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GROUNDING ON NOTHING: THE SPIRIT OF RADICAL CRITICISM IN NISHIDA'S PHILOSOPHY

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Introduction: Nishida's Radicalization of "Kantian Criticism"

In Nishida Kitarō's work, allusions to East Asian philosophy abound. For this reason many researchers have commonly assumed that Nishida's *logic* evolved under the strong influence of East Asian thought, including Zen Buddhism. I do not deny such influences altogether, but nonetheless wish to present in this essay a different perspective. The following statement Nishida made in 1938 offers a good starting point: "I am not saying that there are two kinds of logic, Western logic and Eastern logic. Logic must be one" (NKZ 9:12).¹ Nishida's lifelong quest for the universal systematic logic that these words hint at requires greater attention in interpreting his accomplishments. As I shall argue below, Nishida's famous concept of *place* (*basho* 場所) is not an exception to this—the concept is not "East Asian" in any particular way. In fact Nishida informs us that it was after years of struggle and changing views that he reached "the idea of 'place'" ("'*basho*' no kangae" 「場所」の考) (NKZ 1:3). The idea is important since his later philosophy developed as his logic of *place* evolved.

Viewed in this light, it becomes natural to ask how we should interpret Nishida's move from the earlier philosophy of "pure experience" (*junsui keiken* 純粹経験), a position established in his monumental 1911 monograph *An Inquiry into the Good* (*Zen no kenkyū* 善の研究), to his maturer philosophy of "place" (*basho* 場所). What, exactly, we may ask, is the connection between the two philosophical frameworks? In answering this question, we must note that a stable and consistent spirit guided his philosophical growth, the spirit of "Kantian criticism" (*Kanto no hihyōshugi* カントの批評主義) (NKZ 4:7, 148) in Nishida's words, which he considered a radicalization of Kant's view. What this radicalization meant was the removal of as many philosophical presumptions as possible from the analysis of experience. The project was part of Nishida's theory of pure experience, of course, since in *An Inquiry into the Good* he rejected the reality of independent cognizant subjects, each endowed with self-consciousness and in principle separable from the empirical world. Along with such abstract subjects, Nishida also rejected the presumptive reality of self-standing objects that naive realism regards as existing independently of immediate experience. Although not recognized widely, *An Inquiry into the Good* already stressed that it was the standpoint of *criticism* that he was following (NKZ 1:44):

Highly critical thinking (*kiwamete hihanteki no kangae* 極めて批判的の考), which discards all arbitrary assumptions and starts from the most undoubtable direct knowledge, and the other kind of thinking that assumes a reality outside the facts of immediate

experience, are in no way compatible. . . . I intend to abandon all hypothetical thought, and strictly commit myself to the first position, that is, the position I have characterized as highly critical thinking.

In his later 1927 book *From the Acting to the Seeing* (*Hatarakumono kara miru-mono e* 働くものから見るものへ), Nishida's middle-period work in which the very idea of "place" received explicit formulation for the first time, Nishida points out: "Even Kant starts with the thought that knowing is an action [of the subject directed toward the object], which is based on the opposition between subject and object, but notwithstanding this view, I wish to start thinking from a deeper, broader position" (NKZ 3:502–503). The concept of *place* is adumbrated here as underlying both the subject and the object, which Nishida often analogizes with a "surface" (*men* 面) that "envelops" (*tsutusmu* 包む) subject and object.

It is worth observing how Nishida further explains his take on Kant the following year, which connects well to the earlier position he took in *An Inquiry into the Good*. "In Kantian criticism," Nishida notes in 1928, "dogmatic thoughts remained, indeed from its starting point" (NKZ 4:148). This should not be taken as a total rejection of Kantianism since in the same work Nishida elaborates: "I do not intend to discuss what a transcendent reality might be, such as Kant's alleged 'thing in itself (*Ding an sich*),' which exists in and of itself apart from cognizing subjectivity. I am not a metaphysician in such a sense. . . . I rather believe that I am following through the path of Kantian criticism" (NKZ 4:7–8). The main point he makes is that Kant was not critical enough to avoid metaphysical assumptions. What we can perceive in such remarks is that Nishida followed Kant's spirit of *critique* as carefully as possible, while his inquiry gradually pushed him beyond Kant and reached what he called "the standpoint of radical criticism" (*tetteiteki hihyōshugi no tachiba* 徹底的批評主義の立場) (NKZ 4:148). In sum, it was a radicalization of Kant's critical philosophy that enabled Nishida to make the transition from the philosophy of *pure experience* to that of *place*.

