From Seeing to Acting

Rethinking Nishida's Practical Philosophy

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Which words and metaphors are most suited to interpret the philosophy of Nishida Kitarō? Given his lifelong "intolerable wrestle with words and meanings," to borrow a phrase from T. S. Eliot, our choice must be a cautious one. After all, his philosophy was aimed at relocating the philosophical debate by breaking its ties with traditional oppositions, and we do well not to reintroduce too lightly the very terms he was trying to overcome. Matters are further complicated by the considerable evolution that occurred in Nishida's thinking. Words favored at one period were set aside in the next.

The opposition between the "inner" and the "outer" represents just such a shift, and a particularly remarkable one at that, so much so that the idea of "interiority," so crucial in his period of "logicism," was rejected at a later stage. Should we take this as meaning that "exteriority" has taken its place? Clearly not. Rather we need to differentiate Nishida's position from *both* sides of the opposition, to see it as overcoming the tendencies to internalization specific to idealism, spiritualism, and the like, as well as the tendencies to externalization found in positions like scientism and materialism. Indeed, Nishida put a great deal of effort into disassembling these oppositions, as reflected in the importance he gave to the logic of "absolutely contradictory self-identity" (*zettai mujunteki jikodōitsu* 絶対

矛盾的自己同一). Notwithstanding its grounding in the "logic of place" (*basho no ronri* 場所の論理) and the evident similarities between the two logics, there are seminal differences, one of which involves the shift from a philosophy of "mind" to a philosophy of the "dialectical world."

Academic opinions over how to read Nishida diverge widely. Not a few critics have interpreted his philosophy as centered on the problem of mind, as witnessed in his development of concepts like "pure experience" (*junsui keiken* 純粋経験), "self-awareness" (*jikaku* 自覚), and the logic of place. The view is not altogether mistaken, but it does seem to be out of balance. To be sure, nearly half of Nishida's publications, beginning with *An Inquiry into the Good (Zen no kenkyū* 善の研究) in 1911 and extending perhaps as far as *The Self-Aware Determination of Nothingness* (*Mu no jikakuteki gentei* 無の自覚的限定) in 1932 fall into this category. But works published subsequently, from *Fundamental Problems of Philosophy* (*Tetsugaku no konpon mondai* (哲学の根本問題) of 1933–1934 to the several volumes of *Essays in Philosophy* (*Tetsugaku ronbunshū* 哲学論文集) of 1935–1945 are focused rather on the "dialectical world" in what we might call his "historicist period."

The claim is often made that at least in part the weaknesses in Nishida's system are due to its way of relating to the "outer world," that is, to the world that lies outside the realm of thought and interiority. Miki Kiyoshi, for one, dubbed Nishida's philosophy "a technique of the mind" (心の技術) far removed from a "technique of things" (物の技術), arguing that structurally it leaned towards contemplative and psychologistic thinking (MKZ 18: 525). Similarly, Tanabe Hajime criticized Nishida for having speculated on a contemplative form of consciousness that had so little to do with true action that it ended up in purely aesthetic or artistic action (THZ 6: 472).

The same impression was circulating during Nishida's lifetime, as reflected in a comment by Yanagida Kenjūrō: "It is commonplace for people to claim that Nishida's philosophy is a philosophy of artistic impressions (*geijutsuteki kansō* 芸術的感想) or religious contemplation (*shūkyōteki taikan* 宗教的諦観" (YANAGIDA 1939, 3). The same view is shared by many critics today. According to Kosaka Kunitsugu, at bottom Nishida's practical philosophy expresses a "mental state of unity between body and mind, or between things and the I" (*shinjin ichinyo*

aruiwa butsuga ichinyo no kyōchi 身心一如あるいは物我一如の境地, Kosaka 1995, 120). This view seems to converge with James Heisig's conclusion that the central figures of the Kyoto School, and most notably Nishida, elaborated an "anthropocentric" philosophy dominated by the problem of consciousness. For Heisig, the Kyoto School never completely succeeded in breaking free of its dependency on pure, non-subjective, solidly human consciousness, which in effect stood as the tacit center of their thinking (Heisig 2001, 266).

Each of these perspectives on Nishida's philosophy as aestheticist, self-contemplative (as Tanabe has it, relying on *jiriki*), or otherwise tethered to the domain of consciousness, share the view that, when all is said and done, he was an "interiorist." Nishida himself was aware of these criticisms, and to some extent annoyed by them. One sees this reaction running like a *leitmotiv* in his later writings, where he kept insisting that assertions of his philosophy as artistic and mystical miss the point, since his aim was the precise opposite. For example:

> Moreover, people think that even something like what I call the self-formation of form is something non-dialectical like an artistic intuition. (But even what is called artistic intuition is not non-dialectical, as these people seem to think). (NKZ 10: 37)

> People think that such a starting point is something that grounds my philosophy in religion. This is gravely mistaken. (NKZ 10: 47)

In other passages, Nishida acknowledges his own evolution away from any "internalist" approach. In fact, as clearly stated in various postscripts to some short essays around 1930, his approach to human being changes from a philosophy of *homo interior*, to a philosophy of the dialectical world (see especially Huh 1990). As written in the postscripts to his "Anthropology" (*Ningengaku* 人間学) of 1930:

> In this essay, the historical world is considered something external, in opposition to the inner human. Quite the contrary, this "inner human" (*naiteki ningen* 内的人間) is taken to be concrete. The world of history is conceived only in terms of the common sense of the word. This is not how I look at it now. The so-called inner self is located within (*ni oite*) the historical world.

