

# Nishitani Keiji and the Overcoming of Modernity (1940–1945)

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Nishitani Keiji's take on the question of "modernity" lies somewhere on the periphery of his thought, one of the minor planets orbiting around the sun of "self-awareness" and drawing its light and importance from that idea. Almost to a fault. To a more politically and socially oriented thinker, the discussion of self-awareness might be considered a maidservant to questions of subjectivity, cultural identity, moral conscience, national temperament, democratic justice, and the like that rose into prominence in Japan's modern era. But for Nishitani's religious worldview, this would turn the universe inside out. In trying to assess the body of thought that Nishitani left behind, the critical issue is not whether it can be reoriented to some other goal than the one he himself assigned it, the better to pass judgment on it, but whether and to what extent the sovereignty he assigned self-awareness nudged his views of modernity away from ideals we have come to hold crucial to civilized existence. Whether or not he succeeded at constructing a consistent view of reality, the practical consequences that show up in his views of modernity weigh fully on his entire project.

As simple as it is to put the problem this way, the execution is difficult in the extreme, and never more so than when those consequences are set

in the context of a military totalitarianism in which there was far more at stake than there is in a free and open academic forum of the kind we enjoy today. But if we are to give the question its due, it is precisely within that context—roughly covering the period from 1940 to 1945—that we must begin. The chief source of information about what Nishitani had to say on the subject of modernity at the time can be found in five texts: the *Chūōkōron* discussions of 1941 to 1942, the symposium on “Overcoming Modernity” of 1942, a 1941 monograph entitled *View of the World, View of the Nation*, and two essays on “Modern European Civilization and Japan” (1940) and “The Philosophy of World History” (1944). Six others on mysticism, literature, and the philosophy of religion turn out to be only of marginal interest for the topic at hand.<sup>1</sup>

None of this material has been published in translation in Western languages, and to attempt a satisfactory summary of their contents is beyond the scope of a single essay. Instead, I would like to pick up on three interlocking themes that for Nishitani and many others defined the resistance to modernity: rethinking the idea of world history, protecting Japanese identity against the pressures of Westernization, and disassociating learning and reason from a purely scientific worldview. In each case, my aim is not only to clarify Nishitani’s position but to bring to light the underlying logic of his arguments.

Before I had a chance to *read* Nishitani’s views on these questions for myself, I was driven by the force of circumstances to *reread* portions of them through the lens of his critics in search of signs overt and subtle of ideological collaboration with the atrocious adventures of the Pacific War. In defiance of my philosophical instincts, as few and unrefined as they were, I found myself looking for a way first to align myself with his scholarly detractors and then to extract myself from the debate unscathed. Brief though it was, the experience was chastening, and not without a certain irony gave me a glimpse into the power of dominant ideas to eclipse the common decency and academic fairness I had hoped I could count on in such circumstances.

1. Essays written at the same time on “The Problem of Mysticism: Faith and Reason” (NKZ 3: 175–207) and “German Mysticism” (7: 129–204) make no allusion, direct or indirect, to the issue of modernity.

I first met Nishitani when he was eighty years old. At the time, I was engrossed with Jan Van Bragt in a line by line redaction of the English version of *Religion and Nothingness*. Having already translated Hans Waldenfels's *Absolute Nothingness*, the first monograph in a Western language to focus on Nishitani's thought and its relevance for Western theology, I was easily persuaded to undertake the work. To prepare myself for the work, I read everything I could get my hands on in translation and a number of other essays that Van Bragt thought would help me better understand how Nishitani's mind worked. A few years later, buoyed up by the training I had received by the collaboration, I joined forces with Graham Parkes to undertake careful review of the translation of *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*. Immediately that was done, I started a thorough rewrite of his book *Nishida Kitarō*. Shortly after its publication and still buoyantly drifting from one book of the Kyoto School philosophers to the next, Van Bragt passed me an essay by a German scholar in the inaugural issue of *Japanstudien* arguing that Nishitani's 1941 book *View of the World, View of the Nation* was an unabashed defense of the reigning totalitarian regime (KAMBARTEL 1989). I skimmed through the book quickly, pausing over the passages singled out in the essay, and the seas began to whip up around me. I scrambled for dry land and collapsed on the shore exhausted and confused. Nishitani was too advanced in years to think of asking him for one of those all-night chats for which I remember him fondly. I rummaged through our Institute library to read through what I could find on the subject and was alarmed by the number of strong condemnations without the slightest appreciation, it seemed to me, for everything I had found inspiring in Nishitani's thought.

It was around this time, in 1993, that plans were drawn up for an international conference that would culminate in *Rude Awakenings*. Since I had worked on the translation of Tanabe's *Metanoetics* and was somewhat familiar with his own complicities in the war effort, I was asked to prepare a paper on the matter. As it happened, the next summer I traveled around Europe, visiting old haunts and tracking down old friends. Determined to bring some "balance" to my published views of Nishitani's philosophy, I carried with me a copy of the *Chūōkōron* discussions and during the long train rides, set to translating all of Nishitani's remarks and much of the surrounding context. Prior to the conference,

I sent them around to the foreign participants as “resource material.” In March of the following year, we gathered in New Mexico to discuss “Zen, the Kyoto School, and the Question of Nationalism.” During one of the breaks Sakai Naoki, who had heard that I was planning to complete the translation of all of the discussions and publish them, informed me that a project was already underway to do just that. I abandoned the plan, and my translations and commentary never saw the light of day.<sup>2</sup>

Nearly a year later, and not after considerable resistance to the prompting of Mori Tetsurō, Minamoto Ryōen, Ueda Shizuteru, and others, I began, halfheartedly, to read Nishitani again, this time focusing on his wartime writings and without any ambitions to make a contribution to the debate. My own judgment, a few lines published here and there, never amounted to much more than a sigh of relief. In fact, as I look back over my notes from those readings, I am astonished at their naiveté, almost as if I had never really taken Nishitani’s critics seriously at all, in particular the Japanese critics who lived through the same experience and saw it all very differently. The truth is, at the time it felt more like what Paul Ricoeur has called a “second naiveté,” one that had me shifting from one foot to the other for several years before I could find my way back to the genius of Nishitani’s religious thought. In what follows, I seek a fairer and more decent balance by laying out out his views systematically and trying to locate the logic that drove them.

## RELOCATING JAPAN IN THE WORLD

Already from the early years of the Meiji era, the threat that the abrupt onslaught of Western culture and ideas posed to Japan’s identity was obvious to all strata of society. The response ran a full spectrum, bounded on one end by those who eagerly welcomed the challenge to forge a new identity and on the other, by those who demanded that the importation of foreign products, institutions, government, and modes of thought be held strictly responsible to Japan’s own history and tradi-

2. A publication has been announced by Routledge of London for December 2009 under the title *The Philosophy of Japanese Wartime Resistance*.

tions. The extremes became less and less convincing in the latter half of the twentieth century, but public and scholarly opinion on the question still command a considerable audience. During the war years, the situation was different. The debate was deeply stained by attempts to subject national identity to a brand of colonial militarism that today seems so distinctively un-Japanese that even the renaissance of interest in defining what is distinctively Japanese and sharing it with the rest of the world struggles to bleach it out. That struggle is complicated by the fact that it has still to contend with the living memories of its neighboring countries, whose people are quick to see any claim to “uniqueness” as a vestige of the ideology under which they had suffered. But if exaggerated demands that Japan renounce its right to boast a distinctive identity as a people have dwindled, the original context has yet to recede from the picture.

