Quasi-Predicate Theory

A New Interpretation of Nishida

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In what follows I will attempt a reading of Nishida Kitarō’s “predicate theory” from the perspective of contemporary philosophy, that is tools, signs, and networks. His philosophy, rather than contradicting what is called “subject theory,” paints a worldview that may best be called a “quasi-predicate theory.” This may seem a peculiar word, but my reasons for the neologism will be given in what follows. At the same time, I would like to try to disclose the immediacy contained in his later ideas.

SUBJECT AND PREDICATE

Nishida says that when we thinking about something, we think of it in the form of judgments, and such judgments are the most basic form of conceptual knowledge (NKZ 5: 58). In order to consider this object called judgment, he claims, the terms “subject,” “predicate,” “that which exists,” and “the place where it exists” are crucial:

There are various types of judgment, and judgments of the type in which A is equal to B are probably interpreted to have a variety of meanings, but I wish to think of the so-called subsumptions, in which the subject is contained in the predicate, as the fundamental meaning
of judgment, or at the least, I think that such meaning has not been sufficiently considered within past theories of judgment. Subject and predicate, in any case, must be objects that are thought of separately. Judgment, even as that which shows the relationship between both of these, must be a term of the relationship in order for a relationship to form, and cannot consider a term of a relationship from a union of mere relationships. To unite relationships, that which unites must exist; and furthermore, for two objects to mutually correlate, there must exist a place in which they both exist, a place where they relate (NKZ 5: 59).

By “subsumption” Nishida is referring here to a case, for example, in which one says that a “deer” is an “Artiodactyla”: the former is subsumed in the group of the latter. Here, of course, “deer” is the subject and “Artiodactyla” the predicate. He also calls this kind of subject and predicate “that which exists” and “the place where it exists” respectively. These two, along with a third “medium of the two,” are the three components that form conceptual knowledge (NKZ 5: 59). “That which exists” is a subject and is particular; the “place where it exists” is a predicate and is universal.

However, a true concept must be specific, and a specific concept must contain its medium within the self; it is, so to say, an object that contains an individuated principle. To say that a concept contains within the self the medium of the self is to say that it contains that which is truly a subject. It contains the Aristotelian first substance, which is a subject but not a predicate. (NKZ 5: 58)

According to Nishida, a certain object that contains “that which is truly a subject” and an “individuated principle” is an “individual.” At the same time, even if a particular object (a deer for example) is judged to be subsumed in some universal group (Artiodactyla), then that particular object is not specialized any further “within” the universal. Here, the particular object (the deer) is defined insofar as it is bound to the universal (Artiodactyla), and conversely, by subsuming the particular (deer), the qualities of the universal (Artiodactyla) are also limited.

Such a judgment, Nishida holds, is an “abstract concept” (NKZ 5: 60), because it is the mere connection of subject and predicate, with no
chance of further development. “This deer” as an individual is thought of only as an object that transcends this sort of abstract concept—that which is unattainable from an abstract definition. However, Nishida thought that in this case “unattainability” refers not only to the “individual” as subject and as particular, but may also be applied to the universal’s subsuming side, the side of the predicate. This he spoke of as the transcendental predicate aspect.¹ In the case of the subject, the unattainable mediates while the “individual” limits itself; in other words it was seen to have an “individuating” action. In the predicate aspect, too, the limits itself and is seen to have a transcending function while mediating.

That is, the function of the predicate aspect that limits and mediates itself is not just the reverse of the mediation of self by the subject (subject aspect). If the subject, in the course of numerous judgments, is limited as a particular object, that subject will come to possess multiple predicates.