From now on, if I ever would write about anthropology, it should be something completely different from this essay. Human being is historical and must be something similar to what I call creative element within a creative world. The very idea of human being in St. Augustine's *De Trinitate*, which is an anthropology that considers human being as grounded on God as a transcendent reality, must be reconsidered rather as an anthropology of humankind-within-history. Moreover, I think that at that time I was considering the inner human as the core. (NKZ 12: 30)

In the postscript to a 1933 essay on "History" (*Rekishi* 歴史), he continues in the same vein:

In this essay, our self has already become a being within the historical world. But given the time at which the idea appeared, it was unavoidable that as a foundation of the historical world it would be seen as something merely noetic like self-awareness or love. This is not mistaken, just inevitably too abstract. Moreover, the way I have defined society here is not to be taken in the ordinary sense of the term. As I came to see later, when the self-determination of the eternal now is considered, as the ground of the historical world, to be a dialectical self-identity between the determination of the individual and the universal, this self-determination takes on the meaning of society. Behind this essay lies a conception forged at the time of *The Self-Aware Determination of Nothingness* (NKZ 12: 63)

Nishida's words are unequivocal. His ideas of human being, of society, the world, history, and so forth, were poised to undergo a radical change that would effect the whole of his practical philosophy. In the end, *all the themes traditionally associated with interiority would be interpreted within the context of the dialectical world*. Those ideas would not represent *the* horizon of philosophical discourse and would be reoriented as part of a wider, more encompassing place or *basho*. They would be seen as *elements in the self-formation of the world or activities of self-expression of the world. This means that consciousness, sensations, feelings, and the like are all to be defined as self-transformative movements of the world*.[1]

In what follows, I would like to try to rethink the overall meaning and potential of Nishida's late philosophy in the light of the particular ques-

tion taken up here. To do so, I will focus on the notion of practical philosophy, using it as a guide to an alternate reading of his philosophy, one less attached to "internalist" metaphors while avoiding undue emphasis on "externalism." In a word, I wish to argue that *Nishida presents practice as resistant to both internal and external paradigms and thus in need of new terminology if it is to be understood in deeper sense.*

Nishida's late philosophy shares a number themes and motifs with the social sciences, from the idea of human beings as tool-making animals to their salient role in the development of culture. This connection is witnessed in frequent references to anthropologists like Harrison, Malinowski, and Lévy-Bruhl, and sociologists like Durckheim. I will not pursue this any further here,[2] but suffice it to say that these influences were important in Nishida's approach to practical philosophy.

Nishida's final works are almost unintelligible without giving the anthropological element its due place. All the most important concepts of an historicist philosophy—action, morality, art, religion, logic, expression, the self, self-awareness, the world, and so forth—do not make sense from a perspective centered on the interiority of the subject. They begin to take on significance only when the shift has been made to a standpoint of the dialectical, historical world, albeit one that, unlike classical objectivist approaches, includes the element of interiority. This carried over into his practical philosophy as well. In trying to overcome the opposing orientations to internalization and externalization by way of practical philosophy, Nishida devised an idea of the practical self different from the simple notion of an inner being that wills and acts to put its ideas into practice. His is a self seen in terms of the network of relationships within the historical world. As a result, any number of questions previously categorized as internal had to be radically reformulated with an eye to the concrete world of history. In all of this, practical philosophy had a pivotal role to play.

1. An important example of this shift is to be seen in Nishida's final notion of art as an activity of history's self-formation. See, for example, his 1942 essay, "Artistic Creation as an Act of Historical Formation" (*Rekishiteki keisei sayō toshite no geijutsuteki sōsaku* 歴史的形成作用としての芸術的創作, 1942) from vol. 4 of his *Philosophical Essays* (NKZ 10: 177–264). For a closer analysis of the question, see CESTARI 2004.

2. On Nishida's link between aesthetics and anthropology, see CESTARI 2004.

One often hears it said that practical philosophy is the weak point in Nishida's thinking, particularly when it comes to questions of political philosophy. His ambivalence towards nationalism is often chalked up to the constraints of censorship. Does this mean that the only things in Nishida's philosophy worth taking seriously are those that have to do with the interiority of the subject? There is certainly much in his political thinking that is far from adequate, but to take his views on politics as representative of his entire practical philosophy would be to throw out the baby with the bath. Two reasons in particular urge us to include this aspect of his thinking. First, there is the simple fact that this was the direction his philosophy was taking and, as such, cannot be shunted aside. Second, there are grounds for arguing that, however imperfectly formulated, Nishida open up novel philosophical insights in the realm of practical philosophy. I have argued elsewhere that the main fault with his historicism was a logicist, abstractly symmetrical approach to the world that tends all too easily to equate the real with the ideal (Cestari 2004 and 2008). One may add to this his failure to tackle the problem of modernity adequately. In any case, these criticisms only make sense if set within the broader context of what he was trying to do in his practical philosophy.