In Nishitani’s case, his later essays distinguishing aspects of Japanese culture and subjectivity from the West and from other countries of Asia do suggest, at least on the surface, a recognition that the context has shifted, though with no clear repudiation of the role such ideas might have played in supporting the military ideology of the war years.<sup>3</sup> Whatever his subtler intentions, there are hints enough that he did in fact support it. His most telling remarks appear in his interventions in the *Chūōkōron* discussions on the place of Japan in the new, emerging world order and the “moral energy”<sup>4</sup> required for it. I begin with these com-

3. The most important essays of the postwar period are mentioned in MORI 1995. In English, the most relevant essay is a translated transcript of an NHK talk (NKC 19: 3–20; English translation, NISHITANI 1960).

4. The notion of *moralische Energie* was introduced in the *Chūōkōron* discussions by Kōyama Iwao (101), the use of the German word alluding to the attempt of the nineteenth-century historian Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886) to ground morality not in the individual or in racial biology but in concentrations of political and cultural power. Nishitani found it a happy, though initially unfamiliar, phrase and used it continually though without a clear definition. In his *View of the World, View of the Nation*, which was published prior to the discussions, Ranke is mentioned but this term is not. Instead, Nishitani speaks throughout of 気力 or its Romanized equivalent, “ethos.” In an essay published during the course of the discussions, he devotes several pages to Ranke’s *Geschichte der romanischen und germanischen Völker von 1494 bis 1514* and shortly thereafter refers to the idea of “moral energy” (4: 242–9, 251–3), though without any allusion to Japan.

ments not in order to beg the question of whether they are the inevitable logical consequences of his fundamental philosophical orientation, but because I believe they constitute a *scandalum*, a stumbling block, that cannot be dismissed as a mere *scrupulum*, a small, sharp pebble in one’s sandal that breaks one’s pace until it has been shaken out:

For a people to be able to step anew into the midst of an established world order and maintain positive continuity with itself, moral energy is required. Only then can a nation take shape on the basis of its people. In so doing, the nation as much may be said to be a manifestation of the moral energy of its people. Thus, as bad as the terms “nation-centered” and “nationalism” sound to the democratic ear, they are actually of great moral significance.

.....

Japan is currently charged with the role of leadership in Greater East Asia, and for this, moral energy is fundamental.... When there is self-awareness of unity as a people and this becomes the cornerstone of the nation, the nation itself can be seen as a manifestation of moral energy. At the same time, there is a sense in which one can speak of a household spirit at work in the nation. For example, the return of administrative authority to the emperor in the Meiji restoration is a clear display of that household spirit for which there is nothing comparable in foreign countries. In that splendid reform, too, the moral energy of the Japanese race once again came to light, working through the reforms to become the driving force for strengthening the country. Present-day Japan’s leadership in Greater East Asia, therefore, hinges on that same moral energy. As for the nature of Japan’s leadership, it consists in transmitting its own moral energy to the other peoples within the Greater East Asian Sphere, to awaken it within them, and bring them to awareness as a people—that is, to their subjectivity as a people.

.....

For the all-out war of the Co-Prosperity Sphere, the Japanification of certain races within the East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere, a thoroughgoing Japanification through education, is not a mere fantasy.... To take the case of Korea, though it probably doesn’t apply in other cases, the general idea of the “Korean race” up to now is too rigid and inflexible to be adequate any more. The standpoint that considers

individual established “races” as something fixed has generated ideas like racial self-determination. But in a situation like today when Korea has been subjected to Japanese military inscription and where what is spoken of as the “Korean race” has entered Japan in a completely subjective form, they have become subjectively Japanese. Their small concept of “race” that has up until now been thought of as something fixed seems to have fused into a large notion. In some sense the Yamato race and the Korean race can be said to have become one race.... Is it not possible to turn those among the peoples of the Greater East Asian sphere with superior qualities into something like “half” Japanese? The Chinese and the Thai, as peoples with their own history and culture, have a kind of brotherhood that inhibits such a transformation. Or again, people like the Filipinos who have no culture of their own but have so far fed off of America’s culture are perhaps the most difficult to handle. On the other hand, peoples that have no historical culture of their own but are possessed of superior qualities, such as the Malays.... Haushofer calls the Malays an *Adelvolk*. It is said the Japanese also have Malay blood in them. Not without good reason do the Japanese constitute a *Herrenvolk*. Well, I am thinking that it is not impossible to take such a race or the Filipino Moro (this is second-hand knowledge, but the Moro are said to be good stock also), that is, races of high quality, and from their early years educate them into half-Japanese. For example, I have heard that if one educates the Takasago of Taiwan, they become indistinguishable from the Japanese. Is that so? I mean that they would become half-Japanese in the sense of being educated until spiritually they are exactly the same as the Japanese. This would be one measure to counter the small numbers of Japanese, and at the same time would call forth from them their self-awareness as a people. (WSJ 186, 237–8, 337–8, 262-3).<sup>5</sup>

These statements leave little doubt about Nishitani’s opinions. The structure and pace of the discussions did not provide the right forum for the kind of careful, rational argument that would provide his reasons for holding them, and in fact, often leave the impression that all the participants shared a common base of ideas to be applied but not

5. The German philosopher Karl Haushofer (1869–1946) served as one of Hitler’s theorists on geopolitics.

defended. That said, Nishitani scatters a number of hints throughout the discussions of his working philosophical assumptions. In speaking of the emerging “new world order” that has cast Japan into its first historical role of leadership, for example, he often alludes to the “crisis of European consciousness” as too narrow-minded and Eurocentric to be of service to the world as a whole. Its sense of superiority towards the cultures of the East—seeing them as primarily passive “recipients” of the high culture created in the West—is “egocentric,” “exploiting,” “hypocritical,” and clinging to an outdated world order (WSJ 12, 19, 184, 283, 351).

The Japanese, in contrast, are a “world-historical people”<sup>6</sup> in whom “history is becoming aware of itself,” which accounts not only for its own resistance to colonization by the West but its active role in preventing the colonization of China (WSJ 158–60). This “self-awareness” and its moral energy “must take root within the subjectivity of each member of society” and from there be broadened to the rest of the world. Japan’s ideal is to resist merely “repartitioning the old colonies” in order to “give each country its due place” (WSJ 192, 198, 379). He draws the contrast in sharp and uncompromising terms. Under the “cloak of democracy,” the “opium policies” of Europe and the Americas have set out to “secure a comfortable life for the local inhabitants” of its colonies as an “umbrella under which to exploit them.” Their idea of freedom is “hypocritical” and abstract: “Turn their freedom and equality over and you see that its underside is infested with untrammelled ambition and the underhanded role of the survival of the fittest.” The high level of Japan stands more or less alone among the peoples of Greater East Asia, “which remain for the most part at a low level,” and therefore “must open their eyes to self-awareness as a people and transform that awareness into voluntary, active participation” in Japan’s “world-historical vocation.” “Each people has to be granted its independence,” and for this neither totalitarian self-expansion nor liberal *laissez-faire*, will do (WSJ 204–5, 239–40, 351, 356).

