consciousness, or intersubjectivity, and the like functions as a third term.

Nishida employs his interpretation of *basho* as a third term to sort out the ambiguity of the predicate in virtue of its both enveloping and opposing the grammatical subject. As a third term, the “activity of judgment” that unifies predicate and grammatical subject must be distinguished from the predicate that sets itself against or encompasses the grammatical subject. To be sure, the “predicate of the predicate”<sup>14</sup> is not a predicate in the sense of a predicate that cannot become a subject.<sup>15</sup> This is what Nishida means when he says that the “simple” predicate—that is, the predicate of the subsumptive judgment—is not the “real” predicate. On the contrary, he identifies “acting” or “working” as the universal that “unifies grammatical subject and predicate”<sup>16</sup> in the realm of the predicate. Acting is not a predicate or universal in the logical sense, but only refers to the work of making a judgment. In other words, the “universal of universals” does not refer to any aspect of formal argument, or what Nishida calls in his seminal essay “The World of Intelligibility”<sup>17</sup> the “world of the judgment.” It rather indicates a shift in discourse from logic to psychology, or what Nishida calls “the world of self-awareness.”

The introduction of the notion of work or activity raises a host of new questions regarding its relationship to the notions of will, knowing, and self-awareness. But

<sup>12</sup> NKZ IV: 358.

<sup>13</sup> NKZ IV: 355–358, 379.

<sup>14</sup> Nishida uses the term “universal of universals” here, but the meaning is the same.

<sup>15</sup> NKZ IV: 278, 338.

<sup>16</sup> NKZ IV: 277.

<sup>17</sup> NKZ V: 123–185.

these are separate matters that require treatment on their own.<sup>18</sup> What should be noted, however, is that the grammatical subject and the predicate, as well as their symmetric opposition and asymmetric unification in the universal, represent the two aspects of the psychological act of “knowing” in logical form. To indicate this dual character of the “universal of judgment,” Nishida refers to the particularization of the predicate and the opposition of the subject and predicate as the “subject aspect,” and designates their unity in the place of the universal as the “predicate aspect.” Ultimately, both point beyond themselves and beyond all intellectual discourse to self-awareness as the *basho* of judgment and of conceptual knowledge in general.<sup>19</sup>

Analogue to subsumptive judgment, which unites the grammatical subject with its predicates, self-awareness unites the knowing subject and the known object. Insofar as human knowledge is the object of consciousness, consciousness constitutes a universal, that is, the *basho* in which the universal of judgment is located. It is important to note that there are two distinct types of discourse at work here: the discourse of knowledge, or what Nishida refers to as the *world of judgment*, where grammatical subject and predicate oppose each other; and the discourse of self-awareness, the *world of self-awareness* in which subject and object, the knower and the known oppose each other.

In one sense, the knower and the known stand opposed as universal and particular on the field of knowledge. The world of judgment discloses the objective dimension of knowledge where subject and object are objectified and distinct, while the world of self-awareness exhibits the subjective dimension of knowledge where subjectivity and objectivity are unified in the act of the will. Nishida refers to this act of the will also as a “unifying activity.” Like the predicate of the subsumptive judgment, this unifying function of will has an inherent ambiguity insofar as it simultaneously opposes and encompasses the world of judgment. Accordingly it, too, needs to be located in a deeper universal, which Nishida refers to alternatively as the “universal of intelligibility” and the “universal of action.” He identifies this universal with the historical world in which *noesis* and *noema*, along with I and Thou, determine each other. Within this intelligible world, the world of judgment represents the *noemic* dimension or unifying activity of knowledge, and the world of self-awareness, its *noetic* aspect.

Nishida’s mature philosophy, it bears noting, does not advocate a simple unity of subject and object. On the contrary, the noetic and noemic are presented as two aspects of human experience, as two distinct orientations of the unifying activity of

<sup>18</sup> Robert J. J. Wargo and Robert Carter have tried to systematize these different agents of Nishida’s complex epistemological psychology. Wargo, *The Logic of Basho*, 296–321; Robert Carter, *The Nothingness Beyond God: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Nishida Kitarō* (New York: Paragon House, 1989).

<sup>19</sup> Masao Abe, “Nishida’s Philosophy of ‘Place,’” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 28/4 (1988): 359.

knowledge. As such, they are mutually exclusive and yet mutually necessary. The *noemic* orientation of the unifying activity of knowledge reveals the world of the object, which is dualistic and abstract. This is the world of Aristotelian substance, where matter and form, substance and attribute, thing and thing, particular and universal oppose each other as mutually exclusive building blocks of the world of judgment. The *noetic* orientation, in contrast, reveals the subjective dimension of human experience, where every particular melts into a world of Platonic ideas. Nishida is fond of alluding to Kant's idea of "consciousness in general" as an example of the *noetic* dimension of knowledge. Husserl's transcendental ego or even Merleau-Ponty's "interworld," which comprises subject and environment and yet remains "one's own project,"<sup>20</sup> would seem even more fitting, given that Nishida's later work stressed the intentional character of the unifying activity of the will as it collaborates actively with its environment.

In any case, the distinction between the noetic and the noemic leaves Nishida with three approaches to logic: Aristotle's *hypokeinemon*, Plato's Ideas, and his own logic of *basho*. Aristotle's definition of the *hypokeimenon* as the "grammatical subject that cannot become a predicate"<sup>21</sup> represents for Nishida the objective aspect of the subsumptive judgment insofar as it is independent and self-sufficient. Its logic reflects the *noemic* dimension of knowledge. As an independent object, the grammatical subject is unredeemably abstract, doomed to timelessness, and impervious to change. Change requires an interaction between particulars and, hence, a universal "place" in which particulars can come together. It is for this reason that Nishida follows Plato to pursue a logic of the predicate.