Nishida's practical philosophy

In developing a practical philosophy, Nishida seems to follow its classical definition as "a philosophy of action" in four aspects: (1) action, production, and technology; (2) morality; (3) politics; and (4) art.[3] In introducing the question, he draws a clear distinction between practical

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3. In vol. 4 of his *Philosophical Essays,* dated 1941–1942 (nkz 10: 3-338), Nishida takes up questions of action, production, and morality in two 1941 works, "Prolegomenon to a Practical Philosophy" (*Jissen tetsugaku joron* 実践哲学序論, 7–123) and "*Poesis* and *Praxis*" (*Poieshisu to purakushisu* ポイエシスとプラクシス, 124–76). Art and science are treated in a 1942 piece on "Artistic Creation as an Act of Historical Formation" (see note 1 above), and finally politics and morality are the subject of an essay published in that same year as "The Question of *Raison d'état*" (*Kokka riyū no mondai* 国家理由の問題, 265–338) of the same year.

philosophy and metaphysical logic, that is between particular problems and general principles:

> In "Absolutely Contradictory Self-Identity," I clarified my fundamental thinking at the time. In that connection, and in order further to elucidate my thinking, a number of particular problems remain to be discussed. (NKZ 10: 3)

In the essay Nishida is referring to (NKZ 9: 147–222), we find him taking up themes so central to his practical philosophy—action, production, human cultures, and so forth—that they affect the very foundations of his later thought. Is this a simple aporia? I think not. What is at stake here is the nature of action, which in turn engages the basic meaning of a "logic" of absolutely contradictory self-identity. The classical opposition between the practical and the metaphysical is a bad fit for what Nishida is aiming at, namely to relate action to the very foundations of reality.

But just what is this "action" he is talking about? In fact, the word is made to span a whole range of nuanced meanings. The most common terms he uses to refer to action directly or indirectly are these: *dōsa* 動作 (action, with particular respect to movement); *gyō* 行 (ascetic practice in Buddhism, but also action, deed); *hataraki* 働き (action in general, work); *hyōgen* 表現 (expression); *keisei* 形成 (formation); *kinō* 機能 (function); *kōdō* 行動 (behavior, deeds); *kōi* 行為 (action with particular reference to an agent, conduct, deed, behavior); *poiesis* (ポイエシス) or *seisaku* 制作 (production, creation, in the technical sense Aristotle gave it); *praxis* (プラクシス) or *jissen* 実践 (practice, another technical term from Aristotle); *sayō* 作用 (activity with particular respect to its object, function, or operation); *seisaku* 製作 or *seisan* 生産 (production, as in "mass production" or "industrial production"); *sōzō* 創造 (creation); *tsukuru* 作る (a polysemic verb meaning to make, create, or form). Some of these terms are more used and developed than others, but their sheer abundance gives an indication of the importance Nishida attached to the question.

From an Aristotelian point of view, "action" is a category, that is to say, a final predicate related to substance (*hypokeimenon*). Insofar as it is predicated of substance, it is accidental. For Nishida, however, action is not one self-sufficient being's way of relating to another. On the contrary, it denotes an essential aspect of reality both for individuals and for

the world, such that we cannot even speak of individuals unless they are always *already* acting. By the same token, we cannot speak of the world without taking its whole network of relationships into consideration. We may recall here the opening lines of "Absolutely Contradictory Self-Identity":

> The world of reality is necessarily a world of interaction among objects. It is possible to think of reality in the form of a mutual relationship among objects, as what comes about as a result of the interaction between object and object. Now the action of an object indicates the self-negation of the object, the disappearance of the object as such.… The world continually advances from the *made* to the *maker*.… What exists in reality can be called a being only in the sense that it is completely determined. At the same time, as something radically *made*, it is also subject to change, to death. It is being-and yet-nothingness. This is why I have defined it as a world of absolute nothingness and a "world of determination without a determining [agent]," a world of infinite movement. (NKZ 9: 147–8)

This powerful passage gives us some sense of the importance Nishida attached to action, interaction, and movement in the logical structure of contradictory self-identity.

We might add here that absolute nothingness is also linked directly to action by virtue of the fact that agents are constantly undergoing change. As determined, the subject of action belongs to the realm of being, but at the same time it belongs to nothingness. Insofar as action is not something that takes place only in the mind, it is not limited to the realm of subjectivity or its overcoming. Nor is it simply a matter of the human world, no matter how many subjects are included in the picture. Action depicts a wider, cosmic perspective on reality that in some sense echoes the Buddhist sense of impermanence (*mujō* 無常).

Moreover, Nishida's refusal to limit action to the realm of inner subjectivity is also due to the fact that action affects the world. Our actions, he saw, are necessarily creative and "poetic" (in the Greek sense of *poiesis*). Nishida's anti-subjectivism could hardly be clearer. If by acting we necessarily make objects, everything that is thus *made* is independent of the *maker* and cannot be reduced to the measure of the making subject.[4] The

independence implies that the made also influences the maker. Hence, by virtue of something *being made*, it also *makes* the *maker*. Just as the maker is made, so does the made becomes maker. In a word, making entails being made. Nishida articulates this interrelationship as a movement " from the made to the maker" (*tsukurareta mono kara tsukuru mono e* 作られたものから作るものへ) that undergirds the dialectical process in which something is at one and the same time the made and the maker, passive and active.[5] This further implies that the making subject is not absolute, since before it makes anything it is already made. Analogous to Heidegger's *Befindlichkeit,* the making subject begins from a location in a world of interacting relationships. Nishida comments:

> Roughly put, the fact that one thing acts must include the fact of its been acted upon. The very fact of negating the other requires that the self be negated. Activity includes counter-activity. Simple action by a single thing does not exist.… The fact that the self becomes the other by negating itself necessarily means, from another angle, that the self is born in that act, that the self affirms itself as an expressive activity and posses itself outside of itself. (NKZ 10: 27–8)

This relationship between made and maker is different from the Greek view of action as somehow inferior to contemplation because of the supposed primacy of seeing to acting (and of acting to producing). It is also different from the Judeo-Christian conception of *creatio ex nihilo*, which sets up a metaphysical imbalance between a creating God and created nature. Both these ideas of the act of making lack a reversible, dialectical, and symmetric relationship between the active and the passive elements involved in production.