To say that an object exists, it must be that much is said about it as a subject. The many are one. It was thought that an object which is a subject, not a predicate, is substance. There are probably various ways of saying that the many are one. For example, various qualities are the qualities of one object, or various changes are the changes of one object. But even by means of such forms, the self cannot contemplate the self. (nkz 5: 58)

Here a multiplicity of qualities (predicates) are the basis of the subject. Nishida expresses this as “the many are united in the one, the one is the point of union of the many” (nkz 10: 478). However, he points out that in this case the qualities are not each perceived as independent objects (nkz 10: 478–9). Only on that single point in which the function of the subject transcends itself while limiting itself, is it subjugated by the many (various qualities), and the manner of this subjugation is linear (irreversible) process. In contrast, he notes that originally “within the reciprocal relationship between the many and the one, each of the individual many must be thoroughly independent” and “each point must be a substrate” (nkz 10: 479). Here, what he calls “each point” refers to the variety of

¹. nkz 5: 61. In the following the transcendental subject shall be called the “subject aspect” and the transcendental predicate shall be called the “predicate aspect.”
predicates (many qualities) concerning the subject, but while these reciprocally possess a function “that transcends itself while limiting itself,” it is necessary for them to act reciprocally.

The predicate is primarily the subsuming, universal side. Thus, Nishida’s principal of reciprocity hold that the subsuming and universal, while mutually separated, perform multiple actions on one another. It is precisely because the predicate as the universal possesses a substrate function and an individuating function that he can emphasize the fact that these are an “individual many.”

The one is its own universal, and if it is to be individual yet universal, it must be able to take others into consideration as well. Here for the first time we can say that independent objects confront objects. Therefore, to say that the individual confronts the individual means, at the same time, that it confronts the universal. It is impossible to contemplate any sort of continuity between them. (NKZ 8: 23)

**Reciprocal Subsumptions**

The universal possesses a function that individuates the self. And the universal (objects that can also be called “individual” or “universal,” depending on their function) is in a reciprocal relationship while performing individuation. To Nishida, the difference between considering the problem of individuation from the predicate aspect and from the subject aspect can be seen in terms of the independence of this reciprocal relationship and the predicates corresponding to multiple substrates. Under what circumstances, then, do such reciprocal relationships form? How does this relate to the problem of predication and subsumption? Nishida has this to say on these matters:

A true universal being must individuate itself; it must be what we may call an individuated principle. Therefore many people regard a universal being as a process, but a mere process must also be a single object. On the other hand, a true universal being must imply a negation of process; it must have denotational meaning. We can say that a universal being signifies a medium between object and object. To give thorough consideration to a true universal being in this sense, universal
being entails its serving as a medium between object and object. It
must have a locational meaning. (NKZ 8: 24)

Here, what is called an “object,” such as the “individual” referred to
above, is a “universal (universal being)” as predicate. Here, Nishida’s the-
ory has a nested structure. That “a universal being entails its serving as a
medium between object and object” means that multiple predicate-univ-
ersal beings (predicate-universal being A and predicate-universal being
B) is further subsumed by predicate-universal being C. Here predicate-
universal being A and predicate-universal being B stand in a reciprocal
relationship and yet exist separately; one is not subjugated unilaterally by
the other. Nishida calls this reciprocal relationship a coexisting “spatial”
and “circular” relationship (NKZ 8: 23–4). But even if it is regarded as a
relationship in which predicate-universal being C is subsumed in predi-
cate-universal being D and all are subsumed in predicate-universal being
E, each of these elements are independent coexisting relationships that
accumulate incrementally (see figure below).

Therefore, if one takes up the problem of transcendence and limitation
from the predicate side, one finds that it is not so much a linear, tempo-
ral object as it is a multi-branching, spatial object. Of course, each piece is
specialized through this accumulation of multi-branching subsumptions
as well as through an accumulation of judgments. It is precisely this kind
of limitation that must be the ideal form of limitation Nishida referred to as “denotational limitation.” Here the relationship of subsumption is not a process; rather it is thought of as the starting point for some predicate-universal being, while the relationship of reciprocal subsumption is centrifugally linked in every respect. Nishida called this a link of “discontinuous continuity.” Here both discontinuity as spatial, circular reciprocity, and continuity as temporal object, are present. This is what he calls a “locational medium”.2

