

THE PHILOSOPHY OF NISHIDA KITARŌ

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A Signature Honors Project Presented to the

Honors College

East Carolina University

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for

Graduation with Honors

by

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Greenville, NC

May, 2025

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I. Introduction

Nishida Kitarō (1870-1945) was Japan's premier philosopher in the twentieth century known especially for his "Logic of Place" (*basho no ronri*) and his influence in providing the basis for the "Kyōto School of Philosophy." In this paper, I will first discuss the historical circumstances surrounding Nishida's life and times, situating him primarily as a late-nineteenth, early twentieth-century philosopher whose ideas sought to capture Japan's transition from its more traditional, early-modern past into its immersion in westernization and modernity in the late Meiji period. In doing so, I will also explore interpretations of various aspects of Nishida's philosophy and the so-called Kyōto School of philosophy which formed around Nishida's thinking. The key notion in Nishida's thought, and that of the Kyōto School, that of "absolute nothingness," will be examined in this context. Additionally, this paper will address the impact Nishida's philosophy has had during his years as a professor of philosophy at Kyōto Imperial University, in the decades that followed his retirement, and up to the present, as Nishida studies have come to flourish internationally, giving modern Japanese philosophy a global presence. Finally, I will discuss how Nishida's philosophy remains relevant in the twenty-first century and beyond.

II. Nishida

Nishida Kitarō was born at the beginning of the Meiji period (1868-1912) on May 19, 1870, in the remote village of Unoke in present-day Kahoku, north of Kanazawa. The Meiji period of Japanese history was a time of great change in which Japan opened to Western

science, politics, culture, religion, and philosophy. Japan became increasingly industrialized and began to remake itself based on Western European models, using the Prussian constitution as a basis for the Meiji constitution of 1889. Western learning began to be taught in schools, and it was in this background that Nishida matured.

Nishida studied mainly English and German in school with a focus on philosophy and math and, as a result of this upbringing, greatly valued the freedom of education and wanted Japan to be thought of on the scale of these Western countries. One such event that exemplifies this is Nishida joining his classmates, including his friend Suzuki Teitarō (D. T. Suzuki), in creating the “*gasonkai*” or “Respect-the-Individual Society” and following the promulgation of the Meiji Constitution on the 11th of February 1889, the group took a picture with a banner reading “We Stand Free at the Top of Heaven,” demonstrating the group’s hope for the eradication of the unfair trade treaties that Japan had been subjected to by Western countries. Nishida dropped out of school just over a year later as resistance against the government’s attempts to centralize education. (Yusa, “Nishida and Totalitarianism” in Heisig and Maraldo, *Rude Awakenings*, 1995, 108)

Nishida then attended Tōkyō Imperial University, Tōdai, as a limited-status student, as a result of his not having graduated high school. Tōdai was the intellectual center of Japan's East/West culture following Tōkyō’s becoming the capital of the country in 1868 and it was at Tōdai that Nishida decided to focus on Philosophy. Following his graduation, Nishida taught German and Philosophy at various schools before being hired at Kyōto Imperial University in 1910. Nishida became a Professor of Philosophy in 1914, and for the following fourteen years furthered his own philosophy in developing his signature “Logic of

Place” (*basho no ronri*), influenced many of his students and peers, leading to the creation of the “Kyōto School of Philosophy” as a school of thought, and gained fame as Japan’s premier philosopher.

Prior to Nishida’s hiring at Kyōto Imperial University, while teaching as a high school professor in Yamaguchi and Kanazawa, Nishida started practicing Zen and began philosophizing in earnest. Before he published his first book, *Zen no Kenkyū* (*Inquiry into the Good*), Nishida gained fame for an article published in 1907 titled *Jitsuzai*, or “The Real” drawing the attention of students of philosophy across Japan. As a result, when *Zen no Kenkyū* was published, its importance was immediately visible and by 1917 with the publishing of Nishida’s *Intuition and Reflection in Self-consciousness* (*Jikaku ni okeru chokkan to hansei*) Nishida’s reputation was well established (Yusa, “Reflections,” 1995, 287-8).

Throughout Nishida’s life, Japan underwent rapid changes as industrialization and increased militarism led to victories in the Sino-Japanese War in 1894-95 and the Russo-Japanese War in 1905, giving Japan Taiwan, hegemony over Korea and developmental rights in Manchuria. As nationalist, militarist, and imperialist tendencies skyrocketed in Japan in the 1920s and 1930s, Japan invaded Manchuria in 1931 and Nationalist China in 1937. During this time, Nishida published several papers on topics such as Japanese culture and the National Polity, and, although explicitly political sentiment was largely absent from the majority of his writing, he was called upon for advice by several groups, especially in the late 1930s and early 1940s, including his former student Prime Minister

Konoe Fumimaro (1937-39, 1940-41), representatives of the Imperial Japanese Navy and Center for National Strategy, and was even invited to give a speech to the emperor (1941).

Following Nishida's retirement in 1928, he continued to further his philosophy, responding to the situation in the world around him as well as within him. Nishida faced criticism from his peers as well as various political groups, the details of which will be covered later in this essay, both before and after his death in 1945. Nishida's final essay, *The Logic of Place and the Religious Worldview (Bashoteki ronri to shūkyōteki sekaikan)*, completed in 1945, goes into depth about the main points in his philosophy and explicitly covers his Buddhist influences absent from his prior writings. Nishida died on June 7, 1945, in Kamakura, just outside of Tōkyō, just two months prior to Japan's surrender that ended the Second World War. Nishida was cremated and his remains were buried in three sites: Unoke, his birthplace, Kyōto, where he taught, and Kamakura, where he died.

Nishida's career in philosophy covers a variety of topics and there are several stages in the development of his thought. Nishida wrote on ethics, politics, consciousness, metaphysics, and epistemology, among others. Nishida's most well-discussed topics are metaphysics and epistemology with the metaphysical concept of religious experience evident throughout his career, from his *Zen no Kenkyū* to his *Bashoteki ronri to shūkyōteki sekaikan*, his first book to his final book. Nishida relates this religious experience to William James's (1842-1910) epistemological (empiricist) concept of pure experience according to which what can be known is what is immediately sensed prior to the inclusion of reason. Another of Nishida's most discussed concepts is his Theory of Place, or *basho*, characterized by the relationship between reality and "absolute

nothingness.” These concepts will be covered more in the following section. In Nishida’s philosophy, there is no agreed-upon delineation for stages in his work, however, for the purpose of this essay, Nishida’s philosophy will be divided into three stages. The first of these stages begins with Nishida’s “An Inquiry into the Good,” (*Zen no Kenkyū*) in 1911, the second with Nishida’s first articulation of his theory of place (*basho*) in 1927, and the third with Nishida’s focus on his idea of the dialectical world “as the historical manifestation of absolute nothingness (Maraldo, “Nishida Kitarō,” 2024, 8.2),” beginning around 1934.

III. Nishida’s Philosophy

In each area Nishida wrote about, focusing on his discussion of metaphysics and epistemology, Nishida discussed various topics. His main discussions in metaphysics were on existentialism, the experience of reality (especially religious experience), and nothingness. Nishida’s main discussions in epistemology were on the origins of knowledge (empiricism) and identity. In his discussion of these topics, Nishida was influenced by many people and ideas, both in Japan and abroad. This influence is visible from his first book, *Zen no Kenkyū, An Inquiry into the Good*.

In the first stage of Nishida’s philosophy, in his *Zen no Kenkyū*, the primary focus of his writing takes influence from William James’s philosophy, specifically his idea of pure experience. In ascribing to this viewpoint Nishida is asserting that the common modern epistemological belief that experience is particular to an individual, subjective, and leads to knowledge via input from the mind or other people, is incorrect (Maraldo, “Nishida Kitarō,” 2024, 2.1). Pure experience is the concept of experience prior to any form of

judgment, including the distinction between subject and object; the experienter and the experienced. It is direct experience with no additional input. This concept is similar to that of Ernst Mach, who “took the immediate sensible phenomena as the primary data, while so-called physical reality was ... a secondary logical construction or a fiction (Noda, “East-West Synthesis,” 1955, 346).”

