

The Other Within

The Relational Self in Nishida's Corpus

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I think that the notion of the individual's being an individual only in relation to other individuals has been neglected. As I have often said, the unity of the person is not a mere continuity but a continuity of discontinuity.¹

At first glance, the relational self does not appear to be a recurrent subject within Nishida's corpus. From his first work, *An Inquiry into the Good*, to his last essay, "The Logic of *Topos* and the Religious Worldview," he is concerned with presenting a non-dualistic logic that captures experience. Wary of dualisms like subject and object and idealism and materialism, Nishida describes experience as that which unfolds through action, expression, and perception in the place between consciousness and matter.² However, true reality

1. NISHIDA 1970, 141 (NKZ 7: 268).

2. Nishida calls originary experience "pure" because drawing the line between subject and object occurs after the original unity of "just perceiving." For example, before reflection, there is just a rose. Only after the initial perception do I add onto experience

must be understood from both the side of the subject *and* from the side of the objective world. He highlights the agency and force of the world which determines the subject.

The real... does not entirely transcend the person, for it always retains the meaning of determining us. True reality is that which fully determines us—indeed, which determines us from our very depths.³

Ultimately, there is no inside or outside to experience for Nishida; the world and the self are mutually self-determining. The Kyoto School philosopher describes reality through his logic of absolutely contradictory self-identity (絶対矛盾的自己同一), which holds that all beings are empty of intrinsic essence and formed through their relations to other beings. Thus, speaking of the “world” and the “self” as distinct entities is misleading; rather, there is only a single, interdependent reality.

Given an interest in logic and ontology, coupled with the fact that he includes few examples from everyday human experience in his voluminous writings, we may be surprised that intersubjectivity is a point of focus within his work. However, following Steve Odin,⁴ I argue that the relational self is an important and recurrent theme in Nishida’s project. Indeed, the “I-Thou” dimension of selfhood is examined in numerous works throughout the different phases of his thought, including *Inquiry into the Good* (1911), *Fundamental Problems of Philosophy* (1933–4), “The Standpoint of Active Intuition” (1935), “Human Being” (1938), “I and Thou,” (1932) “Love of Self-Love of Other and the Dialectic” (1932), and “The Logic of *Topos* and the Religious Worldview” (1945).

In this paper I will seek to show how the intersubjective self is an important motif within his overall philosophical project, as it broad-

the concepts, “rose” and “self” as well as the abstraction “I perceive the rose.” See “Pure Experience” in NISHIDA 1990, 3–10 (NKZ 1: 9–18).

3. NISHIDA 1970, 2 (NKZ 7: 7).

4. See ODIN 1996.

ens the reader of Nishida's understanding of key aspects of his thought, including the self and its basis in nothingness, place, and the historical world with reference to his notions of "expression" and "creative activity." Aside from what the relational self can reveal about common themes in his philosophical project, these formulations offer insight into a vision of the self that is a confluence of relations. The implication of this view is that the self is always tied to an intersubjective space. The deepest reality of the self is Other. Nishida maintains that the self is expressive and free, yet he simultaneously implies that the self does not possess itself.

First, I will provide a brief background of key concepts within Nishida's thought, namely, his view of the self, place, and expressive activity within the historical world. Secondly, I will examine his discussion of the self in relation by investigating three aspects of this discussion: (1) living-*qua*-dying, (2) recognition, and (3) expression. Lastly, I will discuss the implications of such a model of selfhood with reference to vulnerability, possession, and agency.

Concentrating on the "Thou structure" will help rectify the overemphasis, in American Nishida scholarship, on pure experience and absolute nothingness and the avoidance of his discussion of the social self.⁵ According to Odin, much attention is devoted to concepts such as the "self as pure experience" and the "self as absolute nothingness," even though later writings articulate the self in relation in the *social-historical* world.⁶

While all three ways of formulating the self demonstrate the non-duality and interpenetration of the particular and the universal,

5. Odin points out that Nishida scholars have tended to focus on Nishida's conception of the true self as something individual. However, in his later essays Nishida clarifies that the self is always social (ODIN 1996, 85–7).

6. Like Odin, Kopf presents an argument that upholds the importance of the social self in Nishida's thought: "[Nishida]... made the I and Thou relationship the fundament of his theory of self-awareness" (KOPF 2001, 84). Odin claims that the "I-Thou" dimension of selfhood is a "central and recurrent motif" throughout Nishida's entire philosophical project (ODIN 1996, 81).

i.e., self and world, Nishida's work on the social-historical world contains a distinct way of rendering this understanding of the self through his notion of the I-Thou relation. In these works, he concretizes what it means to say that the self is a conduit for the world's expression by calling attention to the way that social-historical self-other relations are constitutive of individuality.

An investigation of Nishida's concept of the relational self would not be complete without a discussion of Hegel's influence on his philosophical project. His philosophical works, letters, and diaries contain numerous references to the German philosopher. Furthermore, even when Hegel is not explicitly cited, his influence on Nishida's thought seems evident in statements like: "The I becomes an I through recognition by a Thou, just as a Thou becomes a Thou only through recognition by an I."⁷ This vein of thought runs throughout Nishida's entire philosophical project in his repetition of "affirmation-*qua*-negation" and "continuity of discontinuity," which echo the idea that individuality emerges through a field of relation.

Nishida also prompts the reader to *realize* the mutual dependence of self and Other, but instead of taking this idea directly from Hegel, he draws on the Buddhist teaching of self-realization through emptiness. Hegel was clearly on the philosopher's mind as he considered the question of intersubjectivity due to the fact that he published "Hegel's Dialectic from my Point of View" one year prior to his essay "I and Thou." While the subject of Nishida's engagement with Hegel is vast, given my focus on intersubjectivity, I will limit my investigation to how the notion of recognition that emerges in the master-slave section of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* influenced his discussion of the relational selfhood.

I will now turn to examining three key aspects of Nishida's thought which will help us to understand his overall vision of the self: the nothingness at the base of the self, place, and the historical world.