The fact that the individual limits itself means that the individual mediates itself boundlessly and is a single world. However, this is a completely subjective world and the individual cannot function there. The functioning individual must be mediated through a locational medium, through a discontinuous continuity. Furthermore, a true universal being must have the qualities of an individual and an individual’s locational medium. On the one hand, this mediates our self, and since our self is mediated by it, it is thought of as subjective. On the other hand, it means a negating of the self as the discontinuous continuity, and is thus thought of as objective. (NKZ 8: 25)

I believe the characterization of the “locational medium” somewhat obscures the fact that this theory was developed from a universal being conceived of in terms of a “predicate” as a “individuated many.” It is also difficult to find much emphasis on the fact that this “predicate” limits itself as a sort of substrate and is given the role of “pseudo subject.” In actuality, the “predicate” to Nishida was a “quasi-predicate” as “quasi-subject.” Naturally, this quasi-predicate is simultaneously the locational medium. That which is at once a medium and a “predicate” subsuming multiple objects possesses active functions (individuating functions) that are not merely subjugated to a subject, making it into a quasi-subject. This is what gives centrifugal action to the “discontinuous continuity” and prevents it from being an object that can be reduced to a subjective structure. It is, in fact, also the manifestation of a “subjective” world, and through this its subject is forced into a passive perception-cognition.

2. Here of course, the aspect of discrete, spatial continuity is emphasized, and thus it is called “locational.”
This centrifugal action of the “predicate” succession and the process that imparts passivity to the subject cannot be understood without taking into consideration the fact that predicate theory is a world image comprised of networked relationships of reciprocal subsumptions. Today, the discussions being developed by Michel Serres (1994) and Pierre Lévy (1995) in the field of information theory on information space, which shows a similar networked centrifugal structure of links, provide us valuable insights on this point. By providing examples of general utility, these thinkers are analyzing the transfer of the active function of information judgment and cognizance from the subject to the object. They have shown how, despite its mostly dependent nature, the object joins with the subject via meanings usually associated with that object, thus yielding a networked medium.

According to Serres and Lévy, in today’s information space the relationship between a shared text and the “writer” is very similar to the relationship between a group of players and a ball in a ball game. In a ball game, players who attempt to subject the ball merely to their own subjective expectations are poor players. In order for such expectations not to be easily noticed, the player will repeat a number of complex passes, causing the ball to behave as if it had a will of its own. The ball is thus made to act as a medium and form a network with the other players. The imparting of activity to the object, that is the ball, and imparting to it the role of node in the various relationships, is the key to skillfully moving the game forward.

In cyberspace, too, the text is disengaged from the “writer” and the independence of the editor is inevitably lost. But as a result, the text itself bears the role of the network node’s virtual actualization and thus takes on an active function of its own. This phenomenon is widely referred to as hypertextualization. This perceptual-cognitive transformation of observing the surrounding relationships, beginning with this actualization, is a condition for hypertext, a situation that is far from unique if one looks at the historical relations of tools and human history.

The transfer of independence to the object is called “objectivation,”
but since the target in this case is semi-independent, it is called a quasi-object, and occasionally a quasi-subject (see Serres 1976).

“Quasi-object” is a term created in order to explain information, and through it cognition, as well as the formation of the subject, but here the role given to the object is comparable to that given to the “predicate” by Nishida. The quasi-predicate, like the quasi-object, also shows characteristics of the quasi-subject in that it imparts passivity to the subject and provides a medium that relates other centrifugal, indirect judgments “within it,” to other information operations in the network. In each case, it is a judgment or information, so the question is how it can become an objective, intermediary tool. Objectivation, viewed in terms of Nishida’s predicate theory, provides a philosophical basis. At the same time, by looking at the question from the dual perspective of Nishida’s theory and of objectivation and the nature of networks, it is easy to identify the concrete elements at work.