His pursuit of a logic oriented to the predicate rather than to the subject earned Nishida the reputation of being a "topological" thinker. To followers like Nishitani Keiji, Ueda Shizuteru, and Fujita Masakatsu, this is taken to mean that he succeeded in overcoming the limitations of Cartesian dualism and Aristotelian particularism. To his critics, he seems to have fallen into an uncritical mysticism of place<sup>22</sup> and a symmetric monism where time is reversible<sup>23</sup> and logic irrational. If indeed Nishida had oriented his thinking in the direction of the predicate to the

<sup>20</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), 357.

<sup>21</sup> NKZ IV: 196.

<sup>22</sup> Thus Hakamaya Noriaki accuses the Kyoto school of blending German idealism with the Mahāyāna ideas of "original enlightenment" and "Buddha-nature" (which Hakamaya later refers to, following Matsumoto Shirō's neologism, as *dhātuvāda*) and thus inheriting from the former "the resonances of mysticism" and "the recourse to dialectical logic," and from the latter the notion of "the universal harmony of things in conflict." 袴谷憲昭, 『批判仏教』 [*Critical Buddhism*] (Tokyo: Daizō Shuppan, 1990), 78, 83.

<sup>23</sup> Steve Odin argues that Nishida sacrifices the freedom of the self to a geometric-temporal symmetry reminiscent of Hua-Yen metaphysics and thus implies that time is repeatable. Steve Odin, *Process Metaphysics and Hua-yen Buddhism: A Critical Study of Cumulative Penetration vs. Interpretation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982). It is clear, however, that Nishida rejects this interpretation in arguing that "time cannot return to what was prior to the individual moment." NKZ VI: 183, 234, 240.

extent that the predicate absorbed the grammatical subject without remainder, and the universal completely subsumed the particular, he would rightly stand accused. As I have tried to show elsewhere, the monism of a universal One absorbs the temporal into the atemporal, reduces linear time to circular time, and condenses the continuity from past to future into the present moment—all of which ends up rendering the idea of time meaningless.<sup>24</sup> While it is true Nishida claims a sense in which the “present encompasses the past and the future” and “time revives itself forever,”<sup>25</sup> in essays like “The Temporal and the Atemporal” he makes it clear that “time cannot return to what was prior to the individual moment.”<sup>26</sup> Thus, at the same time as Nishida insists that his philosophy is oriented towards a logic of the predicate, he persists in criticizing attachment to a transcendent and timeless universal,<sup>27</sup> suggesting that the universal needs to negate itself and transcend itself in the direction of the particular.

Nishida uses terms like “*basho*” and “universal” deliberately in order to pry open Cartesian dualism and to offer a third way between the logics of Aristotle and Plato. The *tertium quid* he had in mind is not a simple, undifferentiated unity of subject and object absorbed into a higher universal, but rather a unity composed of a “particularity” in which the particular and universal, the subjective and the objective oppose each other, and a “universality” in which the particular sinks into the unity of subjectivity and objectivity. Reducing knowledge to its *noemic* aspect gives Aristotle’s “subject that cannot become a predicate” primacy, while reducing knowledge to its *noetic* aspect lands the philosopher in a kind of monism or solipsism. Nishida rejects both positions in favor of a dialectic that embraces both *noema* and *noesis* as well as their respective orientations. In other words, his is a dialectic of a symmetry between a mutually determining and mutually requisite *noema* and *noesis*, and an asymmetry in which “noema sinks into noesis.”<sup>28</sup>

### *The Notion of Basho*

In *The Fundamental Problems of Philosophy*, which Nishida felt to be the mature expression of his philosophical work,<sup>29</sup> this interpretation of the logic of *basho* as radically dialectic is taken up in the course of his discussion of the relationship

<sup>24</sup> NKZ IV: 338. NKZ IX: 150, 172.

<sup>25</sup> NKZ VI: 204.

<sup>26</sup> NKZ VI: 183, 234, 240.

<sup>27</sup> Nishida explains that a universal, by definition, transcends change and, subsequently, time. NKZ IV: 360, 362.

<sup>28</sup> NKZ VI: 244.

<sup>29</sup> In the preface to *Fundamental Problems of Philosophy*, Nishida identifies the first three essays of this book as a “clarification of my main standpoint.” NKZ VII: 3.



between the individual and the universal. In this essay, Nishida identifies the underlying *basho* as a “self-determining universal,” but far from giving the universal precedence over the individual, Nishida understands four aspects in this self-determination of the universal:

1. the self-determination of the universal
2. the determination of the individual by the universal
3. the self-determination of the individual
4. the determination of the universal by the individual

Aspects (2) and (4) have already been discussed above in connection with predicate-oriented logic. As we saw, the universal determines the individual insofar as a red object cannot be conceived of apart from—Nishida would say “outside of”—the universal of redness; and at the same time the individual determines the universal insofar as the universal of redness has to be particularized in individual red objects. When Nishida goes on to say that the universal determines the individual in the historical world, he means that my historical and social situation shapes who I am, and my present awareness of myself and the world expresses this fact. I cannot conceive of who I am without taking into account the fact of my being conditioned historically.

For example, I am sitting at my desk writing. At one level, this activity is contingent on a range of biological and physical elements that make life possible. At another, the freedom I have to engage in this activity is contingent on financial and institutional support. Or again, the fact that the movement of my fingers is able to generate words on the screen of my portable computer has been made possible by a string of scientific and technological advances. Finally, my research would not have a focus were it not conditioned by the thinkers whose writings have been set down in print. And so forth. In Nishida’s terms, the whole picture of me working at my computer “expresses” the historical world.