We are thus led to ask: What are the boundaries of practical philosophy? To answer it is to enter into the complexities at the core of Nishida's metaphysical logic.

4. Nishida uses the term "public" (*ōyake* 公) to underline the objective character of objects (NKZ 14: 269).

5. I translate the Japanese *tsukuru* as "make" in view of the range of meanings the two words share. I am grateful to Rein Raud for having drawn my attention to the inadequacy of the standard English rendering as "create."

The logic of contradictory self-identity as a logic of action

What does "contradictory self-identity" mean?[6] To be sure, it is a kind of metaphysical logical construct, but just how are we to understand it? It seems risky to insist on the formal logical aspects of the idea, and perhaps riskier still to take it as a heuristic device for inquiring into the nature of knowing. In fact, even if we follow Nishida's logic of place, which is properly speaking a logic of the mind, we have to see that he is no longer aiming at a description of interiority. No mention is made of the realm of thought. Contradictory self-identity has rather to be seen as a logic of the world, including but not restricted to the human world, whose goal is to articulate the essential structure of historical phenomena. Here again, the crucial stimuli come from the disciplines of anthropology, ethnology, and sociology. This "essential structure," if we may speak of it in such terms, is a formula or a linguistic construct set up to define the way the historical world (*rekishiteki sekai* 歴史的世界)—or the dialectical world (*benshōhōteki sekai* 弁証法的世界)—actually functions. In this sense, it is a logic of action inasmuch as the historical world itself is fundamentally a world of practical action.

This view is corroborated by the fact that it is difficult to find a single page in Nishida's essay on "Absolutely Contradictory Self-Identity" in which action and counteraction are *not* treated. The entire discussion revolves about the human world in its cultural, social, and historical (macrocosmic) aspects as well as at the individual (microcosmic) level. If this is so, we may take the step further to affirm that *practical philosophy takes the place of metaphysics, or perhaps even that metaphysics is radically transformed into practical philosophy, driven by an inner theoretical need to overcome subjectivity*. In fact, any strong notion of a self-sufficient subject

6. I am translating *zettai mujunteki jikodōitsu* 絶対矛盾的自己同一 as "absolutely contradictory self-identity" and not "the self-identity of absolute contradictions," as is often the case, because I do not find in Nishida's idea of self-identity any actual uniting of contradictions, at however absolute a level, as such a translation suggests. It rather seems to point to a paradoxical clash of identity and contradiction that opens the way to an abyssal horizon that allows to appear in their actual being without requiring any further foundation.

is impossible in Nishida's radically dialectical world of action. It is hardly coincidental that socio-anthropological themes become major concerns here, not in the sense that, once having clarified the logical structure of the world, Nishida sets out to *apply* his logic to particular cases, but in the sense that the logic of place is being *transformed* into a logic of contradictory self-identity as a more useful way to give proper attention to action and thus to deal with the dialectical world.

Although a thorough analysis of the way Nishida employed the notion of absolute nothingness at this time is merited, I wish here only to underscore certain aspects of the question. In his historicist philosophy, the logical and metaphysical mechanisms of the logic of place remain virtually unchanged. Absolute nothingness is so called because it thoroughly negates itself, which enables it to be all-encompassing. This absoluteness, however, represents more than the terminal point of the universal, as was the case in Nishida's logicist period. It refers to the historical world itself. This world as such becomes the all-encompassing nothingness in which we live our lives. How are we to interpret this shift? In the context of historical world, every personal experience is encompassed within a wider horizon. This horizon becomes the *basho* that houses everything that *can* appear, without determining anything in particular that *has to*. In other words, it is open to every possibility. This absolute world is therefore the horizon for both everything positive or negative, angelic or demonic, for Mother Theresa as well as for Auschwitz. *This openness is the chaos*—in the original meaning of "abyss"—*that precedes and grounds all possible logical or rational explanation*. Things here are without foundation, suspended over the abyss, and it is there that they find themselves in interaction with other things of the world and indeed with the world itself.

Activity and inverse activity

What kind of the relationship between the individual and the world do we see at work in "action"? Nishida claims that the activity (*sayō* 作用) of the self is the "inverse activity" (*gyaku sayō* 逆作用) of the world, an idea that takes him further in the direction of a de-subjectivization of philosophy.

The different types of activity referred to earlier can shed some light here. There are at least two patterns of activity: (1) the "pattern of teleological activity" (*mokutekiteki sayōkei* 目的的作用型) and (2) the "pattern of inverse activity" (*gyakusayōkei* 逆作用型), also called the "pattern of activity which is not an activity" (*musayōteki sayōkei* 無作用的作用型). Both types of activity derive from a fundamental relationship between the world and the self, or in Nishida's terminology, from "active intuition" (*kōiteki chokkan* 行為的直観), a knowing-acting seen as a becoming (CESTARI 1998). The distinction between the two modalities of action is not to be sought in activities themselves but in the viewpoint from which we consider action. Accordingly, from the point of view of the acting self, will is final; from the point of view of the world, will is an inverse activity, or an activity that is not an activity. This change of perspective is made possible by the nature of the relationship between the world and the self. The activity of the self is entirely individual, but at the same time, it is also the action of the world transforming itself through the agency of the individual. Hence, the nature of the self is not simply a "given" but is "paradoxical" in the sense that it is formed by both goal-oriented and inverse activities (NKZ 10: 45).