The “objective world” of which Nishida writes is not an “intersubjective world” comprised of multiple subjects. From the start, the objectivation of the intended world is also manifest in the independent subject itself, as a result of which the subject is made passive. While it is clear that objectivation is bound to the passivity of the subject, this passivity is also an aid to the subject trying actively to function. Nishida, too, recognized the sense in which consecutive relationships, viewed from the predicate, always entail multiple layers of reciprocal, circular subsumptions, which, despite the “discontinuous continuity,” also lead to a linear, temporal, subsumption process. This leads to a paradox: through objectivation we can see the diffusion of multi-circular networked relationships towards discrete relationships, but in turn this causes the subject to enrich its own subjective world image, increasing its own activities. Here we may introduce a kind of reflex arc model. When objectivation occurs, passivity towards the objective world increases, and the quasi-predicate and

3. Here, based on the quasi-predicate acting as quasi-subject, the ideal form in which another predicate-related whole is potentially encapsulated can be considered from the perspective of monadism. In fact, Serres’s unique interpretation of Leibniz lies behind his theory regarding the quasi-object. Nishida’s creative monadism has deep similarities with Serres’s relationistic interpretation of Leibniz. Regarding the relationship between Serres, Leibniz, and creative monadism, see Shimizu 2004.
quasi-object function more as a network medium. At the same time, a more rich independence—or at least a sort of false sense of it—is formed. This independence can then test itself by acting on the objective world. The objective world, sometimes a world of time, plays the role of a corrective with respect to this independence. Here objectivation reoccurs, and the formation of a new independence can be attempted.

**Pragmatic interpretation**

This formation of independence can be called pragmatic in Peirce’s sense if the necessary additional lines of relationship are drawn. As we saw above, the indirect, reciprocal succession and subsumption of the predicate are used not only in formal logic and inductive-deductive logic, but also used in the experiential judgments of everyday analogies and associations. Peirce spoke of an ideal form of reasoning he called abduction, but abduction, too, is a kind of reasoning through indirect connections with centrifugally oriented analogies at work.

To take one of Peirce’s examples, from the statement “Tory has a mole on the side of his nose,” we can extract the subsuming concept (which he called a “firstness”) that a man “has a mole on the side of his nose,” position (i.e., subsume) “Tory ” within it (secondness), and associate the characteristic “has a mole on the side of his nose” with a historical person, Cicero (thirdness) (Peirce 2001, 127). The state of affairs “smoke is coming out of house A” (secondness) is positioned (subsumed) within the concept (firstness) that “smoke is produced by fire,” and thus from the association of smoke with fire, we can make the judgment (thirdness) that “house A is on fire.” This is the kind of abduction we perform everyday. It is verified in action by the one who makes the abduction, but when one is in error, a separate network of centrifugal associations is mobilized, giving rise to a separate abduction.

Nishida defines what transcends the universal being of judgment from the predicate side as a function of “consciousness.” The activity of the “will,” in contrast, is aimed at calling the self into existence and at the same time continually restructuring judgment. This he also refers to as “self-limiting activity of a self-aware universal being” (NKZ 5: 130-1).
Clearly, we have to do here with a function different from the “contents” of judgments themselves. We may think of it as consciousness functioning within abductional and experiential judgments and associations.

That said, pragmatism and the reflex-arc model tend to be biased toward seeing things from the side of the subject. What is important in the abduction model is the conditioning of the independence, giving it a passivity that in turn is passed on to some object in the objective world. Only in this way can objectivation occur. I would suggest that pragmatism and the reflex-arc model be adjusted in the light of the quasi-predicate, or the quasi-object in the form of tools.