While Nishida borrows James's terminology, there are differences between what each uses the term “pure experience” to mean. For James, pure experience “covers not only the terms (singular contents) but also the relations between terms. And the subject-object correlation is simply the relation between two serial orders in the field of one immediate experience (Noda, “East-West Synthesis,” 1955, 346).” Nishida begins with this interpretation although, his philosophy differs in that he finds intellectual intuition, “an intuition of ideal, usually trans-experiential things (Nishida, *An Inquiry into the Good*, 1990, 30),” to be the unifying activity of pure and ordinary experience, while James argues that all direct experience is after pure experience. Nishida places emphasis on intellectual intuition and an “idealistic spirit [that] seeks an unlimited unity (Nishida, *An Inquiry into the Good*, 1990, 32),” apart from James’s focus on experience. This intellectual intuition “transcends the will, intelligence (thought), emotion, perception—but is the basis of them all (Carter, *The Nothingness Beyond God*, 1997, 12),” and Nishida calls this realization “true religious awakening (Nishida, *An Inquiry into the Good*, 1990, 34).” Between James’s pure experience and Nishida’s, James is also “unsure whether we actually ever have ‘pure’ experience, while Nishida takes it as given that we do (Carter, *The Nothingness Beyond God*, 1997, 14).” This interpretation of pure experience, as well as Nishida’s many other

concepts introduced within his *Zen no Kenkyū*, provide the basis upon which all of his later ideas are built.

Continuing on from the idea of pure experience, in his *Jikaku ni okeru chokkan to hansei* (Intuition and Reflection in Self-consciousness), Nishida incorporates a Neo-Kantian point-of-view that starts from “the *a priori* truths of logic and mathematics and [progresses] ‘down’ to empirical knowledge, and [tries] to interpret them as the successive products of the one synthetic *a priori* truth (Noda, “East-West Synthesis,” 1955, 348).” At this time, Nishida was influenced mainly by the philosophy of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), Henri Bergson (1859-1941), and Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814) with the intention of his philosophy being “[to] unify Kantianism and Bergsonianism by giving a new meaning to Fichte's system (Nishida, *Intuition and Reflection in Self-consciousness*, as cited in Noda, “East-West Synthesis,” 1955, 349).” The main idea borrowed from Kant at this point in Nishida’s philosophy was transcendental idealism, that we experience only the appearance of things rather than things as they are (things-in-themselves). Both Bergson and Fichte were similarly influenced by Kant and in turn, influenced Nishida, Bergson with his idea of pure duration, and Fichte with his revised systematic version of transcendental idealism, *Wissenschaftslehre* or “Doctrine of Scientific Knowledge,” and the concept of *Tathandlung* found within it.

Bergson posited his pure duration (*la durée*) in his text *Time and Free Will* as a refutation of Kant’s philosophy that sees freedom of the will belonging to a place outside time and space. Bergson’s pure duration separates Kant’s time-space mixture, describing it as the temporally based immediate data of consciousness. In pure duration, “there is no

juxtaposition of events; therefore there is no [mechanical connection between cause and effect]. It is in the duration that we can speak of the experience of freedom (Lawlor, et al., “Henri Bergson”, 2022, 2).” Fichte described his *Wissenschaftslehre* as the first “system of human freedom,” the primary task of which is “to explain how freely willing, morally responsible agents can at the same time be considered part of a world of causally conditioned material objects in space and time (Breazeale, *Johann Gottlieb Fichte*, 2024, 2).” Within the *Wissenschaftslehre*, Fichte’s *Tathandlung*, literally meaning fact or act, is typically associated with philosophical reflection and intellectual intuition and is defined as “a unity that is presupposed by and contained within every fact and every act of empirical consciousness, though it never appears as such therein (Breazeale, *Johann Gottlieb Fichte*, 2024, 4.1).” The conclusion of Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre* was that while freedom of the will is limited and finite, agents must act according to this will and strive for self-determinacy saying, “[between] the original abstraction of pure selfhood as sheer *Tathandlung* and the concluding (necessary) idea of a self that is only what it determines itself to be, in which “is” and “ought” wholly coincide, lies the entire realm of actual consciousness and real human experience. (Breazeale, *Johann Gottlieb Fichte*, 2024, 4.1)”

In his *Jikaku ni okeru chokkan to hansei*, Nishida argues that “the will of the individual can freely express absolute will as the creative activity of the universe when the individual will operates spontaneously, without reflection or objectification (Maraldo, “Nishida Kitarō,” 2024, 9).” At this point in his philosophy, Nishida sees absolute will as “the preeminent form of self-awareness and saw it as the source of acts of moral decision and of the creation and appreciation of art (Maraldo, “Nishida Kitarō,” 2024, 2.2),” and in a

1936 addition to the preface of *Zen no Kenkyū*, Nishida adds a section titled “Upon Resetting the Type,” in which he tracks the development of his ideas, stating, “through the mediation of Fichte’s *Tathandlung*, I developed the standpoint of pure experience into the standpoint of absolute will (xxxii).” During the nineteenth century, Fichte’s philosophy, due to criticism and an unfavorable interpretation of the history of philosophy by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831), was treated almost exclusively as an often-overlooked part of the German philosophical ladder “from Kant to Hegel” and was seen to have only historical significance (Breazeale, *Johann Gottlieb Fichte*, 2024, 5). While Nishida used several of Fichte’s ideas, he also moved along this path from Kant, to Fichte, to Hegel. Nishida continues tracking the development of his philosophy in “Upon Resetting the Type,” stating that, following the development of his idea of absolute will from pure experience “[then], in the second half of *From the Actor to the Seer*, through the mediation of Greek philosophy, I further developed [absolute will], this time into the idea of place. (Nishida, *An Inquiry into the Good*, 1990, xxxii).”

The second stage of Nishida’s philosophy began around 1927 when he first posited his theory of place, or *basho*. This concept became the most famous part of Nishida’s thought and would connect all aspects of his philosophy. The main aspect of Greek philosophy that Nishida used in the development of his theory of place is Aristotelian philosophy. In Aristotelian philosophy, knowledge is a linguistic matter rather than one of sensation like that found in Nishida’s early work. That is, to know something is to use language to define or categorize it. Despite this difference, Aristotle’s philosophy is nonetheless instrumental in the formulation of Nishida’s *basho*. One specific concept

Nishida pulls from is “Aristotle’s *hypokeimenon* or individual substance that can be subject but never predicate (Maraldo, “Nishida Kitarō,” 2024, 3),” which Nishida refers to as the logic of the grammatical subject. Along with this notion, Nishida proposes a logic of the transcendental predicate (or, more succinctly, predicate logic), that which can be predicate but never subject, to which consciousness belongs, that is “consciousness in act can never be made an object of consciousness that could become a grammatical subject (Maraldo, “Nishida Kitarō,” 2024, 3).” Without such logic, consciousness could be made the subject of a sentence that describes it. In his mediation of Aristotle’s philosophy, Nishida noticed that, as, for Aristotle, understanding, *nous*, is the highest power, and language is the tool used to get there, individuation is likely associated with matter. However, matter in this context has no individual character as the forms, the formal aspects of a substance, are what would determine a substance’s identity and, as such, matter would be unintelligible. In noticing these issues in Aristotle’s interpretation of knowledge, that it leaves no way for an individual to be known as individual, only as an intersection between universal predicates (only the forms can be compared and, even compared individually, would not be genuine comparison between individuals), Nishida begins to move from Aristotelian philosophy to the theory of place, utilizing judgments to allow for individuation and to link subject and predicate (Carter, *The Nothingness Beyond God*, 1997, 25-6).

