

NISHIDA'S PHILOSOPHICAL EQUIVALENTS OF ENLIGHTENMENT AND NO-SELF

James W. HEISIG

Nanzan Institute for Religion & Culture

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One of the core ideas associated with the Kyoto School philosophers is that of a *self-awareness in which the self awakens to its true nature as no-self*. There is no text of theirs I can point to in which that idea is expressed in so many words, and no way to make it unambiguous without extensive commentary. And yet it touches on something essential to the whole venture that Nishida set in motion. If that is the case, we would expect the distinction between *self* and *no-self* to figure predominantly in the analysis of self-awareness. Others in his circle like Nishitani Keiji and Tanabe Hajime did indeed take it upon themselves to make those connections explicit, turning to Buddhist resources for support. But Nishida's own strategy was indirect, almost covert. As I hope to show, self-awareness was the label under which he introduced the notions of enlightenment and no-self into philosophy without actually adopting the terms or referring to their Buddhist roots, and his contribution to Buddhist philosophy was all the more persuasive because of it.

I

Start to finish, the pursuit of the enlightened mind lay at the heart of Nishida's philosophical vocation. We see a hint of this in a promise he made to himself during his years of training in Zen meditation: to let go of ego and academic ambitions for the sake of a greater Life, and never to *think about* what he had not first *seen*. In his enthusiasm he had declared that he would not take up phi-

losophy until he had attained enlightenment; and that, succeed or fail, he would practice for the rest of his life. In fact, Nishida gave up his practice and study of Zen—“not having understood it in the end”¹—and never made a formal place for Zen or meditation in his philosophy. In fact, allusions to spiritual cultivation in any form, religious or otherwise, are all but absent from his published writings, but the ideal of awakening to a greater Life was something he carried with him to the end.

Rather than take any of the standard Buddhist expressions for enlightenment over into his philosophical vocabulary, Nishida preferred neutral and non-denominational language. After some years he settled on “self-awareness,” a term that had long since broken free of its classical Buddhist roots and come into common parlance to express being “aware” or “conscious” of something or other, and in philosophical circles was being used to translate “self-consciousness.” The ambiguity suited him perfectly. He could muffle the word “enlightenment” without having to silence the Buddhist echoes entirely. It is only near the end of his life that he brought the connection between self-awareness and enlightenment out of the shadows. I condense two passages from essays published back to back in 1943, two years before his death:

Philosophy is a way for the self to become self-aware and to live. Different philosophies place the emphasis differently, but it seems to me that they all come down to the same thing: the self-awareness of a relationship between the individual self and the absolute one. Western cultures raised in Christianity see that relationship as an opposition that imposes duties on the self; life is rooted in *ought*. Eastern cultures think of self-awareness as leaving behind one’s customary, illusory self for a true self and returning to the one. Seen from western culture, this may seem like an abdication to nature, a loss of the self, the disappearance of morality. But this is where infinite activity and morality truly begin. Buddhism’s *no-self* does not mean that the self disappears or merely resigns itself. Buddhist compassion means to see something by becoming it, to act by becoming one with what is acted upon. In contrast, duty—and even love—set up an opposition between self and other...

1. 1914, 19: 209. All references are to the revised edition of Nishida’s *Complete Works*, 『西田幾多郎全集』 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2002–2009), 24 volumes. Numbers in square bracket refer to the English translation where one is cited. In order to preserve a unity of terminology, and occasionally to restore important terms glossed over in the English, I have adjusted existing translations freely throughout this essay.

Our life and existence are not our own; they are the self-determinations of absolute nothingness. Religious conversions means that I am I not without a thou, that I am not at rest until I am in a thou—in other words, until I become enlightened as a Buddha.²

Nishida's closest colleagues and disciples must have been aware that a Buddhist notion of no-self was at work in the background of his thinking. This late revelation removes all doubt and makes us wonder why it was so late in coming.

If we lay end to end all the previous contexts in which Nishida uses the term *no-self*, there is no indication that he meant to associate it more closely with Zen or Pure Land Buddhist thought than with, say, Christian theology and spirituality. Even in his earliest writings, well before his first book was published and when he was still deeply immersed in Zen meditation, *no-self* is given a non-sectarian sense that supersedes established religious tradition and can therefore be applied as well to pre-reflective consciousness as to submission to the will of God, the Confucian virtue of sincerity, or simply boundless love.³

In a short piece published at the age of thirty Nishida presents morality, art, and religion as stages on the “great path” to no-self. The moral no-self is caught up in discriminating self and other, good and evil; in art, no-self marks a temporary “departure from oneself” to the level of the sublime; only the no-self of religion is everlasting.⁴ In his private notes we find references to no-self as a distinctively Buddhist idea reflected in a variety of Buddhist traditions, but in his lectures he did not hesitate to apply it directly to the Judeo-Christian tradition: “The true religious relationship between the human and the divine is an entry into the realm of no-self. It is to abandon self absolutely and turn to God.”⁵ In fact, until his final years Nishida never singled out Buddhism as a paradigm of religion or as superior to other religious way. This may be one reason that he avoids direct use of the terms *no-self* and *enlightenment*, but subsumed both into what he came to call “a system of self-awareness.”⁶

2. 1943, 9: 461–3, 406. In this context Nishida makes a parenthetical reference to D. T. Suzuki's essay, “The Oriental One” and Hisamatsu Shin'ichi's “Oriental Nothingness.” The Zen expression for *enlightenment* (見性) used here for the first time, will reappear twice more in his final essay (1945, 11: 352–3). Strictly speaking, Buddhism is not without its own ought, as captured in the classical formula “self-awakening, other-awakening” (自覚覚他).

3. See 1905, 14: 546–7.

4. 1900, 11: 58, 60; English translation: “An Explanation of Beauty,” *Monumenta Nipponica* 42 (1987): 216–7. A similar idea appears in his notes from a decade later (16: 281). It is not impossible that Nishida would have come across Kierkegaard's stages, where the position of the aesthetic and the ethical are reversed.

5. See 1905, 16: 216–7; 14: 104.

6. From his first book on, Nishida often spoke of conscious operations as “systems,” but it only four years later that he refers to self-awareness as a system (1915, 2: 109). English translation: *Intuition and Reflection in Self-Consciousness* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1987), 70.

II

Nishida's first attempt to bring enlightenment into philosophy proper was an idea—or more precisely, part of an idea—he borrowed from William James: “pure experience.” For James, paying attention to the stream of consciousness was a way of acquainting oneself with the wider “pure experience” of reality itself. Nishida latched on to the term but hesitated to go as far as James in speaking of a world of pure experience that includes consciousness, in all its states, as one of its ingredients. Since Nishida's primary concern in his first book, *An Inquiry into the Good*, was with the structure and transformation of individual consciousness, he equated pure experience with a “direct experience” that bonds mind to reality by restoring it to its foundations in a unity prior to the separation of subjects from objects.

