

Toward a World of Worlds

Nishida, the Kyoto School,
and the Place of Cross-Cultural Dialogue

Bret W. DAVIS

How should we conceive of the one world which encompasses our various cultural worlds? What is the place in which encounters between cultures should take place?

In this essay I look to the Kyoto School for suggestions of an answer to this most pressing yet perplexing question. My focus will be on the founder and central figure of the School, Nishida Kitarō 西田幾多郎 (1870–1945), but I will also discuss along the way Nishitani Keiji 西谷啓治 (1990–1990) and Kōyama Iwao 高山岩男 (1905–1994). This must also be a critical examination, given the erstwhile entanglements of the Kyoto School in the imperialistic politics of wartime Japan. Hence, after developing a mainly sympathetic interpretation of their (in particular Nishida's) philosophies of cross-cultural dialogue, I will critically discuss certain problematic elements of their thoughts on culture and politics.

But let us rather begin self-critically, namely, with some reflections on the Euro-America-centric topography of today's world of globalization.

THE EURO-AMERICA-CENTRIC
TOPOGRAPHY OF GLOBALIZATION

Cross-cultural encounters are taking place today more often and more widely than ever before in history. The “place” in which these encounters are taking place can be understood in several respects. In addition to older mediums, which range from immigration and colonization to travel literature and scholarly study, today’s transportation and communications technologies have spread out and speeded up cultural exchange through such mediums as television, film, mass tourism, and, of course, the Internet.

Indeed, the very meaning of “locality” has been put in question by these modern mediums; local places are losing their uniqueness and orienting capacity in the “disembedding” or “displacing” process of global modernization.¹ Paradoxically, modern technology both enables and undermines cross-cultural encounter. It not only provides ease of communication, it also tends to homogenize the voices that speak to one another. We do not take the time to learn about one another’s roots, or patiently set down new ones ourselves in foreign soil; rather, as we fly around the world to look-alike cities and log in to cyberspace to create virtual realities, we are uprooted and displaced in the process.

Modern technology not only homogenizes; at another level it can heterogenize, splintering us into new specialized groupings. Airplanes and the Internet are gradually edging out the go-between of the nation-state; today we speak less of “internationalization” and more of “globalization.”² While wars and international sports competitions continue to

On “disembedding,” see Anthony GIDDENS, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 17ff. Also 40–3, where Giddens considers the possibility of “reembedding” or the “recreation of locality” in the space of modern globalization. On the problem of the modern loss of place, see Edward CASEY, *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), and *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). See also Bret W. DAVIS, “The Displacement of Modernity,” *Dokyo International Review* 14 (2001): 215–35.

2. Today in Japan one hears of *gurōbaruka* グローバル化 (globalization) much more often than of *kokusaika* 国際化 (internationalization), although the latter had

fan the flames of nationalism, more and more people today are tending to identify themselves with groups organized around common interests rather than with nationalities. We form multinational groups of individuals interested in, say, Japanese philosophy or sailboat races. But still, what is the space in which we form these groups? For instance, what language do these groups speak when they meet in hotels or on the Internet?

Let us focus here on the example of language, which is, in fact, much more than just an example. Language is not just one cultural artifact among others; it is largely responsible for defining the very sense and parameters of a cultural world. According to Heidegger, language is the “house of being,” which led him to suggest: “If humans dwell within the claim of being through language, then we Europeans presumably dwell in an entirely different house than do East Asian humans.”³ Wittgenstein wrote that “the limits of my language mean the limits of my world.”⁴ If a language is a house or even a world, then the earth is rich in worlds. Or at least it was. It is predicted that during the next century at least half of the world’s approximately 6000 languages will become extinct. Insofar as linguistic diversity is a “benchmark for cultural diversity,” since “each language has its own window on the world,” what some linguists call “language death” is “symptomatic of cultural death: a way of life disap-

been a catchphrase until a decade or more ago. This change in terminology reflects both the fact that cultural exchange is no longer restricted to relations between nations, and also the fact that the linguistic medium for this exchange is ever more predominantly English; *sekaika* 世界化 (globalization or, in French, *mondialization*) is not a word, although there is nothing to prevent it from having become one.

3. Martin HEIDEGGER, *Unterwegs zur Sprache, Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 12 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1985), 85; *On the Way to Language*, trans. by Peter D. Hertz (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 5, translation modified.

4. Ludwig WITTGENSTEIN, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. by D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964), 56 (§5.6). This statement retains its significance beyond the restrictions of the representational philosophy of language of this early work. Wittgenstein later speaks of a plurality of “language games,” each defining a “form of life,” as collectively defining the shifting parameters of the worlds in which we dwell. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. by G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1958), II (§23).

pears with the death of a language.”⁵ The earth is becoming poorer in linguistic houses and cultural worlds.

Insofar as we are coming to speak the same language, we are coming to inhabit the same cultural world. The price for this commonality is not only the richness of cultural variety, but also a certain kind of social equality. The increasingly common linguistic world of English is not equally inhabited. For example, a Japanese, an Egyptian, and a German meet at a business meeting or at an academic conference—and most often they speak English. On the one hand, this common second language makes communication possible, and the benefits of this semi-direct contact are undeniably significant. And yet, what price is paid? They do not learn to speak one another’s languages, or often even those of their neighbors,⁶ and to this extent their mutual understanding of

5. Daniel NETTLE and Suzanne ROMAINE, *Vanishing Voices: The Extinction of the World’s Languages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 7, 14. While they acknowledge the social-political and economic forces that are causing languages to become extinct, Nettle and Romaine argue for the importance of maintaining linguistic and cultural diversity, since “allowing languages and cultures to die directly reduces the sum total of our knowledge about the world, for it removes some of the voices articulating its richness and variety, just as the extinction of any species entails sacrificing some unique part of the environment” (199). They also quote Ron CROCOMBE as writing:

Nothing would more quickly stultify human creativity or impoverish the richness of cultural diversity than a single world culture. Cultural uniformity is not likely to bring peace: it is much more likely to bring totalitarianism. A unitary system is easier for a privileged few to dominate. (199)

Recognizing the need for global communication as well as local identity, Nettle and Romaine promote bilingualism or multilingualism (173, 190ff). Jacques DERIDA, who is less sanguine about the solution of bilingualism, comments on this problem as follows:

Today, on this earth of humans, certain people must yield to the homo-hegemony of dominant languages. They must learn the language of the masters, of capital and machines; they must lose their idiom in order to survive or live better. A tragic economy, an impossible council. I do not know whether salvation for the other presupposes the salvation of the idiom.

Monolingualism of the Other; or, the Prosthesis of Origin, trans. by Patrick Mensah (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 30.

6. In public schools Japanese students are rarely if ever given the opportunity to study Korean or Chinese before college, although English education begins in elementary or middle school.

one other's cultures remains limited. They meet in a fourth party's linguistic and cultural space. Is this space "neutral"? Certainly not. English belongs to a particular language family and has distinct cultural roots. In our scenario, the German has a distinct advantage, for his or her language and culture are much closer to English than that of the other two conversation partners. If British and American persons join the conversation, they will even more clearly occupy a certain position of authority; for the others must keep pace with their fluency and conform to their grammar and vocabulary.

Some have argued that it is appropriate that English has become the global lingua franca, since it has manifested an exceptional ability to incorporate vocabulary from other languages—just as the "melting pot" of American society has allegedly absorbed generations of immigrants and their cultures. But is the capacity to incorporate others a sign of linguistic and cultural openness or imperialism? It might be argued that it is proper for the United States to be the center of globalization because it is itself a successful multicultural society. Yet even if we exchange the metaphor of a "salad bowl" for that of a "melting pot," so that differences are preserved in the mix, the question remains: Where did the "bowl" itself come from? Despite all the cultural influences it continues to openly embrace and creatively absorb, America's linguistic, philosophical, political, and cultural base remains predominantly European in origin. The place in which Native Americans, Arab Americans, African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and European Americans interrelate is decidedly more European in origin than it is Native American, Arab, African, or Latin American.⁷ The encompassing "bowl" of American society remains in large part fundamentally determined by its Western, European genealogy. Even the debates over "multiculturalism" refer predominantly, and quite often even exclusively, to Western philosophies.⁸

7. Hispanic and African Americans are clearly more influential than other minority groups. Hispanic influence is perhaps due not only to population numbers but also to the proximity of their language and culture to English and North America. African Americans are of course significantly influential in a number of cultural arenas; yet one of the irreversible atrocities of slavery was that it cut their direct ties to the languages and cultures of Africa.

8. This is true of the landmark volume edited by Amy GUTMANN, *Multicultural-*

Despite periodic outcries against economic and cultural imperialism, the Western world—in particular America—continues to firmly occupy a privileged position at the hub of the centripetal wheel of globalization. Just as for centuries around the globe “modernization” has proven difficult to distinguish from “Westernization,” today “globalization” is equally difficult to divorce from “Americanization.” At its worst the new world order of the so-called “global village” is—as this oxymoronic expression in fact implies—decidedly parochial. One village has gone out and incorporated the globe.⁹ The America-centric global village is not so much cosmopolitan as, literally, *uni-versal*, a world in which all are “turned towards one” and ultimately perhaps even “turned into one.”¹⁰

ism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994). This is also often paradoxically the case for debates in post-colonialism and critiques of imperialism. John TOMLINSON argues that most of the very values by which we criticize the phenomena of “cultural imperialism” have mainly Western historical and cultural provenances, including “the liberal values of respect for the plurality of ‘ways of living.’” *Cultural Imperialism* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1991), 6. And yet, some non-Western philosophers, including members of the Kyoto School, have in fact developed critiques of political and cultural imperialism which draw deeply on non-Western as well as Western sources. For a variety of non-Western perspectives on comparative political theory, see Fred DALLMAYR, ed., *Border Crossings: Toward a Comparative Political Theory* (New York: Lexington Books, 1999).