7. As quoted in ODIN, 1996, 91.

NISHIDA'S MODEL OF THE SELF

Transcendence and Absolutely Self-Contradictory Identity

In "Human Being" (1938), Nishida writes of the self, "it is not within the self itself that it possesses self identity."⁸ This logic is tied to the Buddhist doctrine of emptiness and interdependent co-origination (*pratīyasamutpāda*). These doctrines signify that the self does not produce its own identity because it is empty of intrinsic essence. While we may posit the existence of a self through the workings of the conceptual mind, the self itself is ontologically fictitious. However, although the self does not exist as an unchanging core entity, human beings do possess distinct identities. The self—and in the Buddhist worldview, all things—gains its identity through its relations to other things. Using the example of a tree, the doctrine of interdependent co-origination claims that the tree does not have an individual essence; its identity is formed through the sun, water, and soil that make it what it is. Nishida describes his own way of conceiving of identity through the term "predicate logic." While "object logic" views a being as a reified entity or substance, "predicate logic" assumes that identity is not something "interior," self-generating, or self-sustaining.⁹

This way of envisioning the self may relate to our common sense understanding of our own identities. For instance, when we reflect on our identities, we do not discover a reified essence. Instead, we find a world that we are engaged in, i.e., we understand ourselves through an environment, a family, a workplace, etc. The self that one is and the self that one knows emerges from what is not self. Nishida writes, "If an object is considered as merely that which opposes the self spatially, the self is no more than a thing, and a relationship of this sort is a relationship of things."¹⁰ For the Japanese philosopher, identity is permeable; it issues from the thorough interaction of beings. Thus, human actions

8. NISHIDA 2012A, 169 (NKZ 9: 45).

9. NISHIDA 1987A, 3.

10. NISHIDA 1987B, 8.

are characterized as having the character of a contradictory identity.¹¹ We see here that all of reality follows the pattern of absolutely contradictory self-identity 絶対矛盾の自己同一; all beings are groundless and gain their identity through self-negation. Here, “self-negation” means that the self is a worldly being both in its consciousness and in its actions; that is to say, it is not self-contained. Our consciousness is always of something just as our actions involve acting on the historical, material world. Both entail moving outside of oneself and having our being in that which transcends us.

While all selfhood originates from what is “other,” in his last essay, Nishida focuses on the absolute other at the base of the self:

We are contradictory existence. We reflect the world within ourselves and yet have our selfhood in the absolute other.¹²

At the bottom of the self there is something that utterly transcends us and this something is neither foreign nor external to us.¹³

If something is empty of intrinsic essence, then at its base it is empty. Nishida uses the term “absolute nothingness” to refer to the true reality of the self. While we often act from a place that believes in its individuality and volition, Nishida asserts that this is not the only way of conceiving of ourselves. Religious-ethical reality originates from a space where absolute nothingness is affirmed and becomes the basis of one’s actions. It cannot rest upon believing in the power of one’s individual will. Here it is important to note that Nishida’s project goes further than offering a model of selfhood. Rather, he encourages the reader to *realize* that she or he is not a self-sustaining individual. He attempts to invoke a fundamental transformation where the self discovers that it is truly itself only through its own self-negation; it has its being in that which transcends it. Thus, it is important to note

11. NISHIDA 1987B, 8.

12. *Ibid.*, 6.

13. *Ibid.*, 85.

that Nishida's use of the term self often reflects *both* the self as absolute nothingness and the self as a particular existence.

Basho and the Historical World

Nishida expands his philosophical vision of the absolute interpenetration of self and world through his notion of place (*basho* 場所) in the mid-1920s. The metaphor of *basho* provides a "logical foundation" for his earlier work by replacing language of the "subject" with the new notion of a "field" of consciousness.¹⁴ In this account, consciousness is not the property of an independent, self-sustaining individual. In order to capture this sentiment, and to articulate action without neglecting it, Nishida describes experience as a place or field.

John Maraldo suggests that within Nishida's project, *basho* "functions as the field that is the opening [or non-dualism] of world and self."¹⁵ In Nishida's words,

The individual determines itself only in relation to other individuals. The idea of a unique self-determining individual has no meaning. In order for the individual to determine itself there must first be what I have called the determination of a place *basho*, i.e., a unity of absolute contradictories.¹⁶

The concept of *basho* abolishes any view of the identity of a being as that which is atomistic or self-subsistent.

The self-determination of absolute space... does not signify a place in which things exist. It must rather signify a place in which things are mutually determining, which is, as it were, a physical space of personal action. The mutual determination of things also implies that the place is self-determining.¹⁷

Nishida's notion of "expression" (表現), *as that which takes place*

14. MARALDO 2010.

15. Ibid.

16. NISHIDA 1970, 6-7 (NKZ 7: 16).

17. Ibid., 48 (NKZ 7: 94-5).

between two human beings and cannot be reduced to the will of merely one, helps to illustrate what he means by *basho*'s "self-determination." Agency does not issue from a subject; rather, *basho* becomes its site. The reader's understanding of agency is thus radically transformed; the subject does not merely stand against and act upon nature. Nishida's ontology consists of the mutual determination of self and world.

Expressive Activity and the Historical World

In later works, beginning in the 1930s, Nishida further develops his theories of *basho* and absolutely self-contradictory identity by affirming the agency of the historical world, i.e., how social structures and past events act on the self. He emphasizes that the human being is *homo faber*; production is an integral part of human existence.¹⁸ However, creativity does not emerge from the will of the self alone. Rather, the world expresses itself through the self: "The individual self is a singularity... it is a point of production."¹⁹ Human beings are fundamentally creative (e.g. we give birth to children, build cities, create art, etc.). What we make takes on an agency of its own due to it becoming a "public" or "historical thing"; it goes on to influence both its creator and historical society. In Nishida's words, "So to make simultaneously entails being made, both in the productive interaction with the thing made and subsequent to that interaction... we are—so to speak—made by making."²⁰ Here we see directly how Nishida's discussion of the historical world represents his desire to concretize his earlier theory of place by including action and production.

Nishida uses "expression" to refer to the non-dual relation between I and Thou in particular as well as the historical world in general. Driven towards presenting a unified view of reality that avoids dichotomies like subject and object, idealism and materialism, Nishida uses

18. NISHIDA 2012B, 158 (NKZ 8: 366).

19. NISHIDA 2012A, 69 (NKZ 8: 114–115).

20. NISHIDA 1998, 40 (NKZ 14: 270).

the word expression to refer to the self's creative activity that occurs in a *basho* of relation. Expression does not merely refer to the existence of interrelated activity, however; expressive activity issues from a thoroughly intersubjective place or field. Recalling the earlier quotation, "The world of expression is neither the world of objectivity, the world of objects, nor the world of subjectivity, consciousness. Again, the world of expression is neither the world of the I nor the world of the Thou, but the world of the I and Thou."²¹ Therefore, the "thoroughly self-expressive" self necessarily entails an intersubjective field of meaning and influence.