Poiesis and Praxis

In order to explain Nishida's idea of action, we may focus attention on the twin notions of *poiesis* and *praxis*. In the two essays, "Prolegomenon to Practical Philosophy" and "*Poiesis* and *Praxis*," both dated 1941, Nishida clarifies his fundamental ideas of human action in the context of a discussion of Aristotle's distinction between *poiesis* and *praxis*.

As is well known, in his *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle considers *poiesis* (production) as action directed teleologically to the production of objects, in close connection to *techne* ("technique," or better at times, "art"). He notes:

> Every art concerns generation and searches for the technical and theoretical instruments to produce one thing which could or could not be, and whose principle lays in the one who produces it and not in the object produced. (*Nic. Eth.*, VI, 4.1140a.10).

Aristotle distinguishes *theoria*, *poiesis*, and *praxis* according to their respective *telos* or end:

> The purpose of a theoretical discipline is the pursuit of truth through contemplation; its *telos* is the attainment of knowledge for its own sake. The purpose of the productive sciences is to make something; their *telos* is the production of some artifact. The practical disciplines are those sciences which deal with ethical and political life; their *telos* is practical wisdom and knowledge. (CARR and KEMMIS 1986, 32)

Praxis is action properly so called that has its end in itself. It is the domain of ethics and politics, the locus where we decide "what is to be done." Hence we may render *poiesis* and *praxis* respectively as "making" (L. *facere*) and "doing" (L. *agere*). As Galimberti explains, of the two, action is more important than production, the latter being a kind of knowledge that imitates the laws of nature and reproduces its mechanisms such that it can be codified and transmitted as it is. In contrast, action, far from having its object in the immutable laws of nature, explores the ever-changing conditions of human life and thus resists becoming an object of "mechanical" knowledge. It is a wisdom (*phronesis*) that deals with the occasions for doing something or not; it is the science of good and evil (GALIMBERTI 1999, 277–8). In the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle, action is metaphysically subordinate to being, a conception that, as Hannah Arendt has observed, has provided the speculative foundations for the predominance of contemplation over action that has prevailed in the Western cultural milieu.[7]

Nishida's idea of practice assumes a posture quite different from that of Aristotle. Nishida interprets the distinction between *poiesis* and *praxis* as the difference between "production" (*seisaku* 制作) conceived of as an action oriented toward objects (*mono* 物), and "practice" (*jissen* 実践) understood as an *action oriented toward the agent itself*. Unlike Aristotle, he sees *jissen* as the formation of oneself, in the sense of a *self-reflective production,* and *praxis* as a kind of *poiesis* conceived of in terms of a historical embodiment and not just a biological one:

7. See ARENDT 1998: 81–5. See also the lucid reconstruction of DE CARO 2008, 101–5.

> It is generally thought that *poiesis* has to do with creating things in a biologically bodily sense. I do not think of *poiesis* only in this sense, nor do I think that *praxis* is *poiesis*. (NKZ 10: 105)

> …it is possible to conceive of *praxis* as an action in which the human being aims at human being. It is possible to claim on that basis that *praxis* is an action in which the self becomes itself. It is here that our self is constituted and born. One might say that *praxis* is the *poiesis* in which we produce our self itself. (NKZ 10: 142)

These two kinds of action are distinct and headed in opposite directions. Production is directed at objects and cannot be accomplished without instruments (*dōgu* 道具); *praxis* is directed at the acting self and other human beings and cannot be accomplished outside of society. As distant as the two seem, Nishida tried to understand them *in a tightly dialectical fashion*, so that it would not be possible to think the one without the other. As Nishida puts it, "*Poiesis is what it is because of praxis, and praxis is what it is because of poiesis*" (NKZ 10: 46). The two are inseparable.

To better understand Nishida's position here, we may recall our earlier discussion of the transition "from the made to the maker," according to which each action affecting others within the dialectical world is at the same time an action affecting oneself. Thus the production of things is at the same time a production of oneself; *poiesis* is *praxis* and *praxis* is *poesis*:

> There is absolutely no *poiesis* that is not *praxis* and no *praxis* that is not *poiesis*. *Praxis* is not simply a conscious activity but takes place through *poiesis* as technique. *Poiesis* becomes itself through *praxis*. Otherwise it would simply occur by chance (NKZ 10: 152).

Nishida insists on the indissolubility of the relationship between these two forms of activity because the very fact of living in the world involves creating things. Production is the fundamental form of relating to others. No one can live and *not* be productive. In this sense, production takes precedence over practice. Moreover, in seeing *praxis* as a kind of *poiesis* Nishida is in effect reversing the Greek preference for *theoria* over *praxis*.