9. In this regard it is thought-provoking to note a statement that President George W. Bush affirmed about his relation to his hometown: “You can take the boy out of Crawford, but not Crawford out of the boy” (from an interview with Katie Couric on a CBS News Special, “Fives Years Later: How Safe are We?” aired in Baltimore on September 6, 2006). Does the spread of freedom and democracy require a cowboy mentality of rounding up and prodding along those who stray from the “wagon trail” that leads to (the) U.S. as the proper “end of history”? Francis FUKUYAMA, a former deputy director of the U.S. State Department’s Policy Planning Staff (who more recently, however, broke with the rank and file of the Neoconservatives to oppose the Iraq War), argues that “History” is a single “wagon trail” leading to liberal democracy, free market capitalism, and the “homogenization of mankind,” and that cultural differences can be explained as different stages on this path where some peoples temporarily lag behind, having gotten “stuck in ruts” or been “attacked by Indians.” *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), 338–9.

10. See John AYTO, *Dictionary of Word Origins* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1990), 550. CASEY marks an important distinction between the “universe” and the “cosmos.”

“Uni-verse,” *universum* in its original Latin form, means turning around *one*

While the Kyoto School philosophers were always willing and eager to learn from the West, this learning was intended to critically supplement, not to replace, their Eastern heritage. Their remarkable openness to the West was paired with a staunch resistance to its cultural as well as political imperialism; and they boldly attempted to steer a middle course through the pendulum swing within Japan between colonial Eurocentrism and reactionary Japanism.¹¹

NISHITANI'S NEW WORLD BEYOND THE DICHOTOMY OF EAST AND WEST

As a group of modern Japanese scholars of Western philosophy who are also steeped in Mahayana Buddhism and other strands of East Asian thought and culture, the Kyoto School stands at a pivotal crossroads between Eastern and Western cultures. And as highly gifted and original philosophers in their own right, they are as well equipped as anyone to, as Nishitani Keiji put it, “lay the foundations of thought for a world in the making.” On the precarious yet promising standpoint of modern Japanese philosophers, Nishitani writes:

We Japanese have fallen heir to the two completely different cultures of East and West.... Our [perilous] condition is that of being torn apart between Western and Eastern civilizations; looked at from the other way around, however, this also means that two great cultures are gathered together in a single self. This is a great privilege that Westerners themselves do no share in ... but at the same time this

totalized whole.... In contrast, “cosmos” signifies the particularity of place; taken as a collective term, it signifies the ingrency of places in discrete place-worlds.

The Fate of Place, 78. A truly cosmopolitan world could thus be thought to imply a unity-in-diversity, as opposed to an imperialistically homogeneous cultural universe.

II. James HEISIG writes that the aim of the Kyoto School philosophers was twofold: “an introduction of *Japanese* philosophy into world philosophy while at the same time using western philosophy for a second look at Japanese thought trapped in fascination with its own uniqueness.” *Philosophers of Nothingness: An Essay on the Kyoto School* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2001), 270.

puts a heavy responsibility on our shoulders: to lay the foundations of thought for a world in the making, for a new world united beyond the divide of East and West [*tōyō to seiyō to no betsu o koete hitotsu ni natta atarashii sekai* 東洋と西洋との別を超えて一つになった新しい世界].¹²

These striking remarks have been quoted in part by Jan Van Bragt, and again by Graham Parkes, in the introductions to their English translations of Nishitani's 『宗教とは何か』 and 『ニヒリズム』¹³ Yet the original context and audience for the remarks need to be kept in mind. They were intended not as a confident proclamation to Western readers, but rather as an encouragement to Japanese philosophers who, immersed in their study of Western philosophy, were failing to bring this study into dialogue with the cultural background and philosophical resources of their own Eastern heritage. Only after emphasizing the need to acknowledge the disadvantages and dangers of being “torn apart” (*hikisakareteiru* 引き裂かれている) by standing between two radically different cultural traditions, does Nishitani then suggest the not yet fully realized positive potential of this situation.

The remarks were penned by Nishitani in 1967, long after Japan's imperialistic political ambitions had been obliterated. Nishitani is thus not talking here about a political role for Japan in uniting East and West. A quarter of a century earlier Nishitani had in fact attempted to attribute such a world-historical mission to the Japanese nation. Elsewhere I have argued that Nishitani's wartime politicization of his project of overcoming Western modernity by way of passing through it, and specifically his attribution of a world-historical political role to the Japanese nation, constituted a detour from the central endeavor of his fundamentally existential and religious philosophy.¹⁴ Obviously, no account of the

12. From Nishitani's preface to 『現代日本の哲学』 [Contemporary Japanese philosophy], NISHITANI Keiji, ed. (Kyoto: Yūkonsha, 1967), 2–4.

13. NISHITANI Keiji, *Religion and Nothingness* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), xxviii; and his *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism* (New York: SUNY, 1990), xviii.

14. Bret W. DAVIS, “Turns to and from Political Philosophy: The Case of Nishitani Keiji,” in Christopher GOTO-JONES, ed., *Re-politicising the Kyoto School qua Philosophy* (London: Routledge, forthcoming).

Kyoto School's social and political thought can afford to ignore their political ventures and misadventures during the war,¹⁵ and I will critically address some central aspects of this issue in the latter parts of this essay. And yet, neither should an inquiry into the contemporary significance of their cross-cultural philosophies be restricted to an examination of their entanglements with the wartime politics of the Japanese Empire.

In the postwar remarks quoted above Nishitani is clearly referring not to a political but rather to a philosophical and cultural synthesis that would transcend the dichotomy between East and West. Yet the political implications of the very use of such global categories as “East” and “West” have also come under scrutiny, especially after Edward Said exposed the extent to which the concept of the “Orient” was used to hypostatize, distort, and disparage the alterity of Near Eastern cultures,¹⁶ and after “East Asia” was used by wartime Japanese politicians and some intellectuals to disguise its own imperialism under the cloak of cultural commonality and solidarity against Western imperialism.¹⁷

Generalizations, indeed, always risk distortion by way of reducing a manifold of phenomena to a single sense. (Even proper nouns can be thought of as distorting generalizations, in the sense that, as Nishida writes, there is an alterity or “discontinuity” even between my self today and my self yesterday.) The question is not whether we may legitimately risk generalizations—to speak and think we must—but rather whether “East” and “West” are *always over-generalizations*. They certainly *often* are; but always?¹⁸ Whether the generalizations of “East” and “West”

15. For an overview of this issue, see section 4 of Bret W. DAVIS, “The Kyoto School,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2006 Edition), Edward N. ZALTA, ed. <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2006/entries/kyoto-school/>. For two excellent collections on this topic, see James W. HEISIG and John C. MARALDO, eds., *Rude Awakenings: Zen, The Kyoto School, and the Question of Nationalism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994), and GOTO-JONES, ed., *Re-politicising the Kyoto School qua Philosophy*.

16. Edward SAID, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978).

17. ARISAKA Yōkō finds Nishida to have ultimately been in effect complicit in this strategy: “Beyond ‘East and West’: Nishida’s Universalism and Postcolonial Critique,” in DALLMAYR, *Border Crossings*, 247–8.

18. I have suggested elsewhere that it can *provisionally and in certain contexts* make sense to refer to the Greek-Judeo-Christian-Euro-American tradition as “the

make more sense than they distort in the context of Nishitani's remarks depends in part on how we are to understand the projected synthesis beyond the dichotomy of Eastern and Western cultures.¹⁹

When Nishitani speaks of "a new world in the making," is he referring to "the one and only world," or to "a world among other worlds"?²⁰ If it is the latter, then Japan's synthesis of East and West could presumably be understood as one among other possible syntheses. If, on the other hand, Nishitani is in fact speaking in the singular of "*the* new world beyond differences of East and West," would this necessarily imply a unity that eradicates cultural differences? The broader context of Nishitani's thought suggest rather that this new world should be understood as a kind of "unity-in-diversity," where cultural differences would be able to coexist within a shared place of dialogical exchange. Just as, according to Nishitani, the interpersonal relation of nonduality implies that "self and other are not one, and not two [*jita wa fuitsu deari, funi dearu* 自他は不一であり、不二である],"²¹ in this new world different cultures would interrelate in the manner of dialogical intertwinement rather than monological fusion. To adapt one of Nishitani's metaphors,²² the unity-in-diversity of a world would be like a house with internal walls that not

West" and, at least from a Japanese Buddhist standpoint, to speak at times of "the East" ("The Kyoto School," section 5.1).

19. It is interesting to note in this regard a programmatic shift in the early East-West Philosopher's Conferences held in Hawai'i periodically since 1939. While at the first conference, organizer Charles Moore spoke of combining East and West into a "single world civilization," and while the second conference (1949) was given the ambitious title "An Attempt at World Philosophical Synthesis," "the mood of the second conference appears to have shifted away from the idea of a universal philosophical synthesis towards the encouragement of open-ended dialogue." J. J. CLARKE, *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter Between Asian and Western Thought* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 121. Grand cultural syntheses began to fall under suspicion even before "grand narratives" did.

20. Interpretation is of course complicated here by the fact that there are no definite and indefinite articles in Japanese.

21. 『西谷啓治著作集』[Collected writings of Nishitani Keiji, NKC] (Tokyo: Sōbunsha, 1986–1995), XII: 277–8, 285; NISHITANI Keiji, "The I-Thou Relation in Zen Buddhism," trans. by N. A. Waddell, in Fredrick FRANCK, ed., *The Buddha Eye: An Anthology of the Kyoto School* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 49, 56.

22. NKC XIII: 133, 141.

only separate but also connect different rooms—like semi-opaque *shōji* 障子 that allow for both private individuality and communal intimacy.

Interpreted along these lines, Nishitani's remarks could be taken to imply that Eastern cultures—which had heretofore shared a neighborhood with various houses both separated and connected by an assortment of walls, fences, gateways, and pathways—would now merge with the neighborhood of the West, with all its interconnected houses, to build together (and presumably with others) a cosmopolitan community of unity-in-diversity for humanity.

NISHIDA'S WORLDLY WORLD OR WORLD OF WORLDS

Ōhashi Ryōsuke writes that a central achievement of the Kyoto School was their concrete realization that Europe is but one relative world among others within a “world of worlds” (*shosekai no sekai* 諸世界の世界).²³ We might then understand Nishitani's anticipated new world in terms of what his teacher, Nishida Kitarō, spoke of as a *sekai-teki sekai* 世界的世界: a “worldly world”²⁴ or—in a more interpretive translation yet one which expresses an important implication of Nishida's thought—a “world of worlds.”²⁵

23. ŌHASHI Ryōsuke 大橋良介『日本的なもの、ヨーロッパ的なもの』[Things Japanese, things European] (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1992), 153.