Although Nishitani applauds signs that “the nation has taken on a

6. The participants are critical of the term “race” and “purity of blood,” finding it dangerously narrow, and in Nishitani’s words “unscholarly” (106–8). The term they prefer in its stead, “people,” roughly coincides with the German notion of *Volk* as understood at the time.



subjective character” and calls for further organizational strength to elevate that character “to what Hegel calls objective spirit,” at one point he declares himself “honestly pessimistic” about the capacity of ordinary Japanese to achieve the level of “spirituality” required, “to temper the nation as a whole to greatness” and for the first time in history “fulfill the dream of Plato.” Nevertheless, since “the nation’s life and death hangs in the balance of the Co-Prosperity Sphere,” efforts must be made, and for this he proposes a notion of *Gesamtkrieg* that involves the whole of the nation, both in its economic, political, cultural, and military aspects, and in the “consciousness of each member of society.” The ground for this has already been laid by the ‘founding spirit of Japan’ that has survived the vicissitudes of history and has surfaced again “in the restoration of government to the emperor.” Drawing on Nietzsche’s idea of a “good war,”<sup>7</sup> he challenges the idea that war and peace are simple contradictories, the latter being a mere “perversion” or “temporary abnormality.” War must be a permanent feature of any true and creative peace, and in this regard he proclaims that “the present war seems to have sunk roots deep into the ground that war and peace share in common.” In this regard, he sees a “ray of light in the war in the Hawaiian seas” and dismisses the one-sided pursuit of peace as “a grave obstacle to waging war” (WSJ 248, 283–6, 293–4, 309, 394).

The rhetoric of the *Overcoming Modernity* symposium, both in the prepared papers and in the two-day roundtable, is calmer and less aggressive in tone. Since the symposium overlapped with the *Chūōkōron* discussions, one might expect a certain overflow of Nishitani’s views on Japan’s place in the world. They are indeed present, but in a more general form that gives clearer insight into his philosophical reasoning. His written contribution (omitted from his *Collected Writings*) offers a concise defense of Japan’s participation in the emerging “new world order” as a response to a genuine and fundamental religious need that requires “moral energy”

7. The reference is to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* ii.10. Whereas Nishitani makes no attempt to exempt military conflict from the notion of a “good war,” Nietzsche’s notebooks leave little doubt that his experience in the Franco-Prussian War left him disillusioned with the glories of literal warfare: “War (but without gunpowder!) between different thoughts! And their armies!” Cited from the 1980 edition of his *Sämtliche Werke*, 10: 16. See the annotation in PARKES 2005, 293.

to realize. His pivotal notion here is what he calls “awakening to a standpoint of subjective nothingness,” which he presents as the most viable and concrete path for Japan to follow:

The nation must repress the arbitrary freedoms of the individual. It is an indispensable requirement for the nation. This has given rise to profound confusion in the modern West over the relation between the individual and the state. What is more, the nation today is being pressed to treat this requirement radically as stress is put on “diminishing the private and serving the public”.... To diminish the private means basically to extinguish the liberties of the small, self-serving ego.... In so doing, the way is opened to a profound religiosity, the kind of way in which the absolute negation of one’s small ego is immediately transformed in a subjectivity that is active, body and soul, in the real world.... And why should the nation demand of its people to diminish the private and serve the public at their places of work? The reason, it should be plain to see, is to reinforce the internal unity of the nation as much as possible. (OM, 26–7)<sup>8</sup>

Nishitani sees the unity achieved through this “new form of human self-awareness” in the context of “the construction of a unified view of the world,” but he sets it firmly within the horizon of a spiritual tradition reaching back to Prince Shōtoku. He cites passages from the fourteenth-century *Chronicles of the Authentic Lineages of the Divine Emperors* in which the selfless mind is likened to a mirror that can reflect all things because it holds nothing to exemplify the sense in which the eradication of the individual mind, if brought about in order to serve the public good, puts one in touch with an “original mind” expressed symbolically as the mind of the sun goddess Amaterasu, and philosophically as “a religiosity of subjective nothingness” (29–31).

In the concluding section of the essay, Nishitani returns to the theme of the *Chūōkōron* discussion to justify this nation-centered religiosity of

8. Along with the other opening essays, Nishitani’s piece on 「近代の超克——私論」 [My view on overcoming modernity] appeared in the journal 『文学会』 10/2 (1942). Near the end of the *Chūōkōron* discussions, Nishitani refers to his essay written for the *Overcoming Modernity* symposium, although nowhere in that essay does he allude to the former.

self-denial, arguing that there is a new world order in the making which requires of Japan a “high concentration of high moral energy” not only to “escape the control of Anglo-Saxon dominion as only Japan can,” but also to carry out “a self-negation at the ground of the nation itself” in order to take its place in the new order of the wider world. “The national life of our country has been poured into world history like the very blood in its veins,” realizing “an ideal that has been with us from the start” (OM 32, 34–5).

The roundtable steered clear of these questions, except for an indirect reference to the mistake of reducing the “philosophical spirit” of Plato to the abstract level of unchanging ideas and avoiding the “struggle” with current social problems. If history becomes centered on the individual, Nishitani stresses, the distinction between the changing and the unchanging is obliterated (OM 223–7). The notion of moral energy is also conspicuously absent from his essays where Nishitani might have naturally introduced it. In particular, his lengthy “Philosophy of Religion: An Introduction” of 1941 defines ethics and morality as fundamentally having to do with “the defeat of self-serving egoism” and “non-subordinate autonomy” in relationship to a transcendent reality, with only a single innocuous reference to “the nation or sovereign” (NKC 6: 8, 76, 99).

The fuller account of Nishitani’s reasoning is laid out clearly in his 1944 essay on “The Philosophy of World History.” Concrete references to Japan’s role in East Asia—the ethnic superiority of the Japanese as leaders of East Asia, the need for a deliberate nationalism to offset Western democracy, the selection of certain countries deemed worthy of Japanization, the justification of all-out war in the name of a Co-Prosperty Sphere—are absent, but the terminology and argumentation are cut of the same cloth as his interventions in the *Chūōkōron* discussions. “The philosophy of history,” as Nishitani understands it, “considers the structure of particular worlds as they are reflected within a world consciousness, and self-aware expressions of this world consciousness within world history” (NKC 4: 225). Its tasks are three:

First of all, we have the problem of *subjectivity*, which begins from the structure and consciousness of ancient and medieval worlds (whether East or West) in which particular subjects grasp the world each with itself at the center, effecting a plurality of particular but closed worlds

and world histories. Secondly, there is the problem of *objectivity*, which treats the structural nature of the world and world consciousness from the point at which, through Europe's globalization of itself, an objective stance towards the transcendence of the world and towards basic consciousness of the "world" and world history came to be, namely, in the modern age. And in the third place, we have the problem of *the unity of subjectivity and objectivity*, which consists of constructing a standpoint from which the subject (in this case, the nation) becomes an authentic subject that includes the elements of "world" and world history, and from which the study of world history, from a position of authentic subjectivity, is able to turn around and purify its own objectivity. This is the problem of the world today. (NKC 4: 230)

In the pages leading up to this passage, Nishitani's tone is a scale higher. He refers several times to the fact that belonging to the modern age is equivalent to belonging to Europe, with the result that "our view of nature, our view of the nation and consciousness of the world, our view of history, and so forth, have been severed from everything prior to the modern West." He laments the fact that the idea of the "world as a whole idea appeared through the spread of European power across the world." With no precedent in East or West to challenge it, the "world became the European world" and was set up as an objective fact. A more balanced, "neutral," truly objective view of the world is coming to germ, setting the stage for a difficult but inevitable defeat of the ruling "bias" that extols "the universality of the modern European spirit." In such circumstances, he finds it understandable that certain circles, both in Japan and in the West, have turned to a simple restoration of the past as a way to "get over the modern world." He finds this wrongheaded and historically blind because it turns away from consciousness of the subjectivity of living in the world today. At the same time, Nishitani is skeptical of the idea that every effort to defeat the modern age is only proof that its irreversible "truths" have failed to penetrate deeply enough. The defeat of the modern world needed today begins from a consciousness of the inherent contradictions in Europe's idea of an "objective view of the world and world history" (NKC 222–4, 228–9).