Now that I have provided background for key aspects within Nishida's thought, I will turn to Nishida's discussion of the I-Thou dimension of selfhood. My discussion will approach this topic through three aspects of this concept: (1) living-*qua*-dying, (2) recognition, and (3) expression. In the first section, I will focus on one text, *Fundamental Problems of Philosophy* (1933–1934), as it lays the groundwork for understanding Nishida's ontology together with his view of the relational self.

THE RELATIONAL SELF: LIVING-*QUA*-DYING,
RECOGNITION, AND EXPRESSIVE ACTIVITY

*Living-qua-dying in Fundamental Problems of Philosophy:
The Anxiety of Nothingness, Risk, and Vulnerability*

Before I begin my investigation into the concept "living-*qua*-dying" in *Fundamental Problems of Philosophy*, I will provide a very brief orientation to the text. Chapter One of the second half of *Fundamental Problems of Philosophy* begins by considering what reality is and then affirms that it must include the subject; the actual world is phenomenological in that one cannot step outside of it. It entails both consciousness and matter. Nishida's route to understanding reality is

21. As quoted by KOPF 2001 119.

through the formulation of a concrete logic. He writes “True *Dialektik* must be a path by which reality explains itself. This can be truly called the science of truth.”²² While he argues that only Hegel was aware of this orientation towards logic, ultimately he sees Hegel as falling short in this attempt. Kant and modern phenomenology also fail to provide a picture of actuality because they consider reality always from the standpoint of the subject. However, for Nishida, true reality must be understood from both the side of the subject *and* from the side of the world. He highlights the agency and force of the world which determines the subject. “The real... does not entirely transcend the person, for it always retains the meaning of determining us.”²³

Nishida emphasizes how the body is the site of the coming together of the ideal and material realms because we move between the two in action. Action occurs as physical and temporal movement. In order to account for an identity that moves, and hence, changes, Nishida proposes that we consider individual beings to be “continuities of discontinuity.” This means that they hold negation within themselves. One way of describing the negation within an identity is to say that it reflects a “world of coming into being and passing away.”²⁴

The universal which determines the individual determines itself by taking absolute negation as mediation. That which exists in it “lives by dying,” i.e., it is the continuity of discontinuity. As the determination of such a universal, it is both determined by the universal, but it is at the same time, the true individual, i.e., an acting thing, which determines the universal through its own self-determination.²⁵

“Determined by the individual,” here, means determined by nothingness. Nothingness allows for personal action. Later on Nishida

22. NISHIDA 1970, 13.

23. *Ibid.*, 2.

24. *Ibid.*, 6.

25. *Ibid.*, 7.

brings together nothingness, the continuity of discontinuity, and interactions between individuals:

The determination of the continuity of discontinuity which is mediated by absolute negation is to be conceived from the mutual determination of individuals, i.e., from the idea of action. The logic of true being, i.e., of concrete reality, has this form. In these terms, I think I can clarify the logical structure of what I call an acting being.²⁶

While the mediation of nothingness is the necessary condition for action, “determination” issues from “the mutual determination of individuals.” The implication of this view is that the self is not individuated based on an individual core, or anything that belongs to it alone. Rather, the self is mediated by nothingness and other human beings. Nishida goes on to include other living and non-living entities (plants, animals, and objects and ideas from the historical-cultural world) as possible “Thou’s.”²⁷ Hegel’s *Antigone* could be used as an example of Nishida’s notion of mutual determination. *Antigone* is determined by the social-historical discourses of divine and human law; yet, she is not fully determined by them. She also acts upon them. If we adopt Nishida’s ontology, *Antigone*’s identity arises out of emptiness because it is a confluence of interacting forces (discourses, practices, and other human beings).

In addition to his concepts of nothingness and action, Nishida uses the oppositional structure between life and death to characterize the conflict between self and other. Frequently, when he writes about the I-Thou relation, he describes it by alluding to the phrase “living by dying.” For instance, he writes “In absolute negation *qua* affirmation, individuals are determined and mutually active. The I and the Thou mutually oppose and determine one another in the absolute aspect of being-*qua*-non-being, or death-*qua*-life.”²⁸

26. *Ibid.*, 8.

27. *Ibid.*, 29 (NKZ 7: 59).

28. *Ibid.*, 27 (NKZ 7: 55).

Recalling Nishida's description of the self as a continuity of individual "points" that are independent, he also uses the term "living by dying" to capture this aspect of the self. If there is no substance or *hypokeimenon* that is unchanging, then each moment of self-experience is a determination of absolute nothingness. More specifically, the self in each moment is a new determination; this means that the self lives through dying. In practical terms, all human beings move towards death; however, Nishida uses the term death to indicate how human reality is constituted by impermanence and non-persistence. However, despite the fading away of each self in each moment, there is continuity within one's self-experience. Significantly, the ability to regard each dying self as a "Thou" allows one to experience unity or continuity.

The personal unity of the individual self is established as the "I" of the present regards the "I" of yesterday as a "Thou" and also the "I" of the tomorrow as a "Thou"—indeed, by the "I" of the past instant and future instant thus mutually regarding each other.²⁹

This vision of the self shows that it is that which contains something Other at its base. The fact that each moment contains negation means that the self is disjointed. Unity is restored to self-experience when a relation between the disjointed moments is achieved; this relation is spoken of in personal terms. Within the self itself, the structure of self and Other is at work. But what does this mean in concrete terms? Nishida writes "The free individual negates both the determinations of the past and the demands of the future at each and every moment. For we not only determine the future, but change the meaning of the past."³⁰ At this point, we can consider how it is common to say "I was a different person five years ago" or "I will surely be a different person ten years from now." In this sense, we regard the person that we were in the past or the person we anticipate that we will become

29. Ibid., 10 (NKZ 7: 24).

30. Ibid., 10.

as separate, independent existences. Nishida's point is that even within the self itself there is tremendous alterity.

Nishida devotes space to the psychological responses that human beings exhibit as a result of "living by dying" in "The Dialectical World" section of *Fundamental Problems of Philosophy*.