24. V. H. VIGLIELMO translates Nishida's *sekai-teki sekai* as *welthafte Welt(en)* “worldly world(s)” —and explains the “dialectical interplay of singular and plural” in this term as follows:

zum einen bedeutet “welthafte Welt” die globale Welt und zum anderen handelt es sich um eine einzelne “welthafte Welt”, d.h. eine besondere Welt, die in die gemeinsame Gestaltung der verschiedenen Welten in der einen globalen Welt eingetreten ist.

Kitarō Nishida (1870–1945). Moderne japanische Philosophie und die Frage nach der Interkulturalität (Amsterdam, Atlanta: Rodopi, 1999], 208; see also 18, 234.

25. V. H. VIGLIELMO renders *sekai-teki sekai* as “world of worlds” and as “multi-world” in his translation of Nishida's “Fundamental Principles of a New World Order,” in David DILWORTH et al., eds., *Sourcebook for Modern Japanese Philosophy: Selected Documents* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1998). Christopher GOTO-JONES also translates and interprets Nishida's *sekai-teki sekai* as “world of worlds.” *Political*

These two translations can be seen as complimentary. The most straightforward translation of *sekai-teki sekai* is “worldly world.” Perhaps because of its apparently awkward redundancy, some scholars have translated *sekai-teki sekai* as “global world.” But this not only lends itself to conflation with what is today called “globalization,” it also glosses over the point of the redundancy: A truly worldly world would be one which lives up to its name—similar to the sense in which, for Confucianism, a king is only truly a king when he behaves in a kingly manner.²⁶ For Nishida, the world is truly worldly when it serves as a place of unity-in-diversity for the interaction of a plurality of particular cultural worlds, and is in this sense a “world of worlds.”

In Nishida’s development of his “logic of place,” he often spoke of various enveloping “worlds,” such as the “physical world,” “the biological world,” and the “historical world.” Of these three, the last is claimed to be most real, as it envelopes the other two. Even the physical world, he says, must be considered to be creatively historical in its foundation.²⁷ The historical world is itself horizontally divided into a plurality of cultural worlds. In part analogous to the evolution of a variety of species in the biological world, in the historical world too various “species” (*shu* 種) have developed.²⁸ These various cultural microcosms are each in one sense complete and in another sense partial worlds; as “monads” they

Philosophy in Japan: Nishida, The Kyoto School, and Co-Prosperity (London: Routledge, 2005), 32, 92.

26. See *Analects*, 13,3, and *Mencius*, 1A7, in Philip J. IVANHOE and Bryan W. VAN NORDEN, eds., *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy* (New York and London: Seven Bridges Press, 2001), 34–5, 114–19.

27. 『西田幾多郎全集』[Complete works of Nishida Kitarō, NKZ] (Tokyo: Iwanami, 1987–1989), XIV: 283. See also NKZ XIV: 211, where Nishida diagrams the direction of his way of thinking, namely from the human world to that of nature, in contrast to the direction of “the usual way of thinking,” namely from nature to the human world (see also NKZ VIII: 282).

28. NKZ XIV: 290. See, however, NKZ XI: 456, where Nishida distinguishes the ethnic “species” of humans from the biological species of animals. Only the former are fully creative expressions of a creative world. As he writes elsewhere, “biological life is environmental, not truly worldly.” Humans, by contrast, are born as “self-determinations of the eternal present”; as historical beings we are “creative elements of a creative world” capable of “counter-determining” our worlds (NKZ VIII: 286 and 314).

each reflect the entire world, but they do so from a particular perspective and in a particular manner.²⁹ Yet there is no ahistorical objective account of the world which transcends these particular cultural differences in perception. According to Nishida, “reality is historical reality,” and “perception” itself is only possible through the medium of a cultural tradition.³⁰ Hence, a truly worldly world can only be opened up by way of a cross-cultural dialogue which brings these various microcosmic worlds into communication with one another without canceling out their specific perspectival differences.

Let us now examine a couple of key passages where Nishida develops his idea of a *sekai-teki sekai* (translated here as “world of worlds”):

That each national ethnic people transcends itself while remaining true to itself in constructing a single world of worlds, must entail that each transcends itself and, *each in accordance with its regional traditions*, constructs first of all a particular world. Moreover, the particular worlds constructed on an historical foundation in this way will unite, and the entire world will be made into a single world of worlds. In such a world of worlds, while each nation and its people live their own distinctive historical life, through their respective world-historical missions they unite in one world of worlds.³¹

29. ELBERFELD argues that Nishida’s “monadological” conception of culture offers us a genuine alternative to the opposition between universalism and relativism (*Kitarō Nishida*, 212–13; see 255–6).

30. NKZ XIV: 378–9. Commenting on recent developments in quantum physics, which recognizes the constitutive role of the observer in observation, Nishida writes “I think perhaps present-day physics is also gradually coming to the point of saying that the true world is the historical world” (NKZ XIV: 283).

31. NKZ XII: 428. In this text「世界新秩序の原理」[Principles of a new world order] (NKZ XII: 426–34), as in other works such as『日本文化の問題』[The problem of Japanese culture] (NKZ XII: 277–383), Nishida attempts to take up and reinterpret ideas that were at the time being propagated as imperialistic ideology, such as “the eight directions constitute one universe” (*bakkō iu* 八紘為宇). It should be kept in mind that “Principles of a New World Order” was rewritten and “simplified” by Tanabe Juri in order to make it more accessible to the authorities whom Nishida was trying (unsuccessfully, it turns out) to influence. On the debate that has surrounded this controversial text, and Nishida’s political thought in general, see ARISAKA Yōkō, “The Nishida Enigma: ‘The Principle of the New World Order,’” *Monumenta Nip-*

Just as a national culture is formed as a contradictory identity between individuals—whom it forms and at the same time by whom it is formed—Nishida suggests that a “particular world” (*tokushu-teki sekai* 特殊の世界), such as that of East Asia, can be formed through the interaction of its various specific national cultures, such as those of Japan and China.

Later we will have to return to the problematic political context and implications of this vision of a unified East Asia. But here let us note another passage where Nishida speaks of the formation of a “world culture” in the sense of a world of cultures.

Cultures—as the self-aware contents of the world of historical reality, which is the contradictory identity of individual determination qua [*soku* 即] universal determination and universal determination qua individual determination—cannot in principle become merely one. For a culture to lose its particularity means that it ceases to be a culture. Yet to develop the standpoint of a unique culture does not entail simply an advance in the direction of abstract individuality. This [too] would amount to nothing less than the negation of culture. [Rather,] a true world culture will be formed [only] when various cultures, while maintaining their own individual standpoints, develop themselves through the mediation of the world.³²

A true world of worlds would thus be neither a monocultural fusion, which would abolish cultural difference, nor a relativistic dispersion, which would reify assertions of uniqueness; rather, it would be a multicultural conversation, where cultures maintain and develop their uniqueness only by way of opening themselves up to ongoing dialogue with one another.

On the one hand, this opening up involves not only a willingness to critically appropriate valuable aspects of other cultures, but also a movement through self-negation, that is, a willingness to call into question, rethink, and in some cases abandon aspects of one’s cultural tradition.³³

ponica 51/1 (1996): 81–106; and GOTO-JONES, *Political Philosophy in Japan*, 75ff.

32. NKZ VII: 452–53.

33. In fact, Nishida at times positively interprets the culture-negating aspects of the modern globalizing age as provoking an opening up of isolated and unquestioned specificity (see NKZ XI: 457).

On the other hand, it also involves self-expression, that is, learning to rearticulate valuable aspects of one's culture and offering these to others for consideration. By each undergoing this process of critical self-opening and creative self-expression, cultures can mutually supplement one another, thus playing a role in the cooperative formation of the worldly world. This *sekai-teki sekai* would be a world which gathers the irreducible plurality of cultural spheres into a dynamically harmonious "contradictory identity" (*mujun-teki jikodōitsu* 矛盾的自己同一).

To be sure, this "contradictory identity" is not always only a matter of harmonious cooperation. In places Nishida speaks of the worldly world of contradictory identity, not only in terms of "mutual supplementation,"³⁴ but also in terms of a "mutual struggle" and "competition." He even claims that the emergence of nationalism and globalism go hand in hand, since the world becomes real only when national cultures become internally aware of one another, and can thus assert their particularity over against one another.³⁵

Nishida accepts that historical ages have in the past always been established by a nation taking charge and unifying a world, and that the global world as a whole was first unified by Western imperialism. And yet, he goes on to say, we stand on the brink of a radically new world-historical era where we must go beyond the simple paradigm of mutual competition between "nations in opposition." Above all, Nishida repeatedly emphasizes, "the imperialistic idea that puts one ethnic nation in the center surely belongs to the past."³⁶ The new global paradigm must be pluralistic rather than imperialistic, and this implies moving beyond competitive antagonism to mutually transforming dialogue, to the cooperative construction of a "world of worlds," a unity-in-diversity to which each nation contributes on the basis of its own global perspective or, as Nishida is prone to say, its own "world-historical mission."

34. NKZ XII: 392.

35. See NKZ VIII: 529; NKZ XII: 334 and 412–13. On the question of war and struggle in Nishida's thought, see UEDA Shizuteru, "Nishida, Nationalism, and the War in Question," in HEISIG and MARALDO, *Rude Awakenings*, 95–6; and Elberfeld, *Kitarō Nishida*, 223–2.

36. NKZ X: 256, 337.

Nishida thus understands the formation of a “world of worlds” to be the *telos* towards which contemporary world history should be moving. This teleology does not steer us towards an end of cultural diversity in the sense of a “homogenization of mankind.”³⁷ Neither does it abandon us to a “clash of civilizations.”³⁸ Rather, its end would be the realized beginning of an ongoing and mutually transformative dialogue of unity-in-diversity.

AN (IMPLICIT) ETHICS OF CROSS-CULTURAL DIALOGUE

Nishida’s vision of the formation of a world of worlds, wherein cultures could freely enter into dialectical and dialogical relations with one another, would seem to imply certain trans-cultural ethical or moral principles; indeed he repeatedly speaks of a “principle of world-of-worlds formation” (*sekai-teki sekai keisei no genri* 世界的世界形成の原理) and of “world-of-worlds formationism” (*sekai-teki sekai keisei-shugi* 世界的世界形成主義).