It is worth repeating for the present purpose that Nishida's "logic of place" (*basho no ronri* 場所の論理) was brought into being not through some kind of "East Asian" thinking or "Zen" experience. As I have already noted at the outset, no *logic* proper can be "Eastern" or "Western" in his view. On the other hand, moving beyond Kant does not entail that he had to dispense with East Asian traditions of thought. While Nishida's radical *critique* had to turn against Kant to some extent, as we saw a moment ago, it is conceivable that radicalizing the spirit of criticism made the distance shorter to Asian philosophical traditions. In what follows, however, I concentrate on tracing Nishida's philosophical progression from *pure experience* to *place*, because the nature of *place*, together with its philosophical relevance, must be clarified before it can be compared with surrounding East Asian philosophical traditions in productive ways.

"One Field of Experience"

In the early pages of *An Inquiry into the Good*, Nishida raised the following question, which marked his starting point for philosophical analysis: "What, then, is direct

knowledge (*chokusetsu no chishiki* 直接の知識) that one cannot doubt even if one wished to?" (NKZ 1:41). As readers may anticipate, it is part of a larger question of epistemology related to mind-matter dualism as well. Nishida writes (NKZ 1:40):

From the perspective of common sense, we think that matter exists in the external world apart from consciousness and that in the back of consciousness there is something called the mind that performs various functions. But the assumption that mind and matter exist independently of each other . . . leaves as much room for doubt as one wants to bring in.

Sharing insights with phenomenism, whose account falls heavy on the phenomenal appearances of the world, Nishida thinks that we cannot grasp the nature of matter, or the object considered in itself, in complete isolation from consciousness. Importantly, this also holds true for mind in Nishida's view such that the knowing subject, which traditional Western philosophy often understood as some kind of "substance," cannot simply be assumed to exist behind, or prior to, consciousness. One should not consider, therefore, that subject (or mind) and object (or matter) existed independently of each other in a substantive way, only to become related later, which account Nishida finds unsatisfactory since, if so, their existence would be correlative even though they were assumed to be mutually independent. The epistemological *critique* Nishida carries forward thus refuses to assume any reality beyond the "phenomenon of consciousness" (*ishikigenshō* 意識現象).

This leads us to the general idea of a phenomenal field that precedes the more particular presencing of subject and object. In one of his lecture notes, Nishida in fact remarks: "Originally, there was no thing-self distinction (*butsuga no kubetsu* 物我の区別); it was just one field of experience" (NKZ 15:111).² The first half of this sentence may not strike readers familiar with Nishida's works or Zen Buddhist philosophy in general, but the second half involves a stronger ontological claim: What *is* must be *one fact*, or better, *one experiential field*, in which the subject and object are primarily open to and exist through each other, neither of them existing "prior" to the field. Nishida rephrases the idea by saying that, however hard one may think or reflect, we "cannot get behind this screen of direct experience" (NKZ 15:100).³ No independent substance exists, and nothing lies hidden in the background.

The "one field of experience" is explained through a concrete, lively example in Nishida's *An Inquiry into the Good*: "[It is] as if we are fascinated with exquisite music, and pass into oblivion of things and ourselves, as if one voice of music fills heaven and earth, in which moment becomes present the so-called true reality" (*iwayuru shinjitsuzai* いわゆる真実在) (NKZ 1:49). Nishida intends more than a metaphor. When I am listening to music, for example, I actually exist insofar as I am actually listening to it, not independently of, or being separated from, the very act of listening. In other words, "listening to music" is *one fact* that cannot be divided into the act of listening and the music being listened to any more than the self, which is not an unchanging substance for Nishida, can be separated from its acts. In the moment my soul is lost in music, therefore, I do not and cannot exist without the music, for I exist only as listening to the music. Reciprocally, the only music existing as such in the same moment is the music I am listening to. Indeed, all listeners of the music exist in the manner they do insofar as they are severally involved, the music

and listenings not disintegrated into a collection of bits of independent activities. "Subject and object abolishing each other, things and self forgetting each other," Nishida echoes his view elsewhere, "what fills heaven and earth is nothing but the sole activity of reality" (NKZ 1:125).

It should not be thought from what has been said above, on the other hand, that finite differences and distinctive nuances of experience vanish in Nishida's world. The emphasis on the *sole* activity of reality, which constitutes the *one* field of experience, indicates dismissal of subject-object dualism, act-agent dualism, and the dualism of internal and external relations, but it does *not* mean that there are no intertwined yet distinguishable features of experience. Continuing with the example of music, each listener exists as long as they co-participate in the production of the musical scene simultaneously. There is no concrete existence of the music apart from its being played and listened to in a certain way, where each co-participant perceives or feels music in a manner different from those of others. In this regard no listener is dispensable or substitutable in accounting for the quality of the music unfolding here and now. Most plainly put, we listen together in the unity of the audience, while the many features of the musical experience involving differences are perceived either explicitly or inexplicitly.