Only in the final pages of this essay does Nishitani make a reference to a "new world structure" that will "sublate national subjectivity and

global universality.” Religion will have an important role to play here, not in the sense of “the ancient mythical beliefs of a national religion or the sectarian creeds of the middle ages,” but in which “the Japanese spirit of ‘all the world under one roof’<sup>9</sup> is now appearing on the stage of world history.” Nothing further is said of Japan, though a final note by Nishitani indicates that he was able to meet the publisher’s deadlines to deal with the meaning of ancient myths and medieval religion and the “world-historical significance of the Japanese spirit” (NKC 4: 255, 257).

The term “elemental subjectivity” was one Nishitani used at the time to define his own emerging philosophical standpoint, which is why he used it to entitle his first published collection of essays dating from 1927 to 1940. In his own words, it is focused on an experience of the “nothingness” at the bottom of the self, awakening to which brings about the birth of a new subjectivity (NKC 1: 3). The idea was developed primarily from his study of the German mystics and the history of Western philosophy of religion in general.

The role that his engagement in the debate over modernity played in shaping the idea only comes into relief in his first book-length monograph, *View of the World, View of the Nation*, published in 1941. The book, which was no doubt influential in the decision to invite his participation in the *Chūōkōron* discussions and the *Overcoming Modernity* symposium, centers on a pattern of thought we have already seen in the passages cited above: views of the nation and the world must be unified into a single standpoint in order to avoid the extremes of national totalitarianism and colonial expansionism. In the words with which he opens his conclusion, his aim is for a “third standpoint” that “affirms the nation against Marxism<sup>10</sup> and positions itself against extreme nationalism to preserve the dimension of global universality in the nation” (NKC 4:

9. The phrase 八紘為宇 comes from the *Nihon shoki* and means making a single family of everything under heaven. It appears several times in the course of the *Chūōkōron* discussions. He also refers to it in passing in *View of the World, View of the Nation*, where he writes it 八紘一字, explicitly rejecting its original associations with the ideology of the “Imperial Way” (NKC 4: 367, 384).

10. Marxism is not taken up in Nishitani’s published works during the period in question. Unless I am mistaken, this is the sole reference to it. A reference to the “third standpoint,” it may be noted, appears in the *Chūōkōron* discussions (WSJ 48).

381). For this to be possible, individual nations must pursue self-awareness as a particular people within a broader, shared awareness of a single world. In the abstract, as Nishitani himself acknowledges, the ideas are not novel. His own contributions are theoretical and concrete.

On the theoretical level, Nishitani extends the dialectic of self-negation and self-affirmation from its use in analyzing the process of coming to self-awareness as an individual to include the “ethnic self-awareness of the nation.” The prose is dense and repetitive, often obscuring the thread of his argument in the attempt to lay out the full spectrum of possible ways to relate the individual to the nation and the world. The almost monotonous use of the same phrases over and over makes it easy to lose track of where Nishitani is going and at times even to mistake his historical descriptions for supportive demagoguery.<sup>11</sup>

From the outset, he challenges the modern idea that the individual can directly become a “world citizen” with “divinely granted rights,” bypassing the need for a national identity, thus effectively reducing the nation to a lawgiver to protect individual rights within society. At the same time as he criticizes absolute individualism, he also resists the appeal of German National Socialism to *Blut und Boden* as a way to justify a “national community” swallowing up individual rights. For Nishitani, “the relationship between the nation and its people or national community is a unity of absolute contradictories.” The nation becomes a nation only by negating its own absoluteness. In his language, “it is in the self-transcendence of the nation that the deepest core of the nation comes to light,” so that we have a core that may be called a “transcendence-in-immanence” (NKC 4: 261, 265–70, 285, 289).

To achieve this, there needs to be a “hand-in-glove relationship between diminishing the private ego at the level of national ethics and the level of religion.” He finds it hard to see how the countries of the West can achieve a unity of Christianity and patriotism, but in Japan

11. The fact that Kambartel’s reading of the book confuses Nishitani’s descriptions of views he is refuting for endorsements of those views is in part the fault of Nishitani’s own presentation. Still, in her enthusiasm to demonstrate his “Unterstützung und Rechtfertigung einer totalitären Aufopferung ereinnahme des Individuums für den Staat, einer völligen Aufopferung des Individuums für den Staat” (KAMBARTEL 1989, 72), her criticisms often land rather wide of their mark.

there is a tendency to “conflate devotion to a religious path through Buddhism and Confucianism with service to the nation” in the attempt to bring a universal, global dimension into love of country. The problem is that self-awareness of the world gets reduced to the internal structure of the nation which is then made to serve as a basis for a new culture that embraces both East and West (NKC 4: 294–6). Nishitani sets his sights higher than this.

In the concrete, Nishitani shies away from talk of “Japanizing” neighboring countries and no mention is made in the book of support for the idea of a “Co-Prosperity Sphere,” but the underlying conviction of Japan’s special place as the first Asian country to take a self-conscious stance against the West is very much indicated from the start (NKC 4: 262). Nishitani believed he was living in an age when the center of gravity of world history was shifting, but not in the sense of new conquests by world powers. Rather, he saw a growing awareness of a truer unity that would do away with the old hegemonies, so that the “seas of the world form a single surface.” The “war being waged at present between Europe and East Asia... is a struggle for hegemony between England and Germany... in which the victory of Europe takes precedence over the advantages or disadvantages to particular countries.” It signals a world in the throes of throwing off an old order and ushering in a new order.

From this viewpoint, Nishitani sees Japan’s coming of age as a crucial element in the process, and in this sense “the present age, when the world is truly becoming a world-historical world, is an age in which Japan has become world-historical” (NKC 4: 326–8). The pattern of historical evolution that guides his thinking here is a simple one:

During the historical age whose center of gravity was the Mediterranean Sea, England was no more than an outpost of the Roman Empire, but it became a focal point of world history when the center of gravity shifted to the Atlantic Ocean in the modern age. In the same way, Japan, long thought to be a “speck on the edge of the world,” and even in the modern age little more than a fringe territory, has developed to the point of waking up the Pacific Ocean, becoming a focal point of world history, and turning the politics of the world into a truly global politics. (NKC 4: 298)

The demand for a “new world order” did not issue from the political will of any particular country, from an economic clash between the haves and the have-nots, nor from any intellectual ground. It was a matter of “historical necessity” whose causes were at once “simpler and more universal.” Once the process starts, it takes on a life of its own (300–1).

The new relationship between the individual and the state, insofar as it entails awareness of a core identity and a transcending of that identity, needs common ground. One might expect Nishitani to call the notion of a universal “world” into service here, but he does not, if only because he cannot accept the universality of the world as an absolute in a political sense, let alone philosophically or religiously. The relation of the world to the nation, and to the individual via the nation, requires awareness of the identity and the limits of identity, of what the world is and what it is not. The absolute grounding of all this “awareness,” public and private, national and international, requires “a universal standpoint of nothingness.” This is the final basis he offers for the “opening” of Japan to the world and the historical necessity of Japan’s role as leader in East Asia:

A negation of the historical closure in which a culture and religion are born has the reverse effect of heightening the particularity of its spirit and at the same time spiritualizing its bonds with others. This is none other than the universal spirit of nothingness.... This spirit of absolute nothingness has been formed most self-consciously within the spirit of East Asia, a fact that will have to give it a place of significance in the spiritual history of the world from here on. Here Japan stands at the center. (NKC 4: 322)

Such is the skeleton—minus the long intervening sorties into European history—of Nishitani’s project to submit a religious philosophy of self-awareness to the cause of justifying Japan’s vocation in the construction of a new world order.