To begin with, we can find sources for an ethics (or metaethics) of cross-cultural dialogue in Nishida’s ontology (or rather “meontology”) of “Absolute Nothingness” (*zettai mu* 絶対無) and in his account of the I/thou relation. In the present context, one could understand “the place of Absolute Nothingness” as a formless unity that would gather the various cultural worlds without forcing one into the mold of another, and without reducing their differences to the sameness of an underlying “universal of being.”

According to Nishida, since “there is no universal [of being] whatsoever that subsumes the I and the thou,”³⁹ the locus of genuine interpersonal encounter must be thought of in terms of the place of Absolute

37. See FUKUYAMA, *The End of History and the Last Man*, 338–9, and note 9 above.

38. See Samuel HUNTINGTON, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

39. NKZ VI: 381.

Nothingness. Through self-negation a true individual realizes itself as a focal point of the self-determination of the place of Absolute Nothingness, a creative element of a creative world which essentially exists in dialectical interaction—in Buddhist parlance, interdependent origination—with other individuals.⁴⁰ Such a true individual is said to encounter the interpersonal thou in the depths of its own self-awareness. But this would not reduce the alterity of the Other to the sameness of one's own subjectivity insofar as Nishida argues that “there is no responsibility as long as the Other that is seen at the bottom of the self is thought of as the self. Only when I am I in virtue of the thou I harbor at my depths do I have an infinite responsibility at the bottom of my existence itself.”⁴¹ Moreover, since individual selves are formed by way of a dialectic of mutual determination with the cultures in which they are situated, a responsibility toward an individual Other implies a responsibility toward his or her culture as well.

The world of worlds thus cannot be thought of as a being. Establishing the place of cross-cultural dialogue on the basis of a particular cultural form, political entity, or religious dogma would inevitably institute an arbitrary hierarchy that tends towards disenfranchisement and imperialism. Hence, the world of worlds must be thought of as a place of Absolute Nothingness. As a formless Absolute Nothingness, the world of worlds would gather the various cultural worlds in such a manner that the form of one is not reduced to the form of another. The world of worlds would be something like a circle whose center is both (permanently and exclusively) nowhere and (potentially) everywhere. Cultural exchange would then be like different salads sharing ingredients without a common salad bowl.

But this must not mean that the world of worlds would simply be a static and vacuously empty space—for that would amount to a mere

40. See NKZ VII: 306.

41. NKZ VI: 420. Despite the fact that he quotes this passage, Heisig nevertheless argues that Nishida's (and in general the Kyoto School's) philosophy of “self-awareness” precludes a genuine relationship with the interpersonal Other (*Philosophers of Nothingness*, 82–86). For a response to Heisig's critique, see Bret W. DAVIS, “Introducing the Kyoto School as World Philosophy,” *The Eastern Buddhist* 34/2 (Autumn 2002): 158ff.

“relative nothingness” and even an “everything is permitted” nihilism. Rather, the world of worlds would in some sense be a medium⁴² of dialectical and dialogical interaction, a medium which is not a substance but more like a concrete and dynamic principle of mediation. While it is not a universal Being, Nishida’s Absolute Nothingness clearly does imply certain dialectical and kenotic (i.e., self-emptying) directives. It would seem, then, that we could derive a morality of cross-cultural dialogue from Nishida’s thought.

And yet, Nishida in fact rejects the idea of a universal or trans-cultural “morality” (*dōtoku* 道徳) per se. In contrast to “religion,” which concerns a direct relation between the individual and the Absolute (or rather, to be precise, a relation of “inverse correspondence” between the self-negating finite individual and the self-negating infinite Absolute), he claims that “morality” originates in the mediating realm of the nation. “The nation is the wellspring of morality; but it cannot be said to be the wellspring of religion.”⁴³

With regard to the idea that moral norms are realized only in concrete historical nations, Nishida is no doubt influenced—both directly and indirectly through the writings of Tanabe Hajime and other Kyoto School thinkers—by Hegel’s critique of Kant. According to Hegel, the categorical imperatives of Kant’s *Moralität* were so abstract as to be vacuous, and thus in need of being filled in with the concrete ethics (*Sittlichkeit*) of the historical communities within which moral agents always find themselves.

This is not the place to consider Hegel’s ethical and political philosophy, and to examine the extent to which it can successfully withstand charges of paving the way for twentieth-century nationalism and even totalitarianism.⁴⁴ Yet one serious problem with rooting morality completely in the nation is that this threatens to leave the individual bereft of

42. In his diagrams, Nishida often uses “M” (*Medium*) for Absolute Nothingness or for a world as an identity of contradictories, “A” (*Allgemeines*) for a universal, and “e” (*Einzelnes*) for an individual.

43. NKZ XI: 463; see also NKZ XII: 398.

44. For an excellent sympathetic account of Hegel’s ethical and political philosophy, see Charles TAYLOR, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), part IV.

moral sources with which to criticize unjust laws or nations. By appealing to a moral Law beyond the laws of their governments, Socrates, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King were able to offer moral resistance to legal injustices. Another problem with rooting morality completely in the nation is that we would then be unable to establish internationally binding codes. As is well known, the need to officially acknowledge a category of trans-national “crimes against humanity” became urgent after World War II in order to prosecute Nazi officials, such as Adolf Eichmann, who professed to be merely following the law of their land as they sent millions to be murdered.⁴⁵

Does Nishida’s thought restrict the reach not only of concrete ethics, but also of morality as such to the nation? In fact, I think that we can find at least an implicit trans-national morality articulated in Nishida’s thought. To begin with, the very impulse to root morality in the nation could itself paradoxically be said to rest on a trans-national moral respect for the dignity and autonomy of peoples and their cultures. Nishida often speaks of the world as “the self-determination of a circle with no center and no circumference,”⁴⁶ and he is fond of repeating Leopold von Ranke’s idea that every historical age (and, for Nishida, cultural world) touches God directly.⁴⁷ These thoughts staunchly resist the idea that one age is but a step on the way to another, or that one people’s culture is peripheral and another’s central.

Yet, although he says that “national morality and morality are not two things,” Nishida also claims that, in today’s “age of global self-awareness” (*sekai-jikaku no jidai* 世界自覚の時代), “the time has come to clarify the essence of morality [*dōtoku to iu mono no honshitsu* 道徳と云ふものの本質].”⁴⁸ This “essence of morality” would be both national and international, insofar as the “true nation” (*shin no kokka* 真の国家) contains the principle of world-of-worlds formation within itself. In a passage sharply critical of “Anglo-American imperialism,” Nishida writes:

45. See Hannah ARENDT, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2006).

46. NKZ VII: 208. Nishitani writes that, on the ultimate “field of *sūnyatā*, the center is everywhere” (NKX: 178; *Religion and Nothingness*, 158).

47. NKZ XII: 61.

48. NKZ XII: 408.

In historical world-formation, the center must always be on ethnic peoples. This is the motivating force of world-formation.... However, an ethnic nationalism which does not include a true worldliness within itself, which puts itself in the center and thinks of the world only from there, is an ethnic egoism, and cannot help but fall into an ideology of aggression and imperialism.... Only when an ethnic people includes within itself a principle of world-of-worlds formation does it become a true nation. It is then that it becomes a wellspring of morality.⁴⁹

Here the idea of the nation as a wellspring of morality is qualified by the idea that, in order to first of all become a “true nation,” a people must avoid falling into ethnic egoism. In other words, we may interpret, *there is an ethical criterion for becoming a wellspring of morality*. A nation has an a priori duty to become an authentic nation by including the “principle of world-of-worlds formation” within itself.⁵⁰

This would also imply a restriction on what cultures and nations qualify to be considered a genuine “focal point” or provisional center of the self-determination of the world as the circumferenceless circle of Absolute Nothingness. The center is not actually everywhere, but rather only at those points which are self-negating as well as self-expressive, those points which are open to dialectical and dialogical interaction with others. This qualification is crucial, because otherwise we lose any basis for international and cross-cultural critique. Without it, even a national culture which glorifies imperialistic aggression would have to be affirmed as a wellspring of morality and a legitimate focal point of world-formation. While Nishida acknowledges that in the course of history some nations will be more influential (formational) and others more receptive (material-like), he stresses that:

In its relation to another ethnic people, a true nation will unite together with them on the standpoint of the self-formation of the historical world which forms them both. What does not express the world within itself, that is, what is not moral [*dōgi-teki* 道義的], is

49. NKZ XII: 432–3.

50. NKZ XI: 455.

not a [true] nation. What emerges merely from exclusionary ethnic nationalism is nothing other than ideologies of aggression and imperialism.⁵¹

While avoiding the unrealistic assertion of a blanket equality between nations, that is to say, while acknowledging a place for healthy competition and shifting roles of leadership and influence, Nishida's conception of the world of worlds as a dialectical and dialogical place of Absolute Nothingness implies a principle of ethical respect for the alterity and autonomy of other cultures which should never be imperialistically reduced to the form of one's own.

To be sure, there are problems with Nishida's view of the nation and, as we shall discuss later, with his specific idea of "national polity" (*kokutai* 国体). In general he saw nations as the proper vehicles for historical development and cross-cultural dialogue; but, in fact, "nation" and "*kokutai*" may themselves be seen as cultural and historical determinations subject to change. While the Western idea of the nation—along with debates between nationalism and internationalism—occupied the center of the political stage from the late eighteenth century through the twentieth century, today nations are beginning to play a diminishing role in cross-cultural dialogue. Not only has more direct contact between individuals—which is, of course, still mediated by the cultural and linguistic worlds of those individuals—dramatically increased, but, more problematically, multinational corporations play a most powerful mediating role in contemporary globalization.

Also, it needs to be critically pointed out, as John Maraldo does, how "Nishida took for granted that a single people formed the ethnic basis of a nation state." Thus, although Nishida "foresaw a *multicultural world* of different ethnic nations," he "did not recognize or foresee multi-ethnic or *multicultural nations*."⁵² Cross-cultural dialogue must in fact be seen as taking place *within* nations as well as *between* them. Just as individuals should be allowed to freely engage in a dialectical relation of

51. NKZ XII: 404.

52. John MARALDO, "The Problem of World Culture: Towards an Appropriation of Nishida's Philosophy of Culture," *The Eastern Buddhist* 28/2: 194.

mutual determination with their cultures, in a multicultural nation the various cultures should be allowed to take part in shaping the wider social space in which they exist.