Ueda illustrates the same idea by imagining someone thinking about the place where they live: “There is no escaping the fact that England and I cannot be separated. England is the country in which I reside, and I reflect England by living there.” Consequently, universals like the historical situation and the *Zeitgeist* are not transcendent or abstract but are concretely particularized in individual events. In this sense, there is no postmodernism without Jacques Derrida’s writings, no Nishida scholarship apart from particular essays on Nishida’s thought, no American lifestyle without individual Americans living their lives. Individual events and persons reflect, constitute, transform, and, hence determine human nature in its historical and cultural expressions. In this way Nishida locates the individual and the universal in a dialectical relationship in which each needs the other.

At the same time, he sees something deeper in this relationship between the universal and the individual, which brings us to aspects (1) and (3). Since the indi-

vidual is located in the universal, he argues, the individual should not be conceived of as an entity separate from the universal but as a self-determination of the universal. In this sense, any red object constitutes the self-determination of redness and every individual American citizen expresses the self-determination of the American culture and lifestyle. Or, to return to Ueda's example just cited: "Insofar as I reflect England, England is reflecting itself from within." This is also the sense in which Nishida can claim that individual objects or person are self-contained insofar as each of them includes within itself a universal. The universal is not something apart from individuals; it is expressed in their activities. In other words, by expressing the universal in which it is located, the individual expresses, and therefore determines, itself. Thus an object's redness is seen as a self-determination of the red object, and American culture can be seen as the self-expression of individual Americans. In Ueda's example, "By internalizing the fact that I reflect England, I am also reflecting myself."<sup>30</sup>

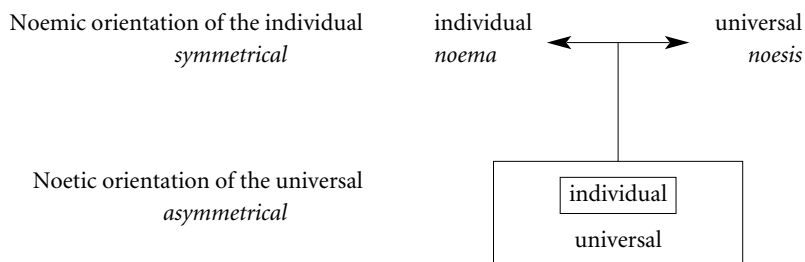
In this way Nishida preserves the irreducibility of the individual and the universal, and at the same time rejects the conclusion that this marks an essential difference between them. The individual and the universal are for him two distinct aspects of one and the same unifying activity. In negating itself, the universal either becomes a particular object or it discloses a symmetrical dichotomy of individual and universal.

On the basis of this fourfold self-determination of the universal, we may distinguish three basic traits to the logic of *basho*. First, even though Nishida orients his logic towards the predicate, his model is too radically dialectical to allow for the self-determining universal to be accorded primacy over the self-determining individual. Second, the four aspects of this dialectic preclude simple generalizations of what is a manifold and complex reality. On one level, the propositions (1) and (2) favor the universal and thus reflect the noetic dimension of the *basho*, while propositions (3) and (4) favor the individual over the universal and thus reflect its noemic dimension. Seen from a different angle, however, one could as well argue that the dichotomy of the universal and individual as mutually irreducible is noemic, while their unity—or more precisely, the absorption of the individual in the universal—is the noetic dimension of the *basho*. This would seem to suggest that the noemic standpoint emphasizes the individual elements of the dialectic (the individual and the universal), whereas the noetic standpoint focuses on their relationship.

Nishida's fourfold analysis of the self-determination of the universal, therefore, reveals two different layers of the universal-individual dialectic: the symmetrical opposition between the universal and the individual oriented towards the noemic aspect, and the asymmetrical unity of universal and individual oriented towards

<sup>30</sup> 上田閑照 Ueda Shizuteru, 『西田幾多郎を読む』 [Reading Nishida Kitarō] (Tōkyō: Iwanami Shoten, 1991), 309.

the noetic aspect. These two layers may be illustrated in the the form of the following diagram:



Finally, the central idea of self-determination establishes self-negation and self-reflection as key characteristics of the logic of *basho*. The universal thus conceived does not determine itself as a self-identical substance but as its own self-negation.

In the final analysis, Nishida's emphasis on the dimension of universal and its subordinate notions of self-determination and self-negation stems from a deep conviction that any dualistic philosophy must not exclude the possibility of judgments and self-awareness. In articulating his idea of self-negation, Nishida distinguishes between an external, relative negation and an internal, absolute negation. Absolute negation constitutes the fundamental condition of self-reflection, its most prominent example being self-awareness in which the self knows itself. As I have argued elsewhere, comparison with Jean-Paul Sartre helps clarify this distinction.

In *Being and Nothingness* Sartre argues that consciousness as *being-for-itself* constitutes itself by negating its own existence as a *being-in-itself*. Employing what we might call with Nishitani a "relative negation," Sartre sets up an external opposition or "infinite abyss" between existence as *being-in-itself* and consciousness of existence as *being-for-itself*, which ends up eliminating the possibility of self-awareness as a unity of existence and consciousness. Forever cut off from a grasp of its own existence, Sartre's *being-for-itself* is condemned to an irredeemable alienation. Nishida, in contrast, develops a theory of self-awareness as absolute negation that includes difference and identity, externality and internality, and ultimately, negation and affirmation. He suggests that self-awareness requires a self-identity of the mutually exclusive elements of existence and consciousness, and this in turn entails the inclusion of absolute otherness within self. Nishida explains:

Nothingness does not simply oppose the self. What opposes the self must negate the self. What negates the self must to some extent have the same foundation as the self. And what is not at all related to the self cannot negate the self.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>31</sup> NKZ XI: 397.