Pushing the point further, it may also be noted that when I feel music—the rhythm, pitch, and voice, for instance—my individual perception comprehends that of others by being part of the musical experience. To give a different example, suppose I am lifting a desk with a friend. My tactile perception does not stop with just one side of the desk or with the surface of my hand, but extends to the coordinated movement as a whole, allowing me to feel how my friend is holding the desk at the other end. We engage in the same dynamics in different ways, of course, such as lifting the opposite sides at slightly different angles, hence not eliminating differences, while my mind and body undergo constant adjustment in response to my friend's cooperation. In this manner perception takes place in the continuity of the field in which individual senses, including mine, resonate and cooperate with those of others. It is such reciprocal constitution of the experiencing self and environment, including the presencing of others, that constitutes the most general fact in Nishida's view. In a brief statement, Nishida remarks: "Just as the objective world can be said to be a reflection (*han'ei* 反影) of the self, the self is a reflection of the objective world" (NKZ 1:125). This also means that the example of music does not refer to a special state of mind. In Nishida's view it belongs to the commonest fact of mundane life, the fact taken as it is, the fact that I am what I am.

I have endeavored to clarify what Nishida meant by "one field of experience." It is now necessary to relate this to Nishida's use of the word "consciousness." Nishida often refers to the field of experience, which has no substance in the background, as the "phenomenon of consciousness" (*ishikigenshō* 意識現象). To repeat a point central to the goal of this essay, there is no substratum behind the "phenomenon" that Nishida considers. He writes: "The presence of the phenomenon of consciousness and being conscious of it are straightforwardly one and the same (*tadachi ni dōitsu* 直に同一); we cannot separate subject and object between them either. . . . Truly one

cannot doubt it even if one attempted" (NKZ 1:41). The phenomenon of consciousness is nothing more or less than reality as it is; its features do not stand in subject-object relation or mind-matter relation, and nothing exists prior to it. Reflecting this point of view, Nishida alerts his readers: "There is danger that what I call the phenomenon of consciousness here may lead to misunderstanding. If I say phenomenon of consciousness, it may be thought that spirit existed on its own separate from matter. But what I really mean by true reality can be called neither conscious phenomenon nor material phenomenon" (NKZ 1:45). Such a phenomenon is not true experience *about* reality but reality itself, what Nishida regarded as "pure experience," and is considered only *intuitively* conscious since it is unmediated.⁴

Two points remain important. First, there is no act-agent dualism implied in this position. In Nishida's words: "People commonly believe that there is some agent of activity (*katsudō no shu* 活動の主) by which activity arises. But from the perspective of immediate experience, the activity is itself reality" (NKZ 1:59). Pure experience manifests itself as reality, not having a subject outside experience that entertains the experience. Second, a multiplicity of participants, features, and elements is not excluded from the picture. As mentioned earlier, reality maintains differences, each individuality expressing reality in its entirety when it appears in pure and immediate form. Nishida writes (NKZ 1:57):

Thus, reality's original way (*jitsuzai no komponenteki hōshiki* 根本的方式) is such that it is one as well as many (*ichi naru to tomo ni ta* 一なると共に多), many as well as one, possessing distinctions within equality (*byōdō no naka ni sabetsu o gushi* 平等の中に差別を具し), possessing equality within distinctions. Because these two sides cannot be separated, it can be said that reality is the self-development of a single thing.

The simultaneous possession of equality and distinctions may require more explanation, but it suffices for the moment to note that "Originally, the differentiation (*bunka* 分化) of reality and its unification (*tōitsu* 統一) are one, and ought not to be two" (NKZ 1:152). What I wish to keep clear in mentioning this is that the claim does not need to depend on any particular East Asian thinking or religious experience. For example, if conceptual difficulties of substance dualism give rise to neutral monism as a philosophical alternative, it is equally natural to consider a theory of pure experience by discarding assumptions about substance in Nishida's way. Differentiation and unification are merely aspects of reality belonging to the one field of experience that consists in a single, self-unfolding activity behind which nothing exists.