**Tools**

When a subject is reconstructed and transformed, the objective world is not antithetical to the subject but rather takes on an affinity to the subject. It is difficult to distinguish the “interior” of the subject. Like concepts whose “firstness” is a medium for centrifugal associations and abduction, and like tools which are the medium for information communication, the objective world appears in a form that is difficult to differentiate from the subject. This manifests itself to us as an “internal anomaly”: what is discovered in this manner constitutes the true objective world. In an essay on “Logic and Life” Nishida writes:

> We make things with tools. When we hold an object as a tool, our bodies too are tools. Our bodies are objects that can be seen from the outside. Operational components arise from the union of one operational component with another. Moreover, new operational components are also objects existing within that world, and function operationally. In viewing the world this way, when we, as functioning objects, with our bodily elements, which are considered the initial point of departure, are made into a unity of operational elements within the world, the world is self-limiting.

> In other words, it is the objective world. It is a society that forms itself. (NKZ 8: 322)

We may consider this a clear definition of the activity of objectivation as well as of tools. When Nishida said that “operational components arise
from the union of one operational component with another” he probably had in mind simple tools like a hammer and chisel. If, however, we read his words in the context of information devices and hypertext, we get a clearer idea of what he wanted to say. A tool is something that extends the body; it is a node or medium into which various functions flow, but it also imparts passivity to the subject who handles it.

The quasi-predicate, the “sign” (the externalized object) is the medium of centrifugal associations. Abduction is this kind of active tool—a linguistic, semiotic tool. To the subject of abduction, this linguistic, semiotic tool is normally nothing more than an interface for realizing its own intentions, but in some cases, that tool urges the subject to a transformation and conversion of the abduction, or mapping of the world image, and to the arrangement of the multiplicity of signs. In a sense, this kind of semiotic tool is a concentration of arranged signs. Put the other way around, by using the tool, semiotic networking occurs and the objective world is rediscovered as an arrangement of signs. In other words, it is encoded. Nishida has the following to say in this regard:

At the base of the self, at the base of our historical lives, we are connected to a boundlessly deep creative being, while at the same time we continually grasp objects as tools in our objective orientation. Within this limitation, the world of the names of things confronts the world represented by signs. This then is the world of the thing-in-itself, which transcends our intuition. However, the world of names of things does not begin within such limitations; when we held an object as a tool within the world of historical reality, this was already a world of names. Objects were things that already had names. Consequently, within our everyday lives they are already logical. (NKZ 8: 327–8)

Nishida also notes that “within the limitation of the orientation of grasping objects as tools, the world of objects is semiotic.” In this sense, tools “encode” the world of objects and at the same time “the corporeal self is able to transcend it” (NKZ 8: 330–2). Nishida’s theory of body finds the objectivation of the body itself in the tools and signs (code). In its mature statement, as notes earlier, he moves towards seeing tools as signs. What is at work here is a “logos body” that has already tran-
scended the ordinary body that takes the form of a “historical body” (NKZ 8: 335–6). This latter is a completely externalized body.

In this way, tools and signs (code), as the individual medium that brings together the entire reciprocal subsuming network of various signs (code), and the objective world, as a networked arrangement of signs (code), mutually seek harmony through the activity of “encoding.” The tools-signs (code) are subsumed in the networked world itself at the same time as they remain self-contained in concentrating and expressing the world, but the active subject and corporeality which are usually seen are negated.

We may arrange this sequentially as follows:

1. The body is negated and externalized (passively).
2. From this momentum, the tools-signs (code) appear in the form of an object that personifies centrifugal and reciprocal subsumptions, as an individual medium.
3. They position themselves as particulars within the entire network of the world itself.

What is important here is that the “positioning” occurs in step 3, after the subject is externalized as an individual medium, that is to say, as the world itself. This is what Nishida calls the “formation of the world by the world itself,” a process in which “the world limits the world itself” (NKZ 8: 329). It is precisely here that “what is thought of” is positioned as identical to “that which thinks,” and are in a relationship in which they mutually subsume one another. Nishida called this “self-awareness” (jik-aku 自覚). Self-awareness is one of the core concepts of his philosophy and was pivotal in forming his later ideas. When it comes understanding the importance of the quasi-predicate and quasi-object, this concept is an essential ingredient.