As the individual determination of the dialectically self-determining world, the self faces absolute negation, absolute nothingness. Therefore, this world is a world of infinite anxiety. Our every step is a danger, with the infinite depths at its foundation. Moreover, these depths are not physical matter, but an infinite darkness, an infinite negation. We are self-determining in individual forms as the individual determinations of such a world. For the self exists in it. It is the life urge. In order to live, man must struggle. Moreover, the foundation itself of that life urge is a darkness. We do not know for what we are struggling. Life itself is a fate.³¹

Here Nishida describes how the absolute nothingness that is part of every being's identity provokes anxiety in the human being. If every moment is radically new and "other," than we are always confronting the fact that the future is unknowable. Moreover, even more significant is the idea that the depths of the self are hidden, i.e., in the depths of the self there is an unbridgeable alterity that cannot be known. However, the self's unknowable foundation incites us to act and "struggle." The self undergoes anxiety before its very ontology, i.e., due to the fact that it is "determined by non-being."

In two essays written after *Fundamental Problems of Philosophy*, "Logic and Life" (1936/7) and "The Logic of *Topos* and the Religious Worldview" (1944), Nishida describes how our consciousness of death sets us apart from other creatures:

While we look at ourselves through and through as objects, we are at the same time always transcending the world of objects. Therein lies the

31. Ibid., 158.

existence of us humans. Only humans are aware of death, only humans commit suicide.³²

To know our eternal death is the fundamental reason of our existence. For only one who knows his own eternal death truly knows that he is an individual... What does not die is not singular existence...only by facing the eternal negation, do we truly realize the singularity of our existence. It is not through self-reflection but by facing our eternal death that we become truly self-conscious.... What lives dies. This is indeed a contradiction, but such is the mode of our existence.³³

In the first passage, we see that Nishida's view of human reality bears a likeness to existential-phenomenological perspectives like those of Heidegger, Beauvoir, and Sartre, where one exists outside oneself by transcending toward the future in action. While we may habitually consider ourselves as "objects" in that the mind and body possess boundaries, Nishida suggests that we are constituted by our ability to transcend these boundaries. In this instance, our ability to see ahead to our own death and to grasp ourselves as living through negation, or "living by dying" defines our humanity.

In the second passage, we see that beyond being that which differentiates us from other creatures, our awareness of our death is that through which we become individuated. Against Descartes, and in line with Hegel's discussion of the bondsman, Nishida writes that becoming aware of our own mortality is that which incites self-consciousness. We see how Nishida's ontology always includes oppositions and unity. Death is that which opposes, but it is also the means through which I realize my singularity. Here we could interpret singularity as my awareness of myself as a unity.

Nishida's description "living-by-dying" is one lens through which we can understand the more all-encompassing claim that being includes a dimension of otherness within itself. The alterity of death

32. NISHIDA 2012B, 109 (NKZ 8: 283).

33. NISHIDA 1987B, 18 (NKZ 11: 395-6).

that we house within us helps us to understand the alterity of the concrete Other. Now I will move to his explicit discussion of I-Thou relations by focusing on his notion of recognition.

The Relational Self: Recognition and the Influence of the Master-Slave Dialectic in Nishida's Philosophical Project

Nishida dedicates two essays to the subject of the intersubjectivity of the self: "Love of Self-Love of Other and the Dialectic" and "I and Thou," both of which were written in 1932. However, in addition to these pieces, Nishida describes the role that the Other plays in the constitution of the self in numerous other essays and books. Just as the identity of the self issues from a determination of absolute nothingness, Nishida's intent in discussions of self-other relations is to show how the self does not produce itself; it is, most basically, something that forms itself through relation. Nishida directly asserts that intersubjectivity is an important aspect of the self:

I think that the notion of the individual's being an individual only in relation to other individuals has been neglected. As I have often said, the unity of the person is not a mere continuity but a continuity of discontinuity.³⁴

Consistent with the first example on absolutely contradictory self-identity that Nishida uses in *An Inquiry into the Good*, we see that identity results from holding oppositions within itself; Using the color red as an example, in order for red to have an identity, there must be other colors that oppose red.³⁵ Red's identity is created through its difference from other colors. Therefore, its very identity is tied to the existence of the opposing colors. In other words, the other colors are somehow contained within the definition of the color red. Here the example of something determining itself only in relation to something else is

34. NISHIDA 1970, 141.

35. NISHIDA 1990, 56–7. (NKZ 1: 67–9).

extended to the realm of selfhood. Not only does the self emerge out of relations with concrete others and thus reflect a continuity amidst discontinuities; it also contains discontinuity within itself as the self is born and dies in each passing moment.

Nishida writes near the beginning of *Fundamental Problems of Philosophy*, in a paragraph following one where he references Hegel:

The individual determines itself only in relation to other individuals. The idea of a unique self-determining individual has no meaning. In order for the individual to determine itself there must first be what I have called the determination of a place [*basho*], i.e., a unity of absolute contradictories. But the principle of particularization means the continuity of discontinuity.³⁶

And, a few pages later, he writes:

The self becomes a personality only by recognizing the personality of others, such as in Kant's statement that ethical action must regard the other as an end in himself.³⁷

Firstly, we see Nishida repeating his idea that individuality forms itself, but not through its individual will or individual notions. The individual contains “non-individual elements,” i.e., others, cultural objects and discourses, its physical environment, etc. that are formative. Rather than lapse into “object logic,” Nishida refers to the self and consciousness as a field or place of interacting forces. Here, he adds the idea that the individual is an individual only through its relation to others. Given the fact that this first passage occurs directly after Nishida discusses Hegel, it seems likely that Nishida is influenced here—in part—by Hegelian recognition in the master-slave dialectic. Consistent with the numerous mentions of the German philosopher in his works, letters, and diaries, Nishida explicitly states in a 1931 essay, “Hegel's Dialectic from My Point of View,” “There is much in my pres-

36. NISHIDA 1970, 6–7 (NKZ 7: 16).

37. *Ibid.*, 9 (NKZ 7: 20).

ent thought that I have learned from Hegel, and I feel closer to Hegel than to anyone else.”³⁸

Just as Hegel claims that self-consciousness and one’s self-relation depend upon encountering an Other who is my double and who sees me, Nishida debunks the idea that the self is self-originating and that which understands itself solely based on its inner resources. In the following passage and other places, Nishida actually uses the word “recognize” or “acknowledge” when describing the effect individuals have on each other’s self-relations. Even in the second passage when Nishida references Kant, we see that the self forms itself through facing and responding to another. This implies that an “individual” is merely a continuity or point that selectively draws together oppositional forces outside of itself.