Judgment is a form of knowledge consisting of a subject and a predicate, typically taking the form of a subsumptive model. In this model, a less general universal is enveloped by a more general universal, a universal being a quality shared by many things

(opposed to a particular which would refer to a specific instance or object), an example being the less general universal "one" enveloped by the more general universal "numbers" (one here refers to the concept of one, a singular thing, which can be attributed to anything by itself). Rather than answering how subject and predicate can be linked, Nishida asserts that the proper question is "'how can such specification of the wider (more general) world occur (Carter, *The Nothingness Beyond God*, 1997, 27)?" The example Nishida chooses to exemplify this point is the judgment, "red is a color." In order for someone to be able to say that red is a color, they must be aware of what it means to be a "color," and they must have some knowledge of the system of colors. One cannot identify red and extrapolate the concept of color from that, as if everything were red, "red" is just what it is, there is no differentiation and thus no need for a concept of color. Thus, the color system must be known to say that red belongs to it. Nishida asserts that the real subject of "red is a color" is not the grammatical subject "red" nor the grammatical predicate "color," but the system of colors itself. "Red" and "color" are both united within the color system. Subject and predicate are not brought together in a judgment but are both specific features of the overarching system and are linked from the start (Carter, *The Nothingness Beyond God*, 1997, 28).

Color is a "field" or "place" in which specifications, individual colors, emerge. This field is not only colors, however, but also that which supports and generates colors, judgments being about the structure of the field itself rather than particular instances. This system acts as the predicate of the grammatical predicate "the universal of universals," that is, "[to] say what the 'this' is of a judgment, then, is to go from grammatical-subject-

as-universal ('red'), to grammatical-predicate-as-universal ('color'), to the universal of the grammatical universal (the entire system of colors) (Carter, *The Nothingness Beyond God*, 1997, 29).” The system, having none of the characteristics of its parts, is not a particular individual, subject, or predicate, it is, rather, the source of all judgments about the field. Here Nishida’s concept of the “contradictory self-identity” of things arises, as this field of color is expressed by the many particular colors it contains and the system itself integrates the particulars. In knowing, one must take both perspectives at the same time, “color is many, yet one. It is a contradictory entity (Carter, *The Nothingness Beyond God*, 1997, 33)”

This is the general format of Nishida’s *basho*, moving from less inclusive universals to more inclusive universals. These universals cannot be abstract however, as “red” is, as they must contain the individual within themselves, given the intuitions through (pure) experience are that of individuals. A description of the four basic levels of Nishida’s *basho*, via Andrew Feenberg’s “The Problem of Modernity in the Philosophy of Nishida” in the book *Rude Awakenings* is as follows:

1. Judgement, or knowledge of nature: the known abstracted from the knower.
2. Self-consciousness, or the psychological self of knowledge and action: the knower/doer abstracted from culture.
3. The world of meaning or values as ground of action: the self considered in its cultural significance.
4. “Absolute nothingness”: experience as a field of immediate subject-object unity underlying culture, action, and knowledge, and making them possible as objectifications of this prior unity. (160)

These levels make up the three main universals of Nishida's *basho*, each divided into three stages, making nine total universals, encompassed by the final *basho* of absolute nothingness (Carter, *The Nothingness Beyond God*, 1997, 34). The first of the main universals is the universal of judgment. The stages within this universal are, the subsumptive universal, the universal of judgment, and the syllogistic universal.

The subsumptive universal deals with abstract universals only, as this *basho* cannot account for individuals, and uses the species/genus model. The move from the subsumptive universal to the universal of judgment is necessitated by the need to account for the individual and, as the individual cannot be abstract (general), the individual must be concrete (specific). Aristotle's *hypokeimenon*, being a combination of the universal and particular, so that the universal is found in the particular, necessitates a concrete universal as abstract things cannot exist by themselves, only as their characteristics. The universal of judgment uses the substance/attribute model, judgments of the attributes within a substance, dealing with the substances as individuals rather than abstractions as in the subsumptive universal. From here, in order to account for change, as the universal of judgment allows for substances to have attributes, but not for change over time—there are individuals, however, they are static, not dynamic—we move to the syllogistic universal.

The syllogistic universal uses the knower/known model and allows for enduring substances and thus change over time. However, knowledge of this change over time requires that a subject be aware of said change. As, in this universal, the knowing self is an object part of nature, the self cannot be a subject aware of this change. To be conscious of time, to have awareness and knowledge of this universal, we would need to see self-

consciously, but this is impossible from within the universal of judgment, as there is no way to account for self-consciousness objectively from this place, only subjectively. Unless this self-consciousness can be accounted for objectively, it cannot count as knowledge. Nishida wants to hold that “all judgments are in self-consciousness, or are judgments for and by a self (Carter, *The Nothingness Beyond God*, 1997, 36),” and, as such, we must move to the second main universal of Nishida’s *basho*, the universal of self-consciousness.

The universal of self-consciousness, like the universal of judgment, is similarly composed of three stages progressing from the most shallow to the most deep. Unlike the universal of judgment, however, the stages within the universal of self-consciousness are all concerned with the self and its relations. These stages are the formal self, the static self, and the active self. In the formal self stage, the self is a purely relational place of knowing in which the intellectual self is only a collection of ideas. Despite this, the formal self does have feeling, although this feeling takes the form of properties, predicates, and attributes and is something that happens to the self rather than something that the self is choosing. In tracking the development of the *basho* of self-consciousness, Robert E.

Carter, in his book, *The Nothingness Beyond God*, cites Nishida, stating:

In Nishida’s essay entitled “Affective Feeling,” he observes that “the living personality is not a mere abstract concept,” but a dynamic unity. More concretely, the living personality or self has feeling as its expression. Joy, sadness, love, and hate “are the resonance of the larger and deeper self grounded in the union of acts.” (38-9)

In moving from the formal self to the static self, the self now has emotions and can reflect on that fact. In the static self's reflection, it comes upon the will, as well as the fact that the self can and does determine its own nature, thus moving onto the final stage of the universal of self-consciousness, that of the active self. The active self willfully causes change, establishing goals and acting to achieve them, reflecting on the past and deciding how to act in the future.

Movement from the *basho* of judgment to the *basho* of self-consciousness results from the shift from the objective world to the self. In moving from the *basho* of self-consciousness to the third main *basho*, attention is again shifted, this time to "acts of consciousness in which the self is no longer the focus, but in which the self loses itself. We lose ourselves in our goals, aspirations, ideals (Carter, *The Nothingness Beyond God*, 1997, 39)." The third of Nishida's main universals is the intelligible universal. Just as the three levels of the universal of judgment are encompassed by the universal of self-consciousness, so too is the universal of self-consciousness encompassed by the intelligible universal. The three stages within the intelligible universal are consciousness in general, the intelligible feeling self, and the intelligible willing self.

Consciousness in general is concerned with the ideal of Truth and, in this *basho*, the self is aware of its own ideas, which guide the self in its goal-directed activity. The self in this stage sees Truth as the eternal ideal for every consciousness. As we have moved beyond the *basho* of self-consciousness, so too must we move to the intelligible self, ideals of intellect, feeling, and willing cannot be merely external to the self. The field of the intelligible self "must include the ground for objective knowledge, feeling, and the willed

goal-setting of a fully reflective and self-conscious self (Carter, *The Nothingness Beyond God*, 1997, 41).” The intelligible feeling self is concerned with the ideal of beauty, reflected in artistic intuition and expression. Artistic expression through imagination allows for feelings to take shape in a way inaccessible to the intellect. The artistic self, when focused into an activity, merges into it, loses itself, and becomes the object of awareness, “[one] has become the bamboo that one is sketching (Carter, *The Nothingness Beyond God*, 1997, 42).”