**Beyond the Subject Theory**

In conclusion, let us consider the relationship of thought (that which thinks) and the content of thought (that which is thought of), from the perspective of a succession of subsumptions as Nishida under-
stood it. Descartes pointed out that even when the content of thought is doubted and negated, there must be some thinking going on. The “self-awareness” he discovered takes the form “Je pense, donc je suis.” As long as there is thought in the form of doubt, that doubt is also already itself a content of thought.

Seen from the standpoint of subject theory, the doubting and negating of the content of thought is simultaneously the doubting and negating of the accompanying substrate. As the are set against each other dualistically, any doubt directed at the chain of predicate subsumptions rebounds on the subject.

For Nishida, the word “limitation” in the phrase “self-limitation” is synonymous with (judgment by) “subsumption.” As he points out, in traditional philosophy and logic, as compared with limitation seen from the perspective of connotation, limitation from the perspective of denotation has not been sufficiently considered (NKZ 6: 21). A “connotational limitation” is always a limitation based on “something indicated by subject,” but a “denotational limitation” is brought about by something that can never be made a subject. Therefore, there is no need to consider any kind of predication, or subsumption, as a process directed to that end. Beyond this, subsumption (limitation) by a network of reciprocal subsumptions based on an unspecified denotation is also assumed. In subject theory, in order for an individual or subject to be specified, there must be sufficient room for true predicates to accumulate and to continue accumulating. The fact that the content of thought is doubted has to do with the individual and its relation to the image of the world as a whole. It is a negation of the result or process of accumulation.

Even in subject and linear theory, it is possible to incorporate this process of negation and doubt, to further develop the content of thought, and to refer to a metaphysical ideal of self-formation (the so-called “dialectical” standpoint). Indeed, if this process is not incorporated into subject theory, the prior content of thought is merely affirmed and nothing more. In that case, the subject cannot transcend the predicate but is simply reduced to the predicate. If the object external to the content of thought and its limitations, on the one hand, and the process of negation, on the other, are absent, subject theory cannot maintain an image of the world in its entirety.
In predicate theory, the fact that the individual is specified means that its positional relationship is assessed precisely, the content of the assessment constituting the content of thought; room is left for improvement. In this case, before all positional assessments and relationships connected to the individual have been completely understood, the entire image of the reciprocally subsuming world is assumed. Within this logic, which is not dependent on the nature of the process, correction and negation of the individual’s position can, but need not, occur within the arrangement of networked signs during the formation of the world image as a whole. At least, it is not necessary to occur without limits. If it does not occur under these conditions, correction and negation cannot be effective. That is, the act of negating some content of thought is possible only by proposing some other content of thought. This condition is inescapable within subject theory where the “content of thought itself” is a prior given, so that to negate or doubt it would amount to a petitio principii.

If one uses predicate theory, however, even if the content of thought is doubted and corrected, the philosophical foundation, the relationship itself of the place and individual which which subsumes the content of thought, does not change. It is what negates the subject that astricts and acts within the arrangement of various networked signs itself as well as within other types of networked “combinations.” In Descartes, the fact that “that which questions thought is also thought” led to the “self-awareness” of the cogito, but that which doubts and negates itself here, while at the same time being compelled to affirm both negation and some degree of thought, is the network itself.

As we have seen, “denotational limitation” also accounts for the specification of particular things within experiential knowledge. In this sense Nishida’s philosophy was tempered and confirmed mainly through everyday experiential knowledge, and already from An Inquiry into the Good it focused on consistency with experience.

The viewpoints of quasi-predicate, tools, the nature of networks, and signs, provide important insight into the fundamental critique that Nishida raised against traditional philosophy. Furthermore, looking realistically at the objectives, technology, and modes of perception of society today, his theories are a seedbed of suggestiveness. The perspective of
quasi-predicate theory demonstrates how his ideas, today as ever, are be situated at the crossroads of a number of vital questions.

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Abbreviation


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