But even without accepting Nishida's view of the nation, and thus his "internationalism" per se, we can still glean from his conception of "world-of-worlds formationism" certain ethical principles for cross-cultural dialogue. For example:

1. A culture's specificity should not be imposed on others.
2. In today's de facto post-isolationist age, cultural specificity shouldn't be either reified or abandoned, but should rather be brought into cross-cultural dialogue.
3. In cross-cultural dialogue, cultural traditions should not only be maintained, but also critically and creatively developed in a dialectical process where "the old shapes and is in turn shaped by the new."
4. In cross-cultural dialogue, cultural groups should not only consider critically appropriating foreign cultural achievements, but should also offer their own cultural achievements to others for consideration.

The first principle prohibits cultural imperialism, while the remaining three go on to say that and how a culture should be engaged in cross-cultural dialogue. While not meant to be exhaustive, these principles can be understood both as guidelines for cross-cultural encounter, and as marking certain limits of respect for cultural difference. As Nishida says that a nation that does not contain a principle of globality (i.e., awareness of and openness to the wider world) within itself is not a true nation, we could say that to the extent to which a culture withdraws into ethnocentric self-enclosure⁵³—and is thus in danger of slipping

53. We have to leave open here the possibility that an ethnic people has the right to decline to enter the post-isolationist age and open itself to dialogue with other cultures. We have no more right today than we did in 1853 to unilaterally force a country to open itself to cross-cultural exchange. On the other hand, a regime has no right to suppress the choice of a populace to end its isolation, either overtly or preemptively by keeping it uninformed. Yet, insofar as giving a populace the chance to make an informed choice is, to an extent, tantamount to opening it up to the world, the choice of "continued isolation" would to that extent be one of "withdrawal into

into xenophobia or imperialism toward the outside, and suppression of differences or even “ethnic cleansing” toward the inside—it forfeits its worthiness of respect.⁵⁴

NISHIDA AND KŌYAMA’S STUDY OF CULTURAL TYPES

In the remaining sections of this essay I will continue to fill out and begin to more critically examine Nishida’s vision of establishing a world of worlds. I will do so by way of bringing into consideration the thought of Kōyama Iwao 高山岩男. I introduce Kōyama into the discussion here first of all because, among the members of the Kyoto School,

isolation.” Moreover, this informed choice of withdrawal would need to be repeated each generation.

54. Perhaps a complementary trans-cultural ethical principle could be developed from TANABE Hajime’s attempts to work out a “logic of the specific” (which were clearly influential on Nishida’s cultural and political philosophy). As James HEISIG has suggested, a potent critique of the implicit ethnocentrism in the so-called “global village” can be gleaned from Tanabe’s work on the logic of the specific, despite Tanabe’s forgetfulness of his own best insights in certain highly problematic wartime texts. See “Tanabe’s Logic of the Specific and the Critique of the Global Village,” *The Eastern Buddhist* 28/2: 198–224; also see Heisig’s “Tanabe’s Logic of the Specific and the Spirit of Nationalism,” in HEISIG and MARALDO, *Rude Awakenings*. Tanabe’s writings on the logic of the specific can be found in volumes VI and VII of 『田辺元全集』 [Complete works of Tanabe Hajime] (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1964). A constant danger in neglecting cultural specificity is that cosmopolitan visions of a universal “humanity” tend to conceal a specific cultural determination dressed up as a universal definition of human nature. Tanabe argues that the individual (i.e., the person) and the universal (i.e., the world) can be brought together only by way of a mediating third term, the specific (i.e., cultural ethnicity). The move from what Bergson calls a “closed society” to an “open society” cannot be made by individuals who would somehow immediately jump out of their ethnic specificity into a would-be universal “world community,” since the individual cannot simply shed his or her cultural facticity. This could be taken to mean that, along with individuals, their specific cultures themselves must be transformed so as to become open to dialogue with others. This idea could then also serve as a basis for cross-cultural critique. Respect for cultural differences must be balanced with a critique of cultures (or those elements in cultures) that fail to cultivate such respect toward others. “Respect for cultural specificity” would thus be a trans-cultural ethical principle that implies a criterion for disqualification.

he in particular concentrated on the question of culture, the critique of imperialism, and the idea of a postmodern multicultural world of worlds. Moreover, certain problematic elements of the Kyoto School's cultural and political thought are clearly pronounced in Kōyama's writings. Indeed, on the basis of his contributions to the famous (or infamous) *Chūōkōron* discussions, contemporary critics may be inclined to prematurely dismiss Kōyama's cultural and political thought as nothing more than an illegitimate attempt to justify Japan's imperialistic construction of a "Greater East Asian Co-Prosperty Sphere" (*daitōakyōeiken* 大東亜共栄圏) during the Pacific War.⁵⁵ Yet aspects of Kōyama's arguments for internationalism and multiculturalism are arguably still highly relevant today.

Kōyama's 1938 public "Monday lectures" at Kyoto University on cultural morphology, which resulted in the 1939 publication of his *The Study of Cultural Types* (*Bunkaruikeigaku* 文化類型学),⁵⁶ were not only influenced by, but also probably exerted a counter-influence on the ever-developing thought of his teacher, Nishida.⁵⁷ Indeed, Kōyama's study of cultural types summarizes and supplements a number of central themes in Nishida's philosophy of culture.

In the concluding pages of *The Study of Cultural Types*, Kōyama writes the following passage in an attempt to define the "structure of the worldly world" (*sekai-teki sekai no kōzō* 世界的世界の構造) in contrast to a world united under the yoke of European imperialism:

The structure of the worldly world cannot simply be the inverse of the structure of the European world, namely, an East Asian world-

55. See Kōsaka Masaaki 高坂正顕 et al., 『世界史的立場と日本』 [The world-historical standpoint and Japan] (Tokyo: Chūōkōronsha, 1943), 171–2, where Kōyama follows Nishitani in claiming that the "Idea of the Greater East Asia War" can be understood to justify Japan's past aggressive actions against China.

56. This text is available today in KŌYAMA Iwao 高山岩男, 『文化類型学・呼応の原理』 [The study of cultural types, the principle of call and response], ed. Saitō Giichi (Kyoto: Tōeisha, 2001). My references will be to this edition.

57. Agustín JACINTO mentions Kōyama's lectures in his remarks on "Nishida's ongoing dialogue" with his students and colleagues ("The Return of the Past: Tradition and the Political Microcosm in the Later Nishida," in HEISIG and MARALDO, *Rude Awakenings*, 146–7), but I know of no study that explores this relation.

structure that would incorporate the European world. For this East Asian structure would be [essentially] the same as that of the present European world, which is based merely on the power relation of master and servant. Such [reversal of roles] would inevitably give rise to an endless repetition of struggles for reversals. The structure of the worldly world must [be based instead on] a moral and humanitarian principle [*dōgi-teki jinkaku-teki na genri* 道義的人格的な原理] which goes beyond this principle of power. In accordance with this principle, I do not incorporate You by means of power, but rather I encounter You as a transcendent Other. It is a principle of human interaction where I and You maintain our mutual independence while at the same time meeting in harmony [*mutsubiau* 睦び合う]. This is the principle for the ordered structure of the worldly world.⁵⁸

Earlier in the book Kōyama had written that, although world history indeed reveals a tendency toward “establishing a unifying world which gradually encompasses [regional] worlds,” this does *not* entail a “loss of the cultures of the various worlds and various ethnicities which differ according to geography and climate [*chiiki-teki fūdo-teki ni kotonaru sho-sekai ya minzoku no bunka wa ushinawarezu* 地域的風土的に異なる諸世界や諸民族の文化は失われず].” The internationalization of cultures does not imply a unilateral homogenization, but rather a simultaneous rationalization/universalization and individuation/particularization. “When a common world is established, an ethnic nationality finally becomes unique; and, at the same time, it takes on a worldly character which makes it commensurable with others.” Thus, the “world is a place where the uniqueness and generality of ethnic mentalities are simultaneously established,” a place of “the harmonization of universalization and individualization [*ippanka to koseika to no sōgōchōwa* 一般化と個性化との総合調和],” which he says can only be thought of in terms of a “place of Nothingness.”⁵⁹

Kōyama’s text thus supplements Nishida’s claim in “The Problem of Japanese Culture” (*Nihon-bunka no mondai* 日本文化の問題, the 1938 inaugural “Monday lecture”), that, even though “until now Westerners

58. Kōyama, *The Study of Cultural Types*, 167.

59. *Ibid.*, 17–18 and 23–4.

have thought that their own culture is the most superior human culture that exists, and that human culture inevitably develops in the direction of their own culture,” in fact the West will no more subsume the East than the East will subsume the West. “Rather,” Nishida goes on to say, “East and West are like two branches of the same tree. They are divided in two and yet supplement one another at the base and roots.”⁶⁰

At the end of his 1934 essay, “The Forms of Eastern and Western Ancient Cultures Seen from a Metaphysical Standpoint” (形而上学的立場から見た東西古代の文化形態), Nishida had written that, when comparing Eastern and Western cultures, and when seeking to determine the significance of Japanese culture within Eastern culture, we must recognize that “strong points are at once weak points,” and that “we can only know the path along which we should truly progress by deeply fathoming ourselves and by attaining a good understanding of others.”⁶¹ In this essay Japanese culture is put on par with Greek, Christian, Chinese, and Indian cultures, but the implications are that it has as much to learn from them as it has to contribute in return.

However, by the time of his 1938 lecture, “The Problem of Japanese Culture,” Japan is said to be especially capable of serving as the “place” for this dialogue and mutual supplementation of cultures. Nishida claims Japanese culture is a “musical” culture without rigid form, and, although this lack may be considered a deficit, in fact this is what has given it “the special character of repeatedly taking in foreign cultures as they are and transforming itself.” He then concludes that “for Japan to become world-historical means that it progressively gathers all cultures and creates a great synthetic culture.”⁶² Japan would then, it appears, no longer be just one cultural world among others in a world of worlds; it would be *the* or at least *a* world which gathers all worlds. One senses that Nishida begins to slip from a multicultural cosmopolitanism towards a “particular universalism,” which in turn all too easily plays into the hands of the kind of ethnocentric imperialism against which he so strongly protested.