To borrow an expression from Kant, one might say that for Nishida *poiesis* without *praxis* is blind, while *praxis* without *poiesis* is empty. In fact, *poiesis* needs *praxis* to know whether to act and how. It needs, as Aristotle has recognized, practical principles for guidance, whether moral (the ethical implications of doing something), political (the occasion for doing something or not, preferably for the good of society at large), or artistic (the inspiration that gives direction to expressive action). Where practical guidance is lacking, our action is not fully human; it occurs, as Nishida says, by mere happenstance. At the same time, *praxis* without *poiesis* has no relationship to the dialectical world of production. There is no way of conceiving of *praxis* simply from the standpoint of the conscious self, since there are aspects of *praxis* that cannot be reduced to consciousness. For this reason, a self-reflective act of necessity contains a productive and a technological dimension.

Morality in the later nishida

It is impossible to clarify the meaning of Nishida's practical philosophy and the weight he gives it in his late thought without coming to terms with his idea of morality. As I have remarked earlier, Nishida's intent was to go beyond the "internalist" paradigm and hence to rethink his own views on consciousness.

Nishida stands in opposition to mainstream Western philosophy, and in particular modern practical philosophy, where morality has by and large been discussed as a problem of the interior disposition of the moral subject and its decisions. Resolute in his refusal to take this route, he seems to pursue rather a general strategy of transforming a subjectively inner morality into a worldly ethic, that is, an ethic constructed from the viewpoint of the world. Consider the following passage:

> From of old, talk of the activity of the spirit... has been taken to mean action from within. It has been understood merely from the stand-point of the [Kierkegaardian] relationship of a self relating itself to itself.... However much self-negation is considered from this position, it never amounts to true self-negation. It is impossible to negate the self from within the self. The activity of the spirit takes place where

this approach is negated as self-contradictory, that is, where activity is posited by a "third." (NKZ 10: 34-35)

Clearly self-negation—one of the key terms in Nishida's metaphysics, often said to refer to a self-reflective act—does not originate within the self, but is constituted by a "third," namely, the dialectical world. The activity of spirit itself comes about by way of the abyssal world over which things are suspended.

Another passage associates action—and with it, will and consciousness—to the historical world, both in the sense that action takes place outside of ourselves and that our subjective mental states themselves are to be understood against the wider horizon of the historical world:

> The fact that in teleologically oriented activity that takes one radically going outside of the self [the activity of the conscious self], we create something outside the self and within the historical world means that the self is possible only insofar as it is posited by an absolute other, that contradictory self-identity is both made and maker.… When a carpenter builds a house, it is an event that necessarily occurs at a specific, historically determined place. It is *praxis* within the historical world. From this starting point, the will, too, is a historical event. Indeed, every activity of consciousness belongs to this pattern of inverse activity [of the self-expressions of the world]. At the same time, everything taken to be historical and social practice must in some sense pass through *poiesis*. It must originate in a pattern of teleological action. (NKZ 10: 45–6)

We may note that at this time Nishida was re-envisioning a whole range of questions taken up in traditionally interiority-oriented philosophies—among them, will and consciousness—as "patterns of activity of the world," that is, as constitutive phases of the self-formation of the world.

In his "Prolegomenon to Practical Philosophy" Nishida refers to the Kierkegaard's conception of the self as expressed in the opening and closing sentences of *The Sickness unto Death*:

> Man is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation which relates itself to its own self.
> ……
> By relating itself to its own self and by willing to be itself, the self is

grounded transparently in the power which constituted it. (KIERKEG-
AARD 1849, 146, 262)

Nishida is clearly attracted by the idea of the self being grounded on the
other implied in the statement that "the self is a relationship that relates
to itself." He goes on:

> If the relationship that relates to itself is posited by the other, then even
> as it is a relationship to itself, it also stands in an encompassing rela-
> tionship to a third that posits the relationship in general. (NKZ 10: 8)

The echoes of the logic of place are unmistakable here in the notion
of a third party that constitutes the relationship between self and other,
although here it is no longer merely a question of thought but also of
historical practice. The difference is plain to see. For Kierkegaard, the
relationship is one of interiority, an encounter between the psychologi-
cally moral conscience of the self and the religiously moral dimension
of the other. The "absolute other" here is God, the source and ultimate
protector of morality and indeed existence itself. With Nishida, the rela-
tionship takes a radical turn to "this world." The locus of the relation-
ship is no longer inner and psychological but is the world of action. The
"relationship which is related to itself" becomes action through which
one modifies oneself, i.e., *praxis*.

Still more basic is the fact that for Nishida the "absolute other"
(*zettaisha* 絶対他者) or "third" (*daisansha* 第三者) is not a transcendent
God but the radically immanent historical world driving the self. The
essence of this self (*jiko* 自己) is not consciousness, will, or conscience,
but the dialectical world (*benshōhōteki sekai* 弁証法的世界).

In other words, Nishida's self is *ek-static* in the sense that it always
finds itself outside of itself, always caught in the play of action and reac-
tion. The true self cannot be conceived of without the world. In fact,
the self is a constitutive element (*keiki* 契機) of the self-formation and
self-expression of the historical world. This is anything but spiritualism.
On the contrary, it conceives of the relationship with the world as one
of "active intuition" (*kōiteki chokkan* 行為的直観), which for Nishida is
the basis for all activity in the world. Active intuition implies a kind of
action/knowledge that comes about through historical bodies. Hence,
the world cannot be a "single whole" (*zentaiteki itsu* 全体的一) with indi-

viduals making up its parts. In Kierkegaard's words, it is paradoxical by nature.[8] By conceiving of morality as something worldly and not simply inner, Nishida links ethics to the society and the state.

