



John W. M. Krummel, *Nishida Kitarō's Chiasmatic Chorology: Place of Dialectic and Dialectic of Place*

Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015. 314 pages.
Hardcover, \$60.00. ISBN 978-0-253-01753-6.

THE PRESENT volume is an inspiring analysis of Nishida Kitarō's 西田幾多郎 dialectics, the philosophical method developed and employed by the founder of the so-called Kyoto School. It is easily one of the three most important English-language works on this pivotal philosopher and joins the ranks of James W. HEISIG's *Philosophers of Nothingness* (2001) and Michiko YUSA's *Zen and Philosophy: An Intellectual Biography of Nishida Kitarō* (2002) as the must-read commentaries on a philosopher who pioneered the practice and discipline of comparative philosophy and whose significance for philosophy in general is increasingly being recognized around the world.¹ What makes Krummel's work stand out is that on the one hand, he focuses on Nishida's philosophical method, and on the other explores its relevance at the intersection of Continental and Buddhist philosophies.

Krummel approaches the task of illuminating Nishida's "enigmatic assertions regarding 'contradictory self-identity,' 'inverse correspondence,' 'continuity of discontinuity,' and 'self-negation,' which seem to shamelessly defy any allegiance to the logical law of non-contradiction" (1) in three steps: Part I, "Preliminary Studies," locates Nishida's philosophy at the intersection of Continental and Buddhist philosophies; Part II, "Dialectics in Nishida," traces the development of Nishida's philosophical method throughout his life work; and Part III, "Conclusions," attempts an interpretation of Nishida's philosophical method and system that is "original and challenging" (141). In all three sections, Krummel takes utmost pains to stay on the difficult path between the Scylla of repeating Nishida's enigmatic phrases without adding any interpretation or commentary and the Charybdis of venturing too far from the text to superimpose one's own philosophical beliefs every interpreter of Nishida is more than familiar with.

In Part I, Krummel succeeds in locating Nishida's project in its proper historical context and identifying "a 'Buddhist metaphysic,' reformulated in the language

* A shorter version of this review appeared in the online *Reading Religion*, available at <http://readingreligion.org/books/nishida-kitar%C5%8Ds-chiasmatic-chorology>.

1. The past ten years have seen an increase in commentaries on and translations of Nishida, not only in the English language as indicated by publications such as HEISIG's *Much Ado About Nothingness* (2015) and Peter SUARES's *The Kyoto School's Takeover of Hegel* (2011) but also in French, German, Spanish, and Portuguese.

of Western philosophy, hidden within Nishida's formulations" (165). Anyone familiar with Nishida knows that this claim is both appealing and problematic at the same time. On the one hand, Nishida clearly responds to philosophical problems and questions as formulated in Neo-Kantianism, and "Nishida's texts in general, except for his last few essays are short on any direct references to traditional Buddhist sources" (36). On the other hand, quite a few of his later conceptual constructions seem to reverberate Buddhist insights to varying degrees.

While he attempted to overcome the Kantian dualism, as he himself professed in his *Intuition and Reflection in Self-Consciousness* (*Jikaku ni okeru chokkan to hansei* 自覚における直観と反省, NKZ 2), Nishida did so in his later work by suggesting a middle path between Aristotle's "substance" and Plato's "forms" in his *Fundamental Problems of Philosophy* (*Tetsugaku no konpon mondai* 哲学の根本問題, NKZ 7) and between Spinoza's monism and Leibniz's monadology in *Philosophical Essays Vol. 5* (*Tetsugaku ronbunshū* 哲学論文集, NKZ 10: 339–565). Krummel seeks the origin of Nishida's philosophy in Nishida's response to "Aristotle's substantialism" and "Neo-Kantian dualism" as well as in Hegel's dialectical philosophy. It is clearly in the latter that Nishida found his inspiration.

In chapter 2, Krummel examines the ways in which the philosophies of Madhyama, Yogācāra, Tiantai, Huayan, and Chan/Zen Buddhist philosophers as well as D. T. Suzuki's reading of the *Diamond Sutra* have responded to dualism and substantialism. He focuses specifically on the concepts of "emptiness" (*śūnyatā*), the "three natures" (*trisvabhāva*), the "three truths" (*sandi* 三諦), the "fourfold dharma world" (*sifajie* 四法界), as well as what D. T. Suzuki calls the "logic of *sokuhi*" (*sokuhi no ronri* 即非の論理).

The common theme Krummel unearths in his discussion of Nishida's debt to two seemingly independent philosophical traditions is the attempt to formulate an alternative to substantialism and dualism by means of what can be called a dialectical philosophy. Accordingly, Krummel identifies Hegel's dialectics as the key to Nishida's philosophy on the whole and, even more so, as a comparative philosophy of non-dualism.