60. NKZ XIV: 404–6.

61. NKZ VII: 453.

62. NKZ XIV: 416–17.

This slippage is clearly at work in Kōyama's text as well. After the first long passage quoted above from the conclusion to *The Study of Cultural Types*, Kōyama writes:

The [world-historical] mission of Japan... is to bring about the completion of this worldly world that is ordered by a humanitarian ethic.... The task of contemporary world history is the transposition from a European world to a worldly world, and it is Japan that stands in the middle of this whirlpool. Japanese history is at the same time world history.⁶³

The final sentence of Kōyama's book reads:

To participate in the creation of a new culture while looking back at ancient culture, this is the mission given to contemporary Japanese, who have already absorbed Eastern and Western culture in their past and who are in the process of opening up a worldly world [*sekai-teki sekai* 世界的世界].⁶⁴

SPECTERS OF CULTURAL ESSENTIALISM AND JAPANISM

Up to this point, I have mainly attempted to sympathetically retrieve and develop some indications for thinking the place of cross-cultural dialogue from Nishida and the Kyoto School. This sympathetic retrieval, however, must now be balanced with a critical examination of certain problematic aspects of their cultural and political thought. I will focus on two problems. The first concerns the question of cultural identity and in particular what Kōyama unambiguously refers to as an “unchanging essence” underlying tradition. Nishida's dialectical thought would seem to preclude such an assertion of unchanging essence, and yet, as we shall see, he places the Imperial Household at the center of Japanese tradition as an “absolute present” which unites past and future. The second and most vexing problem, which was already introduced at the end of the previous section, is their assertion that it is the world-

63. Kōyama, *The Study of Cultural Types*, 167–8.

64. *Ibid.*, 169.

historical mission of Japan to establish a truly worldly world. These two problems are interrelated in their thought, and can both be considered aspects of “Japanism,” understood in this context as *the assertion of a unique essence of Japan, an essence which makes Japan superior to other cultures and which puts it in a position to serve as model and leader for a new global age*. The former problem in part sets the stage for the latter, and so I will discuss them in this order.

According to Kōyama, cultures are not only defined according to a dialectical process of historical development, in which they appropriate from, and differentiate themselves over against, other cultures; cultures also possess an “unchanging essence” that persists through this historical process of development. This remains an unresolved, yet quite explicit, tension in his text.

On the one hand, Kōyama acknowledges that, while a culture is the product of a particular ethnic mentality, ethnic mentality is itself an “historical product” (*rekishi-teki sanbutsu* 歴史的産物).⁶⁵ Moreover, he claims that ethnic mentality is not some fixed and immovable substance, but that it necessarily develops in relation to (that is, under the influence of and in contrast to) other cultures. At one point he even claims that “all cultures are formed in the midst of cultural exchange, and thus there is none that is not a synthesis of manifold types [*fukugō-ruikei* 複合類型].”⁶⁶

On the other hand, despite this emphasis on the historically fluid and dialectical development of cultures, Kōyama nevertheless clearly asserts that there is “something immobile and unchanging [*fudōfuben no mono* 不動不変のもの] at the deep base of ethnic mentality,” that there is “an ethnic mentality’s unchanging particularity that flows at the base of and pervades all ages.”⁶⁷ It is this “unchanging essence of an ethnic mentality” (*fuekina minzokuseishin no honshitsu* 不易な民族精神の本質)⁶⁸ that is said to define a cultural type, and the aim of Kōyama’s cultural morphology is to distill such essences from out of their complex historical devel-

65. *Ibid.*, 6–8.

66. *Ibid.*, 9, 100.

67. *Ibid.*, 9.

68. *Ibid.*, 10.

opments, and thus to “reconstruct the ideal types”⁶⁹ of what he sees as the seven main cultures of the world: Ancient Greek, Indian, Christian, Buddhist, Chinese, [Modern] Western, and Japanese cultures. I cannot here give due critical consideration to Kōyama’s bold, sometimes insightful and frequently thought-provoking, yet often also markedly biased characterizations of these seven “cultural types.”⁷⁰ What becomes clear by the time we reach the final chapters on (modern) Western culture and Japanese culture is that the text does not intend to be just a neutral classification of types; it is also quite explicitly an injunction against Western imperialism, an argument for “the decline of the West,” and a pronouncement of the world-historical moment for Japan.

Kōyama’s criticism of Western imperialism and his critique of modern Western culture remain some of the more thought-provoking sections of his text. One of the text’s most troubling aspects, however, especially given the historical context of 1939, is not just *that* Kōyama claims an “unchanging essence” for Japan, but rather *what* he claims defines this essence. The first defining characteristic of Japan’s cultural type he gives

69. *Ibid.*, 12.

70. Even his list raises serious questions: Why these and only these seven cultures? What about Islamic and African cultures? Why separate Buddhist from Indian culture, but not Judaic from Christian culture? Although I will be concerned more with his Japanese bias, let me also give here one example of a *Western* bias evidenced in Kōyama’s text. He claims that “philosophy” is born out of the negation of “myth,” yet “religion” arises to counteract the anthropocentrism of philosophical reason. The proper relation of dialectical tension between philosophy and religion is, he claims, paradigmatically (*tenkei-teki ni* 典型的に) manifested in the relation of “unity in contradiction” between Greek philosophy and Christian religion in the history of the West. From this standpoint, KōYAMA criticizes Indian culture for failing to clearly distinguish philosophy and religion, and Chinese culture for conflating religion with ethics (*The Study of Cultural Types*, 26–7). And yet, as I have argued elsewhere, one of the significant aspects of the Kyoto School’s provocatively ambivalent “philosophy of religion” is to have called into question the typically Western account of the relation between philosophy and religion. See my “Rethinking Reason, Faith, and Practice: On the Buddhist Background of the Kyoto School,” 『宗教哲学研究』[Studies in the philosophy of religion] 23 (2006): 1–12; and my “Provocative Ambivalences in Japanese Philosophy of Religion: With a Focus on Nishida and Zen,” in James W. HEISIG, ed., *Japanese Philosophy Abroad* (Nagoya: Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, 2004).

is “the myth of the nation” (*kokka no shinwa* 国家の神話), a myth which links the historical and essential origin of the Japanese nation to the divine origin of the Imperial Household.⁷¹ In fact, the first example he gives in the book for an unchanging cultural essence is “the thought of reverence and the heart of loyalty to the Imperial Household,” which is said to be “an unchanging national sentiment that pervades every age” of Japanese history.⁷²

Nishida also claims a pride of place for the Imperial Household in his account of Japanese culture. Indeed, he claims that the Imperial Household is the “absolute present” (*zettai genzai* 絶対現在) that unifies Japan temporally as well as spatially. “In our national polity, the Imperial Household is the beginning and end of the world. It envelopes past and future, and everything, as the self-determination of the absolute present, develops with it at the center.”⁷³

But if Kōyama’s claim that cultures possess an “unchanging essence” lies in unresolved tension with the historical and dialectical side of his theory of culture, even less would Nishida’s philosophy seem to allow anything to underlie the dialectical process of history, which always moves according to his fundamental principle of “from that which is made to that which makes” (*tsukurareta mono kara tsukuru mono e* 作られたものから作るものへ). Can Nishida’s thoroughly dialectical thought—which rejects the ontology of substance and which criticizes even Hegelian dialectics for presupposing an underlying process of Spirit as substance becoming subject—be made compatible with a cultural essentialism?

To be sure, Nishida does compare the various national and cultural “species” with Platonic Ideas. And yet, these cultural forms are not said to be ahistorical substances, but rather historical formations. Like biological species, which develop over time, he sees cultural species as historically formed and presumably always in the process of reformation. He writes that human societies, such as Japan and China, historically develop in ongoing processes wherein “something created becomes

71. Kōyama, *The Study of Cultural Types*, 119.

72. *Ibid.*, 10.

73. NKZ XII: 409.

itself in turn creative.”⁷⁴ Once developed into a distinct formation, such a national culture may, in a certain sense, live on forever; Nishida says that even after a nation such as that of ancient Greece or India perishes, its “culture may still become a resource for the life of other nations.”⁷⁵ Yet this idea of cultural immortality would not imply an uncreated eternal essence.

In 1934 Nishida wrote that, while Japanese “culture” was created through an assimilation of Indian and Chinese cultures, “Japanese ethnoses” (*nihon-minzoku* 日本民族) had been “formed” (*keisei serareta* 形成せられた) prior to that.⁷⁶ How was this prehistorical ethnicity itself formed? It was presumably a prior layer in the dialectical process of temporal—if not yet properly “historical”—formation. For if it were an underlying essence of, and unchanging agent for *all* layers of cultural formation and assimilation, where would such an essence come from; would it simply have shined down one day from the heavens?

One might expect that Nishida’s thoughts on “tradition” would clear this matter up once and for all. Nishida claims that tradition is a dynamic process wherein “the new is guided by the old and, at the same time, the new changes the old.”⁷⁷ There would seem to be no room for an unchanging essence in this thoroughly dialectical process. And yet, Nishida also enigmatically speaks of tradition as a “catalyst” for this process of historical change. Insofar as the scientific definition of “catalyst” indicates something which promotes a chemical reaction *but which does not itself change in the process*,⁷⁸ is there after all something essentially unchanging about tradition for Nishida?

Along with many of his thoughts on tradition, Nishida appropriates the idea of “catalyst” from T. S. Eliot. And yet, Eliot in fact uses the notion of catalyst to refer to the *mind* of the poet as a self-abnegating receptacle in which various feelings from the past and present of a tradi-

74. NKZ XIV: 289–90.

75. NKZ XII: 424–5.

76. NKZ VII: 441.

77. NKZ XIV: 384.

78. I thank Silja Graupe for calling my attention to this scientific definition of “catalyst,” which I also found clearly expressed by T. S. Eliot (see note 79 below).

tion are at liberty to enter into new combinations. Eliot does not speak of tradition itself as a catalyst. Rather, the poet's mind, which serves as a medium for the combination of a plethora of "feelings, phrases, images," is like the shred of platinum that remains "neutral, inert, and unchanged" even as it facilitates a creative combination of gasses.⁷⁹ By contrast, Nishida writes: "As a catalyst, tradition unifies a world... and from there a poem is born."⁸⁰ For Nishida, the poem and the poet are apparently somehow born out of the catalyst of tradition, rather than, as for Eliot, the catalyst of the poet's mind being the vehicle for the movement of tradition.