The Groundless Will

The common idea of reality, based on fundamental divisions between independently existing things, is thus called into question. More precisely, Nishida considers that the divisions themselves are in fact forms of self-development of one and the same reality. He says, "We talk about division (*bunretsu* 分裂) and about reflection (*hansei* 反省), but it is not that such separate activities exist, for these are all merely developments of the activity of differentiation (*bunkasayō no hatten* 分化作用の発展) that

constitutes the other side of unification" (NKZ 1:153). In interpreting these words, we must distinguish between at least two sides of division and reflection. One occurs when we realize the division of self and others, subject and object, and so on, amid the sole activity of pure experience in a productive (*sōsakuteki* 創作的) awareness, in which case we become the "working reason itself" (*ri sono mono* 理そのもの) (NKZ 1:61). The other more degenerate or serious case occurs when we fall away from reality by accepting the independent existence of the subject and object, self and others, and so forth. The latter experience arises with the appearance of oppositions, contradictions, and conflicts between the subject and object, as well as those between self and others. Then we see human life and the Universe as filled with suffering.

As I have mentioned already, however, division and reflection constituting conflict and suffering are features of the sole activity of reality such that "on the one hand reality is infinite conflict and on the other it is infinite unity" (NKZ 1:78). What may appear as endless differentiation on the one side is incessant unification on the other. It is in this sense that Nishida writes, "the differentiating self-development of consciousness seeks for a greater unity (*issō dainaru tōitsu* 一層大なる統一) to its contrary" (NKZ 1:137). He also notes that "behind division and reflection lies the possibility of a more profound unity. Reflection is a route to a profound unity" (NKZ 1:153). This means that reality is the self-developing activity from one unity to another through reflection, conflict, and suffering, as if it experiences labor pain.

Nishida sometimes characterizes such a unifying activity as a "will" (*ishi* 意志) that seeks for a growing unity of subject and object, self and others, forming a whole-some Universe. Seen this way, "Pure experience is the state in which the will is active most freely and vigorously, where not even a hair's breadth lies between the demand and realization of the will" (NKZ 1:13). As the one activity of reality, the Universe actualizes itself as a cosmic will, so to speak, though it is essential to Nishida's view that there is no "reason" that the will refers to in actualizing and realizing itself, which means that the will is "blind" (*mōmoku* 盲目) for him.

Three main points help explain his insight. First, the *sole* reality as such cannot be included in some higher reality, nor can it have a foundation-like "substance." Second, there is no dualism of will and reason, as if the will subjected itself to a principle external to it. Third, no *fact* or *facticity* can be explained away rationally or through reason. A dense passage in *An Inquiry into the Good* argues as follows (NKZ 1:33):

Some people draw a distinction between will and reason (*risei* 理性) because the will is blind [whereas reason is not], but it is impossible to explain whatever are immediate facts to us, nor can reason explain the principle of intuitive grasp (*chokkakuteki genri* 直覚的原理) that lies at its foundation. To explain means we can include others in a given system [through a unifying act]. What renders itself the central axis of unification (*tōitsu no chūjiku* 統一の中軸) cannot be explained; it is blind in any case.

The will's activity as pure experience is that which is never given any ground or reason. If it could be included in or unified with another system in some rational way,

there would have to be another active principle of inclusion or unification. Hence, pure experience, realizing itself as an unmediated will, is “blind” and “groundless” in the sense that it is not grounded in anything other than itself. In this sense, Nishida also remarks, in a well-known line, “pure experience has no meaning whatsoever” (*nanra no imi mo nai* 何等の意味もない) (NKZ 1:9). As a reminder and clarificatory note, however, this does not mean that there is no multiplicity of elements or structure within pure experience itself.

It is true, on the other hand, that each finite individual has a tendency to set up their “subjective self” (*shukanteki jiko* 主観的自己) (NKZ 1:136) as the ground or basis for its own “relative” (*sōtaiteki* 相対的) (ibid.) unification. In this second sense, the activity reveals a will that strives for its own ground, even though reality is originally groundless, which is where Nishida partly inherits Arthur Schopenhauer’s (1788–1860) language of “will,” especially in his early writings. Each event or entity, Nishida recognizes, could be subject to some principle according to which it realizes itself, which may appear as a will achieving a telos or purpose. It is also possible, Nishida thinks, that the will may appear at times more implicitly such that its self-realization or becoming may resemble “Schopenhauer’s will-less pure intuition (*ishinaki junsui chokkaku* 意志なき純粹直覚)” (NKZ 1:34) or “intellectual intuition” (*chiteki chokkan* 知的直観) (ibid.) in general. This is why Nishida writes that “the advance of the will is the development and completion of such intuitional unity (*chokkakuteki tōitsu* 直覚的統一)” (NKZ 1:36). Nonetheless, Nishida pays greater attention than Schopenhauer to the kind of *logic* needed to articulate the idea.⁵ Nishida points out that “It would be very difficult if it had to be proven that the myriad things in the Universe are all created teleologically” (NKZ 1:80), hinting that more than intuition is required to make a strong case, and continuing, “even if this were proven, we could still conceive of the world as being created teleologically by chance” (ibid.). In one of his key remarks, Nishida also writes: “If we consider the way true reality, independent and sufficient in itself, obtains, it is always through the same form (*dōitsu no keishiki ni yotte* 同一の形式に由って) that it obtains” (NKZ 1:63). From this we can see that it is the identical form, a universal logic, that Nishida aims at unveiling.