Here we have a first sketch of what a philosophical *no-self* would look like: a conscious mind reflecting on itself, intuiting a state prior to assuming the posture of a subject standing before a world of objects, and recovering its “true personhood” by “forgetting itself.”⁷ Such a state is prior not only in terms of conscious processes; it is the pristine state to which mind returns when it is truly and fully self-consciousness. Hence, the only one true good is to know that “true self as the very *noumenon* of the universe.”⁸

The connection to Zen enlightenment was obvious and Nishida did not deny it. As a young man had been attracted by “self-awareness” movements in Europe and wrote a short essay about it, but he found them too pessimistic and too infatuated with the very ego that the no-self of Zen aimed to overcome. The self-awareness he was trying to express rationally as pure experience could only be sustained, he claimed, by a “great self-awareness equal to God.”⁹ His reading of western philosophers convinced him that he was on the right track.

As an account of the enlightened self, his first book failed. In time he would agree with his critics that it had been too psychological, by which he meant overly focused on the structure and functions of subjective consciousness that did not in the end support his conclusions. Two problems stand out. First, given his years of training under a Zen master, Nishida knew the importance of navigating one's way from everyday consciousness to the true self and back again. If pure experience means transcending the distinction between subject and object that makes ordinary consciousness possible, and if being a knowing subject means to reflect a world of objects within oneself, then how can one *know* one-

7. 1911, 1: 121 [130].

8. 1911, 1: 134 [145].

9. 1909, 19: 162. The essay referred to appeared in 1906. See 11: 75–9. On Nishida's connections to Zen, see the always helpful details provided by Michiko Yusa in *Zen and Philosophy: An Intellectual Biography of Nishida Kitarō* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002), 84–6.

self without making oneself an object? Unless he could resolve this problem, the way from the knowing self to pure experience would be blocked.

Secondly, despite his strong insistence that “*reality* is the activity of consciousness” and that “the state of consciousness in which subject and object have dissolved into a unity of thinking, feeling, and willing is *true reality*,”¹⁰ Nishida could not bring himself to deny the primacy of a greater reality beyond conscious experience. The question of a wider world driven by desires and demands that lay behind consciousness and can never simply be reduced to it,¹¹ pure experience in James’ extended sense, pressed in on him. It would be several years before he would address it.

III

Nishida’s immediate response to the predicament he had landed himself in as a result of trying to bringing enlightenment into the world of philosophical reason was to back-peddle from the focus on pure experience and the choppy, aphoristic style of *An Inquiry into the Good* with its casual dropping of names and ideas from western philosophers. His rationale for enlightenment and no-self would have to be constructed from the ground up and that meant establishing a transcendental basis for the unity of the conscious, knowing self. In *Intuition and Reflection in Self-Awareness*, Nishida carried out his task through a painstaking discussion of Kant, Fichte, the neo-Kantians, and finally Bergson, but the fundamental question that guided him for nearly four years was very much his own: What does it mean for the self to be aware of itself? For Nishida self-awareness was not only possible, it was the alpha and omega of philosophy. “Self-awareness is the essence of the *I*, the *raison d’être* of the *I*.”¹²

The true self had become the *I*, or more precisely, the pure *I* of Fichte that wills itself into existence and constitutes the empirical world as the *not-I*. Eventually Nishida decided that the only way to resolve the problem of self-reflection was to disentangle it from the thinking *I* altogether and see it as the creative working of an absolute will more real than the whole of the material world, a spiritual reality that reveals itself to us at in a self-awareness that can say with St Paul, “It is no longer I that live but Christ that lives in me.”¹³

10. 1911, 1: 52, 59. English translation (hereafter in square brackets): *An Inquiry into the Good* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 51, 59. Emphasis added.

11. I have laid out the textual references in an essay entitled “*An Inquiry into the Good* and Nishida’s Missing Basho,” *Comparative and Continental Philosophy* 4/2 (2012): 237–51.

12. 1915, 2: 84.

13. 1916, 2: 269–70 [169]. These lines had appeared at the end of *An Inquiry into the Good* (1911, 1: 124 [135]), where it was meant to illustrate the erasure of the distinction between the self and things.

There is no direct mention of a *no-self* in Nishida's summing up of his conclusions, despite a passing remark on the idea of "a thinking without a thinker, an acting without an agent."¹⁴ Nonetheless, as writings from the years immediately following make clear, from this point on his idea of a true self would entail the self-destruction of the ordinary, thinking *I* with its subject-object thinking: "The true *I* is the *I* at the point where the self extinguishes itself, . . . where subject turns into object and object into subject, like a snake feeding off its own tail."¹⁵

The idea of absolute will as a spiritual reality beyond subject or object was intended to provide a more solid foundation for self-awareness. This in turn led Nishida to speak for the first time of an acausal nothingness, a fusion of being and non-being reflected in the idea of God.¹⁶ The God that Nishida had in mind was not a creative, provident, other-worldly transcendent, self-sufficient being who caused the world into existence but the very God he had earlier decided was the equivalent of the enlightened mind. Part of the reason he hesitated to complete the equation was that there was a kind of philosophical imbalance between the two. The "system of self-awareness" he was working on was as yet no match for philosophies of God that had developed since the time of the early Greeks. In particular, he needed to find a way to incorporate the creative, providential attributes of God—or divine will—into self-awareness. The solution ready at hand was to make nothingness an absolute and assign it the role of a self-determining, self-realizing will that was "at work" in consciousness behind the workings of the conscious subject.

Introducing God into the picture was also his way of restoring to self-awareness the element of love and compassion that had been absent during his entrapment in the neo-Kantian hall of mirrors. Here again, he prefers to avoid any direct illusion to Buddhist thought to make his point: "It is only by actual conscious bonding with the outer world that we arrive at the true self."¹⁷ He goes on to say that in love God and the self unite to form a *coincidentia oppositorum*, from which we may conclude that when the *I* is converted to a great *I* that transcends the *I*, self and God are swept up into a nothingness beyond being where they can no longer be distinguished. All of this will be made more explicit later, but for now it is enough to recognize that the conditions for associating God with nothingness, no-self, and the enlightened mind are already in place.

14. 1915, 2: 18.

15. 1919, 2: 389.

16. See 1917, 2: 241–52. The remark that "being is born of nothingness" (248) appears to be a direct quotation from a book of Hermann Cohen's that he was reading at the time and which Joseph O'Leary has tracked down. See *Intuition and Reflection in Self-Consciousness*, 183. The point here is only to dismiss a causal relationship between the experience of self-awareness and the natural world. Soon thereafter, however, he will state more directly that "the true *I* stands on the edge of being and nothingness" (1919, 2: 389).

17. 1920, 2: 286, 289, 291, 326–7, 376–7, 387–9, 420, 426.

The inclusion of a bonding with the world also suggests that the “trueness” of the self is not ready-made but discloses itself in-the-making. It is will at work in actuality, not will in the abstract ground of mere possibility. As he notes, “There is no self in being thirsty and no self in having taken a drink of water. The self is in the transition from the one to the other.”¹⁸ The question was how to negotiate the return to the concrete world. If, as Nishida still thought, the world and individual consciousness within it are objective reflections of an absolute, self-determining, self-realizing will, then something had to be “at work” in consciousness that was not the working of the conscious subject.¹⁹ He did not dismiss out of hand the suggestion of a psychological unconscious as a precondition for high-level conscious unity, provided it was not understood as an external causal force in nature.²⁰ But what he needed was something more tangible. It was as if his idea of the true self had floated off to a cloudy abstraction, where engagement with the world was only the *idea* of engagement. He had been caught up in disassembling earlier ideas and reassembling them in a new order. The “system” he had hoped to construct from his initial intuition of awareness prior to subjective consciousness had stalled in the blueprints.