Morality and Politics

We will pass over the question of politics here, despite its relevance to Nishida's practical philosophy. Still, a word seems in order concerning the connection he saw between morality and politics.

   In his historicist period, Nishida was surely driven to political philosophy by the historical upheavals of that time. But this is only one side of the coin. At the same time, and more essentially, historicism was an answer to the turn his philosophy had taken to an increased focused on practice. Clumsy as the actual results were, his theoretical strategy was to liberate morality from the constructions of a psychological interiority. To counter this modern assumption, he followed Aristotle in setting up a close connection between *ethos* and *ethnos*, morality and people, customs and society. At the same time, he seemed to share Kierkegaard's concern with defending the value of the existential individual:

> Kierkegaard affirms that our self is a relationship of the self to itself and at the same time is a relationship constituted by an absolute other. Practical philosophy must be based on such a position. Traditional moral philosophy, in contrast, begins from an abstract conscious self. From such a position, even when it speaks about reason, it cannot avoid subjectivism. To speak of the place of action (*gyō* 行) is to speak of historical practice, of creating things in a historically embodied way (in the sense of unity between body and mind), within the historical world. If this were not so, there would be no way escape from the facticity of consciousness, no way to save morality from being abstract.

8. The paradoxical nature of human being is attributed by Nishida to the coexistence of objective and subjective aspects (See NKZ 10: 50). The human being is both an object of the social sciences (insofar as free will is left out of the picture) and a free subject. From the viewpoint of statistics, individuals exert free will in doing something, and yet the sum of these actions display statistical trends. Nishida clearly distinguishes this kind of paradoxical from religious paradox, whose overcoming he considers a task for philosophy in the future (NKZ 10: 46).

> Our moral practice is based on the self-formation of the world, which is an absolutely contradictory self-identity. Consequently, the nation is the beginning and the end of moral action. (NKZ 10: 4–5)

The need to overcome the conscious self led Nishida to consider activity in general (and moral activity in particular) as based not on an inner self with subjective will and consciousness, but on the state or nation (*kokka* 国家). This ambivalence regarding nationalism reflects a tendency rooted in Nishida's early logicist leanings which he never completely dismissed, and resulted in a philosophy "without perspective" (*enkinhō nashi* 遠近法なし) and a "logic of reconciliation" (*wakai no ronri* 和解の論理), as Miki Kiyoshi complained (MKZ 10: 434; 18: 525).[9]

Apparently Nishida's rationality had trouble coming to grips with modernity. To explain the modern nation, he drew on the Aristotelian idea of the *polis*, thus arbitrarily conflating two quite different historical categories and raising serious questions about his historical consciousness. One might, of course, make adjustments on Nishida's behalf, developing his ideas in a more sociological and anthropological direction to claim that human societies (though definitely not nations) represent a fundamental dimension of the "social animal" (*zoon politikon*). Society could then be considered the proper locus of morality, without any need to collapse into anti-democratic discourse even when it comes to differentiating morality from religion. To suggest what Nishida *might* have thought is not to gloss over his difficulties with modernity, whose inner mechanisms and specific character seems to have eluded his better philosophical instincts and to have landed him in the sorts of naive, if not outright reprehensible, positions of which his critics have accused him.

TECHNOLOGY AND THE MODERN WORLD

The question of modernity also rears its head when we come to Nishida's attitude towards technology. We may begin by noting that Nishida translates the Greek word *poiesis* as *seisaku* (制作), a term ordi-

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9. Concerning the ambiguous nature of Nishida's individualism, which stressed academic freedom while denying other human rights, see CESTARI 2008.

narily associated with artistic creations or handicrafts. It seems oddly out of place to use it with reference to industrial manufacturing or mass production, which are more commonly referred to as *seisaku* (製作) or *seisan* (生産). There is more at stake here than a choice of words. His language forces us to question Nishida's reliability as an interpreter of the modern technological world.

Nishida seemed to consider production a matter of craftsmanship or artistry. His idea of the productive process was scaled to the human being. In fact, he depicted technology as a natural habit for humankind. It is not an historically accidental event but touches the core of the way human beings relate to the world. It is a fundamental character of the self, since human beings are essentially toolmakers, and these tools are used to make things. It is in line with our nature that our bodies and minds give rise to technology as both an inverse (bodily) and a teleologically oriented (conscious) activity (NKZ 10: 81). In fact, our physical nature is such that we not only *are* bodies but also *have* bodies, and therefore can consider ourselves as tools. As toolmakers by nature, *we are also tools for ourselves.* In this sense, Nishida regarded technology as arising from our very being and thus constituting a socio-historical phenomenon. For in fact our bodies are not merely a physical, biological reality; they are historical, that is, they are shaped by the world as it is disclosed in human society with its ethos and rules. As Nishida writes: "The *homo faber* is at the same time a *zoon politikon* [social animal] that is *logon echon* [endowed with rationality]" (NKZ 10: 82). Accordingly, human productivity is at its origins a technical-bodily enterprise grounded in *kōiteki chokkan* 行為的直観—a knowing-and-acting by which we become what we know and act upon.