The self must in essence be personal. Such terms as consciousness, thinking, willing, or acting cannot adequately describe the self...The self becomes a self by recognizing a Thou as a Thou.”³⁹

As stated earlier, the self does not merely regard other human beings as others. It also relates to itself as a “Thou.”

The personal unity of the self can only be established by the self of yesterday regarding the self of today as a Thou, and vice versa...There is no solitary individual personality. There is no I without a Thou, no individual person without society. There must be a Thou which makes the I an I.... The self of yesterday and the self of today must be in dialogue.⁴⁰

Nishida’s overall intention when writing of I-Thou relations is to demonstrate how the alterity of the other symbolizes the alterity of the self when it seeks to relate to itself. Just as an individual depends upon having a society from which to differentiate itself, at each moment the self itself enters into relation to the self of the past and the self of the

38. SUARES, 3–4.

39. NISHIDA 1970, 43 (NKZ 7: 85–6).

40. *Ibid.*, 43 (NKZ 7: 86).

future. If the relationship between opposing forces is the true picture of reality, than it follows that identity is established based on individuals recognizing each other. The unity of the self would crumble if one were unable to understand or relate to the person one was in the past or the future. While we sometimes express a lack of understanding when it comes to why we made certain decisions in the past, only in pathology is the break between our former selves and our current self complete.

Nishida's concept of the "social" is also important when understanding what Nishida means when he says that even one's inner world contains intersubjective elements:

Even in saying that we stand independent in the form of internal perception, the idea of a mere individual man has no meaning. For the I is the I by standing over against the Thou, and the individual is the individual relative to other individuals. The self is social. The self may only be conceived as the self determination of the medium between individuals.⁴¹

Nishida implies that our individuality is always experienced amidst the background of a realm of others. The very uniqueness of the self depends upon the medium of the social. Odin points out how Nishida is influenced by James' notion of the social as a background against which the self forms itself.⁴² The implication of this view is that the interior world is not a private space where one could stoically retreat from the world of others.

One could interpret what Nishida is saying here in terms of the structure of the self, wherein the self is a thoroughly relational being. However, one might also interpret it in terms of the experience of introspection. For instance, our interior world is often filled with imaginary situations and dialogues between ourselves and others. We may

41. *Ibid.*, 207 (NKZ 7:382).

42. ODIN 1996, 85.

spend a large portion of our time recalling past interactions with Others and imagining them differently or envisioning future encounters.

Here it is helpful to recall the earlier quotation:

The free individual negates both the determinations of the past and the demands of the future at each and every moment. For we not only determine the future, but change the meaning of the past.⁴³

For Nishida, the self is constantly dying and being reborn in each moment; it changes its relationship to its history and future continually. However, the preceding quotation does not just pertain to the discontinuous nature of the self and its experience of its temporality. For example, “chang[ing] the meaning of the past” implies that I imaginatively reflect on the meaning of past events; these past events very likely involve others. Even when one interprets a past feeling or situation that did not outrightly involve others, the weight of social discourses that determine values as well as relationships that take on the role of examples of possible ways of being structure the way that we engage with our past. In sum, Nishida points out the inextricable role that the “social” plays in our inner life; one’s interior space is not free of the reach of the “social.”

In addition to positing the social as a background or “fringe” of relationships is justified, Nishida also intends to reveal the agency of the social realm:

Usually the social is taken to mean the abstract relationship between men, but here it refers to that which determines the personal action of the I and the Thou as the self-identity of absolute contradictories. It is the determination of subject *qua* predicate. That which exists in it must be both subjectively and objectively at the same time. Thus, I and Thou mediate one another. The Thou which stands in opposition to the I must be both internal and external. It is neither merely physical nor merely spiritual, but both. The world which is social in such a sense determines itself dialectically as the unity of absolute contradictories. It

43. NISHIDA 1970, 10 (NKZ 7: 24).

is metaphysical and historical. This means that the world of truly concrete reality is social in essence and determines itself historically. Even the natural world can be conceived in the ultimate point of the subjective aspect of such determination.⁴⁴

Although we may think of the self as the center of an individual will, Nishida is interested in the idea that what is “outside” of us also determines our individuality. For example, later on in the text (and referenced earlier) he writes, “Such terms as consciousness, thinking, willing, or acting cannot adequately describe the self. The self becomes a self by recognizing a Thou as a Thou.”⁴⁵ However, the self does possess a subjective reality, i.e., it does experience its consciousness, thought, intentions, and acts. Nishida’s point is that one’s self-experience and one’s agency continually reflect both subjective *and* objective influences.

While we have devoted time to unpacking how *basho* is social, it is still unclear what Nishida means when he writes that there is no I without a Thou. What exactly does he mean by this? I think that this is best interpreted by remembering his recurrent interest in unity because unity allows for relationship. In “I and Thou” he writes,

A self must include the absolute other in itself. It is not that a self becomes other and the other becomes the self through a medium. But the self becomes the other through the bottom of itself. Because there is the other at the bottom of the self’s existence and there is the self at the bottom of the other’s existence. I and Thou are absolute others. There is no general thing which includes I and Thou. But I am I by acknowledging Thou, and Thou are Thou by acknowledging me. There is a Thou at my bottom and my I at Thy bottom. I unite with you through my bottom, and the Thou unites with me through Thy bottom. Because they are absolute others, they unite with each other inside of themselves.⁴⁶

The absolute other within the self is what Nishida means in his last

44. Ibid., 36 (NKZ 7: 71–2).

45. Ibid., 43 (NKZ 7: 85–6).

46. As quoted by ODIN 1996, 88.

essay when he writes “At the bottom of the self there is something that utterly transcends us and this something is neither foreign nor external to us.”⁴⁷ Succinctly, the absolute other is absolute nothingness. As we contain that which is absolutely other at our core, we become ourselves by recognizing this part of ourselves. In this sense, the Other’s alterity incites one to see oneself clearly. While initially this may sound as if the self instrumentalizes the Other, I think there is more going on here. While the Other’s alterity prompts us to grasp our own alterity, it also reveals that our selfhood cannot be neatly enclosed within our own consciousness and experience. Most basically, the self becomes itself through recognizing the Other. This is another way of reformulating Hegel’s premise in the master-slave dialectic that self-consciousness depends upon the encounter with the Other. For Nishida, the deepest part of oneself is not a core, but something like an opening which allows us to unite with the Other. Relation is possible based on the fact that our identities issue from nothing (i.e., that which is the base of the self). Later on in *Fundamental Problems of Philosophy* Nishida explains the radical nature of his notion of intersubjectivity:

But the I and thou do not come into being merely through mutual opposition and mutual understanding. I do not mean to imply this when I say that the I becomes the I by recognizing the Thou and (vice versa). *I rather mean that the Thou is the prerequisite for the existence of the I, and the I is the prerequisite for the existence of the Thou.* ...that the I and the Thou become themselves by recognizing each other means that we are what we are by mutual self-negation.⁴⁸

Like Hegel, Nishida claims that the Other is a necessary condition for selfhood. The recognition that constitutes the self can be understood as self-negation. Given Nishida’s ontology of absolute nothingness, it makes sense that he would be drawn to Hegel’s premise that the Other is a prerequisite of the self and interpret it through the lens of

47. NISHIDA 1987B, 85 (NKZ 11: 418–19).

48. NISHIDA 1970, 143 (NKZ 7: 271–2). Emphasis added.

self-negation. Recognition, for Nishida is a movement toward another in that it requires one to deny one's purely individual needs and desires and affirm that another being has the same needs and desires, i.e., that the other is a free being. Therefore, I believe that Nishida interprets Hegel's idea of two subjects mutually recognizing each other's freedom in terms of his structure of "affirmation-*qua*-negation." Affirmation, or recognition, co-exists with negation of oneself, which in this context entails negating one's own freedom. Negating oneself means that one allows for another dimension of being, i.e., absolute nothingness to emerge. This is what Nishida means when he says that we "become what we are by mutual self-negation." The concrete Other and the absolute nothingness at the base of the self both represent self-negation; when they are acknowledged, reality is seen clearly and affirmed.

We have seen Nishida define the thou in two main ways thus far. First, the "Thou" is defined as any human Other that the self is faced with. Secondly, Nishida details how the self contains an internal Thou or a series of Thou's. The internal absolute Thou is the absolute nothingness at the base of our consciousness and self-experience. The series of Thou's are the individual selves that arise and fall away in each moment that "recognize" each Other and thus form a continuity of discontinuities. Nishida goes on to expand the meaning of "Thou" even further:

In the concrete world there must be the relation of I and Thou between thing and thing. That which stands over against the I must always be a Thou. But the I-Thou relationship is not a mere opposition between individuals. When there is a mutual experiencing separated by absolute negation in which the self exists in the state of absolute negation *qua* affirmation, everything which stands opposed to the self—even the mountains, rivers, trees, and stones—is a Thou. In such a sense, the concrete world becomes a metaphysical society.⁴⁹

Here it is important to note that Nishida does not simply state

49. Ibid., 29 (NKZ 7: 59).

that plants and material entities are Thou's in the same way that human beings are. He begins by including the qualification "When there is a mutual experiencing separated by absolute negation," these beings are "Thou's." The state that the self must inhabit, in order to effect this, is one in which it perceives and relates to the world from a place of its own nothingness. Here we could think of Nishida's allusion to the Kamakura era Zen Buddhist Dōgen Kigen in his last essay, "To pursue Buddha's path is to pursue oneself. To pursue oneself is to forget oneself."⁵⁰ The significance behind this statement is that reality is experienced more completely when the ego has been shed. Part of seeing the world from the place of nothingness, the standpoint without a standpoint, is that it allows one to realize that one is fundamentally related to other beings; one is a place of interacting beings. Or, in Dōgen's way of thinking, one does not *have* Buddha nature; instead, one *is* Buddha nature.⁵¹

Expression

Now I will deepen my investigation of the intersubjective realm of selfhood by unpacking what Nishida means when he describes I-Thou relations as fundamentally "expressive." Delving into what this signifies in the context of I-Thou relations will shed light on Nishida's use of the term throughout his other works. In *Fundamental Problems of Philosophy*, Nishida writes:

individuals who thus face one another separated by absolute negation are an immediate mutual determination of negation *qua* affirmation, i.e., they are mutual negation through action. Individuals oppose each other expressively, and determine one another through action.⁵²

Nishida describes action as that which is always self-negating and transcending. Action is directed toward the Other; it is expressive, i.e.,

50. NISHIDA 1987B, 89 (NKZ II: 424).

51. Dōgen 2002, 60–1.

52. NISHIDA 1970, 29 (NKZ 7: 59).

it appeals to the Other in its drive to communicate. In “I and Thou” Nishida writes that expression is neither the result of our subjective intention nor something that can be grasped only as an objective act that neglects the subject’s intention:

The world of expression is the world of the I and Thou... it is neither the world of objectivity, the world of objects, nor the world of subjectivity, consciousness. Again, the world of expression is neither the world of the I nor the world of the Thou, but the world of the I and Thou.⁵³

Expression symbolizes the mutual determination of self and Other because it takes place in between the two. With this last passage, we see what Nishida means when he writes that action is mutually self-negating and affirming. Expression and action require that we move outside ourselves toward the Other; it also means that we must affirm the Other’s individuality. We can see what Nishida means by recalling a common experience in which one wants to relate a story to a friend. The act of telling the story cannot be reduced to my own intention alone. I am telling the story to an audience who possesses the power of judgment. In order to tell the story I take for granted that the Other has autonomy. In a sense, the Other represents the power of negation. Ultimately, we see that all things are expressive because all beings are—ontologically speaking—naturally self-negating.