Part of the problem was that Nishida’s primary metaphors were fraying at the edges and no longer leading him forward. In his own words, he had set out to solve the philosophical problem of the dichotomy between the *is* and the *ought* by bridging the gap between an “inner” consciousness and an “outer” world with the “internal unity” of self-awareness.²¹ The search for the “roots” of an inner realm “deeper” than conscious mind meant that the dichotomy of a world within and a world without dominated his thinking. “The true infinity,” he now says, “lies not in pursuing what lies without but in entire to what is deep within.”²² Or again, “The contradiction of a self doing battle with the objective world or overcoming it is a battle born within the self. It is the self that moves the self.”²³ Even his metaphors of reflection in a mirror, which date from his first book, did not escape the interference of this pattern: in subject-object thinking, something outside is reflected within and then bounced back outside; in absolute will and artistic intuition, reality is internalized like mirrors facing one another. As much as he insisted on the need to overcome the dichotomy of inner and outer, its shadow lay over everything he wrote. In general, I have the impression that thinking in imagery came hard to Nishida, and that as a result the images that dominated his thought were largely opaque to him. Meantime,

18. 1920, 2: 389–90.

19. 1923 3: 13 [11].

20. 1920, 2: 446; 1916, 2: 251 [159].

21. 1937, 1: 164; 1941, 2: 3.

22. 1923, 3: 109.

23. 1923, 46 [41].

the years of juggling abstruse concepts without concrete examples had slowed his thinking down. An intense period of concentration on the analysis of artistic creativity helped Nishida regain his footing.

IV

Art and Morality, despite its subject matter, is remarkably lacking in concrete examples. Very little is to be found in the way of specific aesthetic or moral judgments. But once again, Nishida's plodding, repetitive prose makes it easy to overlook the fact that as he drags his plow back and forth over familiar terrain, he is also scattering new seed that will later blossom into a radical change of direction. For now, by concentrating on the relationship between artistic intuition and moral will, he tries to have a new and critical look at self-awareness as the goal of philosophy.

Nishida patches together a variety of aesthetic theories to enhance his idea of intuition, "the foundation of aesthetic feeling," as the very creative and activity of will on which the unity of consciousness rests. Accordingly artistic intuition is not just an intellectual vision of an objective world. It is the performance of a kind of "unconscious will" engaging the whole body and aimed a "pure feeling."²⁴ Nishida brings self-awareness into the picture this way:

With self-awareness, the contents of consciousness change completely. In artistic intuition we arrive at a level of self-awareness deeper than the merely conceptual. It is not non-self-aware or unconscious in the sense perceptual consciousness is. It leads truly to a self-awareness of the free *I*.²⁵

Nishida is clear that the *I* that only sees the objective world and does not engage in the work of creating an objective world of its own is no more than mere abstraction lacking a proper identity of its own. He likens it to absorption into the universal, all-seeing eye of God, a statement that we may now infer he intends to apply as well to an enlightenment that does not return to serve the enlightenment of others. His own connections are less explicit. Insofar as conscious identity always entails a subject, he says, it naturally opens up to inter-subjectivity, which in turn means "the unfolding of a greater self."²⁶ But it

24. 1923, 3: 24, 84, 86, 187. English translation: *Art and Morality* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1973), 22, 72-3, 157. By contrast, in an undated note to himself, Nishida uses the rather peculiar term "unconscious thinking" to describe the creativity of a working artist (14: 104). It is worth noting that references to the unconscious can be found throughout Nishida's writings, but clearly mean nothing more than "non-conscious."

25. 1923, 3: 133 [cf. 112].

26. 1923, 3: 138 [116-7]

is only in actual artistic performance, which transcends conceptual thinking and “wraps it up” in itself, that artistic intuition becomes real. At the same time, what is creative is always an imperfect reflection of the creative will that produces it, just as the human being never reflects the fullness of the divine image in which it was made (or, on our reading, just as subjective consciousness never reflects the fullness of the enlightened mind). The self can never objectify itself; it remains an unattainable limit. In self-awareness one is aware of “infinite self within the self” only as an ideal, ever-receding goal. Moral performance can also be seen as a work of art aimed at a moral ideal and constructed by pure will, wherein that “the move from artistic intuition to the moral imperative is a matter of internal necessity.”²⁷

Throughout *Art and Morality* Nishida continues to wage a campaign against the idea that the natural world is the real world and our grasp of it mere illusion.²⁸ His goal is rather to pursue “true reality as a union subject and object in a system of self-awareness after the manner of Fichte’s *Tathandlung*.”²⁹ The advance beyond his previous thought may not seem very remarkable, but there were subtle shifts of argument and emphasis along the way. First, he gradually replaced the “transcendent, absolute will” with talk of a “pure will,” a term that not only echoed his inaugural notion of “pure experience” but helped to distance his project from objective idealism and restore the focus to closing the gap between the absolute of nothingness and the absolute of self-awareness.

Secondly, Fichte’s *Tathandlung*, according to which the *I* is not an objective fact in the world but the act in which the *I* sets up its own self-identity, is expanded to include artistic and moral creativity. As we saw, he had already turned self-awareness away from the transcendental ego as the logical “a priori of all a priori” in favor of creative will, but not without retaining vestiges of an outer, objective world becoming a fact through the act of an inner, discerning subject. Moral and artistic creativity provided a first hint of the transition from the standpoint of an inner subject perceiving an outer, objective world to that of an aesthetic intuition in which outer world is seen as the creative expression of a deep, inner will beyond the reach of ordinary subjective consciousness.

Finally, he comes to settle on the term *self* to absorb Fichte’s idea of a true and absolute *I* that “runs against the current of the personal *I*.”³⁰ The following passage from the concluding paragraph marks the change by underlining the

27. 1923, 84, 187–9, 193, 200 [72, 159, 162, 169]

28. 1917, 2: 268 [168].

29. 1923, 237 [198].

30. 1923, 35 [31]. It is not that he is simply returning to the notion of “true self” advanced in *An Inquiry into the Good*. The term is the same but the meaning has been enriched.

importance of “work” from the standpoint of religion where everything is an expression of the self whose destiny is to extinguish itself:

Reality is at work in itself; what we know of reality we know by our own work. The objects we see at work in the world are shadows cast by the work of the self. To know reality is to know the deep self. The self is not merely something within consciousness; if it were, it would not be the self. When the working self reflects on itself as the ground of an infinite reality, it sets up a confrontation between the inner and the outer and gives rise to what we call consciousness of the self. The task that is given this self is to conquer itself. In performance, the purification of the body is a purification of the self... in which the outer and the inner are united.³¹

It is only with Nishida’s next book that the reference to negating the working self in order to affirm an infinite reality will be seen as a first step towards a new and liberating metaphor.