Part II traces the development of Nishida's dialectics throughout the latter's career. He does so by spreading the "four stages" (8) of Nishida's philosophical development over five chapters, dedicating three chapters to the last and final stage when Nishida's dialectics blossomed fully. However, it is worth pointing out that Krummel does not simply introduce the various key concepts Nishida developed over the course of his career as James Heisig did so skillfully in his *Philosophers of Nothingness*, but rather focuses deliberately on the various ways in which Nishida appropriates and transforms Hegel's dialectics with the intent to subvert Kant's dualism and Aristotle's substantialism. Krummel outlines the deepening of Nishida's dialectics from his first attempts to conceive of a "subject-object non-differentiation" (58) in the *Inquiry Into the Good* (*Zen no kenkyū* 善の研究, NKZ 1), to his mature non-dualism as expressed in concepts such as the "universal of noth-

ing,” which as “universal of universals” is “another name for the dialectical universal, except that here its non-substantiality and self-negation are made explicit in its designation as a nothing” (111). He further explores Nishida’s threefold conception of *basho* as “the place of beings ... the place of oppositional (or relative) nothing ... and (3) the place of true (or absolute nothing)” (69) and the “dialectic of the world-matrix as ‘dialectical universal’ ... and an ‘absolutely contradictory self-identity of many and one’” (79).

Krummel suggests that Nishida “finds that the world contains contradiction and that it determines itself dialectically in its contradictions” (105) and develops a “standpointless standpoint” that constitutes “neither a materialism nor an idealism but instead what he calls a ‘dialectic of Heraclitean realism’” (118). Krummel suggests that Nishida’s penchant for dialectics is rooted in his commitment to a holism that implies that the totality of the world is expressed in each moment and that is usually rendered by what Nishida terms the “religious world view” (*shūkyōteki sekaikan* 宗教的世界観). The infamous, “enigmatic assertions regarding ‘contradictory self-identity,’ ‘inverse correspondence,’ ‘continuity of discontinuity,’ and ‘self-negation,’ which seem to shamelessly defy any allegiance to the logical law of non-contradiction” indicate Nishida’s desire to conceive of a dynamic holism that defies substantialist and dualistic frameworks.

In Part III, Krummel ventures to suggest his own interpretation of Nishida’s system, which he claims to be “original and challenging.” In short, Krummel’s interpretation of Nishida’s dialectic is threefold. First, he distinguishes Nishida’s “absolute dialectics” (*zettai beshōhō* 絶対弁証法) (144) from Hegel’s “dialectics of being” (*yū no beshōhō* 有の弁証法) (152). Contrary to Hegel, “Nishida’s absolute ... is no spirit or mind (*Geist*) modeled on the cogito but rather an un-objectifiable non-reason of nothing ... Its self-awareness (*jikaku* 自覚) points to its own darkness” (155). Krummel continues that “[a] true dialectic, Nishida argues, must be radically relational to account for the complex inter-determinations between individuals and environment, their mutual self-negation” (161).

Second, Krummel examines the influence of Buddhist philosophy on Nishida’s dialectics. He explores, particularly, the Mahāyāna Buddhist equivalents and/or origins of the concepts “nothing” (*mu* 無), “*sokuhi*” 即非, “mutual non-obstruction” (Ch. *wuai*; Jp. *muge* 無礙), the “depth in the ordinary” (*byōjōtei* 平常底), and “inverse correspondence” (*gyakutaiō* 逆対応). It is both refreshing and a witness to the apparent quality of his scholarship that Krummel concludes his reflections on the connection between Buddhist and Nishida’s philosophy with these two observations: Nishida’s variations on the concept of “nothing” “are not real Buddhist terms although one finds the expression “nothing” (*mu*) in both Zen and Daoist writings” (37). Most importantly, however, Krummel argues that “although it is commensurable with Mahāyāna notions, Nishida’s development of his notion of contradictory self-identity and its placial (*bashoteki* 場所的) of chōratic nature in conjunction with a bodily praxis—that is embodiment as dynamic implacement—encompasses the complex-

ity of a multidimensional chiasma that extends beyond the previous formulations of Nishida's forebearers, Buddhist or Hegelian" (190). Therefore, "Nishida's work is a true case of cross-cultural or world philosophy, even if it is inspired by Mahāyāna" (189).

Chapter 10, finally, moves "beyond Nishida's formulations to unfold the implications of his thought in a way that it may be relevant to our contemporary context" (190). In this chapter, Krummel suggests using the term "chiasm" to interpret Nishida's concept of "contradiction" (*mujun* 矛盾). Krummel bases his suggestion on the explanation of the sinograph 矛盾 in the Chinese classic *Hanfeizi* (192), on the one hand, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's "chiasm" (194) on the other. Krummel explains his reasoning as follows: "By taking Nishida's 'contradiction' (*mujun*) as a chiasma, we can focus on its character as an inter-dimensional cross section where opposites, including contradictories, meet and condition each other, and as their source, out of which they are abstracted" (193). Krummel juxtaposes the "over-determinate" aspect of the chiasma with the "under-determinate aspect" of the *chōra* (206) to fashion his term and heuristic principle of the "chiasmatic chorology" (191). He explains that "[t]he self-determination of the (under-)determined *chōra* is a chiasma of (over-) determinations, a perpetually reconfiguring chiasmatic *chōra*—as a self- and inter-morphing amorphousness—the sheer complexity of which undermines any final *Aufhebung*" (207). This reformulation of Nishida's dialectic allows Krummel to avoid the discussion of whether Nishida's "absolutely contradictory self-identity" violates the law of non-contradiction, and he identifies Nishida's system as a blueprint for a "multi-worlded' inter-civilizational world-culture" (218). This is, ultimately, where Krummel's greatest contribution lies.