While the enveloping of consciousness in general makes the intelligible feeling self more profound, as feeling can disappear when focused on, there must be a further level where feeling is clear to knowledge. As such, we must move to the final stage of the intelligible universal, the intelligible willing self. The intelligible willing self is concerned with the idea of the good, the ideal one adopts as they move, via the feeling self, towards some goal, determined by the self of consciousness in general. The intelligible willing self can finally be said to have consciousness, and aims to determine its own nature, bridging the gap between ideal and said nature. However, in viewing this self-determining willing self as moral, as good, a contradiction arises. If this moral self is a being, an object, it would be determined by its ideals and thus contradict the notion of free will, a requirement for morality. Nishida’s strategy for dealing with this is to move to a final *basho* beyond the subject/object distinction which encompasses the layered universals. From the point of view of the self, this final *basho* would be the behaving self, the self as activity, which can never be objectified. This final *basho* is the place of absolute nothingness (Carter, *The Nothingness Beyond God*, 1997, 42-5).

Absolute nothingness determines itself in the subject/object dichotomy in each of the universals it encompasses and is both subject and object, yet neither. “The ultimate *basho* is the ground of the self which sees but cannot itself be seen. It is as no-self, an ultimate intuition out of which and on which all distinctions are based (Carter, *The Nothingness Beyond God*, 1997, 46).” Nishida himself asserts the place of absolute nothingness as the religious consciousness. In this *basho* of religious intuition, God acts as a transcendent subject unifying the ideals of the intelligible universal. This religious standpoint of nothingness transcends conceptual knowledge, yet is the ground from which it arises, conceptual knowledge being the manifestation of absolute nothingness. Despite the introduction of religion into his philosophy, Nishida is not a mystic in the Western sense of the word, as he aims to ground this religious experience of absolute nothingness in philosophy, bypassing the techniques of religion and focusing instead on the metaphysics and epistemology of human experience (Carter, *The Nothingness Beyond God*, 1997, 46-7).

In this discussion of nothingness, the influence of Zen on Nishida’s philosophy becomes apparent, with the importance placed on nothingness and his assertion that God (the absolute) must contain its own negation. The absolute must have an identity of self-contradiction. Absolute nothingness holds within it this identity of self-contradiction, D. T. Suzuki’s logic of *sokuhi*, “because it is absolute nothingness, it is absolute being (Nishida, *Last Writings*, 1993, 69).” In his creation of the theory of place, Nishida utilized Plato’s idea of a *chora* (receptacle) of ideas as well as Aristotle’s adaptation of this idea in his *topos* (place). Nishida also borrowed the idea of fields used in modern physics and relativity

theory, where spacetime is a field unable to be separated from the physical objects contained within it, similarly borrowing James's notion of a "field of consciousness" in which all perceived and conceptualized objects are located, although his use of the term in his *basho* as active and creative differs from how James uses the term (Maraldo, "Nishida Kitarō," 2024, 3.2).

As the influence of Zen Buddhism becomes more apparent in Nishida's philosophy, it becomes necessary to discuss this influence. Nishida's practice of Zen Buddhism as well as his lifelong friendship with the Buddhist scholar D. T. Suzuki (1870-1966) had a profound influence on his metaphysics, especially the Zen Buddhist idea of nothingness and contradiction. The idea of nothingness itself comes from the Buddhist idea of "void," as the negation of substantiality and of the self-nature of things. Something would be void if it is a non-self-sufficient endlessly changing thing that emerges from the interrelated network of causation, and it is this endlessly changing nature that makes something as it is (Cestari, "The Knowing Body," 1998, 187). In his discussion of God, Nishida holds that the absolute (God) must contain its own self-negation, that is, absolute being must be opposed by absolutely nothing. "It is truly absolute by being opposed to nothing. It is absolute being only if it is opposed to absolutely nothing. Since there can be nothing at all that objectively opposes the absolute, the absolute must relate to itself as a form of self-contradiction (Nishida, *Last Writings*, 1993, 68)." Something can only be absolute if it contains within itself its own negation, as nothing outside of God can negate God. For Nishida, reality is both being and nothingness, the contradictory relationship between

objective being and relative nothingness is contained within the “place of absolute nothingness” where every event takes place (Davis, “The Kyoto School”, 2023, 3.3).

In his *Bashoteki ronri to shūkyōteki sekaikan*, Nishida cites a passage from the *Diamond Sutra*, shared with him by Suzuki that further demonstrates how Nishida views nothingness:

Because all dharmas are not all dharmas,

Therefore they are called all dharmas.

Because there is no Buddha, there is Buddha;

Because there are no sentient beings, there are sentient beings.

Nishida further cites Suzuki’s “logic of *sokuhi*” (“is” and “is not”) “The Buddha preached that the perfection of wisdom (*prajñāpāramitā*) is *at the same time not (sokuhi)* the perfection of wisdom, and therefore it is called the perfection of wisdom. (SDZ 5: 387, as cited in Yusa, “D. T. Suzuki,” 2019, 589-90)” to demonstrate his belief that “God is the identity of absolute contradiction that includes absolute negation within Itself (Nishida, *Last Writings*, 1993, 75).” This passage breaks down to “To say ‘A is A’ is to say ‘A is not A.’ Therefore, ‘A is A.’” The “logic” used here is more a spiritual intuition than how logic would typically be used in the West. Absolute nothingness contains all of the other universals, and its parts are contained in each one. However, because this nothingness is absolute, it cannot be opposed by something that itself isn’t absolute, so it is not the universals. As it needs to oppose the absolute, it must be opposed to absolute being. Given the paradoxical nature of this logic, this implies that absolute being is absolute nothingness.

When all content is removed from consciousness, feeling is left over (the intelligible feeling self). This feeling is revealed in the self's merging with its activity, disappearing into undifferentiated awareness. This awareness is itself aware, not awareness of something, nor something's awareness, just awareness (Carter, *The Nothingness Beyond God*, 1997, 84). This awareness is typically taught to be reached via meditation or Zen koans, "puzzle[s] meant to reveal the inadequacy of all merely intellectual accounts of reality (Carter, *The Nothingness Beyond God*, 1997, 50)," which are meant to lead one to the depths of the self, where one experiences pure experience without subject/object distinctions (which Nishida attempts to justify via philosophy), to discover that the Buddha is one's own mind. In attempting to characterize this, one only discovers its formlessness, nothingness progressing from pure experience ends without form, yet contains innumerable forms within it. As such, nothingness acts as the form of the formless, a concept seen in Nishida's absolute nothingness and which acts as a central image in the Kyōto School of philosophy.

The awareness of forms reveals the formlessness beneath them, making awareness of said forms possible, the same way "seeing" presupposes an unseen "seer." To understand nothingness, one must understand the nothingness of pure experience, or the self as pure awareness. This undifferentiated awareness cannot be given a fixed form, nor can it become an object of knowledge, it is an uncatchable subjectivity, the unobjectifiable ground of objectivity. Absolute nothingness is the ultimate reality, the ultimate ground of everything. Being and non-being both arise from absolute nothingness, God, containing

Their own self-negation (self-contradictory identity), and Buddha only point to the depths of nothingness (Carter, *The Nothingness Beyond God*, 1997, 85).

In discussing the relevance of the Christian God and the Buddha to absolute nothingness, Nishida brings more attention to the concepts of immanence and transcendence. God's (the Buddha's) being both in the world as well as beyond it. Nishida describes Christianity as having the special characteristic of transcendent immanence while describing Buddhism as having the special characteristic of immanent transcendence (Nishida, *Last Writings*, 1993, 99). The Christian God experienced by the self transcending itself outwardly (through the spark of God within the self) and the Buddha experienced by the self transcending itself inwardly. Transcendence in immanence and immanence in transcendence contradict each other in the place of absolute nothingness. In this, every thing is an expression of the absolute, a manifestation of nothingness. Absolute nothingness beyond immanence and transcendence comes to form Nishida's concept of an absolute present, moving from the created to the creating. With these notions of absolute nothingness, religion, self-contradictory identity, and the absolute present, we enter the third stage of Nishida's philosophy, in which Nishida turns his attention to the self's interaction with the historical world, "of individuals as the self-determinations of the universal of [self-consciousness]; and of absolute nothingness as a dialectical universal (Maraldo, "Nishida Kitarō," 2024, 8.2)."