V

By now Nishida had all the pieces necessary to assemble his “system of self-awareness.” It was the “difference of emphasis” that eluded him, one that would allow him to distinguish his thought *systematically* from western philosophy and theology without dismissing their vocabulary from a place in his scheme. The cryptic title of his next collection of essays, *From Worker to Seer*, symbolized just such a shift.

The working of absolute will he had extrapolated from Fichte’s self-positing *I* was not really the right foundation for self-awareness, let alone artistic intuition. In analyzing art and morality as modes of performance, self-awareness had receded into the background, almost as if it were a quality attributed to the *working self*. At some point it struck Nishida that he had to return to his original intention, which was to make the *seeing self* primary. He would have to subsume the performance of the *working self* into self-awareness. As is often the case with Nishida, the transition is oblique. Rather than simply redefine self-awareness directly, he introduces new terminology. Thus he begins to speak of “expressive activity” in which “we see without subjective consciousness,” thereby arriving at the goal towards which all conscious functions aim, namely, “the inner per-

31. 1923, 3: 247 [206]. Here, as elsewhere, I have had to translate Nishida rather differently from the published translation to make the meaning less opaque. Incidentally, as far as I have been able to determine, it is in *Art and Morality* that Nishida first uses the copula 即 (rendered in this passage with a simple “as”) to indicate mutually defining terms.

ception of will.” These first steps are reflected in the titles of essays originally published between 1923 and 1925 and incorporated in the first half of the book. In the second half things come together in more systematic fashion, principally in his 1926 essay, “Place.” At last, our pursuit of Nishida’s equivalent of a notion of no-self opens out into a clearing where we can take our bearings and begin to lay out an argument smoothly and quickly, without having to hack our way step by step through the dense underbrush of his previous writings.

Nishida attributes his new orientation to two factors, both of them a direct consequence of *Art and Morality*: “thinking about religion” and “shifting from a Fichtean voluntarism to a kind of intuitionism”:

My foundations do not rest on intuition as a “unity of subject and object.” I understand intuition as seeing all working beings as shadows of that which reflects the self within the self by becoming nothing, as a kind of seeing into the ground of all things without there being anyone or anything that sees.

There is more at work here than another reshuffling of the pieces. Behind the scenes, Nishida has taken a dramatic step that he describes in these words:

Obviously, there is a great deal to esteem in the dazzling development of Occidental culture which made form into being and formation into the good, and a great deal to be learned from it. But is there not something that lies concealed in the ground of the Oriental culture that has nourished our forebears for thousands of years, something like seeing the form of the formless or hearing the voice of the voiceless? Our hearts never cease in its pursuit; what I want to do is give it a philosophical basis.³²

Nishida’s new-found confidence to assert himself in his public writings as a *Japanese* philosopher would affect everything from that point on. His letters show him aware that a momentous shift had taken place in his thought. Clearly something had given Nishida the impetus to break out of a world of ideas that, try as he might, he had never quite been able to make his own. That *something* was the metaphor of “place as containment.” That as rational and abstract a thinker as Nishida should be shaken awake by a simple change of root metaphor may sound like an exaggeration, but that is precisely what I mean to suggest. From this point forward, Nishida not only tried to recapitulate his previous harvest of ideas—along with the schematic oppositions of inner and outer, reflecting and reflected—by locating them in this metaphor. He also began to

32. 1927, 3: 253, 255.

reformulate his questions in terms of a logic of *place*, which in turn gave him a fresh set of questions that would occupy him for the rest of his life.

Any attempt to appreciate Nishida's logic of *place* as a reorganization of his earlier thought is bedeviled by the presence of so many passages in his earlier writings that fit into the new scheme just as they are, without any change in wording. The immediate context is often not much help, given his affection for oracular statements that leap outside of the surrounding text like "flashes of insight" and then evaporate before the reader's eyes. A few relevant examples of the many passages that stand out in hindsight but whose meaning has changed in the reorganization may help. In the Preface to *An Inquiry into the Good*, he drops the remark that "it is not that first there is me and then experience, but that first there is experience and then me." Later in the book itself we read statements like the following: "It is not that I give rise to desires, but that I myself am an occasion for reality to work"; "To see a flower is to become the flower"; and "The self is infinite and embraces the whole of the universe."³³ In *Art and Morality*, we find similar echoes in statements such as "The infinite world is embraced within the *I*."³⁴ We are also struck by a reference to annulling consciousness by "making it nothing" as well as by the suggestion that Oriental thinking seeks the "form beyond form."³⁵ There is no doubt that Nishida's logic of *place* developed out of what preceded it. But that development was not as organic as a liberal culling of citations might make it seem.

VI

The basic metaphor of containment that underlay Nishida's new logic of *place* is not complicated and gives the "feel" we need to see his notion of self-awareness mature into the equivalent of the religiously enlightened mind. The idea of one thing being contained in another is, of course, nothing original. On the contrary, it is a matter of grammatical necessity that some things are said to include others. But Nishida's terminology cannot be said to belong to the logic of *place* until after his shift of basic metaphors. The Latin roots of the word *comprehension* can be pulled part to contrast it with the Anglo-Saxon term *understanding*; but the latent etymological nuance of enclosure does not make a difference until it is made to. The same holds of the terms Nishida adopts to underscore his idea of location by containment. The new meaning cannot simply be read back into allusions of "subsumption" in his previous writings with all the nuances of his new logic. (Scholars have often pointed out that Japanese sentence structure

33. 1911, 6, 27, 75; [xxx, 25, 77]

34. 1923, 3: 93 [80].

35. 1923, 3: 36, 38 [32, 35].

lends itself naturally to Nishida's logic of *place*, but this is more a coincidence than a cause. There is no evidence that he himself was aware of the correlation.) In any event, it is worth spending a moment on the imagery before we look at the service to which Nishida put it.

In purely spatial terms, to say of anything that it is contained in a place, there must be some sense of the boundaries or limits that circumscribe the place or "define" it. For most purposes, we overlook containment when we locate things. Localization only requires specifying the position of that thing relevant to other things near it. As long as I am locating things for myself or for those near me, this is no problem. But the more specific I have to become about its location to those who are not in the vicinity or at least do not have a clear image of it, the more I am obliged to mark off boundaries of containment that include myself as the one doing the locating. Note the curious reversal: the wider the boundaries, the greater the degree of precision in locating something contained within it. To establish contact between the outermost boundaries and the most immediate vicinity, I need to think of the one as contained in the other. I can move freely in and out of different environments only if I understand them as enveloped in a larger common environment.

Nishida's strategy was to apply the image of locating things in space to locating what it is that makes them what they are. Just as two objects cannot occupy the same space, neither can they share the same identity. But then, too, just as things can change location in space, so can their identity change. Aristotle's strategy was to go after the essence or underlying substance that gave something its self-identity while allowing it to change its accidents or secondary qualities. In doing so, he inverted Plato's suggestion of an all-encompassing receptacle in which the essences of all things were contained in non-substantial, ideal form. For Aristotle's logic, the self-identical individual was a grammatical subject which could have universal attributes predicated it, but which could never itself become a predicate. Thus the objective reality of both the thinker and the things that are thought about is not located in their universals but in their individual essences. For Plato, objective reality lay in the universals that floated freely in the void of the great receptacle.