#### DE-WESTERNIZING JAPANESE IDENTITY

The question of recovering Japan’s identity without discarding the achievements of modernity runs subtly throughout the materials being discussed here, though direct comments to the effect tend to



be impressionistic and to lack theoretical structure. In the *Chūōkōron* discussions he expresses his agreement with those who saw the revival of the past as the only way to achieve this. What is unique to his view is that religion is in a special position to effect the retrieval because the past is always just within its reach, even though it often retreats to abstractions removed from history. “What is needed at present,” he states, “is a religious standpoint that can embrace modern notions of progress and pragmatic idealism and yet itself resist becoming an idealistic religion.” The religious standpoint he has in mind, however, is not Japanese at all, but one that takes into account the diversity of religions in Greater East Asia: “In other words, because the region has a mixture of virtually all the world religions, it harbors within itself a problem that is not seen in other regions of the world.” It is a question of returning to the essence of the religious standpoint, namely, a relationship of the individual to the absolute (WSJ 33, 222).

Granted, the idea of the individual imported with modernity is one cut off from anything absolute, or rather “one in which the establishment of the person in relation to an absolute has given way to the absoluteness of the individual.” Still, the achievement of the adventuresome, experience-centered individual is not to be discarded as such. For Nishitani “there is no way to conquer this individualism without returning to that point and starting over again.” The problem is, there are no available paradigms for “what it means to be human.” For a majority of the intelligentsia, the break with past models that took place during the Meiji restoration was replaced with “superficial models of self-‘cultivation’ pursued through ties with Western culture,” but the general public, including women, wandered about disoriented, “unable to find anything of real substance in either traditional Japanese culture or Western culture” (WSJ 52, 346–7).

As for how the forging of a new Japanese identity is related to a revival of its own past, Nishitani expresses doubts over the “terribly fragile” educational policy of putting all the stress on Japan’s past history and “immersing people in a patriotic spirit,” which “in the worst case only makes frogs in a well.” Somehow, modernity has to be taken into the picture. The capacity to do this is itself a hallmark of Japan’s moral energy, as seen in the “confident spirit” with which Japan embraced culture and

technology. “This is something the Chinese have failed to understand about the Japanese, and it is of the utmost importance that we get them to swallow it.” At the same time, the quest of a Japanese identity is also part of the construction of a Co-Prosperity Sphere, all of which has to contend with the “ceaseless propaganda of America and Britain.” He counts it a blessing that, unlike modern Europe, the countries of Greater East Asia lack “a clearly defined consciousness as a people” (WSJ 73, 167, 310, 342).

Nishitani asserts that the “purification of the spirit” required for Japan to forge a new identity extends to the culture as a whole but begins with a certain “asceticism” in the individual. “The waging of war has introduced controls into various aspects of life today,” which liberalism can only experience as a restriction but for which “we need to seek a positive meaning and then go on to radicalize them so that a new transformation of values can take place.” There is a real “self-awareness” that combines “ordinary mind with extraordinary spirit.” Rather than seek to compensate the public with entertainment for the sacrifices they are being called on to make, Nishitani calls for a general revival of the living spirit of Tokugawa *bushidō* as epitomized in the saying “arms and letters—a single path.” The kind of “self-restraint” entailed, he adds, is only possible if the economic and political leadership can harness the “moral power of the spirit” into a single working unity that “can move the nation and the world” (WSJ 360, 362, 410–11).

In the *Overcoming Modernity* symposium, too, he criticizes the “intoxication” and “captivity” of the Japanese by the high culture of the West and its progress, making them susceptible to its individualism (WSJ 240). But if one sets ancient Japanese Buddhist thought alongside the ideas of thinkers like the philosopher Herbert Spenser, for example, and looks at the two from the vantage point of the present, the latter “pales” by comparison. “Why have Buddhist and Confucian thinking been thrown out and such superficial thinking become so fashionable and caused such a stir?” he asks. He goes on:

The feudal period was marked by the social discrimination of warriors, farmers, artisans, and merchants. Now without a transition away from a situation in which the lives of ordinary people were at the whim and mercy of the *samurai* to equality and an age of civil liberties—

in the worst case, of individualism and liberalism—there'd have been no way for Japan to achieve unity in the form of a nation of people centered on the Imperial Household.... The “opening of civilization” and introduction of civil liberties is still tied to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment of the West.... In my high school and university days, I felt the urge to read the literature and classics of Japan’s past, but except for my personal interests in the poet Bashō and the *Manyōshū*, they didn’t really sit well with me. It was the same with the *Kojiki* and such works. In contrast, Western literature seemed as if it had been written for me.... Western literature had a raw vitality to it.... Just now I spoke of the stir over Spenser, but is it not the case that in the name of Western learning and its “scientific” or *wissenschaftlich* character, people are being taken in all kinds of superficialities while the sort of profound philosophical reasoning we see in Buddhism is pushed to one side? (WSJ 242–3, 245–9)

Nishitani’s first major essay on modern European culture was published in 1940 and reissued that same year as part of a collection of earlier essays published under the title *A Philosophy of Elemental Subjectivity*. The book was reprinted in a 1961 edition, where Nishitani moved the essay to the end on the grounds that the wartime situation in which the arguments were made has passed, leaving much of the text “inadequate” (NKC I: 6). In it, he attempts to identify modernity as a child of the West that has been nurtured since the middle ages but today is approaching its end. The key elements, which he identifies as a materialist, mechanistic culture, and the spirit of individualism, have reached a point of such internal conflict—and distance from the rich spiritual and non-individualistic culture in Europe’s history—that “modern” culture is showing its bankruptcy on all sides and “stands on the eve of a new conversion.” In particular, he singles out modern individualism as having become a kind of “ethos” that is simply “breathed in like the air without reaching consciousness” (NKC I: 119–21).

Once again, the crucial question for Nishitani is whether Japan can find a way to inherit the kind of European spirit found in the medieval mystics, for example, and “develop it further” in order to overcome the crisis it has inherited from the West, and in so doing bring the force

of the “Japanese spirit” to bear as a positive force in the world (NKC I: 150).

In his writings between 1940 and 1945, Nishitani’s take on world history and Japan’s place in it was always associated with a recovery of a spiritual, religious dimension that had been eclipsed by the forfeiture of identity to the processes of modernization. In a section of the essay on “Modern European Civilization and Japan” devoted to a critique of Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* he utters a clear reprimand against the “brute instincts” behind its totalitarian approach to nationhood and against its neglect of the ideal of world citizenship and world nationhood that Christianity’s idea of universal love had championed in the West.<sup>12</sup> Though referring to Hitler as a “political genius,” the context makes his irony clear, as Nishitani reduces that genius to little more than a distorted sensitivity to the spiritual poverty of modernity in Europe after the First World War:

The only thing that can defeat the crisis of modern European culture is an ethos capable of combining into a single, foundational standpoint the three periods of brute naturalness, rational intellect, and the transcendent spirit of religion. We may speak of it as a uniting of raw life, reason, and mysticism, or as an ethos that can embrace a life of economics and politics, of morality and knowledge, and of religion.... Only if equivalent aspects of the crisis of modern European civilization (which is at the same time the modern civilization of the world) can be overcome in our own country through the ethos we inherited from our forebears, will Japan then the Japanese spirit be able to play an active role in world history and to take on world significance. (NKC I: 147–8, 150)

The same theme of preserving Japan’s identity is taken up directly in *View of the World*, *View of the Nation*, but always in the general language of culture, tradition, and spirit. No mention is made in the course of the work, not even in the sections devoted to recovering Japanese identity

12. Nishitani seems to echo here the ideas of Friedrich Meinecke (1862–1954), whose theory of nationalism led him to a critique of Hitler. No direct mention is made of the connection, though Meinecke is cited in support of the importance of the nation (4: 266).

from its own past and the past of Asia, to the Imperial Household and its role inside or outside of Japan as a symbol of collective identity. When he speaks of the “rebirth of the traditional spirit” in Japan, it is as part of a larger Asian effort to break free of “the absorption of a prospering Western culture” by turning its digestion of the West into the basis for cultivating a high cultural spirit of its own. This is a “self-aware development whose spirit must penetrate deeply into the inner life of the people in general.” A “new distillation” of the Japanese spirit needs not only a view of the world but “a recognition of people everywhere and at every crossroads that the traditional ethos that needs to be defeated is resisted by an ingrained inertia” (NKC 4: 333–4, 347–8).