True life, as the unity of absolute contradictories implies an I-Thou relationship for that which stands in opposition to the I must possess expression. In fact, the mountains and the rivers must also be expressive.⁵⁴

Just like the self, mountains and rivers are also baseless; their identities are based in absolute nothingness. This means that their identities are “expressions” of relation. Nishida states repeatedly that indi-

53. As quoted by KOPF 2001, 119.

54. NISHIDA 1970, 35 (NKZ 7: 71).

viduals are mediated; they are constituted through their relations to others.⁵⁵

While expression is a term that Nishida uses to convey his ontological theory of absolute self-contradictory identity, by referencing action and the historical place of selfhood, his discussion of intersubjectivity enhances our understanding of the way that he uses the term throughout his corpus. Recalling that expression is the “world of the I and the Thou,” rather than that which is merely subjective or objective, it is helpful to turn to his description of a “true personal relation”:

The usual concept of personal relations is an abstraction. The abstract relation between mere rational persons is not a true personal relation. However, true personal relation does not consist in the abstract relation between rational persons. The I-Thou relationship is a mutual seeing separated by absolute negation. For the I and Thou are always separated by the physical world.... Therefore the actual world, in which individuals are mutually determining, is neither simply spiritual nor simply physical. Rather it is metaphysical and social in the sense of including the I and the Thou. Usually the social is taken to mean the abstract relationship between men, but here it refers to that which determines the personal action of the I and the Thou as the self-identity of absolute contradictories...the world of truly concrete reality is social in essence and determines itself historically.⁵⁶

What does Nishida mean here when he says that the “I-Thou relationship is a mutual seeing separated by absolute negation”? An intersubjective encounter, for Nishida, cannot be described by “object logic” or any way of interpreting the two human beings as completely separate and self-enclosed entities. However, each stands opposed to the Other because both inhabit bodies with boundaries. In this sense, we can think of Hegel’s description of how what opposes the self in the “Truth of Self-Certainty” chapter is experienced by the self as funda-

55. *Ibid.*, 186 (NKZ 7: 346).

56. *Ibid.*, 35–6 (NKZ 7: 71–72).

mentally “not me.”⁵⁷ True reality includes “mutual seeing” and mutual determination; this is what Nishida means when he says that individuals are self-expressive points of the world. Reality is a unity of oppositions or a continuity of discontinuity.

THE RELATIONAL SELF AND KEY ASPECTS OF NISHIDA'S
PHILOSOPHICAL PROJECT: THE SELF AND ABSOLUTE
NOTHINGNESS, *BASHO*, AND THE HISTORICAL WORLD

In the foregoing, I have outlined key aspects of Nishida's thought, including his view of the self, place, and expressive activity within the historical world. Then, I moved on to unpacking the intersubjective dimension of selfhood that is interspersed throughout his works. Now I will examine the two sections together and explicitly show what the latter can do to broaden the reader's understanding of the former.

Firstly, Nishida's discussion of the I-Thou relation deepens our understanding of his view of the self. Nishida repeatedly claims that the self is absolutely contradictory identity. He writes that we have our selfhood in the absolute Other, and that our deepest reality is something transcendent. While absolute nothingness is of central importance to Nishida's philosophical project, pointing to the way that it is realized through intersubjectivity not only clarifies the confrontation with the Other, as a being that is fundamentally “other” to us, it also prompts us to realize ourselves in the Other. On the one hand, this way of understanding the self and other human and non-human others is best explained through the result of Buddhist self-emptying practices like meditation and chanting, which Nishida references in his works from time to time.⁵⁸ Through focused attention, rigid boundaries between the self and other beings relax and one begins to perceive the

57. HEGEL 1977, § 167.

58. See NISHIDA 1987B and HIROTA 1995.

world outside of the lens of the ego. In more concrete terms, when one stills one's thoughts and practices viewing them with non-attachment, then one begins to realize oneness between one's own reality and that of other beings. We can see this clearly when we recall this passage, quoted earlier:

A self must include the absolute other in itself. It is not that a self becomes other and other becomes the self through a medium. But the self becomes the other through the bottom of itself. Because there is the other at the bottom of the self's existence and there is the self at the bottom of the other's existence. I and Thou are absolute others. There is no general thing which includes I and Thou. But I am I by acknowledging Thou, and Thou are Thou by acknowledging me. There is a Thou at my bottom and my I at Thy bottom. I unite with you through my bottom, and the Thou unites with me through Thy bottom. Because they are absolute others, they unite with each other inside of themselves.⁵⁹

In the Buddhist worldview, self-realization depends on recognizing that ultimately, self and other are non-dual. While Buddhism is often viewed as individualistic through its insistence that there is no self, i.e., beings are empty of intrinsic essence, in actuality self-realization depends upon grasping the fact that one is intimately connected to other beings. Nishida's allusion to the necessity of acknowledging a "Thou," clarifies that his notion of the self is thoroughly relational. The Other plays a key role in self-realization because self-realization hinges on the recognition of one's relatedness.

Nishida's account of intersubjectivity clarifies his view of the self in another way as well. As discussed above, the self contains alterity within itself not only due to the lack of rigid boundaries between self and Other but through the fact that it is always other to itself. Albert Camus writes "forever I shall be a stranger to myself"⁶⁰; indeed, at times, we experience surprise in reaction to our own actions. Nishida's

59. As quoted by ODIN 1996, 88.

60. CAMUS, 1955, 19.

discussion of the self as a continuity of discontinuity, i.e., a series of selves that arise and fall away clarifies this experience of distance. Here, we see another meaning of his repeated phrase “we have our selfhood in the absolute other.” Recalling Nishida’s caution that intersubjectivity is neglected when philosophers consider the self and that the self is a “continuity of discontinuity,” we see that he seeks to expose how the intersubjective realm clearly illustrates his notions of absolutely self-contradictory identity and creative activity. The fact that our experience is structured by the social reveals that the self contains oppositions within itself; it is an acting being that is both “making and made.” Other individuals shape the context out of which the self acts. The self is “made” as a result of the oppositions of others, yet it also “makes,” i.e., by being an individual “self-expressing point of the world.” Ultimately, Nishida’s discussion of the relational self aims to reveal how the alterity of the Other symbolizes the alterity of the self itself.

This account of the relational self also enhances our understanding of the notion of *basho*, or place. Through lines like “the individual only determines itself in relation to other individuals” and “the self becomes a personality only by recognizing the personality of others” we see that when Nishida describes *basho*, which is the site of mutual determination, he means to include human beings. Additionally, such references give us a better idea of what Nishida means when he says that *basho* does not mean “a place in which things exist.” Rather, it means “a physical space of personal action” and “mutual determination.” Therefore, putting all of these statements together, mutual determination implies intersubjective recognition and the actions of human beings. Nishida goes on to state that place is “self-determining.”