Near the end of "Absolutely Contradictory Self-Identity" Nishida remarks:

> Our biological body is already technical (*gijutsuteki* 技術的) insofar as it belongs to historical life. As Aristotle says, the development of the body is nature's *poiesis.* But it is in our social life that this becomes truly technical. Our bodies may be referred to as historical embodiments. From this standpoint, one might say that our historical life is through and through technical. (NKZ 9: 222)

The result of such a formulation is that technology is humanized. It is seen as an extension of the human body. The problem is, if technology is imagined only as a "tool," the fundamentally distinguishing features of *modern* technology escape notice. In point of fact, for a technological age like ours, it is not simply a question of human beings making tools and using them to make things. Technology has become centered on itself, with every greater independence from the aims of its workforce. It becomes an end in itself. Or rather, as Heidegger has shown, it becomes *the* end.

The heavy emphasis on production that marks Nishida's discourse fails to depict essential aspects of the developed industrial world, wherein mass production has dramatically transformed the once intimate connection between human beings, their tools, and their ends. From Nishida's perspective, for example, it is impossible to approach the phenomenon of work-related alienation that resulted from the systematization of industrial mass production. Nishida seems to have overlooked entirely the phenomenon of human existence having become defined by the consumption of marketable goods. Moreover, by failing to consider the negative side of reality, his attention was naturally fixed on the positive side of technology, not because he wanted to champion the case of science, but because he fully humanized it as an integral part of human culture.

Nishida's way of considering technology might prove useful in explaining certain sub-worlds within the wider technological world or in drawing attention to certain aspects of our *immediate* experience of the tools and products that technology has provided. Despite the alienating system of production in the background, the relationship between ourselves as embodied beings and our tools remains a powerful force. But that alone is far from adequate to depict what has become of human beings as a result of the modern world.

There seems to be a kind of logical mechanism at work in Nishida's approach that points to two important assumptions: (1) that a deep relationship exists between us and the world such that our products are never completely detached from our human reality; and (2) that whatever exists, in virtue of its existence, is somehow a self-representation or self-reflection of the historical world. For Nishida, this latter includes the artificial or "virtual" worlds that human beings create, since even

a fictional reality is still in some sense "real." Thus, like it or not, technology has to be accepted as a part of the world and not dismissed as some kind of "foreign body." Certainly there is much to question in this relationship with the world. One may wonder, for example, whether the relationship with the world may be conceived not in terms of representation and expression, as Nishida has it, but simply as an external relationship between a container and its contents, as is the case in materialism. Granted Nishida's insistence on our ineluctable connections to the world, this does not imply that those connections are always positive and expressive of what is best in human being.

Recently W. S. Huh has criticized the historicist turn in Nishida's thinking as inappropriate or even downright wrong, arguing that he was applying characteristics of consciousness to what are basically nonconscious phenomena (Huh 2009, 289). I agree with his assessment that Nishida has all but ignored the dimension of human finitude, but I would claim that the historicist turn was less inappropriate than it was incomplete. As I have tried to show in the foregoing pages, Nishida came to realize that the only possible direction for his philosophy to take was one that superseded the realms of consciousness and logic, in short, that it needed to embrace the dimension of bodily existence. In so doing, he may have failed to appreciate sufficiently the fact that our world, and our bodies within that world, are not born perfect and complete in accord with a pre-existing logical scheme, but are radically limited and tied to particular perspectives. We are subject to all the mistakes and misunderstandings of our natural finitude. Furthermore, deception and evil are also part of the world, quite independent of the constructive principles of logic. None of this seems to have detained Nishida. The question is whether his philosophy has the potential to compensate for this oversight and, where necessary, be carried beyond his own tacit assumptions.

Might not an alternative approach be possible if, beginning from the same logical premises, we were to include a reevaluation of modernity? My own view is that his conciliatory approach to the world could be reoriented to a more disquieting and critical one. The deep and expressive relationship between mankind and the world that was pivotal in Nishida's later thought might also be turned in a direction other than the one that Nishida himself took. Where he highlights the positive side

of a world expressing itself through human consciousness and creative genius, and transforming itself in the process, might we not shift the focus to the darker and less humane aspects of the process?

If in fact, as Nishida supposed, our actions constitute the self-formation of the world, then what are we to think of our polluting actions that have resulted in global warming, of pandemics, the thread of nuclear warfare, and the promotion of terrorism on a mass scale? Should we not think of such effects of technology also as self-manifestations of the world? Following this line of reasoning, are not famine, earthquakes, and other natural disasters, not to mention the endless proliferation of human wickedness and violence, also to be classified as self-expressions of the historical world? If so, then on Nishida's own terms and despite his rosy view of our relationship to the world, we would have to admit that *the world's sickness is our sickness ,and our madness the world's madness.*

Far from resigning our responsibilities toward the natural world and human history, such an advance in self-awareness would underline the complex and difficult task that lies heavy on our shoulders at this critical juncture in history and to drive us to make a clean break with Nishida's overly optimistic and vague, idealistic standpoint. Such a rethinking of the relationship between humanity and the world would seem to me to provoke the deeper potential in his logic of contradictory self-identity and nudge it towards an opening to the world in all its aspects.

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Abbreviation

MKZ　『三木清全集』[Complete works of Miki Kiyoshi], (Tokyo, Iwanami Shoten, 1967), 19 volumes.

NKZ　『西田幾多郎全集新版』[Complete works of Nishida Kitarō, New edition] (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1978–1980), 19 volumes.

THZ　『田辺元全集』[Complete works of Tanabe Hajime], (Tokyo, Chikuma Shobō, 1963–1964), 15 volumes.

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