In this third stage of his philosophy, Nishida took much inspiration from Hegel, to the point where Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), one of the most important philosophers in 20th century Germany, remarked upon reading a work of Nishida's, likely his 1929 work

Ippansha no jiko gentei (“The Self-determination of the Universal”), that “It sounds like Hegel (Miyake Gōichi, *Nishida Kitarō, Dōjidai no kiroku*, cited in Yusa, “Reflections,” 1995, 291),” and the most important part of Hegel’s philosophy that Nishida applied is his dialectics. Dialectics “is a term used to describe a method of philosophical argument that involves some sort of contradictory process between opposing sides (Maybee, “Hegel's Dialectics”, 2020).” This method of argument is used in Plato’s dialogues, the opposing sides being that of Socrates and of those he argues against, “[the] back-and-forth debate between opposing sides [producing] a kind of linear progression or evolution in philosophical views or positions, (Maybee, “Hegel's Dialectics”, 2020).” The dialectical method used by Nishida is closer to that used by Hegel, however, rather than the ancient Greeks. In Hegel’s dialectics, the opposing sides are different philosophical concepts that differ based on the subject discussed, rather than people in a dialogue.

While Hegel used Plato’s concept of dialectics, he disagreed with Plato’s version of dialectics, seeing it as only capable of discussing limited philosophical claims and unable to reach past skepticism and nothingness. Traditional logic dictates a contradiction leads to nothingness, that is, if premises contradict, they must be false and thus there are no premises, or nothingness. As such Plato would have to wait for new premises that could also potentially contradict each other. Hegel believed that reason necessarily brings about contradictions and that Plato’s dialectics is restricted to the generation of only approximate truths and thus not a genuine science (Maybee, “Hegel's Dialectics”, 2020). Typically, Hegel’s dialectical method is made up of three parts, the thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, and flows from one to the other. The thesis is the moment of understanding in

which a concept seems stable. The antithesis is the moment of instability in which the thesis undergoes a kind of self-sublation where it negates and preserves itself. The synthesis is “the unity of the opposition between the first two determinations, or is the positive result of the dissolution or transition of those determinations (Maybee, “Hegel's Dialectics”, 2020, 1).”

With Hegel’s dialectics, as well as his philosophy to this point, Nishida creates his “most comprehensive and concrete standpoint, that of the historical world (Maraldo, “Nishida Kitarō,” 2024, 8.2).” Prior to this stage of his philosophy, Nishida rarely wrote on topics that were political in nature (outside of his personal correspondence), however, beginning in the 1930s, Nishida’s “interests turned to the nature of human actions and interactions in the historical and social world, and eventually to the meaning of culture and nationhood (Maraldo, “Nishida Kitarō,” 2024, 1).” This change was largely due to the influence of his critics, specifically his colleague, Tanabe Hajime (1885-1962), and his students Miki Kiyoshi (1887-1945) and Tosaka Jun (1900-1945). These critics alleged that Nishida ignored the effects of individual human action on the world by replacing subjective individual experience with consciousness, experience beyond the individual, which shifts agency from the individual to the world (Maraldo, “Nishida Kitarō,” 2024, 4). From this, Nishida develops his idea of the world as a dialectical universal, a place of mediation between the world and acting/interacting individuals, which would serve as the basis for both his philosophical and political writing (only his philosophical writing will be covered in this section). In this stage of his philosophy, Nishida’s dialectical universal, of which the opposing directions of subject and predicate are self-determinations, is his new

understanding of the “place of nothingness (Nishida, *Last Writings*, 1993, 62).” The historical world, as a dialectical universal, arises with the individuals through their creative interactions rather than arbitrarily determining them from above/beyond as would be the case in an all-encompassing *basho* of absolute nothingness.

In explaining his human-historical world, Nishida first brings up the world as physical, then the world as biological. The physical world is predominantly spatial, composed of physical entities and merely quantitative forces and, while the physical world does contain an aspect of time, time is static and reversible, snapshots of physical entities located spatially. From this Nishida goes to the biological world in which time is irreversible, the activities of life evidence of unique events in time. While the physical world is predominantly spatial, the biological world is predominantly temporal, always moving from formed to forming, and is a world of duration and transformation. Nishida’s biological world has the form of a self-contradictory identity, infinitely determining itself with its own organic centers, “Each new pulsation of life [being] a vector of the biological world’s own self-formation (Nishida, *Last Writings*, 1993, 50).” Humans, as biological beings, are active according to the biological world, however, we act in our human-historical world of individuality, this individuality having “the structure of the absolutely contradictory identity of the many and the one (Nishida, *Last Writings*, 1993, 51).” The biological world, while it contains its own self-contradictory identity, is more closely linked to the physical world than the human-historical world that encompasses them both. In describing the historical world and its relationship with the self, Nishida states:

The self-conscious world of each individual human self is a self-determining monadic world; but as such, each self is a self-expression of the historical world. Therefore each self-conscious world is a momentary vector of historical world-space, which mediates its own objective self-determination within itself, and infinitely determines itself through its own process of self-expression (Nishida, *Last Writings*, 1993, 58-9).

The historical world's contradictory identity, exemplified by the self's self-determining of the world, leads to the understanding of the historical world as the absolute present.

Nishida finds that the historical world exhibits true, existential, individuality through its contradictory structure, with each individual conscious act as a contradictory identity, existing and moving itself while dynamically expressing the world. As such, the world in human consciousness has both spatiality and temporality, existing simultaneously in spatiality and occurring infinitely in temporality, thus appearing as a form of self-negation. The world in human consciousness, containing the contradictory identity of time and space, is a bottomlessly self-determining and creative transformational process of which Nishida refers to the self-determination as the absolute present (Nishida, *Last Writings*, 1993, 51). Every act in the historical world originates in and gives direction to the absolute present, enfolding the eternal past and the eternal future within itself. The absolute present "is the place where history can happen precisely because it enfolds the past, though is not entirely determined by the past, and it holds the future as infinite possibility... [the absolute present is] the ever-present juncture between a determined past and an open future (Maraldo, "Nishida Kitarō," 2024, 4)."

In attempting to explain the formation and structure of the historical world, Nishida explains his concept of active intuition (*kōi-teki chokkan*), also called action-oriented intuition (or enactive intuition per Maraldo). Nishida describes active intuition as a transformational vector of the creative world, that transcends the self in the depths of the self, where intuition becomes active through its mediation by its own negation. Active intuition is a seeing contrary to intellectual intuition and aesthetic intuition, it is to see things from a standpoint transcending that of the preconceived conscious self, from the creative world in the depths of the active self (Nishida, *Last Writings*, 1993, 84-5). It is the artist intuiting and transforming the world as artist and work form mutually and reflect each other, a place “wherein intuiting entails acting and acting entails intuiting, and wherein the difference between internal and external collapses (Maraldo, “Nishida Kitarō,” 2024, 4.1).” Active intuition is transformative and is the ultimate form of judgment. Nishida holds that even science is based in active intuition, that science holds that we see by becoming things and hear by becoming things. This is likened to Dōgen (1200-1253), the Zen Buddhist philosopher and monk credited with bringing Zen to Japan, characterizing achieving enlightenment as the advancement of all things. Nishida expands that active intuition is the ground for morality, with any truly selfless act being actively intuitive, as well as the foundation upon “which we obey God's decisions through our own decisions as self-determinations of the absolute present (Nishida, *Last Writings*, 1993, 102),” making religion the ground for the morality of our decisions.