The self-developing activity as a whole is not grounded on anything. Every single thing is as it is and ultimately groundless—reality as the activity of pure experience is not “teleological” for Nishida. The negation of the will probing for a ground, that is, the resignation of “the belief in one’s own self” (NKZ 1:135), realizes the sole activity as unification *qua* differentiation. It means that differentiation does not take place to the exclusion of unification, as if one followed the other. In this sense the rejection of the will searching for a ground is the turning or the transforming into the will itself, the realization and becoming of the will’s original nature, as it were. To repeat, the negation of the will for a ground leads us not to justify a fundamental or ultimate essence or existence other than the will—nothing lies in the back-ground—nor is there anything “teleological” in Nishida’s view of the will. Of course, the consideration does not attempt to deny the fact that the self-developing, self-realizing activity as a whole is groundless. From a critical and logical standpoint, reality as a

whole cannot be grounded on anything else. What appears as a split between agency and its goal indeed results from abstract thinking. It is only when “differentiation” is regarded as separate from “unification” that the will appears to have a “teleological” structure. Reality as a whole exists not in the manner of advancing from something potential to something actual in a teleological way—a view Nishida voices clearly when he writes, “The differentiation and development of consciousness (*ishiki no bunkahatten* 意識の分化発展) is the other side of unification (*tōitsu no tamen* 統一の他面)” (NKZ 1:137). Therefore, it does not make sense to ask “Is this differentiation or unification?” because they are both aspectual manifestations of one and the same reality, or, to lean more toward Nishida’s later vocabulary, they can be seen as absolutely contradictory aspects of one and the same self-identical reality.⁶

Consciousness and the Place as Nothingness

In his early works, including *An Inquiry into the Good*, Nishida does not seem to cast sufficient light on the logical side of his argument. Furthermore, when it comes to “pure experience” of the individual, the status of the subjective self and its will become somewhat ambiguous, since the experience is, on the one hand, continuous with the “one field of experience” as a whole, while it does appear to belong, on the other hand, to the experience of the finite individual. In this respect we might as well say that Nishida maintained the standpoint of the subjective ego in his early philosophy, a subjective self that seeks for a ground or basis of its being. Hence, it is not surprising that Nishida later criticized the notion of pure experience that he developed in *An Inquiry into the Good* as drawn too much toward the “standpoint of consciousness” (*ishiki no tachiba* 意識の立場) (NKZ 1:3), siding with a form of “psychologism” (*shinrishugi* 心理主義) (*ibid.*),⁷ or “bearing a psychological tint” (*shinriteki shikisai o mottamono* 心理的色彩を有ったもの) (NKZ 8:255), according to his much later remark.

This also meant that there was room for Nishida to radicalize the spirit of criticism a step further with respect to the presumptions of subjective experience, whose residue was perceivable in his descriptions of the “will” and “conscious phenomenon.” In other words, the way he understood consciousness and the subjective self in *An Inquiry into the Good* was considered dogmatic for the purpose of fully characterizing reality. To radicalize his critical thinking, Nishida brought “consciousness” into focus and examined it throughout *From the Acting to the Seeing*, a work published sixteen years after *An Inquiry into the Good*. The introduction of the concept of *place* is to be viewed together with his radical interpretation of “consciousness as nothingness” (*mu no ishiki* 無の意識), which not only eliminates the presumption of consciousness as an independent substance or substratum but attempts to take it to another, deeper level. Since consciousness is no longer concerned with any form of subject or object, Nishida regards it as a moving “surface” (*men* 面) or active “place” (*basho* 場所) that envelops all being.

Such a place is not a thing, of course, but a precondition for knowledge and cognition. Hence, when Nishida analogizes it as a “mirror” or “mirroring” in his re-

nowned essay “Place,” a chapter in *From the Acting to the Seeing*, it is not a “device” standing between subject and object but the “field of consciousness” (*ishiki no ya* 意識の野) captured in the most general and comprehensive form. To avoid the slightest implication of subject and object, including their relative and contingent absence, Nishida writes (NKZ 3:426):

That which knows does not simply signify constituting (*kōseisuru* 構成する) or working (*hataraku* 働く) but must be that which envelops (*tsutsumumono* 包むもの) what is known; nay, it must be that which mirrors the known inwardly (*uchi ni utsusumono* 内に映すもの); when we talk about the unity of subject and object (*shukaku gōitsu* 主客合一), or say that there is neither subject nor object (*shumo kyakumo nai* 主も客もない), it must just mean that place (*basho* 場所) becomes true nothingness (*shin no mu* 真の無), that it simply becomes a mirror that mirrors (*tan ni utsusu kagami to naru* 単に映す鏡となる).