The contrasting approach of Plato and Aristotle to universals was the catalyst Nishida needed. His search for pure experience in which subject and object are not yet distinguished had set him on a search for a purified form of thinking in which thinker and thought achieve a unity. He had imagined such "self-awareness" to be the ultimate foundation of all things, the *a priori* of all *a priori* in which reality itself achieves full awareness. The problem was that no amount of reflection on the workings of the mind could bridge the gap between the inner world of consciousness and whole of reality outside of it. Self-awareness had landed him in a kind of Platonic cave where reality had become a shadow

cast on the wall by a self reflecting on itself. The ordinary world of perception, work, culture, and inter-human commerce evaporated into mere preconditions for self-awareness. Obviously, relinquishing self-awareness to a great inactive void would not be of much help, but neither could be return to the world as a collection of substantial objects for the mind to think about. His solution was to see Aristotle's universals as themselves a kind of creative receptacle, a form that is prior to matter and not dependent on it. In effect, Nishida reconfigure Aristotle's constellation by having the grammatical subject orbit around the grammatical predicate.³⁶ The trail of provisional a priori left behind in the quest of the ultimate a priori would give way to a series of expanding, concentric universals radiating outwards from the simplest act of conscious judgment until they reach the unbounded expanse of what he now called "absolute nothingness."

The key to the shift of metaphor of *place* lies in the simple insight that for anything to happen in reality, it must happen somewhere. Reason entails *seeing* beyond the actual *working* to the context in which it "take place." The assumption is that nothing in reality is static, that all of being is becoming—or, in Nishida's terms, that everything that is made is in-the-making. Thus, things have to be *in place* in order for them to be *at work*. To make it clear that he intends to absorb the earlier, simpler distinction between inside and outside, Nishida introduces a peculiar neologism at the launch of his new logic: things are not simply *in* a place, they are *inset*.

The metaphor generated two new and interlocking questions for Nishida to ask in reconstructing his view of reality as a "system of self-awareness." First, of everything it must be asked, *Where does it take place?* This is a question about the setting wherein a particular thing, event, idea, function, or structure takes shape and without which we could not identify it as what it is. Second, we take a step back and ask, *Where, then, does that place take shape?* If we understand something as inset in something else, then where do we stand when we recognize the connection between the place and thing inset within it, between the containing and the contained? It is not enough to say that we have taken up a position *outside* of a thing and its place which then allows us to study the relationship between them, like a subject viewing an object. We want to know where the event of containment itself takes place.

At this stage, the subject-object relationship itself becomes the object of attention, but it can no longer be the original subject who is paying the attention. That would be a vicious circle leading nowhere, like one mirror reflecting another or like Baron von Munchausen trying to pull himself out of the swamp by his own pigtail. There has to be something like subjectivity behind the sub-

36. Some years later he would claim that this position is consistent with the Buddhist idea of mind (1940, 9: 69).

ject, a *selfhood* behind the self. This was where Kant's idea of consciousness-in-general, Fichte's pure *I*, and Nishida's attempt to fuse the two in absolute will had come into play. But now he makes a clean break:

If we think in terms of a pure *I* that serves as a unifier of the operations, the *I* is construed in contrast to what is not-*I*. That in turn entails something to envelop the opposition between *I* and not-*I* and give us what we call conscious phenomena.³⁷

Unless we are prepared to reduce self-awareness to the freedom to observe mental events in the present or recall those from the past, there has to be a sense in which we can speak of consciousness at work apart from individual minds focused on particular objects. It would have to be a seeing without a seer, a true self that that annuls the ordinary self.

In a sense, as Nishida had recognized early on, to arrive at the *place* where ordinary consciousness is inset is an ideal that forever recedes our grasp. The true self, or place of self-awareness, "is only visible as a shadow cast onto consciousness."³⁸ But this does not make it unreal. Like the flight of Zeno's arrow that flies freely to its target oblivious of the mathematical paradox of always having to travel another half of the distance there, reality is not defined by the contours within which our minds work. Just the opposite. Consciousness at work in the concrete self is defined by the contradiction of not being able to satisfy its unquenchable desire to step outside of itself and see itself. Its *place* in the real world is marked off by this internal, unresolvable paradox. Selfhood can never coincide with the conscious self. Its self-identity, that which makes it itself and not something else, is irrevocably contradictory.

In order to posit self-awareness as the landscape within which consciousness arises and not the other way around, Nishida had to reject the idea of increasingly expanding states of consciousness. Self-awareness arises out of the "annulment" of conscious self. This gave rise to a new and more radical question. Granted that the theater of operations for self-consciousness, which is in turn the theatre of operations for individual subjective consciousness, is bound by an ineluctable contradiction: *Where does self-awareness itself take shape in the wider scheme of things?* In answering this question, Nishida had to part from his longstanding, though often tacit, suspicion that reality can be understood as a function of conscious experience. Self-awareness would have to be inset in

37. 1926, 3: 415. English translation: *Place and Dialectic: Two Essays by Nishida Kitarō*, trans. by J. W. M. Krummel and S. Nagatomo (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 49–50. The translators capture the oddity of the Japanese term in question, 於いてある, with the English oddity "implaced." Lacking the equivalent of a middle voice, the English passive form of both our translations suggests an agent; the Japanese does not.

38. 1928, 4: 112.

something more primordial, more encompassing, than the individual mind. He called it the *place* of nothingness, by which he meant not a mere nonbeing to oppose being, but the “true nothingness” out of which being and nonbeing arise.

Looked at this way, the pursuit of the final *place* of self-awareness coincides with the pursuit of the universal of all universals. Logic and ontology overlap in Nishida no less than they had in Hegel. There are other indications that the latter’s influence was crucial to the working out of the logic of place, as in his earlier endorsement of Hegel’s idea that “reality is contradiction.”³⁹ Thus, as we follow the transition from one *place* to the next, the impetus to transcend a self-defining, self-contained *place* to something greater that contains it is an internal contradiction between the determined and the determining that cannot be resolved without being inset in a larger frame of reference. What is more, as we noted when speaking of the spatial metaphor of place, the larger the frame of reference, the further away it appears to be from the concrete individual we are trying to locate. But insofar as each place contains within the location of all locations before it, it gives us greater precision than the immediate environment ever could. So too, if there is a universal of all universals, it would not only touch reality at its core, it would amount to a true absolute, that is, an absolute that sustains the relativity of everything that exists, the material as well as the merely intelligible.

Having arrived at this point, Nishida came to realize that his first attempt at defining true nothingness had been too hasty.

VII

Nishida’s students and critics had often locked horns with him over the abstractness of his thinking and its distance from history reality. His first sketch of a logic of *place* did little to parry those views. His system of self-awareness was like a colossal thought experiment. The only factors that seemed to matter were the cognitive which then faded away into nothingness. His response was to take a step back and interpose a *place* in which the self of self-awareness, the *noumenal self*⁴⁰ that appears to consciousness as a phenomenal shadow, is inset. He called it “the intelligible world,” which he described as a *place* of opposition between being and nothingness, of coming-to-be and passing-away.⁴¹

39. 1923, 3: 46 [41].