The claims that nothingness does not simply oppose the self, and that whatever opposes the self must negate the self, read as a direct criticism of Sartre's position. Nishida himself describes self-awareness as something absolute and hence self-contradictory. As Jung noted in his theory of the Self, as long as the self stands beside itself, it cannot know itself but only disassociate itself from itself. In self-awareness existence and knowledge, subjectivity and objectivity, collapse into an absolute negation by an absolute other.<sup>32</sup> In similar fashion Nishida defines *basho* as a universal that includes otherness as its own negation, and thus dialectically forms itself and affirms itself in the age of self-negation. It is a kind of absolute that contains within itself its own negation. This is why Nishida refers to his elemental principle as "absolute nothingness."

Discussing his dialectical method, Nishida observes that "the absolute is truly absolute when it is opposed to nothing." In practice Nishida's absolute nothingness identifies the historical world as a self-determining universal encompassing the totality of individual persons, times, places, thoughts, and so forth, transforming and expressing itself endlessly in the course of human history. Similarly, in his final essay, "The Logic of *Basho* and the Religious Worldview," Nishida speaks of absolute nothingness as that which negates itself and "transforms itself into the relative."<sup>33</sup> He adopts the religious language of the self-emptying God and the non-dualism of the *Heart Sutra* to exemplify the self-negation of absolute nothingness and its radically non-dual character as an "immanence-qua-transcendence, transcendence-qua-immanence."

The consequences of this dialectical conception of the transcendental ground of human experience as an absolute contradictory self-identity and as a transcendence-qua-immanence are radical. Granted Nishida's evocation of religious symbolism and use of dialectical language may seem to signal what Paul Griffiths has called "an esotericist triumphalist position,"<sup>34</sup> his conception of the transcendental ground as an absolute contradictory self-identity is not uncritical. Reminiscent of the Mahāyāna Buddhist idea of the nonduality of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* (and perhaps, too, J. N. Mohanty's observation that "the empirical ego and the transcendental ego are... one and the same—the same entity considered from different standpoints"<sup>35</sup>), Nishida makes it clear that understanding the *basho* of human experience as absolute nothingness must not be taken to mean a forfeiture of its noemic and noetic dimensions.

<sup>32</sup> NKZ VI: 381.

<sup>33</sup> NKZ XI: 397.

<sup>34</sup> See Paul Griffiths, "On the Possible Future of the Buddhist-Christian Interaction," in Byron Earhart, Minoru Kiyota, James Heisig, and Paul Griffiths, eds., *Japanese Buddhism: Its Tradition, New Religions, and Interaction with Christianity* (Los Angeles: Buddhist Books International, 1985), 146–61.

<sup>35</sup> J. N. Mohanty, *Transcendental Phenomenology: An Ananalytical Account* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 153.

Applying his fourfold dialectic of the self-determining universal, we may conclude that, seen as absolute nothingness, *basho* determines, negates, and transforms itself in the activity of the individual, that is to say, in the “acting self.” If absolute nothingness determines itself by negating itself within itself,<sup>36</sup> the self-determining universal is expressed fully in individual self-awareness. Moreover, insofar as each individual represents as self-negation of the universal, each is engaged in transforming the universal of the historical world. We see this, for example, in the way in which a seemingly insignificant act like Rosa Parks’s refusal to give up her seat on a Montgomery, Alabama, bus was dramatically to alter the course of history. Conversely, no “universal truth” can be posited apart from the discourse and self-awareness of specific individuals: any truth that merits the name universal must be so in virtue of its specification in historical individuals. What is more, for Nishida the self-determination of the universal—as universal-determination-qua-individual-determination, self-transformation, and self-negation—represents an unending, ongoing process. Only thus can the *basho* of absolute nothingness truly represent an “absolute contradictory self-identity.”

### *Foundationalism or Transcendental Relativism?*

What difference does it make, in the end, to see the transcendental ground of reality as a self-determining universal, an absolute contradictory self-identity, an absolute nothingness? The question is crucial, since the whole of Nishida’s philosophical system pivots on this dialectical idea. Time and again he refers to the grammatical subject, the predicate, history, religion, God, and so forth as instances of absolute contradictory self-identity.

This way of talking is one of the main reasons his writings have stood accused of mysticism and muddled thinking. Since Nishida defines his logic of *basho* as a dialectical self-negation rather than as a logical contradiction, simplistic criticisms like those of Nobechi that everything in Nishida’s philosophy can be logically, or pseudo-logically, justified,<sup>37</sup> are easily set aside. Far more challenging is Takahashi’s claim that every dialectic, as dialectic, must eventually exhaust itself and turn into its own opposite. Applied to Nishida’s philosophy one could argue that since God, religion, history, self, and the like are an absolute contradictory self-identity, they necessarily negate themselves and become their own opposites.

<sup>36</sup> NKZ XI: 397.

<sup>37</sup> Nobechi differentiates between two epistemic modes, “I think” and “I believe.” The former he fashions, not unlike Hakamaya’s “critical philosophy,” after Descartes’ scepticism as a systematic method of doubt. The latter, however, he refers to a subjective sense of certainty. In the mode of “I believe” “an individual grasps certainty subjectively... While the ‘I believe’ can strengthen itself by using the ‘I think,’ the ‘I think’ destroys itself whenever it uses the ‘I believe’” (Nobechi, *A Criticism of Nishida Philosophy*, 10, 16).

Indeed even the dialectical principle of absolute contradictory self-identity would fall under the demand of self-negation. Although I agree with the thrust of Takahashi's criticism, I see it rather as a strength of Nishida's position. It seems to me that Nishida distanced his philosophy from the "foundationalism" inherent in Plato, Aristotle, and the German idealists precisely in order to draw attention to the inherent ambiguities in the notions of substance, place, and nothingness, and in this way to work out a philosophy devoid of all foundations. On this point I concur in general with David Loy's case for the deconstructive potential of philosophical nonduality, though I myself would prefer to speak of "philosophical criticism."<sup>38</sup> To clarify my own position, I should like briefly to retrace Nishida's discussions of substance and place.