The dialectical process may be conceived from the self determination of this world of reality which is both one *qua* many and many *qua* one. It may therefore be seen from the world of the I and the Thou. The self is the affirmation of the self negation of this world of reality.⁶¹

61. NISHIDA 1970, 139 (NKZ 7: 264–5).

When Nishida speaks of the “self-determination” of place, he means to highlight how action is typically attributed to an agent with conscious intent. However, his ontology of absolutely contradictory self-identity contests any purely interior or external, ideal or material notion of thought or action. The self cannot be reduced to consciousness, the will, or actions. In his view, the self cannot be a locus of autonomy; place is the site of autonomy. Moreover, Nishida’s discussion of I-Thou relations reveal that *basho* is an *intersubjective* space that is “self-determining.” We can make sense of this statement if we think of how the self contains “non-individual elements.”

If the self is truly empty of intrinsic essence, then its agency issues from the confluence of a variety of forces within the field that it inhabits. Furthermore, it also continually shapes other beings. With reference to the last line of the passage above, the self is fundamentally that which affirms self-negation. This is shown most clearly in the I-Thou relation when one acknowledges non-dualism between self and other. The world is self-negating through the fact that it expresses itself through the singularity of the self. Furthermore, the self must always affirm the ways that it is determined by the world. Its existence encloses much more than its own intention; even its intention is produced through mutual determination.

Nishida’s use of the term “social” helps the reader see that *basho* is not a field of separate “thing-like” existences that interact. Recalling the earlier passage, “I and Thou mediate one another. The Thou which stands in opposition to the I must be both internal and external,” the extent to which our own identities are bound up by the mediation of others provides a way of envisioning *basho* as a site of interweaving relations rather than a place that “things” inhabit. Here we can see why Nishida was most likely attracted to Hegel’s notion of recognition; we may recall paragraph 179:

Self-consciousness is faced by another self-consciousness; it has come *out of itself*. This has a twofold significance: first, it has lost itself, for it

finds itself as an *other* being; secondly, in the other sees its own self.⁶² The encounter between two human beings is one where two freedoms mutually determine, or recognize each other. The same thorough interdependence that symbolizes an intersubjective meeting helps us envision what Nishida meant by a place of absolute self-contradictory identity.

Lastly, Nishida's account of I-Thou relations sheds light on what he means by creation, expression, and the historical world.

Our self as a creative element in the creative world... a creative element in the creative world is made from a combination of other creative elements and must also be what makes other creative elements. This is why I say that in the depths of the historical world, there is the opposition between the I and the thou, and that otherwise there would be no such thing as a historical world. Here lies the ground of the historical reality of society. The I does not confront the thou in the region of things. That the I confronts the thing and that the I confronts the thou, are confrontations in two opposing regions. Even in biological life, while we confront the nutritional environment in the region of things, we confront the parent or the child in the region of life. But the world of living things is not creative; it is not the world that lives on its own. That which confronts [us] as object is merely nutritional and not the expression of life. In the world of historical reality, while we confront expressions in the region of things, persons encounter persons as creative elements. We accordingly intermingle through the medium of expression. Although biological life determines itself merely morphologically, historical life goes on forming itself expressively.⁶³

Here, Nishida clearly states that his concept of the historical world can be understood if we think of the absolutely self-contradictory identity of I and Thou. The human being is “the expression of life” and “a creative element.” Nishida's allusion to the parent and the child are helpful to the reader because most of his discussions of creation and

62. HEGEL 1977, § 179.

63. NISHIDA 2012B, 145 (NKZ 8: 343).

expression contain very few examples; furthermore, when he does give an example, it is almost always of artistic creation. Human beings are not things for Nishida; they are characterized by the fact that they determine each other and create each other. Nishida repeats here the phrase “The self is not a thing.” Alluding to the I-Thou relation and expression is helpful in understanding this point. A thing is self-contained, while human beings go beyond themselves through expression. “Just as the artist may have had an intention when he began creating, while the friend telling the story also has an intention, both the work of art and the story are directed outside of themselves. Expression, for Nishida, includes the qualification “to another.” If we take his discussion of expression within intersubjective encounters and apply it to statements where he writes that *basho* is expressive and the individual is fundamentally self-expressive, than we see that beings are always directed outside of themselves to other beings. This concept also clarifies my assertion above that self-realization for Nishida includes the realization of one’s own otherness through one’s fundamental belonging to a world of others.

In conclusion, I have sought to demonstrate that the intersubjective self is a crucial concept within Nishida’s overall philosophical project as it broadens the reader of Nishida’s understanding of key aspects of his thought, including the self and its basis in nothingness, place, and the historical world. By examining the following aspects of his theory of the relational self, i.e., living-*qua*-dying, recognition, and expression, I brought out key characteristics of his view. For example, the self is fundamentally discontinuous based on its interior and exterior relations to Others as well as its relation to the various selves that arise and fall away in its own interior temporal experience. Secondly, the self relates to the fact that it is other to itself with anxiety. Thirdly, despite the discontinuity, the self still experiences itself as a temporal whole. Furthermore, human beings experience a type of belonging based on the fact that they gain their identity through a shared inter-

subjective field; human beings share a commonality through the fact that they are all “expressions of life.”

The implication of Nishida’s notion of selfhood is that individual agency and possession are displaced. Nishida’s “self” does not create itself, it does not fully direct its own movements, and even its interior life is not its own, at least not in the merely particularistic sense of self. The self does possess free will, but this freedom originates from a social-historical world that determines it, one that is ultimately an expression of the universal, or of the all-embracing *basho*, that is, an absolute nothingness that encompasses and works through/as the historical world including the particular self, but that is ultimately beyond discursive conception. As Nishida prefers to speak of *basho* as self-determining instead of the self as determining itself, the autonomy of the self is put into question. According to the picture that Nishida puts forth, selfhood is marked by vulnerability. If it is fundamentally tied to an intersubjective space and social-historical discourses and modes of production, then it is indeed other to itself. Its very being is “toward another”; it does not fully possess or direct itself. Ultimately, we have seen that the self does not exist *in* a field; it *occurs* in the space of relation. In Nishida’s words, we could say that the field of historical relations, itself, is expressive.

* This article is an adaptation of Chapter IV from my dissertation: “The Vulnerability of the Relational Self: G. W. F. Hegel, Simone de Beauvoir, and Nishida Kitaro meet Patty Hearst.” Dissertation, University of Oregon, 2014.

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