40. Odagiri Takushi argues convincingly that this is the most accurate equivalent of what Nishida meant by the “intelligible world.” See his essay, “From Self-Reflexivity to Contingency: Nishida Kitarō on Self-Knowledge,” J. W. Heisig and M. Uehara, *Frontiers of Japanese Philosophy 3: Origins and Possibilities* (Nagoya: Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, 2008) 123–39.

41. Nishida uses the Buddhist term for the changing impermanence of things: 生滅. 1926, 3: 423.

The term was misleading, as was its identification as a “*place of nothingness*,” and he later replaced it with “the historical world” as he came to see that the *place* where self-reflection occurs could not be an ethereal, self-contained, “self-illuminating mirror” floating free of the contingencies of time and space that limit ordinary consciousness. It had to belong to a world that was inexhaustibly intelligible precisely because it was co-determined by, but never fully coincident, with our understanding of it. The historical world is not a world of ideas; it is a world in-the-making and everything that takes place within it is open to revision. The world circumscribed by the noumenal self is the world of the conflicted, confused, tormented self. “The most profound reality in the intelligible world is the anguished soul,” and only a self that transcends the interiority of consciousness to take in the objective world is truly “free.” The noumenal self does not “take in” the world as an object opposed to a subject; neither is it merely a matter of an “intellectual intuition” of transcending the dichotomy. The self knows the world not as an outer object for inner reflection, but by *becoming* it:

The truly free self must have content—will without content is not will—and must take that content into itself; that is, the content must be inset in the self.⁴²

The locus of true moral decision and action cannot be a *place* where self and world are simply set at odds. It has to be seen as a place where the historical world transcends itself *in* the free will of a higher, more self-aware self. It is not a merely cognitive intuition, but a *performative intuition*⁴³ in which the historical world and the noumenal self are mutually constitutive. It is the *place* where body and mind are united, where “maker and made are contradictory and yet identical.”⁴⁴

With this step, the initial predicament we met in *Inquiry into the Good*, whether to see “pure experience” as a mental phenomenon or to include reality itself is partially resolved. But if reality itself is to be understood as a system of self-awareness, understanding can hardly come to rest on an anguished self-awareness in an indeterminate historical world. There must be a more encompassing universal within which everything nested within the relative world of being and becoming can be seen as inset. It would be the *place* without form or sound within which form and sound take shape and change shape. Self-awareness can only come to rest where it can see the formless and hear the voiceless,

42. 1928, 4: 140–1.

43. The ordinary translations “active intuition” and “acting intuition” do not catch the sense of “enaction” that John Maraldo highlights in “Nishida’s *kōiteki chokkan* 行為の直観 and the Notion of Enaction in Cognitive Science,” R. Elberfeld and Y. Arisaka, eds., *Kitarō Nishida in der Philosophie des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Freiburg: Karl Albert, 2014), 342–64.

44. 1939, 8: 383.

and it can only accomplish that by annulling the historical world and the self. In other words, it must attain a final self-awareness of no-self.

If the noumenal self is no more than a shadow cast on consciousness, the no-self would have to entail erasing even that shadow. From the viewpoint of consciousness, we should say that self-awareness is empty because it has no content to define it and nothing to define. But in Nishida's logic of *place*, we are invited to think of nothingness as a negation of all definition and therefore incapable of being reflected within a self. It is not the *relative* nothingness set up as a logical framework within which being and nonbeing can interact in opposition to one another. It is an *absolute*, self-contained nothingness, self-awareness of which can only be a no-self-awareness. The final frontier of the self is the annulment of self-awareness through insight into an ultimate reality beyond being and becoming. But to call nothingness *absolute* does not mean that it is disconnected from everything else. It is always a universal One *for the many*. It is the *place* at which self-awareness defines the historical world and everything it contains.⁴⁵ Just as the performative intuition of a self-aware self gives the historical world the only standpoint from which it can see itself, so, too, the absolute One of nothingness can only reach self-awareness as that whose work *is* the historical world.

Insofar as insight into nothingness implies transcending every *place* in which the self can function as a self, it entails a final and unavoidable contradiction. If there is indeed a universal of all universals, that is to say, if reality is ultimately one, then it cannot be a mere collection of all beings into a formal category called "being." Being must be inset in a *place* not encompassed by being. Moreover, if self-awareness means assuming a perspective from which to view the perspective within which the self sees, then the perspective from which to view that greater self-awareness cannot be located in the noumenal self. It must rather be its radical negation. In short, the reality must consist of a self-positing of contradictories that can never be eradicated or subsumed into a higher unity. In Nishida's terms, reality must be "a self-identity of absolute contradictories" inset in an infinite nothingness unbound by any *place* of containment. The "world" in which the self-negated self awakens to the final frontier of absolute nothingness is what Nishida calls religion.

VIII

The association of religion with an awakening to absolute nothingness is hardly surprising. We have seen that from his early writings Nishida set religion as the final goal of philosophical reasoning. And now, having reached religion at the

45. 1939, 8: 464.

outermost circle of universals inset in universals, it may seem as if the logic of *place* is a kind of medieval spiritual pilgrimage, an *itinerarium mentis in nullum*. After all, does Nishida not end up telling us that self-awareness inset in the *place* of absolute nothingness transcends not only the objective world but the moral subject as well? “The standpoint of morality, he writes, cannot reach the true self.” And elsewhere: “Religion is not a question of what the self is supposed to *do* but of what the self *is*.”⁴⁶ Does not his description of the “true *place*” as a “self-illuminating mirror”⁴⁷ suggest a kind of passive *visio beatifica* in which the self no longer sees itself but only stares into the empty face of nothingness? Does not all the chiaroscuro of reality vanish into the pure white light of the absolute? The answer to these questions, which incidentally represent the brunt of Tanabe’s critique of Nishida, depends on how one understands what is *true* about Nishida’s true self.

In the logic of *place*, as in Nishida’s previous schemes, *true self* is not a univocal term. At almost any point in an argument, we can find him referring to a *true* this or a *true* that as a way of valuing one thing or activity more highly than another. Truth is always relative to its context. This does not mean that there is a truest of all true selves which only discloses itself in the final context, the *place* of absolute nothingness. Reality is not swallowed up in absolute nothingness like matter being sucked into a black hole. Neither is the everyday self. I know of nowhere that Nishida makes such a claim, which is why I think it is mistaken to view his *places* as milestones on a spiritual journey that, once arrived at its goal, renders everything before it false or illusory. When Nishida speaks of *truth* in connection with self-awareness, he is not speaking of a successful performance within defined limits but with the ability to transcend those limits to a more encompassing landscape. The grandeur of truth—and also of beauty and goodness—lies in what it includes. Exclusion, whether as the deliberate narrowing of awareness or occlusion of the desire to know, is falsehood. Hence, there is no logical reason to conclude that the ascent to nothingness in any way compromises the truth of the rational self or the compassionate self in their respective *places* of activity.