Nishida also speaks of tradition as the "self-determination of the eternal present" and as "a force that forms history" as a process of "making and being made."⁸¹ We could perhaps interpret this force of tradition, which is always changing yet always the same, as something like Heraclitus' fire. And if for Heraclitus the *logos* (river) persists through the ever changing phenomena of the world (waters), we could say that for Nishida what is constant is nothing but the dialectical principle of "from that which is made to that which makes." This understanding of tradition as "the constitutive principle of the historical world"⁸² would be a law of tradition rather than a particular tradition.

As we have seen, however, Nishida does speak of the Imperial Household as itself an absolute present, the self-determination of which unifies Japan over space and time. The unchanging catalyst of Japanese tradition would then not only be a dialectical principle of change, it would also appear to be this particular cultural and political institution. While

79. T. S. ELIOT, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in *The Waste Land and Other Writings* (New York: Modern Library, 2001), 104. While Eliot does claim that the poet must have an "historical sense" of "the timeless as well as of the temporal," that is, of the "simultaneous existence" of "the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer" as well as of one's own place in time, the "timeless" he speaks of is by no means unchanging. On the contrary, the "ideal order" among the "existing monuments [of all past art is necessarily] modified by the introduction of the new... work of art," for "the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past" (101–2). For Eliot, then, there is no unchanging essence of a tradition.

80. NKZ XIV: 381; see 384, 399.

81. NKZ XI: 189; see also NKZ XII: 378–9.

82. NKZ XIV: 384.

various political powers came and went, the Imperial Household purportedly remained the quasi-transcendent stillness in the midst of the storm of Japanese history. It provided the non-subjective and non-egoistic place for competition and cooperation.⁸³

To be sure, Nishida does not crudely deify the Emperor or absolutize the Imperial Household. In general he prefers to speak of the “Imperial Household” (*kōshitsu* 皇室) and not directly of the person or the family lineage of the Emperor.⁸⁴ He speaks of the Imperial Household as a “being of nothingness” (*mu no u* 無の有) and not as “Absolute Nothingness,” as *an* “identity of contradictories” and not as *the* “absolute identity of contradictories.”⁸⁵ Moreover, he specifically states that “The Imperial Household is the beginning and the end of *our* world,”⁸⁶ not of *the* world. Would it then be merely the center of one world among others in the wider world of worlds?

Yet Nishida does claim a unique world-historical role for the Japanese “national polity,” and thus for the Imperial Household at its center. Moreover, while he claims that “we must not simply pride ourselves on the particularity of our national polity, but rather fix our attention on its world-historical depth and breadth,” he supports Japan’s claim to a world-historical role by claiming that the “uniqueness” of the Japanese national polity lies in its capacity for a dialectical identity of immanence and transcendence.⁸⁷ Although Nishida explicitly avoids directly equat-

83. YUSA Michiko points out that as early as 1918 Nishida wrote that he understood the “unbroken line” of the Imperial Household as “a symbol of great mercy, altruism, and partnership.” NKZ XVIII: 207, as quoted in YUSA’s essay, “Nishida and Totalitarianism: A Philosopher’s Resistance,” in HEISIG and MARALDO, *Rude Awakenings*, 109.

84. See JACINTO, “The Return of the Past,” 142–3. Jacinto suggests that *kōshitsu* should be translated as “Imperial Throne” rather than as “Imperial Household,” but it seems to me that the latter can also be understood as the place and not the person of the Emperor.

85. NKZ 12, 336; see UEDA, “Nishida, Nationalism, and the War in Question,” 94–5.

86. NKZ XII: 430, emphasis added. In an uncharacteristic mistranslation ARISAKA renders the phrase “our world” as “the world,” giving the passage an overtly globally ethnocentric meaning. “Beyond ‘East’ and ‘West,’” 242.

87. NKZ XII: 410–11.

ing the nation with a transcendent religious realm, he does claim that the nation “must be that which reflects the Pure Land in this world.”⁸⁸ And the Japanese people are evidently in a privileged position to establish their nation as an immanent reflection of transcendence, since “the true essence of the Japanese spirit consists in the fact that that which is transcendent is thoroughly immanent and that which is immanent is thoroughly transcendent.”⁸⁹ Thus Nishida can assert that “the basic principle of national polity [*kokutai no hongī* 国体の本義], which ... is word-historically formative as the self-determination of the absolute present, is grasped and awakened to only in our own national polity [of Japan].”⁹⁰ This puts Japan in a position not only where it has the legitimate responsibility to establish the “East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere,” but indeed where “the solution to the world-historical task [in 1943] may be said to be given in the principle of our national polity. Not only should America and England submit to it, but the Axis nations as well will come to model themselves on it.”⁹¹

The purported world-historical mission of Japan is to spread to the world the principle of world-of-worlds formation. Since Japan has uniquely maintained and cultivated the non-imperialistic yet unifying principle of “the eight directions constitute one universe” (*bakkō iu* 八紘為宇) within its tradition centered on the Imperial Household, its duty is to unite East Asia and then the world at large. Japan would, after all, be destined to establish not just *a* world of worlds, but *the* world of worlds.

QUESTIONABLE DILEMMAS AND UNAVOIDABLE APORIAS

The Kyoto School philosophers were not unaware of the tension in their thought between the denunciation of (Western) imperialism and the assertion of a world-historical leadership role for Japan. We

88. NKZ XI: 463–4.

89. NKZ XII: 434.

90. NKZ XII: 415; see 410.

91. NKZ XII: 434.

have seen that Nishida repeatedly denounced imperialism, and, at least in his private correspondence, he was clearly and often severely critical of the reality of Japan's politics and its imperialistic establishing of the Co-Prosperity Sphere.⁹² Moreover, in his published texts Nishida certainly tried to redirect the political course of Japan by way of what Ueda Shizuteru 上田閑照 has called his “semantic struggle” or “tug-of-war over meaning” with regard to such catch-phrases as “the eight directions constitute one universe” and the “Imperial Way” (*kōdō* 皇道).⁹³

Far from proffering “a thinly disguised justification ... for Japanese aggression and continuing imperialism,” or from “defining the philosophic contours of Japanese fascism,”⁹⁴ Nishida and the Kyoto School in general can be understood as struggling to engage in what Ōhashi Ryōsuke has called “anti-establishment cooperation” or “oppositional cooperation” (*hantaisei-teki kyōryoku* 反体制的協力).⁹⁵ All the political writings of the Kyoto School during the war years must be read in light of the razor's edge of immanent critique they were attempting to walk. Nevertheless, this does not relieve us of the responsibility to critically read these writings, which at times involves turning the light of immanent critique back on the compromised and otherwise problematic elements of their own texts.

Nishida warned that Japan must not approach other nations as one “subject” that “negates other subjects and tries to make them over into itself.” This, he says, is “nothing other than imperialism.” In contrast to this degenerate way of imperialism, the true Imperial Way, according to Nishida, proceeds by way of self-negation, that is, in the manner of Dōgen's “dropping off body and mind.” If it proceeds in this self-emp-

92. For a number of passages from Nishida's private correspondence in this regard, see UEDA, “Nishida, Nationalism, and the War in Question,” 90; YUSA, “Nishida and Totalitarianism,” 112–25; and GOTO-JONES, *Political Philosophy in Japan*, 94.

93. UEDA, “Nishida, Nationalism, and the War in Question,” 90–5.

94. See the often criticized characterization (or polemical caricature) of the Kyoto School in Tetsuo NAJITA and H. D. HAROOTUNIAN, “Japan's Revolt against the West,” in Bob Tadashi WAKABAYASHI, ed., *Modern Japanese Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 238–9.

95. ŌHASHI Ryōsuke 大橋良介, 『京都学派と日本海軍』[The Kyoto school and the Japanese navy] (Kyoto: PHP Shinsho, 2001), 20ff.

tying manner to develop the Co-Prosperity Sphere, Nishida proposes, “rather than confront other subjects as a subject, Japan will *envelop them as a world* (*sekai toshite ta no shutai o tsutsumu* 世界として他の主体を包む).”⁹⁶ Nevertheless, we must ask, would reforming Japan from an aggressively incorporating subject into a non-egoistically embracing world really provide a radical alternative to imperialism as such? Or would it just make for more benevolent empire? Is the root problem of imperialism only a matter of bellicose and self-interested national subjectivity, or is it not also a matter of attributing to any one nation the capacity to envelop the world?

In the midst of the *Chūōkōron* discussions, which contain many of the Kyoto School’s most blatant assertions of Japan’s purported world-historical mission, Nishitani manages to state the dilemma of distinguishing Japan’s role in East Asia from (Western) imperialism quite clearly:

On the one hand, Japan is to awaken each ethnic nation to its own self-awareness and transform it into something capable of autonomous activity. On the other hand, Japan is at the same time to maintain its leadership position. These two sides are mutually bound together, even if on the surface they seem to stand in contradiction. I think the fundamental question is how to think these two in such a manner that they are not in contradiction.⁹⁷

Of course, one could say that there was no way to solve this dilemma, and therefore that Japan’s claim to leadership should have been abandoned. After the war, Nishitani defended his wartime efforts to walk a middle path of neither remaining silently on the sidelines nor uncriti-

96. NKZ XII: 349, emphasis added. Elsewhere Nishida writes of “our nation’s peculiar subjective principle” as a matter of “emptying the self to envelop the Other” (NKZ XII: 434). ARISAKA writes that “the defenders [of Nishida’s political thought] argue that in his theory the words ‘Japan’ or the ‘Imperial House’ cannot refer to a *particular entity*, a ‘being,’ since they represent his philosophical concept of ‘absolute nothingness’ as the ‘field’ or ‘place’ [*basho*] in which all nations coexist dialectically. In other words, Japan is *not* one of these nations which interact, but is in fact an empty ‘scene’ in which all others work out their mutual existence.” “Beyond ‘East’ and ‘West,’” 244.