Krummel's analysis of Nishida's philosophical method is, without doubt, meticulous, sensitive, and, more often than not, brilliant. His focus on Nishida's dialectic and Hegel and the non-dualist strands of Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy as Nishida's antecedents underscores Nishida's philosophical importance, achievements, and innovations. His suggestion to read Nishida's "absolutely contradictory self-identity" as chiasmatic *chōra* highlights Nishida's ongoing relevance and counters some of the criticism Nishida's dialectics and, especially, "logic of *basho*" have faced over the past one hundred years. However, like most English-language works on Nishida, Krummel does not engage Nishida's severest critics such as his former protégé Tanabe Hajime 田辺 元, his contemporary Takahashi Satomi 高橋里美, and the founder of "critical Buddhism" (*hihan bukk'yō* 批判仏教) Hakamaya Noriaki 袴谷憲昭. The former two criticized Nishida's reading and appropriation of Hegel's dialectics, the latter called Nishida's "logic of *basho*" as "an indigenous East Asian ethos of original enlightenment tinged with German idealism" (HAKAMAYA 1990, 78) and a "departure from philosophical thought" (HAKAMAYA 1990, 51). While it is impossible for any work to consider all angles to and scholarship on a given subject, the works of these three critics seem to pertain directly to the core of Krummel's project.

A second shortcoming Krummel shares with many commentators in the English and Japanese languages is his treatment of Buddhist ideas, especially the so-called “logic of *sokuhi*.” While Nishida uses this phrase in his later work to refer to his own philosophy, two observations are in order: 1. Despite Nishida’s rhetoric of “*sokuhi*,” Nishida actually coins phrases using the term “*soku*” and not “*sokuhi*”; and 2. As I have pointed out before (KOPF 2005), the phrase and stratification of the “logic of *sokuhi*” is D. T. Suzuki’s neologism and innovation. The author of the *Diamond Sutra* uses phrases involving the negative copula “is-not” (Ch. *jifei*; Jp. *sokuhi* 即非) such as “what we call ‘all dharmas’ is not all dharmas; that’s why we call them ‘all dharmas’” (T 8, no. 235, 751b2–3) to challenge the positivistic use of concepts and to subvert the belief in a one-to-one relationship between signifier (*signifiant*) and signified (*signifié*) rather than to make ontological claims or to fashion a new logical system. A nod to this observation would not only strengthen Krummel’s claim that Nishida’s philosophy “extends beyond the previous formulations of Nishida’s forebearers”; it would also minimize the danger of alienating readers primarily trained in Buddhist philosophy or buddhology. However, it is worth mentioning that, in general, Krummel approaches the Mahāyāna Buddhist inspiration of or equivalents to Nishida’s phraseologies with a sophistication and sensitivity rarely seen in works by scholars trained primarily in comparative philosophy.

Despite these imperfections, Krummel’s work surely makes the must-read literature list of anyone who is seriously interested in understanding the importance of Nishida’s philosophy in the context of its antecedents. His depiction of Nishida’s “absolutely contradictory self-identity” as chiasmatic chorology and as a blueprint for a “‘multi-worlded’ inter-civilizational world-culture” is ingenious. The challenge now is to apply it to concrete philosophies of globalism and multiculturalism. In particular, Nishida scholarship today is faced with two challenges: 1. If Nishida’s chiasmatic chorology reveals an “*Urkultur* ... from which spring the branches of East and West” (219), is it still meaningful and tenable to use language dividing the “‘multi-worlded’ inter-civilizational world-culture” into constructed cultural binaries such as “East” and “West”?; and 2. if we are to apply Nishida’s terminology to the “(post/hyper-)modernity” (137) of today’s world, would it not be fruitful to compare Nishida’s reading of Plato’s *chōra* with that of Jacques Derrida (see KOPF 2003)? Either way, the current volume constitutes an enormous contribution to Nishida scholarship, comparative philosophy, and postmodern visions of and for a global world. It provides inspiring scholarship on Nishida and, at the same time, invites subsequent creative reflections. In short, it constitutes philosophical reflection at its best.

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ABBREVIATIONS

- NKZ *Nishida Kitarō zenshū* 西田幾多郎全集. 20 volumes. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1988.
- T *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新脩大藏經. 100 vols. Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎 and Watanabe Kaigyoku 渡辺海旭 et al., eds. Tokyo: Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai, 1924–1934.

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Gereon Kopf
Luther College