For Nishitani, the reconstruction of a “Japanese character with a view of the world” entails three elements: praxis, philosophy, and religion. Unlike the West, “whose view of the world by and large has lost its way by following purely rational interests,” Japan needs to turn to its past to recover practical, “primitive intuitions” for which the kind of self-centered scientific and rational knowledge of the West cannot provide a foundation. A more universal and objective rationality must break free of purely subjectivist claims on a ground at which “the negation of the self and the disclosure of a realm of commonality between self and other” open up. For this the self-reflection of philosophy is required, lest “assertions of a Japanese spirit collapse into self-infatuation.”

Finally, openness to the wider world is needed lest “the true elevation of the national character” land itself in a “self-important nationalism.” Here is where religion comes into the picture in order to achieve a “standpoint of praxis that invigorates autonomy by negating the reason and scientism that negate praxis.” If religious faith is to draw on a “creative continuity of tradition” to aid in the process, it “must come to birth out of the mutual negation of past and future in the midst of the present.” He suggests that the world can be seen as a kind of *dōjō* in which a single Way runs through heaven, earth, and humanity so that one’s view of the world directly becomes a form of “global praxis.” This kind of “all-in-one, one-in-all”—a “nothingness” in which world and mind are fused—that ties the view of the world to everyday life is to be found in the “culture of the past that Japan can proudly hold up to the world as a *Kultur* of humanity itself.” Here he widens the sectarian notion of

religion to include the traditional arts like the Way of Flowers and the Way of Tea that express the transformation of everyday life into art. In this regard he cites in passing the celebrated Tea Master Okakura Ten-shin's idea of "the spiritual nobility of all people" can form the basis of an "Eastern democracy"—the exact opposite of the "racism of Nazi totalitarianism" (NKC 4: 350–8, 360).

In speaking of the role of religion Nishitani cautions against a view of "nation-in-world, world-in-nation" that deprives religion of its transnational character:

From the standpoint of the nation, religion is seen as a direct endowment of politics and ethics, without taking into consideration the originally global nature of religion. When that happens, religion is simply contracted to something directly immanent in the nation, blocking the wellsprings of the true strength of religion. By trying to make religion of service to the nation, it falls into the contradiction of rendering it useless. (NKC 4: 367)

This does not, however, simply negate a "healthy relationship" in which religion serves to diminish the "private" to return to the "public." Drawing a distinction from Pascal, he claims that Japan is better equipped to achieve a balance here because of its native *esprit de finesse* which is evident in its mythology and contrasts sharply with the Western *esprit de géométrie*. In an excursus on the role of mythology, he insists that it not become "theologically dogmatic" or assume to take over the role of religious self-awareness needed to turn the private to the public by offering "an ethic of *Blut und Boden*." Religion, unlike myth but like philosophical skepticism, is born of a "deep and vital crisis of the human heart" and a call to an "expansion of the heart" that transcends national borders, a confrontation with "nihility" that transcends not only philosophy and ethics but organized religion itself (NKC 4: 370, 374–7). This is in fact the note on which he ends his text:

Education in learning and morality are necessary to the nation, and in the end religion does not contradict that necessity. Rather, from its own standpoint, religion can accompany it by teaching magnanimity. (NKC 4: 380)

## RELATIVIZING THE SCIENTIFIC WORLDVIEW

If there is one aspect of Nishitani's critique of modernity that he did not abandon in his later writing, it is his critique of the scientific worldview. Allusions in the *Chūōkōron* discussions are few and brief, most of them touching on disenchantment with the "positivistic" claim to present the facts about the world and about human beings as offering a foundation for truth and its quest to the neglect of religion and philosophy. He saw the dominion of science, although inherited from the Christian West where its face-off with religion is "the most fundamental problem facing Europe today," as every bit as real a question for Japan (WSJ 24–5, 40, 97). In contrast, at one point, his enthusiasm for the "war in the Hawaiian seas" bubbles over into the remark that the "union of science and spirit" represented there shows "the most authentic way of living in reality" (WSJ 258).

In his essay prepared for the *Overcoming Modernity* symposium Nishitani notes that the Western culture inherited by Japan arrived in the fragmented form of "areas of specialization" that had lost unity and touch with their subject matter but gained weight by their association with progress in science. The question of subjectivity, he argued, was reduced to "what was left over after science had taken its spoils." With "self" and "consciousness" becoming the objects of science, ideas like "mind" and "soul" were effectively removed from science or reduced to purely mechanical epiphenomena (WSJ 19, 23). In the ensuing roundtable he sees the standpoint of scientific progress as directly related to a weakened faith in a creative, provident deity. He suggests that the Christian manifestation of God in revelation as both entailing a negation of the "I" or private self<sup>13</sup>—comparable to the manifestation of Buddha-nature as "nothingness"—is most visible in the mystical tradition, which stands in contradiction to faith in scientific progress (WSJ 196–7).

At the time, Nishitani was also deep into research on the mystics that he

13. In his essays on mysticism and his essay on "The Philosophy of Religion: An Introduction," Nishitani frequently uses expressions such as 自己を越える, 脱自, 忘我, and 脱我 to speak of self-negation, which raises the suspicion that his use of 私 in the symposium discussions alongside 無我 (197–9) is meant to imply the distinction

had begun during his time abroad in Freiburg. The inherent contradictions of modernity are touched on in only one of the essays on mysticism published during these years, a piece entitled “German Mysticism and German Philosophy.” Read by itself and in the context given it in his *Collected Writings*, there is little to attract one’s attention. But coincidences of vocabulary and argument with the *Overcoming Modernity* symposium and the *Chūōkōron* discussions are too plain to ignore. In laying out the background for his study of Eckhart’s response to the medieval conflict between faith and reason, Nishitani begins by observing that the “time has come for a people to carve out its place in world history,” when it has achieved the needed “self-awareness to shape its own individual ‘spirit,’ when the soul of a people can be elevated to the spirit of world history and realized there.” Nishitani sees three such turning points in German philosophy: the German mysticism of Eckhart, the Protestant Reformation of Luther, and German idealism.

He presents Eckhart as struggling to break through the medieval impasse of affirming God through an absolute negation of self and world by focusing on “the freedom of the soul” and turning away from the Latin spirit to express himself in “the ethos of his people.” This shifted the focus to the contradiction between a thoroughgoing denial of the self vis-à-vis the absoluteness of God, and a thoroughgoing affirmation of the soul in its freedom. This problem has yet to be resolved, as we see in the case of the “modern spirit,” which has landed itself in its own impasse by taking the path of affirming the world and the self, an impasse “from whose difficulties it has yet to extricate itself” (NKC 7: 205–6, 227–8). Although it is difficult to capture the flavor of these allusions without citing the passages in full, there is no mistaking the connections with Nishitani’s conviction that the time has come for Japan to get over Western modernity by asserting its identity as a people.