Parenthetically, we may note that the use of the term *the self*, although increasingly important in Nishida’s writings, does not always do justice to his intentions. When he wants to be unambiguous about the term “the self” he writes “our self” (Japanese lacking a definite article). But this does not mean that each succeeding reference to “self” has the same meaning. What is often no more than a reflexive pronoun meaning “oneself” is easily mistaken for a

46. 1943, 9: 406; 1945, 10: 312. English translation consulted: “The Logic of Topos and the Religious Worldview,” *The Eastern Buddhist* 19/2 (1986): 1–29; 20/1 (1987) 81–119 [17].

47. 1926, 3: 419, 429 [53, 61].

substantive. Particularly where the term appears in connection the unequivocal term for *the I* it is important not to interject a distinction between *self* and *ego* were none is intended. Observe the difference this over-determination makes in the following two translations of the same passage:

Renouncing the self truly never means aimlessly following along with whatever the self is doing at the moment. The true *I* lies in our exhausting all the powers of the self while paying serious attentive to time.

To renounce oneself never means aimlessly abandoning oneself to the moment. The true *I* lies in exerting all our strength while paying serious attention to time.⁴⁸

The passage dates from well before Nishida began to use the term “the self,” let alone before he was prepared to distinguish it from the standard term for the conscious ego, rendered here as “the *I*.”

With these qualifications in mind, we return to our initial question of how far Nishida’s “self-awareness of the true self” may be related to “seeing one’s true nature”⁴⁹ (the term he preferred for “enlightenment” on the few occasions he made reference to it) as a “no-self.” As we noted, it was only in Nishida’s late years that overtly Buddhist language appears with any frequency in his published writings. Note the following passage in the conclusion to a lengthy essay summing up his “system of self-awareness” and the role that religion plays in it:

In religious experience the self, however it is viewed, disappears; it becomes a no-self.... There is no longer anyone who sees or anything that is seen. It is the experience of form-in-emptiness, emptiness-in-form.⁵⁰

Around the same time, he referred to the affirmation of no-self as central in the Buddhist philosophy of India, whereas Mahāyāna Buddhist thought pivoted around the being-in-nothingness of absolute nothingness.⁵¹ This is a rather odd generalization but it reflects Nishida’s own usage. In fact, he never adopted no-self as part of his technical vocabulary, never explained its relationship to absolute nothingness, and never even distinguished the two clearly.

Nevertheless, the negation—or, as Nishida frequently has it, annulment⁵²—of self that occurs in the transcendence of self-awareness from *place to place* can

48. 1905, and 16: 257.

49. 見性.

50. 1939, 4: 352, 357. The final phrase is, of course, from the *Heart Sutra*.

51. 1940, 9: 69. See also note 38 above.

52. Literally, “making nothing.”

no more be left out of his system than the affirmation of the conscious self can. Where self-awareness is singled out for attention, no-self is absent; and where no-self is present, it floats free of the main text. If there are connections to be made, they have to be made by trying to refer the answer to questions Nishida himself left unanswered. First of all, the negations of “self” have to be lined up to see if together they amount to an idea of no-self. Secondly, the underlying assumption of the progress from self to the no-self as an enhancement of consciousness needs to be clarified and evaluated. Thirdly, we have to ask whether the rejection of “substantialist” views of the person allows for the no-self to be structured in such a way as to fit in with the structure of the non-self-conscious world. That is, it would have to be shown that any notion of no-self proposed as an advance on the substantial self coincides with the structure of the rest of the world, including not only lower life forms but the inanimate world as well. Finally, sufficient reason has to be found for the claim that a philosophy of nothingness is better suited to a notion of no-self than philosophies of being are.

A first step, but only a first step, is to draw out the connections Nishida himself makes between absolute nothingness, true self, and God.

IX

We have already made mention of Nishida’s suggestion of an equivalence between God and the enlightened mind, but this statement has to be reconsidered in the light of Nishida’s final essay linking his *logic* of place to a religious worldview.

On one hand, within the landscape of absolute nothingness, the true self of self-awareness and God are functionally indistinguishable and therefore in *direct* correlation. The idea of God can no more be an object (*noema*) of thought (*noesis*) than the true self can. Since the inseting of reality in absolute nothingness discloses the self-contradictory nature of the world of being and becoming, to see into that nature would mean to *become* it, which in turn would imply that the mind that does the seeing would be a mind that has transcended the contradictory world to perform in nothingness. Self-awareness in nothingness is longer awareness *of* anything. Along with everything it once contained, it is now in a place where there is nothing to see or anyone to see it. The language of a self standing *before God* and God standing *over the world* has been transcended.

On the other hand, the *place* of the historical world and every *place* contained in it require an opposition between God and self. If they are seen as identical, the whole idea of God would become superfluous. The two must be mutually defining, or as Nishida has it, in *inverse* correlated: the further apart the poles of the opposition, the stronger the correlation and the identity of the things correlated. This does not imply a bond between beings. It functions more

like a bond between a being and an ideal, which then fuse in the final negation of both, that is, when they are inset in the absolute of nothingness.

In this way, we can recognize the equivalence of God and the enlightened mind both within the historical world and in the transcendence of the historical world. This does not, however, justify a simple equation of God and absolute nothingness, as if they were two names—one Christian and one Buddhist—for the same thing. Nishida's earlier association of absolute will with God had hinted at a kind of creative force straddling being and nonbeing, a combination of Bergson's *élan vital* and a Fichtean *I* writ large. These positions were at least marginally compatible with Christian thought and also concur with the position he takes in *Inquiry into the Good*, where God is seen as "the ground of all unifying activity in the universe." But Nishida had so many things to say about God in so many different contexts that it is almost impossible to sort out metaphorical allusions to western ideas of God from his own attempts at redefinition. Perhaps no other concept in Nishida's thought is as pliant to its context and as amorphous to reason as *God*. His final essay helps alleviate this ambiguity, but only if we tie up some of the ends he left loose in the text.

Nishida states at the outset that "Without God, there is no religion."⁵³ The context makes it clear that he understands *religion* as a type of experience within the historical world that straddles its borderlands with absolute nothingness. To see being as the final universal in which God is set as an objective transcendence, and the world as immanent, would therefore amount to a "denial of religion itself."⁵⁴ With that qualification, Nishida can still argue that the God of absolute being who stands opposed to relative beings is indispensable to religion because the ultimate absolute of nothingness is only absolute in virtue of enveloping everything that is only relatively absolute. God is such a relative absolute precisely because the divine is only divine in its relation to what is not divine. This self-contradictory nature of God means that God is only God in self-negation, or that it is only as an absolute being that the idea of God can be embraced within the idea of absolute nothingness. But the same is true of the self that comes to its true nature only in denying itself, like the kenotic, self-emptying nature of the Godhead.⁵⁵ This is the exact inverse of grounding the affirmation of self in belief in a self-sustaining God. For Nishida, the self is a point at which the self-contradictory nature of the divine is projected into reality, transcending good and evil, angel and devil.⁵⁶

53. 1945, 10: 296 [2].

54. 1945, 10: 364 [117]. On the following page he calls this way of thinking "anachronistic."