In the first line we must note Nishida’s unvoiced reaction to Kant, for whom the transcendental subject was the pure constituting ego that acts on the given. Nishida refers to no such *a priori* subject, the enveloping or mirroring consciousness only indicating the minimum condition for any being to be possible. More accurately, consciousness and being form one and the same reality viewed from two perspectives, expressing themselves only for and through each other. Neither consciousness nor being exists prior to the fact or event of the enveloping or mirroring of consciousness. In this manner Nishida develops the idea that, when seen from the one side, being is unified with the consciousness of being as it is, while, on the other side, consciousness obtains in its most fundamental form when it is one with being as it is. It follows that “behind consciousness” (*ishiki no haigo* 意識の背後) must be “absolute nothing” (*zettai no mu* 絶対の無) (NKZ 3:433), for there is no “separate layer” behind consciousness itself; there is nothing behind being *qua* consciousness or consciousness *qua* being.

This, of course, is not a theory easy to flesh out. In *From the Acting to the Seeing*, Nishida warns his readers: “When we think of something we [usually] refer to as conscious, it is already something that has been brought to consciousness rather than what one is being conscious of [in my sense]” (NKZ 3:462). He further contends that consciousness is “true nothingness,” or “ultimate nothingness,” leading to the statement, “The true standpoint of consciousness (*shin no ishiki no tachiba* 真の意識の立場) must be that of ultimate nothingness (*saigo no mu no tachiba* 最後の無の立場)” (NKZ 3:437). Nothingness considered this way, of course, does not have “psychological” properties, nor does it support idealism or panpsychism.⁸ Since it does not concern itself with mind-independent “objects,” Nishida regards it as a working that can be modeled as “self-mirroring” (*jiko o utsusu* 自己を映す), “self-seeing” (*jiko o miru* 自己を見る), and hence “self-awareness” (*jikaku* 自覚), which amount to the unmediated self-presencing of the being-conscious-of. Another way to refer to the fact or event of “being conscious” could be to use the neologism “consciousing” as a verb or gerund, coming closer to the tradition of William James and others, which wards off interpretations of consciousness as substance.

The theory of consciousness as *nothingness* can be seen as corresponding to the one field of experience expounded upon earlier. Nonetheless it is equally important to observe that Nishida radicalizes his criticism including the negation of will when he reaches the concept of *place* as nothingness. To repeat: being, or more precisely the relationship between being and consciousness, is grounded on nothing—when the will for ground is negated it does not mean that being cannot be, but entails instead that being is what cannot be included in any further ground. Indeed, being is grounded on the nothingness of ground or in virtue of nothingness itself, for which reason Nishida also regards nothingness as “creative nothingness” (*sōzōteki mu* 創造的無) (NKZ 3:438) in his essay “Place.” If this argument invites skepticism—for example, doubting that one could not verify whether a being really exists or not “behind” the scene—Nishida would reply that we are still trapped in substance ontology. As a result, our thinking revolves around the relationship between substance and phenomenon, ground and effect, and so on, which translates into the “will for a ground.”

Hence, Nishida encourages us to transcend the substance-phenomenon, ground-effect relation and its variants. It is suggestive that in “Place” Nishida goes so far as to write: “When we enter the true place of nothingness, such a thing as free will (*jiyūishi no gotokimono* 自由意志の如きもの) must vanish (*shōmetsu senakereba naranu* 消滅せなければならぬ)” (NKZ 3:447). Note also that pluralicity is not excluded from Nishida’s picture: “When we take the standpoint of true nothingness, each thing must be itself mirroring itself” (*ichi ichi ga jiko ga jiko o utsusumono* 一々が自己が自己を映すもの), that is, it must be something self-aware (NKZ 3:445). From this, we see that Nishida calls nothingness *place* (*basho* 場所) precisely because it is *that in which being is as it is* and is inseparable from being itself. Struggling to put the insight into intelligible words, Nishida writes: “To say that what is is being as it is” (*aru mono ga sono mama ni u de aru to iū koto wa* 有るものがそのまゝに有であるといふことは) means that “being as it is is nothingness” (*aru ga mama ni mu de aru* 有るがまゝに無である) (NKZ 3:445). He also frequently uses the expression “implaced in the place as nothingness” (*mu no basho ni oite aru* 無の場所に於てある) so as not to have his audience confound it with some “physical space.” Nothingness does not occupy physical space but simply precedes it.