The remarks critical of the domination of the scientific spirit that we find scattered throughout the pages of *View of the World*, *View of the Nation* add little to Nishitani’s views except to locate them in the con-

between the “public” and the “private” that appears in his *Overcoming Modernity* essay in the context of self-denial for the sake of the nation. None of the participants pick this up, nor does Nishitani pursue it.



text of the new view of the world he is advancing. His most extended statement appears in his discussion of the alienation of religion from the modern West, arguing that Christianity's transference of religion to a relationship with the realities of "another world" have made it easy prey for scientific rationalism, leaving a yawning gap:

The religiosity of the West rebels against the spontaneity of reason, the inevitable result of which is a philosophy detached from religion. There are those who have managed a unification of the two by seeing something "uncreated" and prior to God's creative work in the recesses of the soul, but in general religiosity focuses its gaze on a God of the *al di là* separated from all things human, reason included.... The new Japanese view of the world highlights this orientation in the Western spirit which suffers from a fundamental isolation of religion from philosophy. (NKC 4: 365)

#### THE LOGIC OF OVERCOMING MODERNITY

There are certain patterns of thought that strike the reader again and again in Nishitani's wartime essays. The most basic, as touched on earlier, is his extension of a basically individual, and for Nishitani quintessentially religious, process of coming to self-awareness to include the self-awareness of the nation and the world. His idea is not simply to promote a national and international community of the enlightened. Rather, he treats the nation and the world as subjects in their own right. I cite from the opening and closing pages of his *View of the World, View of the Nation*:

As one who has devoted himself to philosophy and religion, I have the feeling that the attempt to relate these clearly to the nation as far as my powers allow, are an especially pressing and necessary task in the present situation. At present religion and philosophy are suited to the task only if they take a global perspective of universal humanity... (NKC 4: 261).

I have considered the global character of the nation as *a subjectivity of no-self through self-negation*, and further considered such a standpoint

as a task whose truth needs to be uncovered<sup>14</sup> one way or another, not only in Japan but in all nations. On this fundamental point my thinking separates itself from nationalism. Even when speaking of the subjectivity of Japan, I had in mind an illumination of the world from a position that offers self-negation in the form of an immediate affirmation or thesis. In speaking of the self-negation aimed at the transition from the modern nation to a new way of being, I referred to it as a leap from a subjectivity of national “ego” to a subjectivity of national “non-ego.” (NKC 4: 38I–2)

In Nishitani’s later works, this way of thinking fades away, but in the works under consideration here there is hardly a page where the idea of the nation comes up in which some aspect of this pattern of thinking does not feature. It stands behind even the most offhand remarks made in the course of the *Chūōkōron* discussions and the *Overcoming Modernity* symposium. Put the other way around, from all the materials I have read through, I find no evidence that he ever backed away from this position or explicitly took a counter position during the years in question.

But if this is his overt working assumption, there is nothing strikingly original about it at first glance. Hegel had already given full subjectivity to the state as the essence of history, and in the process exempted the subjectivity of the state from the distinction between altruistic and egoistic acts that governs human morality. Nishitani’s position is not very different, to the point that his idea of “moral energy,” in reinforcing the subjectivity of the nation, not only serves the visible public good but is also serving a higher, invisible, transmoral cunning of historical reason. I do not know whether he makes a problem of the connection between historical necessity and moral exemption anywhere in his writings. For a thinker who put a premium on self-awareness, Nishitani’s lack of other-awareness when it came to promoting the Japanese ideal among the peoples of Asia is distressing. For everything I know of his later work, I suspect that if he had been faced with it, he would have recognized the severe limits of extending “self-awareness” from the individual to the collective, and then from the particularity of Japan to the universality of

14. The term he uses here, 開顯, is an allusion to the Tendai Buddhist idea of uncovering the truth from within conventional or expedient teachings.

Asia. From where we stand today, an explicit conversion in his thinking might seem the best and most morally acceptable way of responding to the suspicions and criticisms that he met with in the postwar period. The fact that he chose not to express himself in this regard leaves us at something of a loss. Whether there was some deeper change of heart that led him to turn away from his political views in his later work we simply cannot say on the basis of the corpus of writings he left behind.

In any event, when we search the texts to see just how Nishitani himself applied the process of self-awareness to the development of the nation and its place in history, we see that there are other, more tacit assumptions at play. In a later book, Nishitani will cite his teacher, Nishida Kitarō, to the effect that in order to understand a thinker, one had first to get a “feel” for how his mind worked. Once one had the “knack,” one could understand not only what was written but how the writer might think about matters that were not immediately taken up (NISHITANI 1991, 65).

I believe there is just such a tactic at work in the movement of Nishitani’s logic, one that offers us a key to understanding how he winds his way through discussing the relationship between individual, nation, and world. It first becomes explicit in a series of lectures he delivered on nihilism in 1949 and indeed accounts for our decision to change the title of his *Nihilism* to *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism* in its English translation. In a word, Nishitani’s approach to “getting through” modernity was to press modernity, from within modernity, to “overcome itself.”<sup>15</sup>

Consider the following statement concerning the true standpoint of “neutrality” latent but not sufficiently realized in modernity’s spirit of “objectivity”:

Let the modern world be defeated as it may, its arrival at this truth cannot be obliterated. Rather, the defeat of the modern age includes the fact that this truth has not yet been able to appear there fully.... This entails *overcoming the modern age by setting a course towards fur-*

15. The Japanese term translated as “overcoming” here does not carry the alternative English meaning of “defeating” a foe, but simply means “getting over” or “getting through” a difficulty. Western critics of the idea almost uniformly miss this nuance.

*ther radicalizing the modern standpoint...* The orientation to radicalizing the spirit of the modern age and the orientation to opposing it head-on are tied together. The radicalization of the standpoint of objectivity belongs to the resurrection of the standpoint of subjectivity. (NKC 4: 228-9)

The phrase set in italics shows a pattern repeated frequently not only in this book but in all of the material considered above. As should be clear, he is not pursuing a logic of self-destruction according to which inherently flawed systems of thought or social organization overextend themselves and at some point cross a threshold beyond which they begin to work against their original aims. The “higher standpoint” he refers to frequently is one that transforms the Hegelian notion of sublation to a logic of “affirmation-in-negation, negation-in-affirmation.”<sup>16</sup> As such, it reaches across his interpretation of the mystics—in particular, Eckhart’s idea of “letting go of God for the sake of God” (NKC 7: 177–9)<sup>17</sup>—to the various elements involved in overcoming modernity.

As pervasive as this model of “self-overcoming” by way of affirmation radicalized to the point of self-negation is, nowhere does Nishitani detail the move from the mental exercise of the logic to a concrete praxis involving the relationship between individual, nation, and world. He applies it to religion, life, culture, egoism, science, the individual self and the “self” of the nation in the *Overcoming Modernity* symposium (OM 22, 24–5, 34). In the *Chūōkōron* discussions he speaks of “defeating historicism by way of historicism” and suggests that “the defeat of individualism” has become possible because “it has gone as far as it can and has now reached a bottom.” At the end of the final discussion, he remarks that, facing one grave moment after another, “the way will show itself from out of desperation” (OM 45, 52, 54). But it is not clear where the natural course of history ends and decisive action begins, let alone how

16. The logic of *soku-hi* 即非 that he shared with his predecessors Nishida Kitarō and Tanabe Hajime.

17. It should be remarked that dialectical thinking in the form of a “union of absolute opposites,” which is explicit in Nishitani’s analysis of the Western mysticism of the time (NKC 7: 177, 185), does not come up for direct discussion in his critiques of modernity.

one would now when the radicalizing of modernity had in fact given way to its overcoming.