With the additional concern of morality and expansion on religion, we move from the historical world to the interacting individuals, self and other, within said historical

world. Within the historical world, God, the absolute, possesses itself and sees itself through its own self-negation, its relationship with humankind dynamically expressed between them. Self-negation requires the absolutely contradictory identity of that which forms itself expressively, is created and creates, the expressive and the expressed that responds expressively. This absolutely contradictory identity expresses the self and other. The self understands the other through their own conscious activity, said conscious activity originating not from within or without, but in the self and the other's mutual expression of themselves in each other, the other creating the self as its own self-expression (Nishida, *Last Writings*, 1993, 103). The self's recognizing the absolute other within the self's interior, reflecting a kind of self-awareness or self-awakening (*jikaku*), the self being one with, but not the same as, the other, the self reflecting itself within itself (Maraldo, "Nishida Kitarō," 2024, 4.2.1). Similar to the relationship between self and other, is that between one and many as, per Nishida "The historical world is always the self-determination of the absolute present in the form of the contradictory identity of the many and the one (Nishida, *Last Writings*, 1993, 109-10)." The many co-originate in expressive self-negation while each transformative individual originates as the one in self-affirmation. The historical world arises from the absolute's, God's, own negation, as the contradictory identity of the many and the one. Our selves, as fundamental substances of the world, mirror the world while being the world's own self-expression. In this mirroring, the self possesses itself in its own self-negation. The individual's self-awareness of the world reflects the world's self-awareness of the individual.

In his final essays, near the end of his life, in addition to being more explicit with the religious influences of his philosophy, Nishida also wrote more on death and on the finite existence of the self, especially in the self's awareness of the absolute. The self faces its finite nature in facing absolute infinity, God, and realizes one's death by facing absolute negation. In the realization of one's own death, one realizes the fundamental meaning of one's own existence. Only by knowing one's own death does one become truly individual. A being removed from death is not finite, not temporally unique, and, as such, cannot be an individual. The self's realization of its own temporal uniqueness arises in the self's facing of its own eternal negation (Nishida, *Last Writings*, 1993, 67-8). While an ever-present part of one's life, the more one faces the reality of their death, one's own self-negation, the more uniquely individual one is.

Just as the individual faces the absolute at the limit of their own individuality, in a kind of inverse correlation/polarity (*gyaku taiō*), God faces the self in his own absolute will. This inverse correlation, while having a kind of self-contradictory identity, implies a kind of asymmetrical co-dependency between God and the relative self, "God or the absolute embraces and never excludes the human or relative, and the relative self never coincides with or dissolves into God (Maraldo, "Nishida Kitarō," 2024, 5)." The self, grounded in religiosity, becomes self-aware through one's own self-negation, approaching the absolute and, in realizing one's own finite nature, embraces the unique individuality of the self and the self's place in the historical world, "The existential self [discovering] the self-transforming matrix of history in its own bottomless depths (Nishida, *Last Writings*, 1993, 84)." While Nishida's introduction of the importance of death to his philosophy is an

important shift in his philosophy, beyond just self-negation, as this idea only arises in the final developments of his thought, this area is too brief to constitute a new stage in his philosophy (Maraldo, “Nishida Kitarō,” 2024, 8.2).

Throughout Nishida’s career, his writings covered a broad range of topics. Despite this, each topic leads into another and back to his starting point in *Zen no Kenkyū*. Even with his final additions to his philosophy, Nishida’s concept of active-intuition relates back to his conception of pure experience, “I have now come to think of [the world of pure experience] as the world of historical reality. The world of action-intuition—the world of poiesis—is none other than the world of pure experience (Nishida, *An Inquiry into the Good*, 1990, xxxiii).” Nishida acknowledges that, despite how his thought has changed since his first book, the thought contained within it would develop later into his logic of place (*basho*) then into his dialectical universal, and finally to active-intuition as mentioned above. In conjunction with the development of his philosophy, Nishida’s work as a professor at Kyōto Imperial University, especially his interactions with his students, colleagues, and intellectuals outside of Kyōto Imperial University, introduced Nishida to criticisms and complements of his thought, influencing the direction and formation of his philosophy.

Throughout his career, Nishida received much praise for his writing, however, Nishida also received many critiques. The first critique that will be discussed is from Yamanouchi Tokuryū (1890-1982), one of Nishida’s fellow professors of philosophy at Kyōto Imperial University. Yamanouchi’s critique of Nishida’s philosophy is based in Hegelian dialectics and consists of three parts: the system of the world Nishida describes

with his theory of place is reliant on a “medium” rather than a “means” and thus is restricted to spatiality, the relationship between medium and the facts within it is that of a universal and its instances with said instances merely located in the medium and easily replaceable, and a system reliant on a medium rather than a means neglects the development of the system. Regarding the terms “medium” and “means” in this context, a medium is akin to being and a means is more of a device by which the attribute of being is ascribed. In critiquing the theory of place as restricted to spatiality, Yamanouchi misunderstands place as something static in the sense that a place is a concrete whole, however, Nishida’s place is self-determining, that is, place is made up by the negation-in-affirmation, *soku* logic, interaction between things, and is characterized by the eternally moving present, its constant determining of itself.

Yamanouchi’s second critique, that the things located in a place are merely instances within a universal and are not necessary is similarly connected to his misunderstanding of place as an unchanging whole. The self-determination of the individual and the world tied together by *soku* logic is as it is specifically to avoid the mere contingency Yamanouchi is expressing. Again, with his final critique, that a system reliant on a medium rather than a means neglects the system’s development, Yamanouchi begins from his misunderstanding of the logic of place. A static system of the kind Yamanouchi criticizes would be merely objective and confined to the realm of intellectual thought, and, as Nishida is attempting to create a new philosophical system, the goal of which would be to comprehend the world as deeply as possible, that would be a problem. However, as

Nishida's system attributes significance to place's self-determining nature, it attempts to sidestep the issue. (Nishitani, *Nishida Kitarō*, 2016, 220-6)

Another critique is from Takahashi Satomi (1868-1964), professor and later president of Tōhoku University, whose two main points of contention with Nishida's philosophy were that Nishida's absolute nothingness is insufficiently absolute and that finite being is not as important for Nishida as Takahashi believes it should be. Takahashi understood Nishida's absolute nothingness as defined in terms of being and, as such, only a relative nothingness. Comparatively, Takahashi posits that "what determines absolute nothingness is rather systematic being, which comprehends relative and nothingness qua being (TSZ I: 236-7 as cited in Nishitani, *Nishida Kitarō*, 2016, 232-3)." Similar to Yamanouchi, Takahashi also seems to begin from a universal of nothingness by itself, rather than nothingness as a self-determination of the individual and the world (and as such idealistic), and then sees the beings as arising from this universal. From this Takahashi determines that nothingness is related to being directly and continuously, rather than the mutual determination that Nishida means (via *soku* logic).

In the second part of Takahashi's critique regarding the significance of the finite, he holds that something such as freedom or time comes in degrees and is not an absolute but a becoming, that is, the freedom of becoming or time as the temporal form of decisions (decision becoming decision). Were these things absolute and continuous, there would be no point in discussing concepts such as death, "... we become at each instant.... If we were forever dying and resurrecting, there would be no particular need to discuss life and death as momentous matters (TSZ 5: 112-3 as cited in Nishitani, *Nishida Kitarō*, 2016

232).” In analyzing this critique, Nishitani Keiji (1900-1990), a student of Nishida’s and a member of the Kyōto School, agrees with Takahashi that Nishida tends to posit “the ‘dialectical universal’ and ‘place’ ... immediately rather than as negative mediations of finite opposites,” although he does note that Takahashi’s critique fails in that he “pursues these two ways of seeing to the end but does not develop their interpenetration adequately, and as a result he risks reducing both ways of seeing to the level of abstraction (Nishitani, *Nishida Kitarō*, 2016, 239).” The ways of seeing mentioned being from a higher and lower stage of reality in the system of the dialectical universal; seeing things from the finite as seeing from a lower stage of reality and his criticism of the absoluteness of Nishida’s nothingness as seeing from a higher stage of reality.