Nishida dedicates two key works, *From Acting to Seeing* and *Fundamental Problems of Philosophy*, to an exploration of the Aristotelian notion of substance as "a subject that cannot become a predicate." In its pure form, Aristotelian substance constitutes the grammatical subject. As noted earlier in our discussion of the subsumptive judgment, at best the grammatical subject is joined to the predicate, and at worst is swallowed up by it. In either case, it loses its defining trait as a subject that cannot become a predicate. The predicate, even though if seen to be the most basic concept and *basho* of the subsumptive judgment, cannot fulfill the role of an underlying substance insofar as it is understood as a "predicate that cannot become a subject." In the subsumptive judgment not only does the grammatical subject negate itself and collapse into the predicate, but the predicate also negates itself and is absorbed into the grammatical subject. This is why Nishida refers to the predicate as a "predicative-determination-qua-subject-determination." Obviously a predicate that is a grammatical subject<sup>39</sup> cannot at the same time be a predicate that does not become subject.

Clearly both the idea of subject and the idea of predicate are contradictory. Nishida accepts from Aristotle the idea that the two ingredients of a subsumptive judgment, namely, the grammatical subject and the predicate, are mutually exclusive opposites, neither capable of becoming the other. However, and this seems to be Nishida's fundamental conundrum, if this is the case, subsumptive judgment seems to be an impossibility. For the subsumptive judgment to be made, either subject and predicate have to affirm each other or negate each other. In the former case, we have the static opposition of two isolated Leibnizian monads, subject and predicate, each of which defines itself tautologically. Nishida calls this a "simple"

<sup>38</sup> David Loy, *Nonduality: A Study in Comparative Philosophy* (New York: Humanity Books, 1988). This claim is, of course, diametrically opposed to Hakamaya's contention that Nishida's philosophy uncritically blends the "theory of original enlightenment" with German idealism and as a result his philosophy of *basho* fails to meet the standards of a "critical philosophy."

<sup>39</sup> NKZ VII: 237.

or “relative” self-identity of the two opposites. This would imply, Nishida argues, that substance consists in a “self-contradiction identical to itself.”<sup>40</sup> True self-identity must therefore consist in the uniting of the two mutually exclusive opposites in the subsumptive judgment. In other words, the subsumptive judgment is itself an “absolute contradictory self-identity.”

Far from being triumphalist, Nishida’s view does not replace Aristotelian logic with mysticism, but rather questions the assumption that Aristotelian substance, Platonic ideas, and the predicate of the subsumptive judgment are independent or, as Nāgārjuna would have it, possess a self-nature (*svabhāva*). Nishida sees them as provisional (*samvṛti*) rather than ultimate (*paramārtha*) reality. This leaves the “universal of universals” as the only possible ground for truth claims.

As discussed above, Nishida identifies the universal that unites the grammatical subject and the predicate as an activity or acting individual. In *From Acting to Seeing*, he presents a coherent argument for understanding substance as acting—or, to be precise, the “activity without a foundation.” This leaves us with a dilemma. On the one hand, Nishida makes activity a universal uniting subject and predicate in a self-contradiction. On the other, he consistently refers to individual activity as a subject that cannot become the predicate or as a sort of individual that cannot become a universal. He seems to have landed himself in a position where any description of a *tertium quid* to join individual and universal is inconsistent with simple (or relative) self-identity exemplified in the Aristotelian notion of substance or the Sanskrit notion of *svabhāva*. Taken as the opposite of the grammatical subject, not even the predicate that cannot become a subject and Plato’s ideas can count as such a relative self-identity. For Nishida, the union of grammatical subject and predicate in subsumptive judgment is an absolute self-identity or a noetically oriented self-identity.

Even if understood as an absolute self-identity—whether as a unity of subject and predicate, as the unity of that which acts or that which is acted upon, or even as a unity of subject and object—activity always lacks self-reflection and therefore points beyond itself. In the same way that Husserl understood consciousness as always implying consciousness of something<sup>41</sup> that points beyond itself to self-awareness as self-reflexive awareness of itself, so, too, acting transcends itself towards the “activity of activity” or “the world where individual activities act on each other.”<sup>42</sup> Along the same lines Nishida grounds all a priori in an “a priori of a priori,”<sup>43</sup> in a *basho* we might call “the place of all places,” namely, place at which

<sup>40</sup> NKZ IV: 103.

<sup>41</sup> This is a mainstay of Husserl’s theory of intentionality.

<sup>42</sup> “The world of the present is the world where individuals mutually act upon each other” (NKZ IX: 147).

<sup>43</sup> NKZ IV: 15, 21.

absolute nothingness is the nothingness of nothingness.<sup>44</sup> Nishida introduced this idiom of “activity of activities,” “universal of universals,” and so forth in order to distinguish the *basho* that grounds the grammatical subject in the unity of subject and predicate from the *basho* that reflects itself in the manner of self-awareness. Since the separation of experience and the transcendental ground of experience (as we see exemplified in Sartre’s *being-in-itself* and *being-for-itself*<sup>45</sup>) results in alienation, just as the identification of the two ends up in monism, Nishida insists that the transcendental ground be self-reflective.

Nishida draws on a distinction of three epistemic levels to argue the point. First is the level at which the object of knowledge is constituted, the world of judgment. Second, we have the ground of experience, the world of self-awareness. Finally, we come to the ground of the ground, the level at which philosophers theorize about the transcendental structures of human experience; this is the intelligible world. Clearly Nishida is not primarily interested in the knowledge of objects (first level) or their transcendental structure (second level), but rather in the self-understanding of the transcendental structure as such (third level).<sup>46</sup> To translate this into the idiom of self-awareness, we would say that Nishida’s focus is not fixed on knowledge of the self that takes the subject as its object (first level), or even on the self’s knowledge of itself as a subject in which it is located, which is located in the “unity of subject and object” (*shukyaku tōitsu*) (second level), but rather predominantly with the self-understanding (*jirikai*) of self-awareness itself qua “unity of subject and object” in the “unity of subject and object” (third level).