In Nishida’s opinion, being as it is in the place as nothingness *is* the realization of being and the realization of consciousness as nothingness at the same time, which is the original mode of *being conscious* or *consciousing* without ground or basis, intuited as the fact itself that being *is* nothingness. The structure of being and nothingness unfolding into the presencing of things is traced to the place of nothingness in the following passage, which Nishida explains as “self-mirroring,” discussed above (NKZ 3:429):

True place (*shin no basho* 真の場所) mirrors its own reflection within itself, becoming something like a mirror that illuminates itself. When a being is implaced as being (*u ga u ni oite aru toki* 有が有に於てある時), it could be said that the latter holds (*motsu* 有つ) the former [i.e., a being], and when a being that has become manifest (*arawareta u* 顕れた有) is implaced as a being not becoming manifest (*arawarenai u* 顕れない有), it could

be said that the former is a manifestation of the latter [i.e., the being not becoming manifest], although when a being is implaced as true nothingness (*shin no mu ni oite aru toki* 真の無に於てある時), it could only be said that the latter [true nothingness] mirrors the former [the being].

The *place in which being is* is nothingness as consciousness that sees and realizes itself not as substance but through self-negating the will for ground. In fact the will realizes its limiting nature through a contradictory self-negation as nothingness in Nishida's view. Only then does the willing for being lose its telos-oriented form and realize itself as a seeing or intuiting of being just as it is. It is an "intuiting of pure state" (*junsui jōtai no chokkan* 純粹状態の直観) (NKZ 3:446) in which we are encouraged to "transcend" all remaining feelings of "the contradiction of will" (ibid.).

The fact that experience is in the end grounded by nothing might generate the impression that it is insignificant or meaningless. The sense of deprivation, uncertainty, or less, however, stems from our lingering assumption of substance in Nishida's analysis, which easily connects to the negative perception of *nothingness*, considered as an "antithesis" to substance or essence. Contrarily, negating the will for ground in Nishida's sense leads to the realization of genuinely irreplaceable experience accounted for by no other ground. Seeing as a field of experience as it is means that the seeing realizes being in which others as well as the whole are mirrored in one unifying place. We must remind ourselves that it does not refer to a "process" in which the potential is realized, as Nishida clarifies in *From the Acting to the Seeing*: "When something potential (*senzaiteki* 潜在的) is thought of behind consciousness (*ishiki no haigo* 意識の背後), it is no longer consciousness [in the genuine sense]; it becomes a development of force" (NKZ 3:437). I also wish to emphasize that this is the very experience of the differentiation, conflict, and suffering as unification discussed earlier on, whose formulation Nishida sought after in subsequent years. In the midst of conflict, each perspective rises as a reflection of unity across the one field of experience. The self-seeing, self-intuiting, or self-awareness, through the negation of the will for ground, realizes a unique, irreplaceable experience. It is the immediate presentation of *being conscious of* or *consciousing*, being as it is, the experience not being included in anything else or subsumed under any teleological order.

Conclusion

I have emphasized that Nishida proposed the concept of place as *nothingness* through a *radical critique*, reading and departing from Kant, Schopenhauer, and others. The spirit of criticism requires that we dispense with common presumptions regarding experience. One such presumption is the independent reality of the subject of consciousness; another would be the independent reality of objects; yet another would be the bifurcation of experience into differentiation and unification considered separately; still another the assumption of teleology of the will at the

deepest level; and so forth. My analysis presents an interpretive context for existing Nishida scholarship. James W. Heisig says, for example, that “Nishida suggests that the true identity of the individual only emerges through a co-existence of opposites” (Heisig 2001, p. 65), also remarking that nothingness “relativizes any model of co-existence or harmony that sublates, transcends, debilitates, or otherwise obscures that contrariness” (ibid., p. 63). As one can see, it relates directly to the opposition between being and nothingness and the kind of perspectival plurality examined in the present essay. Likewise, when John C. Maraldo writes, “Literally, the Sino-Japanese term for absolute, *zettai* [絶対], means breaking through opposition, so absolute nothingness is not opposed to anything; it is the place where all things are held together as one, along with the negation of that oneness” (Maraldo 2011, p. 367), he is talking about the *one field of experience* realizing itself as unique irreplaceable experience.