97. KŌSAKA et al., *The World-Historical Standpoint and Japan*, 205.

cally submitting to the political tide of the times, but rather of working to “open up from within a path for overcoming the extreme nationalism [that was becoming increasingly prevalent at the time].”⁹⁸ Yet in hindsight, given the historical realities—as opposed to the Kyoto School’s ideals, which, as we have seen, were not always themselves unproblematic—of Japan’s “leadership,” and given the fact that the Kyoto School’s immanent critique was co-opted by the imperialist regime more than it succeeded in altering its imperialism, one could argue that they should have jettisoned the path of “oppositional cooperation” for that of outright (or at least silent) resistance.

The debate over the intent and effects of the Kyoto School’s critique of and/or complicity with Japan’s extreme nationalism and imperialism during the Pacific War continues.⁹⁹ But let us here return from the past to the present, and reconsider how we are to critically appropriate their philosophies for our current attempts to think the place of cross-cultural dialogue. In the first parts of this essay, I have attempted to glean a number of positive contributions from their thought in this regard, before critically examining certain problematic specters of cultural essentialism and Japanism. The question is: Can we exorcise these specters from their thought and develop from the rest a viable conception of a world of worlds? To a significant degree, I think the answer is yes; and this is indeed a major part of what I have attempted to begin to do here. But we must also ask: Even after a thorough exorcism, would such a concep-

98. NKC IV: 384.

99. Responding to a wave of hypercritical treatments, two books have recently appeared which, despite vast differences in tenor and method, both defend political philosophies of the Kyoto School. In *Political Philosophy in Japan: Nishida, The Kyoto School, and Co-Prosperity*, GOTO-JONES painstakingly argues that Nishida’s political thought, which draws deeply on East Asian as well as Western sources, remains an original and viable contribution to contemporary political theory. In *Defending Japan’s Pacific War: The Kyoto School Philosophers and Post-White Power* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), David WILLIAMS provocatively asserts that Tanabe Hajime and other Kyoto School thinkers should be reevaluated as vanguards in a revolt against the racism and victor’s justice that he sees as pervading orthodox Western accounts of history and the current Euro-America-centric global order. For a discerning review article of these two books, see John Maraldo, “The War Over the Kyoto School,” *Monumenta Nipponica* 61/3 (Autumn 2006): 375–401.

tion still—of necessity perhaps—contain residues of cultural specificity, if not lingering specters of Japanism? Can the vision of a world of worlds as a place of Absolute Nothingness (understood as a dynamic field of dialectical and dialogical interaction) be completely extracted from its culturally specific roots and generalized into a neutral meeting place?

Let us turn the question back on ourselves. Today we—let me be specific, Americans—are globalizing our way of life, often under the banner of spreading freedom and democracy. Of course, we are also spreading more problematic aspects of our way of life, such as dehumanizing technologies and exploitative capitalism. But let us take even our most noble ideals of freedom and democracy. Are we so sure of a specific notion of freedom that we are willing to unilaterally universalize it? There are, after all, many concepts of freedom. As Nishitani has pointed out, a mere “negative freedom” (in the sense of a freedom from external constraints) does not guarantee a genuine autonomy, insofar as we reduce ourselves to consumers driven about from below by an “infinite drive” to gratify the base appetites of our insatiable egos.¹⁰⁰

And what happened to the debate over how to strike a tenuous balance (or “contradictory identity”) between freedom and equality?¹⁰¹ After the rise and fall of communism, we hesitate to even speak of promoting economic equality, and when we do talk of spreading equality it gets reduced to a handful of basic human rights, including of course the right to participate as a consumer and, if one has the capital, as an investor in the “free market.”

My point here is that the ideal of “freedom” should not just serve as an uncritical slogan, for it must always be critically defined and balanced with other ideals. Democracy, too, must be continually debated

100. See NKX x: 259–60; *Religion and Nothingness*, 235–7; Bret W. DAVIS, 「神の死から意志の大死へ——ポスト・ニーチの哲学者としての西谷啓治」 in FUJITA Masakatsu 藤田正勝 and Bret W. DAVIS, eds., 「世界のなかの日本の哲学」 [Japanese philosophy in the world] (Kyoto: Shōwadō, 2005), 208–10.

101. Kōyama argues that there is an irresolvable self-contradiction in the twin ideals of freedom and equality in liberal society, pointing out that free market capitalism allows equality (and thus any real freedom of opportunity) to be sacrificed to the freedom of individuals to pursue their self-interests (KŌYAMA, *The Study of Cultural Types*, 113; also see KŌSAKA et al., *The World-Historical Standpoint and Japan*, 349).

and redefined, as well as balanced with non-democratic institutions such as education. And such debates always take place within or between specific cultural contexts, contexts which determine in part our individual and communal ideas and ideals.

Nishida had a point when he wrote that “there has never been an abstract universal morality. Even the moral theory of the Enlightenment age was fitted to a particular age and ethnicity.”¹⁰² It is, of course, largely from the Enlightenment that we get many of our commonplace conceptions of freedom and democracy. What historical and ethnic presuppositions do these conceptions harbor? As communitarian critics of Enlightenment conceptions of liberal democracy have argued, such conceptions often presuppose a particular notion of human beings as “atomistic” individual subjects, individuals who are motivated primarily by self-interested desires yet equipped with a faculty of reason which allows them to enter into social contracts of mutual advantage with other such individuals.¹⁰³ Because of its own cultural specificity, Charles Taylor has argued that Western democratic liberalism cannot simply serve as the place of cross-cultural dialogue: “Liberalism is not a possible meeting ground for all cultures, but is the political expression of one range of cultures, and quite incompatible with other ranges.”¹⁰⁴

102. NKZ XII: 408.

103. For an excellent collection of articles by leading proponents of communitarianism and liberalism, see Shlomo AVINERI and Avner DE-SHALIT, eds., *Communitarianism and Individualism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992). For a communitarian critique of the liberal concept of the individual, see for example Alasdair MACINTYRE, “Justice as a Virtue,” *ibid.*, 58–9. In his article, “Atomism,” Charles TAYLOR argues that “the free individual of the West is only what he is by virtue of the whole society and civilization which brought him to be and which nourishes him” (*ibid.*, 45). In her mediating response to the communitarian critique, Amy GUTMANN argues that “the real, and recognized, dilemma of modern liberalism... is not that people are naturally egoistical, but that they disagree about the nature of the good life” (“Communitarian Critics of Liberalism,” in *ibid.*, 130). The challenging question which arises out of the liberal-communitarian debate, then, could be understood to be the question of how to conceive of a democratic space which does justice, not merely to competing individuals, but also to co-existing cultures and their different conceptions of the good life.

104. Charles TAYLOR, “The Politics of Recognition,” in GUTMANN, *Multiculturalism*, 62.

Liberal individualism is also challenged by the conception of human being found in the East Asian background of the Kyoto School. By drawing on East Asian Buddhist and Confucian sources, Watsuji Tetsurō 和辻哲郎 has argued that “ethics” (*rinri* 倫理) concerns the “betweenness” (*aidagara* 間柄) of persons who can no more be isolated from their interpersonal context than they can be wholly reduced to a static group identity.¹⁰⁵ Nishida, Nishitani, and Ueda have drawn on Mahayana Buddhist ideas to claim that the true self is a “self that is not a self” (*jiko narazaru jiko* 自己ならざる自己), insofar as it achieves its interdependent and non-substantial selfhood only in a dialectical process of self-affirmation by way of self-negation.¹⁰⁶

The Kyoto School’s ideas, no more and no less than those of Western philosophies, have specific genealogies. Yet to note the cultural origins of such ideas does not necessarily mean to limit the extent of their viability to their original cultural spheres. Just as Western ideas of freedom and democracy can and should be offered to non-Western peoples, Japanese ideas can and should be allowed to help us critically and creatively rethink our own cultural specificity. The point is that in either case we generally should not *impose* such ideas on one another; rather, we should *offer* them to each other for dialogical consideration.

At times, however, in the name of justice—and in spite of the fact that our conceptions of “justice” too are laden with cultural specificity—we must risk cross-cultural imposition. Sometimes the line must be drawn where cross-cultural openness gives way to criticism; and, more rarely, we must even risk venturing out in the name of a “just war.” In other words, for the sake of a more binding principle of justice, we must at times risk breaking the principle of non-imposition of cultural specificity. Even Taylor, who argues that “liberalism can’t and shouldn’t claim complete cultural neutrality,” does not infer from this a pacifist imperative

105. Watsuji Tetsurō’s *Rinrigaku: Ethics in Japan*, trans. by YAMAMOTO Seisaku and Robert CARTER (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996). For a critique of individualism that draws on Pure Land Buddhism and on Watsuji, see ŌKŌCHI Ryōgi 大河内了義『異文化理解の原点』[Principles of understanding foreign cultures] (Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 1995), 226–45.

106. For a sketch of this idea of “the self that is not a self,” see Davis, “The Kyoto School,” section 3.6.

of non-interference: “Liberalism is also a fighting creed.”¹⁰⁷ But the risk here is as real as is at times the ethical imperative to take it. Today, as the so-called “war on terrorism” blends with a deeply ambivalent fight to spread our conceptions of freedom and democracy to the Islamic world, we find ourselves increasingly exposed to the terrible physical and moral dangers of taking this risk. The Kyoto School philosophers, in their time, ran the risk of taking their ethical ideals—such as “the principle of world-of-worlds formation”—as fighting creeds, and inadvertently succumbed in part to the danger of aiding rather than reforming Japanese imperialism.

To critically note the grave risk of generalizing a specific conception of the just and the good, however, cannot in the end provide us with an excuse for never taking it. The enigma of how to conceive—both theoretically and practically—a world of worlds, as an open place wherein a genuine dialogue of cultures can take place, remains with us. And its core aporia is one that we must pass through, again and again, rather than avoid: We can only ever draw on and develop ideas with specific cultural genealogies in our efforts to conceive of the place wherein a dialogue between cultures should take place. Mindful of this aporia, we can at least venture here a modest general rule for attempting to think the proper place of cross-cultural dialogue, namely, that *this thinking must itself proceed dialogically*. The place for dialogue can itself only, and ever again, be opened up dialogically. In this essay on the Kyoto School, I have attempted not only to indicate some of the problems that haunt their thought, but first of all to show that their cross-cultural philosophies have much to contribute to this critical conversation.

107. TAYLOR, “The Politics of Recognition,” in GUTMANN, *Multiculturalism*, 62.