The distinction of epistemological levels brings into relief three fundamental characteristics of Nishida’s logic of *basho*: first, even though Nishida discusses the formal structure of the subsumptive judgment, the logical syllogism, and the structure of self-awareness, he is primarily interested in the necessary conditions of logic and self-awareness. Questions such as “Why (not how) does the judgment work?” and “What is the structure of self-awareness?” are what his philosophical project is about. Second, Nishida argues that both formal judgment and self-awareness point to their own transcendental foundation. In other words, while investigations into the formal structures of the world of judgment and the world of self-awareness are important, they always point beyond themselves and do nothing to clarify the epistemic ground. This is why Nishida felt compelled to complement

<sup>44</sup> Nishida differentiates between two kinds of nothingnesses, a relative and a “non-relative” one (*zettai*). The latter one functions, in analogy to the “universal of universal” as “nothingness of nothingness.”

<sup>45</sup> Since Sartre’s *being-in-itself* constitutes the ground of consciousness, *being-for-itself*, and is never reached by consciousness, it functions *de facto* as transcendental ground. In some sense, it functions as “transcendental field purified of all egological structure.” Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Transcendence of the Ego*, trans. Forrest Williams and Robert Kirkpatrick (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990) 93.

<sup>46</sup> Nishida refers to the first layer as the “world of the judgment” to the second layer the “world of self-awareness,” and the third layer “the world of intelligibility.”



the logic of formal arguments and self-awareness with a logic of “ground.”<sup>47</sup> To accommodate the various levels of the epistemological question, he introduced the idea of multiple discourses. Third, any exploration of the epistemic ground reveals a self-reflective and contradictory structure that requires a logic of *basho*, and with it the idea of absolute contradictory self-identity in order to unify the subject and object of knowing. This is not a formal logic or a psychology of self. It is rather concerned with the ground of these things, or more precisely, the discourse of the ground concerning the ground itself.<sup>48</sup>

The implications of Nishida’s decision to define the self-reflective ground of experience as a *basho* of absolute nothingness are far-reaching. In my view, this strategy not only undercuts the notions of substance and predicate, but also provides a standpoint from which to criticize the notion of *basho* itself. His frequent use of qualifiers like *absolute* and *infinite*, as well as allusions to the mystics,<sup>49</sup> seem to suggest a religious philosophy or even a theology of nothingness. And yet, his *basho* of absolute nothingness could as well suggest the very opposite, namely, a systematic dismantling of the notions of infinity and absolute by exposing their inner ambiguities. Western criticisms of Nishida’s philosophy as a form of foundationalism are due in part to the standardized translation of Japanese term 絶対 as “absolute.” There is no question that Nishida adopted the term to render the philosophical notion of *das Absolute*, but when it is contrasted with “opposition” the literal meaning of the term, “severance of opposition” comes into relief—a connotation that the term “absolute” cannot evoke. Rejecting a monotheistic absolute standing in opposition to the phenomenal world, and a pantheistic absolute that absorbs the phenomenal world into itself, Nishida wants to recast the notion of the absolute in nondualistic form. Accordingly, in what follows I will render 絶対 as “non-relative” in order to indicate this shift of meaning.

Simple though it be, the difference in meaning is significant. For example, the claim that non-relative nothingness, which expresses itself noemically in knowledge, art, and religion, negates itself infinitely, implies that the historical world, as the *basho* where the universal determines itself, is indefinite and indeterminate, and that its expression is an ongoing, infinite process. Nishida speaks of this self-

<sup>47</sup> Wargo, following Hisamatsu, defines “nothingness” as “not-a-single-thing.” *The Logic of Basho*, 156.

<sup>48</sup> This raises the question of how Nishida saw himself. Although he was certainly aware of the question, he never puts it directly. Still, in essays like “Place” and “The Knower” we see him acknowledging the way in which his own discourse on the *basho* is a rational construct. He also suggests that “knowing is bigger than acting and embraces acting within itself” (NKZ IV: 129), even though he speaks elsewhere of acting as a “non-relative contradictory identity.”

<sup>49</sup> It is interesting to note, as David Loy suggests, that quite a few of the mystics Nishida is fond of quoting were themselves involved in a deconstructive project on their own, as in the case of Meister Eckhart’s claim that “as long as I am this or that, I am not all things and I have not all things, being neither this nor that, are all things.” *Nonduality*, 203.

determining universal as *nothingness* because neither the noetic nor the noemic aspects of thought can exhaust it, because neither the idea of being nor of nonbeing, although needed to express it, can fully cover it. It is nothingness, because it always negates, transforms, and determines itself. If the place of non-relative nothingness ceases to negate itself, it is no longer the *basho* of human cognition and existence. For anything to be truly non-relative, it must negate itself and transcend itself within itself.

In other words, the use of terms like *infinite* and *absolute* to describe absolutistic systems are inherently ambiguous. “Infinity,” for example, can as well connote infinite fulfillment as infinite deferral.<sup>50</sup> (As Takahashi notes, the opposing connotations are in fact two sides of the same coin, in that infinite fulfillment takes an infinite amount of time and is therefore deferred infinitely.) The same may be said of concepts like change, self, and even object. Change requires changelessness, thus eliminating the conception of simple self-identity; the self requires its own negation by transcending itself within itself; objects can only be conceived of as non-relative, that is, as objects that in fact are not objects at all.