I am not saying that the entirety of what Nishitani has to say is empty abstraction, only that the transition from logical pattern to concrete praxis is elusive. Part of the reason lies in the fact that, despite his digressions into history, a pattern does not emerge from his reading of historical events past or present any more than the prominence he gives to “self-awareness” that can be called the conclusion to an analysis of history. What we have seems to be in the nature of a heuristic maxim given in advance, insuring that he finds what he expects to find. What is more, it is the kind of heuristic that permits no grounds for its disproving, either theoretical or practical. This is not to say that it does not bring a fresh perspective, particularly when the questions he is treating are on the same epistemological level as the heuristic. For example, in discussing the conflict between faith and reason in medieval Europe, he notes a kind of self-overcoming in the “intellectualism” of Thomas Aquinas, insofar as he “uses Aristotle’s philosophy to satisfy the self-conscious standpoint of reason until it shifts from within to a higher faith, and in this way seeks to overcome free thought by using thought itself as a weapon” (NKC 7: 151). But when the heuristic is turned on historical events, we expect more in the way of a rational justification.

Nishitani’s most determined efforts at the time to wrap his logic around the fundamental metaphysical questions of the one and the many, self and other, are argued from examples of its use in poetry and religion. No indication is given as to what might qualify as a counter-example against the universality of the pattern (NKC 19: 269–70, 282). Certainly the sufferings imposed on Japan’s neighbors for the sake of their own particular “self-awareness as a people” and to secure Japan’s own identity as guardians of a new world order did not prompt any question on the matter. In its purest philosophical expression, therefore, Nishitani’s basic pattern of thought neither requires historical verification nor need bother acknowledging its critics. I cite from his 1941 essay on the philosophy of religion:

Radicalizing reflection within itself, the bottom of the “self” appears, and at that point the self comes up against a negation of life itself at

the bottom of life. Reflection is a negation of life, but from standpoint of reflection the self directs itself again to things and exits itself. Controlling things, loving things, knowing things is a way of embracing things. But when the self takes the opposite course to radicalize reflection within itself, it is there that it encounters the negation of life itself. There is a denial of the self at the bottom of the self. That is, in radicalizing the life of self-negation, the self faces within itself the total self-negation of life, the negation of that very self-negation of life, the negation of life itself. This is the absolute negation of the self and at the same time the absolute negation of life. At the bottom of the self, death appears. But when one fixes the gaze of the self on death, one must take a step away and enter into death itself, appropriating the death that the self encountered at its own bottom and transforming it into the self itself. (NKC 6: 26)

Nishitani goes on for several pages in this vein, but the passage above should be sufficient to show that he sees the transition from the deliberate pursuit of affirmation to the “encounter” with negation (or vice-versa) as something that takes place naturally and of its own. The implication seems to be that as long as one is “radical” and “thoroughgoing” enough in one’s affirmation and negations, the rest will take care of itself. In this sense, there is a kind of “self-overcoming” implied in Nishitani’s thinking at the most fundamental level, which was then carried over to concrete questions of national destiny, cultural identity, and the like.

Now aside from the logic of argumentation, we still have to ask whether there is any other internal logic at work, explicit or implicit, that might help us place his work in the history of Japan’s wartime ideology. On the basis of the material used above, three questions can be disposed of rather easily.

To begin with, we may safely dismiss the idea that Nishitani’s few allusions to Shinto mythology can be read in any sense as an appeal to their authority. Nor is there any textual basis for claiming that he put them on a par with the Buddhist and Confucian traditions “which cannot be extricated from Japan’s high culture” (NKC 4: 261). On the contrary, as we have seen, he expresses skepticism on the matter.

Secondly, Nishitani would have been the first to see that the cultural diversity of the world makes it unthinkable to absolutize Japanese cul-

ture in general,<sup>18</sup> let alone the emperor system in particular. Of all the philosophies available to support absolutism, imperial or otherwise, his numerous objections make it the least suited.

Thirdly, in his critiques of modernity, Nishitani's familiarity with an appreciation for the intellectual history of the West is beyond question. In a special afterword he penned for the Japanese translation of his 1940 book *Der Europäische Nihilismus*, Karl Löwith, who had fled the Nazi persecution in 1936 and was teaching at Tōhoku University, complained that "the way the majority of the Japanese take in European thought shows an insecurity that we have a hard time really getting a grasp on." He goes on:

They seem to be living in a two-story house. On the first floor they think and feel like Japanese. On the second, a string of European scholarship from Plato to Heidegger is lined up. The European teacher is perplexed over just how to move back and forth from one floor to the other. (LÖWITH 1948, 27, 29–30)

In Nishitani, Löwith would have met someone scampering up and down the stairs freely and with surprising confidence in both worlds of thought and feeling. Even as he sought a way through modernity rooted in Japanese tradition, he did so in a discourse that would have been familiar to the modern West, if often not to the ideologues whose totalitarian ideals he opposed to the end.

These are the simple questions. Far more difficult is deciding just where to place his wartime writings in the ideological context of the time. Granted, his penchant for the abstract and his strategy of facing modernity by stimulating its "self-overcoming" would have been of little practical use to the military or government leadership. Granted, too, the grotesque naïveté of his proposal to spread Japanese influence in Asia by educating the higher cultures as "half-Japanese." Still, without a careful determination of just how influential his ideas were and in which circles, it is not possible to sustain the claim that he had by and large been able

18. The single exception I have recorded is a reference to Japan as an "expression of absolute spirit" in the *Chūōkōron* discussions (OM 50), but the context makes it clear that he is speaking in Hegel's terms in order to counter the idea of the totalitarian state and its claim to the status of "objective spirit" (OM 395).

to stand his ground above the intellectual and moral excesses of the age. I have not myself read deeply enough in the primary sources of the ideological literature relevant to the question to know whether the philosophical basis Nishitani added to perilous ideas like *Gesamtkrieg* had any impact, practical or theoretical, on the war effort. These are matters that, if left to the surface impressions of hindsight to decide, too easily take on the stature of a competing ideology and ultimately leave us in the dark about what was going on at the time and what meaning it might have for us today.

Even apart from the ideological question, the writings considered in the foregoing pages help to sharpen what may be the most basic theoretical problem a philosophy centered on “self-awakening” has to contend with, namely, negotiating the transition from the demands of self-reflection to the realities of social life. The *scandalum* of the *Chūōkōron* discussions is not merely a regrettable opinion expressed under the duress of war and afterwards set aside. It reaches deep into the recesses of Nishitani’s thinking, to an ineradicable hostility between the elitism and discrimination entailed in making a supreme value of self-awareness on the one hand, and on the other, the moral obligation to keep one’s mind open to the novelties of experience lived in the immediacy of the everyday and to the sheer wonder of otherness. This “good war” is too much a part of Nishitani’s mature work to leave any doubt that, on calmer reflection, it would lead him to disacknowledge the shallowness of his views on the neighboring cultures of Asia and on the world-historical leadership he had assigned Japan. There is no question here of a lasting peace, a harmony of opposites, without cutting the very heart out of Nishitani’s philosophy.

Reading Nishitani’s later work, I have often felt as if I were stepping into one of those great stone cathedrals whose vaulting architecture lifts the mind above the concerns of the everyday to relocate the things of life in a realm without time or form. But even as the gaze is drawn upwards, there is always the sense of something dark and menacing in the crypt below. Nishitani himself was never far from this awareness himself, both in his personal religious struggles and in the struggles of his age. Whether or not the material summarized in these pages may hearten his critics or



fortify his defenders, at least I can hope that it will help complicate the simpler judgments on both sides.

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