The most famous critique of Nishida came from a fellow Kyōto School member and his former student Tanabe Hajime. Tanabe’s critique of Nishida’s philosophy, specifically of his concept of the “place of absolute nothingness,” was that it was similar to Plotinus’ emanation theory, that all things arise from the One (similar to Nishida’s absolute nothingness, both all things and no individual thing), rests on religious, or mystical, intuition and lacks a philosophical foundation in historical reality. In regard to Tanabe’s first critique, that Nishida’s “place” falls into mysticism, it is first important to note that the Zen Buddhist conception of religion calls for a progression from rational thought in the direction of an “awakening” compared with the Western conception of religion as a “leap of faith” (Davis, “The Kyoto School”, 2023, 3.4). At this point, Tanabe sees Nishida’s philosophy as crossing the line between religion and philosophy and thus becomes merely religious philosophy rather than a theory of reality. Tanabe’s second critique, that

Nishida's "place" lacks a philosophical foundation in historical reality, is the view that when Nishida makes absolute nothingness the all-encompassing "place" of a system of reality and has it transcend the oppositional interactions between beings, it becomes a metaphysics of being. Tanabe expands on this view in his own philosophy conceiving of absolute nothingness as "absolute mediation." In response to this critique, Nishida claims that while his philosophy does imply the significance of religious experience it is not mystical in the direction of "religious ecstasy," it is different from Plotinus' emanation in that it is not the self-determination of being, but the self-determination of nothingness. The absolute is among beings, not above them, as Nishida states that it is, "because this is absolute nothingness, that the mountain is mountain, the river is river, and all beings are just as they are" (*NKZ V*, 182; see Nishida 1958, 137 as cited in Davis, "The Kyoto School", 2023, 3.4).

A final critique of Nishida's philosophy is one of the first that arose in reaction to his writing, of his philosophy as psychologism. Psychologism is the view that problems of epistemology can be solved satisfactorily by the psychological study of the development of mental processes and at the time Nishida wrote was typically used to describe "the mistake of identifying non-psychological with psychological entities. For instance, philosophers who think that logical laws are not psychological laws would view it as psychologism to identify the two (Kusch, "Psychologism", 2024)." This critique accuses Nishida's philosophy of being overly concerned with the subjective experiences of consciousness and reducing his logic to the conjectures of the individual mind. This critique first appeared in response to Nishida's *Zen no Kenkyū*, specifically with his idea of

pure experience, as it is prior to any outward distinction and only subject to the individual mind. Nishida himself acknowledged this critique, saying “[as] I look at it now, the standpoint of this book is that of consciousness, which might be thought of as a kind of psychologism. Yet even if people criticize it as being too psychological, there is little I can do now (Nishida, *An Inquiry into the Good*, 1990, xxxi),” and that, despite this psychological leaning, what he had written went beyond just psychology, using this accusation to further his writing. To avoid this critique in his future writings, Nishida would make an effort to develop a more logical structure for pure experience, attempting to do so in his *Jikaku ni okeru chokkan to hansei*, to move his work away from something merely psychological. This would evolve his pure experience into his standpoint of absolute will, “seeing without a seer,” and self-consciousness, from there into his concept of *basho*, and so on, as mentioned above. Given the impact of this critique, it is arguably the most important, setting a standard for Nishida’s philosophy and forcing him to go past psychology, providing a jumping-off point into the rest of his philosophy.

One of the most frequent issues in critiques of Nishida, seen in several places here, is a misunderstanding of Nishida’s philosophy. Nishida wrote on a great many topics in the field of philosophy, and, while his *Zen no Kenkyū* is considered to be his easiest to read text, this text also brought the critique as psychologism. While this allowed Nishida to provide a clearer philosophical foundation for his later work, it also led to Nishida taking much more care in the language he used to accurately convey the points he was trying to make in his writing. Following this Nishida’s writing became much denser, even more so than his first text was. This has made the interpretation of his work quite difficult, both

among his critics and supporters and there are many different interpretations of his philosophy, as well as his writing in political contexts which will be discussed in relation to Nishida's impact, both in philosophy and outside it.

While the criticisms mentioned here arose among Japanese philosophers contemporary of Nishida, there are many more, both in Japan and beyond. One issue to face when engaging with Nishida's writing, especially as a foreigner, is that of translation. While much of Nishida's work has been translated, there are still many more that have yet to reach outside of Japan and what has been translated is mostly in English, German, and French. Translation itself, while helpful in spreading the awareness and impact of a writer and their work, is a type of interpretation. In reading the translated texts, the point of Nishida's writing has already been interpreted through the lens of the translator, and, while this could make the more complicated points clearer for readers, there can also be subtle concepts or words that can have several meanings, all of which important for a specific subject, that can be lost. Since, even in its original language, Nishida's writing can be misinterpreted, this remains a problem for the study of his philosophy. Despite this, one can supplement their reading of Nishida and his philosophy with that of his peers within the Kyōto School of Philosophy, their interpretations of his writing, and the historical context of Japan in the time that Nishida lived. As such, the below section will cover this topic.

IV. The Kyōto School

The Kyōto School of Philosophy is a school of thought originating from Nishida Kitarō. After the publication of his *Zen no Kenkyū* and Nishida's hiring at Kyōto Imperial University, Nishida's ceaseless development of his philosophy, and especially the concept of "absolute nothingness," as well as his interactions with others at Kyōto Imperial University, such as Tanabe Hajime, and Nishitani Keiji, led to the Kyōto School's foundation as a school of thought. Like Nishida, the others in the Kyōto School were concerned with the interaction between Eastern and Western philosophy, especially religious philosophy, East Asian Mahāyāna Buddhism and Christianity, "absolute nothingness," and the contrast between "Western being" and "Eastern nothingness."

The first aspect of the Kyōto School's philosophy to be engaged with in the West was its religious philosophy which, at the time, was seen as representative of East Asian Mahāyāna Buddhism as a whole. Despite this, Kyōto School philosophers discussed many topics both within and apart from that of religion, covering ethics, epistemology, aesthetics, philosophies of culture, and many more. Similarly, while the Kyōto School was heavily inspired by Mahāyāna Buddhism, the manner in which this topic is discussed is different than what would normally be expected, as the Kyōto School philosophers drew upon and reinterpreted Christian sources just as they did Mahāyāna Buddhist sources. The Kyōto School's debate of both Eastern and Western ideas, at a time when Japan was modernizing via appropriation of Western culture and in a place that once served as the nation's capital and steeped in the nation's traditional culture, goes beyond merely molding Western thought to fit an Eastern lens or expressing Japanese thought in modern Western terms. The Kyōto School, as has been seen in Nishida's thought, critically and

creatively developed a style of philosophy in dialogue with both Eastern and Western sources, developing a uniquely Japanese cross-cultural philosophy (Davis, “The Kyoto School”, 2023, 1).

When nothingness is spoken of in Western terms, it is typically that of the negation of being, ontology, a philosophy of being, versus a meontology, a philosophy of non-being. However, in Kyōto School philosophy, nothingness is not merely the negation of being but is beyond being. Similar conceptions of nothing can be found in Western philosophy, in both Heidegger and Hegel’s writing, although, within the Kyōto School, these conceptions of nothingness are seen more as relative nothingness rather than the absolute nothingness that is most valued, the origins of which are most purely found in the traditions of Asia. Nishida himself states in his book *From That Which Acts to That Which Sees*, that, while there is much to admire about the achievements of Western philosophy “does there not lie hidden at the base of our Eastern culture, preserved and passed down by our ancestors for several thousand years, something which sees the form of the formless and hears the voice of the voiceless? Our hearts and minds endlessly seek this something; and it is my wish to provide this quest with a philosophical foundation” (NKZ IV, 6 as cited in Davis, “The Kyoto School”, 2023, 3.1).