In short, the *non-relative* entails its own negation, or, in contemporary terminology, its own criticism. The conceptions of substance, place, and nothingness, as helpful as they are, point beyond themselves to a deeper expression of reality, an expression that, as Derrida would say, is “infinitely deferred.”<sup>51</sup> This same sense of infinity is present in Nishida’s recognition of the strong ambiguity in his idea of “non-relative nothingness.” In “The Intelligible World” and *Fundamental Problems of Philosophy* Nishida describes the *basho* of non-relative nothingness as a self-determining universal expressing itself in the dialectic of *noema* and *noesis*. In the “Non-Relative Contradictory Self-Identity” and *Fundamental Problems of Philosophy*, he introduces the dialectic of individual and universal to describe this expression of the self-determining universal. And finally, in “The Logic of *Basho* and the Religious Worldview,” both the dialectic interplay of *noesis* and *noema* and the historical world itself are presented as self-negations of non-relative nothingness.

Nishida’s reasons for employing the idea of non-relative nothingness are two. First, what is non-relative must be nothing, since it is not a simple self-identity as being and nonbeing are. Second, the non-relative cannot be grasped rationally but only “expressed” noetically and noemically as being and nonbeing (or as individual and universal), after the manner of Sartre’s *being-in-itself* and *being-for-itself*. In a certain sense, Nishida’s description of non-relative nothingness as infinitely elu-

<sup>50</sup> J. N. Mohanty, *Phenomenology: Between Essentialism and Transcendental Phenomenology* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1997) 67.

<sup>51</sup> Nishida contends that “the universal returns to itself infinitely” (NKZ V: 118) and that acting acts infinitely (NKZ IV: 71).

sive, on the one hand, and inherently ambiguous, on the other, seems to echo Derrida's descriptions of Plato's *khora*:<sup>52</sup>

As it is neither this nor that (neither intelligible nor sensible), one may speak as if it were a joint participant in both. Neither/nor easily becomes both...and, both this and that.... *Khora* is nothing positive or negative. It is impassive, but it is neither passive nor active.<sup>53</sup>

Nishida's statements about "place of non-relative nothingness" seem to echo the discourse of "neither this nor that... and both this and that," and hence to expose their own internal ambiguity. The idea of *basho* is "neither the *noesis* nor the *noema*... and both *noesis* and *noema*," and hence is neither their symmetry nor their asymmetry... and yet and both their symmetry and their asymmetry.

From his notion of the place of non-relative nothingness Nishida elaborated a philosophical position that discloses the ambiguity inherent in opposing terms and demands an infinite process of self-negation and self-determination. Nishida applies his twofold logical strategy—the infinite deferral of self-reflection and the ambiguity of non-relative contradictory self-identity—not only to his search for an epistemic ground, but also to a more general examination of fundamental philosophical problems such as the formal structure of the subsumptive judgment, self-awareness, free will, intersubjectivity, time, and religion. He begins typically by setting up two alternatives such as the objective and the subjective standpoint, the grammatical subject and the predicate, the known and the knower, mechanistic causality and teleological free will, objectifying desire and intersubjective love, theism or "salvation religion" and pantheism or "moral religions."<sup>54</sup> Secondly, he tries to show how both terms of the opposition are necessary for the other to make sense, such that, for example, the choice is not between *noema* and *noesis* but between a static opposition when oriented noemically, and a contradictory unity when oriented noetically. But since a unity based on mutual need leads to a false dichotomy between unity and duality,<sup>55</sup> a third opposition is called into play, for example between the symmetry of unity and duality in a noemic orientation, and

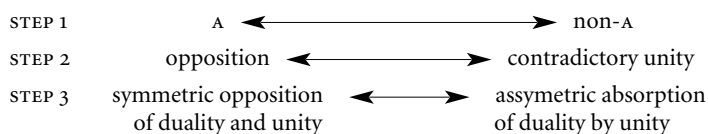
<sup>52</sup> I do not mean to suggest any comparison between the philosophies of Nishida and Derrida here. Their differences, as in their respective conceptions of time, are many. I only mean to underscore how both draw on Plato's *khora* to criticize essentialism. Nakamura and Abe Masao trace Nishida's *basho* to Plato's *khora*. Nishida himself refers to the Greek term "topos."

<sup>53</sup> Jacques Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," *Derrida and Negative Theology*, Harold Coward and Toby Foshay, eds. (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992) 105, 107.

<sup>54</sup> Nishida introduces this distinction in his lectures on religion (NKZ XV: 221-381), where "salvation religions" are characterized by salvation through "Other-power" and "moral religions" by salvation through "self-power."

<sup>55</sup> In his objection to material reductionism, John Searle argues that materialism constitutes a "conceptual dualism" because it implies its opposite mentalism. The same argument could be made with regard to a philosophy that privileges either the noetic or the noemic directions. John Searle, *The Rediscovery of the Mind* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), 26.

the asymmetry of unity and duality in a noetic orientation. Insofar as this is a dialectical process, it can be extended infinitely. These three steps may be laid out diagrammatically as follows:



This method of argument not only enables a critique of individual terms like “objectivity” and “subjectivity,” “mechanism” and “teleology,” but leads to a more fundamental position that Loy and Fujita refer to as the “deconstruction of dualism.” The actual execution of this “deconstruction of dualism” involves a basic difficulty, however. As Derrida has argued in his “Of an Apocalyptic Tone Newly Adopted in Philosophy,” any “new philosophy” (such as a deconstruction of dualism is) offers itself as alternative to a previous position to which it sets itself up in opposition. To avoid introducing a new duality between a dualistic and a nondualistic standpoint, Nishida seems to suggest an infinite self-negation of the latter. Contrary to Hakamaya’s contention, therefore, Nishida strikes a critical tone here to his philosophy. Only a philosophy that negates itself again and again as one extremity of the self-determination of the universal can do justice to the fact that philosophical discourse on the grounds of knowledge is necessarily self-reflective and self-contradictory.