In summarizing Nishida’s view, it may be helpful to briefly contrast his view with that of Kant again, from whom Nishida inherited the spirit of criticism that I have emphasized at the outset of this essay.⁹ Nishida does not assert that Kant’s theory was false. In developing the idea of *place*, he suggests instead that Kant did not go far enough with his well-known idea of “consciousness in general” (*Bewußtsein überhaupt*). In Nishida’s own words, “When the transition is made from the standpoint of being and nothingness opposing each other to the standpoint of true nothingness, it is in this turning point that what Kant called consciousness in general obtains” (NKZ 3:434). From Nishida’s point of view, Kant’s consciousness in general acts like a theoretical validating screen for objects of knowledge such that any object projected on it is justified immediately, while true reality is concealed beneath the screen, and becomes the unknowable “thing-in-itself” only to slip away. In short, generalizing consciousness, from that of the individual knower to that of everyone and every object in Kant’s manner, does not reach reality in Nishida’s sense, which is *being conscious of* or *consciousing* beyond the relative nothingness of the transcendental subject. Hence, Nishida says, “This position of consciousness in general [i.e., the position Kant takes] is the position of nothingness that subsumes all existing things, so that it never ceases to be a position grounded in the position of consciousness. But that is not consciousness as reality” (ibid.).

There are other respects in which Nishida tries to move beyond Kant. In the essay “Place,” Nishida points out: “The space of perception that we see is not transcendental space immediately. Yet the space of perception finds its place in transcendental space, and furthermore, behind transcendental space must be true nothingness” (NKZ 3:451). It is not hard to see that Kant’s transcendental space is regarded as a step toward reality, that it must be the *groundlessness* itself at work that reality consists in a non-teleological state of freedom. In understanding the relationship between Nishida’s *place* and Kant’s *transcendental space*, it becomes clear that from Nishida’s point of view Kant’s transcendental space is designed to serve Kant’s foundationalist program of epistemology, which marks a stark contrast with Nishida’s theory of *groundless* reality. Furthermore, the realization of the groundless abyss of nothingness renders our experience singular as well as irreplaceable, hardly similar

to Kant's consciousness in general, which emerges from the ultimate negation of the will searching for a ground. In this regard, the radicalization of *critical philosophy* is accomplishable only when the will probing for a ground is denied, which, in Nishida's view, opens a path toward the *being-conscious-of* or *consciousing* in the most authentic sense.

Notes

I wish to thank the anonymous reviewers of this journal for their insightful comments and suggestions, which greatly helped me to improve this essay.

- 1 – All references to Nishida's text are based on the latest edition of *Nishida Kitarō zenshū* 西田幾多郎全集 (The complete works of Nishida Kitarō), 24 vols. (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2002–2009), which will hereafter be abbreviated as *NKZ*, followed by volume and page number. The English translations are all mine, although I have occasionally benefited from existing English translations, which are indicated in the bibliography.
- 2 – The phrase “one field of experience” in this quote was written in English by Nishida, which I verified when examining Nishida's manuscripts in preparation for the newest scholarly edition of *Nishida Kitarō zenshū* mentioned above. Previous editions are slightly misleading regarding the text here in that the impression is given that only the word “field” was originally written in English, which is not the case.
- 3 – Again the expressions “screen” and “direct experience” are written in English by Nishida (for additional textual information, see *NKZ* 15:100–101).
- 4 – The relationship between the phenomenon of consciousness and “intuition” (*chokaku* 直覚) receives an illuminating interpretation in Ueda 2007, pp. 49–51.
- 5 – For more details regarding the similarities and differences between Nishida and Schopenhauer, including the latter's influences on the former, see Itabashi 2012. I offer more specific comparative analyses between Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Presentation* (*Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*) and Nishida's *An Inquiry into the Good* in Itabashi 2014, pp. 265–276, and Itabashi 2016, pp. 95–118.
- 6 – This point and related issues are discussed further in light of Nishida's late philosophy in Itabashi 2008, pp. 224–257, 322–324.
- 7 – What Nishida meant by “psychologism” should not be considered the same as what “psychologism” tends to signify today. Ishida (2011) alerts readers to the distinctive meaning and form of Nishida's “psychologism,” which should be interpreted strictly along with his Kantianism, making it clear that Nishida hardly meant something like empirical psychologism even when he admitted traits of “psychologism” in his early account of “pure experience.”

- 8 – This line of reading is certainly not altogether new and finds advocates in recent Nishida scholarship. John W. M. Krummel, for example, writes: “the *basho* of true nothing would be reducible to neither realism nor idealism, nor any sort of dualism” (Krummel 2011, p. 22).
- 9 – For a close examination of Nishida’s interpretation of Kant compared with those of such Neo-Kantians as Hermann Cohen (1842–1918), Heinrich Rickert (1863–1936), and Emil Lask (1875–1915), who critically inherited Kant’s work in Germany, see Itabashi 2004, pp. 58–72, 105–122, 131–146.

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