55. See, for example, 1945, 10: 333, 335, 347–8, 361 [20, 86, 88, 101, 114].

56. 1945, 10: 321, 324 [25, 28].

So far, all of this is consistent with Nishida's general principle that the self-determination of all universals, whatever the place they circumscribe, consists of a self-negation that drives them to transcendence to a more comprehensive universal.⁵⁷ The "reality" Nishida has in mind for God is not the realm of objective fact but the realm of "spiritual fact."⁵⁸ It is not an external realm towards which the self directs its reason and desire in search of higher meaning; it means paying attention to something that has been there all alone "in the inner recesses of the mind." Nishida insists that negating the reasons and desires of the self does not mean slipping into an unconscious state or losing one's identity in a formless One, but becoming "more clearly conscious" as the inner recesses of the self become more intelligible.⁵⁹

God can be said to *become* absolute nothingness only in a final negation of the absoluteness of the Godhead, which is to say, in the radical affirmation of its relativity to the world. Yet Nishida's God is not a transcendent, omniscient, self-sustaining being or as a creative cosmic force at work in a pantheistic or panentheistic sense. Only as a spiritual creativity does God become a proper focus of religious faith. As a living "ideal," God cannot not be absolute in itself but only in forfeiting its absoluteness to the relativity of its realization in time and space. The same must be said of the true self: it *becomes* absolute nothingness only in negating the relativity of its relationship to the ideal of full self-awareness.⁶⁰ Only in realizing the ideal of true selfhood is the dichotomy between God and self overcome. Consequently, God can only be understood as absolute nothingness when it is united with the true self, and vice versa.

It was not simply out of a sense of loyalty to western philosophy that Nishida spoke again and again of God. To the last, the idea of God performed a function that neither absolute nothingness nor true self were able to. It was, at least in part, a kind of Platonic *eidos* set not in the all-encompassing empty void of nothingness but in the mind of the self in pursuit of self-awareness. This is what I mean by referring to it as an "ideal" for the self and why Nishida was able to equate God with enlightenment. Cataphatic and apophatic God-talk were both grist for Nishida's mill. As an ideal, God was able to yield to symbolic representation as perfect love or perfect freedom and yet remain open to the negation of all representation. God could as well serve to symbolize fulfillment of the self's desire for awakening as to expose that fulfillment as a permanently receding goal.

Nishida declares himself near the end of the essay in terms that help make the connection to enlightenment clearer:

57. The point is reiterated specifically in this context. See 1945, 10: [15].

58. 心霊上の事実.

59. 1945, 10: 332 [86].

60. 1945, 10: 315–6 [19].

Because there is Buddha, there are sentient beings, and because there are sentient beings, there is Buddha. Creation exists because there is a creator God. As I have often said, the absolute is not that which has nothing opposing it but that which contains absolute negation within itself.⁶¹

Let us take Buddha to mean the universal of no-mind that embraces the multiplicity of all minds (as Nishida himself does later in the essay) and self-awareness as awakening to that fact. The universal of no-mind does not exist objectively in the world, nor does it simply transcend the world. It is a spiritual ideal that only becomes real in the negation of its status as an ideal. This is “no-mind,” which is not irrational but a higher rationality in which the mind “becomes the self of things and of God.”⁶² This affirmation-in-negation is enlightenment, the self that had seen its true nature as a no-self inset within the ultimate, absolute, all-encompassing universal of nothingness.⁶³

The connection between Buddha and God is essential here. Like Buddha, the only way that God can embrace the multitude of created beings is as a universal ideal becoming real through the kenotic self-negation of being projected into the concrete point of individual minds. Both are like a circle whose center is everywhere and its circumference nowhere.⁶⁴ In both cases, self and absolute are relatives set within the historical world as spiritual facts. In nothingness, their distinction is erased. In the world of time and space, the ideal and the real are always mutually defining contradictories, but it is only in absolute nothingness that “things are as they are” and that “we see the real God where there is no God,”⁶⁵ no Buddha, and no self. With that, the guiding image of a “great self-awareness equivalent to God” is exposed as a philosophical expression of an “enlightenment equivalent to Buddha.”

Nishida’s allusions to Buddhist ideas increased as his logic of *place* matured into a religious worldview, but there is no textual evidence in his writings that he ever claimed to have made a contribution to Buddhist thought as such. He was not unaware of what he was doing, but it is precisely because he refrained from using Buddhist ideas and terminology, or at least only introduced them as

61. 1945, 10: 316 [20].

62. 1940, 9: 230. The term *no-mind*, or later *Oriental no-mind*, appears often in Nishida’s writings as an expression of annulling the self, but care should be taken not to narrow it to any particular Buddhist meaning.

63. 1945, 10: 353 [105–6].

64. 1945, 10: 316 [20]. Nishida attributes the phrase to Cusanus, apparently unaware of the source of the image in the medieval pseudo-hermetic text, *Liber xxiv philosophorum*.

65. 1945, 10: 363 [118]. Nishida uses the Buddhist term 自然法爾 to express the idea of things as they are in their true nature.

incidental to his philosophical arguments and conclusions, that his contribution is all the more remarkable.

On one hand, Nishida's philosophy was, from start to finish, a philosophy of mind. Social and cultural institutions, political and economic power, science and technology, the evolutionary advance of the natural world were all secondary concerns, if not passed over entirely. What is more, the texts that served him as resources in the development of his thinking were all from the western philosophical tradition. Questions that arose out of his personal experience with Japanese culture and religion were rephrased in terms of those resources, resulting in a highly original approach to both traditions. Only near the end of his life did he close the circle and turn to Oriental resources, in particular Buddhist ideas, to allude to the questions and answers he had made central to his thought. By avoiding the methods we now associate with "comparative philosophy" and trying to transform western philosophy from within, Nishida opened a way to make room for western philosophy in Buddhist thought.

Conversely, Nishida's philosophy—if not Nishida himself—has opened a way to make room for Buddhist thought in western philosophy. Two pages from the end of the last essay he wrote, he raises the unusual suggestion that it may be time for Christianity to break its ties with the God of objective transcendence and open up to a new mode of religion that thinks in terms of transcending one-self immanently, within the world. He then poses the rhetorical question: "From today's world-historical standpoint, will Buddhism have nothing to contribute to a new age?" So long as it remains bound to the specific historical condition that it was shaped in, he added, Buddhism will be "no more than relic of the past." But if it can regain its universal character, ideas like immanent transcendence might prove valuable for the self-understanding of Christianity, provided of course it had "a thoroughgoing rational foundation."⁶⁶ Nishida was convinced that his own logic of *place* had an essential role to play in making room on both counts.

Over the past generation it has begun to dawn on more and more philosophers from around the world that he was right. For his part, three days after the essay was published, Nishida penned a short piece in which he complained that the logic he had framed to "take up questions previously ignored or left unclear by previous logics" had been misunderstood by the academic world as a capitulation to religion and twisted into an unrecognizable form by his critics.⁶⁷ Later that afternoon he fell into a coma from which he never awoke.

66. 1945, 10: 365–6 [117–8].

67. 1945, 10: 431.