In this regard, Nishida’s frequent repetition of the term *non-relative contradictory self-identity* echoes Mahāyāna ideas such as “the emptiness of emptiness” and the characterization of spiritual paths, Buddhism included, as mere “vehicles” (*yāna*) that point to something beyond themselves. Loy describes how Nāgārjuna utilizes the idea of the emptiness of emptiness to deconstruct duality and nonduality:

Nāgārjuna’s task was quite simple: to take all proposed candidates for Reality and demonstrate their relativity (*śūnyatā*) leaving nothing—not even *śūnyatā*, since that term too is relative to all its candidates.<sup>56</sup>

This is precisely the predicament that Nishida tries to avoid with his corrective, self-negating principle of non-relative nothingness. Consistent with his fourfold dialectic of the self-determination of the universal, non-relative nothingness has to empty itself in the dialectic of nonbeing and being, *noesis* and *noema*, and, ultimately, nonduality and duality. This kind of transcendental relativism represents a critical and open-ended application of a principle of self-negation by means of which self-negation both expresses itself and at the same time transforms itself.

<sup>56</sup> Loy, *Nonduality*, 251.

## Conclusion

Where does this leave us? Although Nishida dedicated his final works to similarities between his logic of *basho* and religious worldviews, I am increasingly suspicious of claims that this constitutes a kind of foundationalism. True enough, *Inquiry into the Good* opens with the bold assertion that “experience knows the facts as they are.” What is more, his view of religion there and even the general tone of the book reflects the typical universalism of the early twentieth century. As noted earlier, “The Logic of *Basho* and the Religious Worldview” alludes to the analogy of his own logic with religious thinkers, among them a number of mystics. All of this seems to support Griffith’s complaints of triumphalism, Nobechei’s dismissal of Nishida as a religionist rather than a philosopher,<sup>57</sup> and Hakamaya’s criticism that Nishida’s philosophy of *topos* is lacking in critical potential. While Griffith’s objection seems to be a matter of perspective and taste (Nietzsche has shown that that even nihilists can be triumphalist), I am persuaded that Nishida’s system is indeed a philosophy and, Hakamaya notwithstanding, a critical one.

Hakamaya argues that Nishida philosophy constitutes a hodgepodge of Mahāyāna theory of “original enlightenment” and German idealism, and that like most of Japanese Buddhism, has forfeited the power of original Buddhism to criticize the indigenous religion of Japan.<sup>58</sup> There is a point to his contention that Nishida failed to apply philosophical concepts like self-negation, the I-Thou relationship, and the fourfold model of self-determination to social conditions or, with the possible exception of his ambiguous statements on Japanese militarism and nationalism in the early Shōwa period,<sup>59</sup> the political realities of his time. Still, Nishida did apply his logic, with all those Mahāyāna Buddhist traits that Hakamaya so despises, to a critique of German idealism and those philosophical traditions of Europe that represented his primary focus as a philosopher.

As I have tried to show in the foregoing pages, Nishida not only wrestled critically with Aristotele’s *hypokeimenon*, a point on which most scholars agree, but also with Plato’s Ideas, and even his own concepts of *basho* and nothingness. Nishida’s logic is possessed of a critical power that seems to fit the description of

<sup>57</sup> In his *Critique of Nishida’s Philosophy*, Nobechei first contrasts two cognitive modes, “thinking” and “believing” and, then, introduces “the philosopher Satomi Takahashi” as an example of the former cognitive mode and “the religionist Kitarō Nishida” as the prototype of the latter (Nobechei, 14–35).

<sup>58</sup> Hakamaya defines “critical philosophy” (*hihan no tetsugaku*) and “critical Buddhism” (*hihan bukkyō*) motivated by political and social concern as critical challenge to “indigenous thought” (*dochaku shisō*) such as idealism in Germany, Taoism in China, and “thought on original enlightenment” in Japan.

<sup>59</sup> As James Heisig’s and John Maraldo’s *Rude Awakenings* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1995) makes plain, the interpretation of Nishida’s essays on the activities of Japanese government and military during the later part of his life range from the claims of scholars such as Ueda and Yusa (and I would add Kosaka Kunit-sugu to their number) that Nishida rejected the mainstream political tendencies of Japan at the time, to the bold assertion that essays like *The Problem of Japanese Culture* demonstrate nationalistic tendencies in this thinking.

what Loy calls the deconstructive dimension of nonduality, and even shows unexpected resemblances to the philosophy of Derrida, who based his own theory of deconstruction on Plato's notion of place (*khora*).<sup>60</sup> This critical dimension seems to be what impelled Nishida's philosophy, willy-nilly, towards a transcendental relativism and away from foundationalism. Like transcendental relativism, Nishida's philosophy acknowledges a transcendental ground but at the same time realizes its absolute elusiveness, thus barring philosophy from absolute truth claims. The task of philosophy is rather, as Nishida would say, to deepen itself infinitely and to negate itself infinitely in pursuit of its own ground. This kind of transcendental relativism has, I believe, a contribution to make to contemporary philosophy in showing how to articulate a meaningful description of personal identity that includes both identity and difference, and a model of psychology that takes into account both teleology and causality.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Hakamaya wholeheartedly approves of Takeuchi Yoshirō, who criticizes scholars like Nakamura Yūjirō for uncritically following Nishida philosophy and postmodern trends in their rejection of the Cartesian ego in favor of an "unconscious self" or "no-self," and thus fall into the trap of "topical philosophy." *Critical Buddhism*, 130.

<sup>61</sup> In my *Beyond Personal Identity* (Richmond, U.K.: Curzon Press, 2001), I have proposed a theory of personal identity that privileges neither change and difference nor changelessness and identity.