While the Kyōto School formed as a result of those at Kyōto Imperial University that followed Nishida, the deciding factor in creating the Kyōto School separate from a purely Nishidian school of thought was Tanabe Hajime’s critique of Nishida’s philosophy. This critical reception of Nishida’s philosophy, mentioned above, led to further dialogue between Nishida, Tanabe, their peers, and their students, furthering both the membership

and the breadth of the subject matter the Kyōto School covered. The name “Kyōto School (*Kyōto gakuha*)” was first coined by Tosaka Jun, specifically in reference to the philosophies of Nishida, Tanabe, and Miki Kiyoshi, the school of thought as a social phenomenon and representation of bourgeois philosophy (Davis, “The Kyoto School”, 2023, 2.1 and Yusa, “Reflections,” 1995, 289). Despite this, the name “Kyōto School” was not often used by members of the school themselves, but more often by journalists, specifically in regard to the political discussions of several of the school’s members immediately preceding and during the Second World War. The name did not return to referencing specifically the school’s philosophy until after the school’s thought had been studied and seen positively in the West, and, although the political controversies of the school did eventually come to the forefront of Western discussions of the school, this initial positivity was enough to shift attention in Japan back to the philosophical merit of the Kyōto School’s thought (Davis, “The Kyoto School”, 2023, 2.1). While the Kyōto School has had many influential members, the discussion here will be limited to five outside Nishida. Tanabe Hajime and Nishitani Keiji will be the most discussed members, especially in their philosophical and political differences with Nishida, along with Tosaka Jun and Miki Kiyoshi, specifically in regard to their interactions with Nishida and their political standpoint in comparison to others in the Kyōto School, and Ueda Shizuteru (1926–2019), a student of Nishitani’s who belongs to the third generation of Kyōto School philosophers (the first being Nishida and Tanabe, and Nishitani being part of the second) and was a central figure in the revival of Nishida Studies in the 1980s.

In contrast to Nishida's activities prior to his teaching at Kyōto Imperial University, teaching German and philosophy at schools in Yamaguchi and Kanazawa, studying philosophy through the various texts that entered Japan, and studying Zen under masters in Kyōto, Tanabe Hajime, a Pure Land Buddhist compared to Nishida's Zen Buddhism, studied philosophy at Kyōto Imperial University with Nishida and later went abroad and studied in Germany with Heidegger and another of the most important philosophers of the early 20th century, phenomenologist Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). While influenced by Nishida and his studies in Germany, Tanabe would develop his own philosophy from the standpoint of the philosophy of science. The most important concept of Tanabe's pre-war writings is his *Logic of Species* (*Shu no ronri*), and his most important post-war writing is his *Philosophy as Metanoetics* (*Zangedō to shite no tetsugaku*), the first of which will be covered here and the second later on. Tanabe's *Logic of Species* emerged from his earlier writings on culture in which he expresses disappointment that Taishō period culturalism moves from a focus on the individual to a focus on humanity as a whole while ignoring the significance of the nation and the race of people that inhabit it. This idea paired with his shift away from Kantian philosophy and towards Hegel, as well as Nishida's logic of place (and his criticism of it), pushed Tanabe first to his dialectics of absolute mediation, then on to his logic of the specific (species). Tanabe's dialectic of absolute mediation held that history was the mediation of beings in their growth into absolute nothingness, however, as this view didn't account for the individual's ability to exercise free will in directing the course of history, Tanabe looked in logic for a way to do so, finding it in his logic of species

(Heisig, “Tanabe’s Logic of the Specific and Nationalism” in Heisig and Maraldo, *Rude Awakenings*, 1995, 274-8).

In his search for this logic, Tanabe came upon Bergson’s *Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, specifically the concepts of “open” and “closed” societies contained therein. From this in his logic, Tanabe felt it possible to identify what made a closed society (the specific) close and the effects it had, a closed racial society limiting a society’s thought and standing between individuals and an idealized society. In recognizing contemporary Japan as a closed society, Tanabe, attempted to guide his logic away from modes of thought constructive of closed societies to that of open societies by expanding the society’s frame of reference. However, while this sounds as though Tanabe is advocating Japan to move away from closed society ideology reminiscent of Nazi ideology and Heidegger’s search for German uniqueness, both of which he criticized (Heisig, “Tanabe’s Logic of the Specific and Nationalism” in Heisig and Maraldo, *Rude Awakenings*, 1995, 280), Tanabe didn’t directly criticize these irrationalities in Japanese society, in fact, providing support for them due to his absolute mediation requiring a reality to direct history. This reality cannot lie with the individual nor the memory or collective culture, as that would either raise consciousness beyond absolute mediation or do away with the races and cultures that make up the advancing history, and as the human race itself is also unsuitable, as it is no more than an ideal, what remains is the Nation, “[i]n the sense in which the nation achieves unified form as an absolutely mediated unity of the specific and the individual in religion, the nation is the only absolute thing on earth (Tanabe Hajime, THZ

6:145 as cited in Heisig, “Tanabe’s Logic of the Specific and Nationalism” in Heisig and Maraldo, *Rude Awakenings*, 1995, 282).”

Similar to Tanabe, Nishitani Keiji studied under Nishida and studied in Germany with Heidegger, although Nishitani made more of an effort to evolve Nishida’s philosophy through his study of Bergson, Heidegger, Nietzsche, and nihility than break altogether with Nishida and his philosophy (regardless of Tanabe’s actual success in doing so). From these influences, Nishitani developed his own philosophy, an existential and phenomenological path to absolute nothingness, his three-field topology of being, nihility, and emptiness (Davis, “The Kyoto School”, 2023, 3.5). Nishitani thought that, despite the profundity of Nishida’s philosophy, it did not properly address nihilism. Rather than the more subtle influence of Zen felt in Nishida’s writing, Nishitani is much more explicit and specific (as Nishida took influence from Shin Buddhism and Christianity as well), writing on and from a “standpoint of Zen (see NKC XI; and Nishitani 2009 cited in Davis, “The Kyoto School”, 2023, 3.5).” Nishitani’s Zen philosophy is much more concerned with letting go of one’s attachments rather than grasping some conception of God (the absolute) as found in Nishida.

To reach the place of absolute nothingness (where one would let go of their attachments), for Nishitani a “non-dualistic reaffirmation of self and world” (Davis, “The Kyoto School”, 2023, 3.5), one would need to first escape the field of being, then break through the relative nothingness of nihility. In facing nihility and overcoming it by passing through it, one passes through the field of nihility to the field of emptiness. This field of emptiness is not a relative nothingness like that of nihility, but an “open clearing wherein

beings are neither nullified nor reified but rather let be in the mutual freedom of their coming to be and passing away in unobstructed interrelation with one another (Nishitani 2004; Davis 2017, as cited in Davis, “The Kyoto School”, 2023, 3.5).” A topic frequently mentioned in Nishitani’s writing is that of “overcoming modernity,” the idea of which is that, rather than retreating from Western modernity, one must go through and beyond modernity, critically and creatively utilizing the traditions of East Asia and specifically of East Asian Mahāyāna Buddhism (Davis, “The Kyoto School”, 2023, 2.2). While this idea is relevant to both Nishitani’s pre- and post-war writing, its use has a much more political tone during and prior to the war, which shall be discussed later in relation to a wartime symposium regarding the topic.

While they are not always grouped with the main philosophers of the Kyōto School, Miki Kiyoshi and Tosaka Jun, as students of Nishida, both influenced the Kyōto School’s reputation as well as the thought of others in the Kyōto School. Tosaka, as mentioned above, was the first to coin the term *Kyōto gakuha* and criticized the Kyōto School’s philosophy as “bourgeois philosophy” that ignored historical and social concerns. Despite this, as well as the differences in political opinion and philosophical thought, Tosaka remained on good personal terms with Nishida. Miki Kiyoshi similarly remained on good terms with Nishida (despite disagreement with elements of Nishida’s philosophy, Tanabe was the only member discussed here who also cut personal ties with Nishida), was influenced by Nishida’s nothingness beyond the subject-object distinction and which envelops both in his unfinished work, *The Logic of Imagination*, and was one of Nishida’s former students who inspired him to take an interest in Marxism. Both Miki and Tosaka are

key figures in what is sometimes known as the “left wing of the Kyōto School,” and during the Second World War, unlike the many philosophers who retreated into seclusion, away from the potential dangers posed by the government to those who dissented, openly opposed the injustices of wartime Japan and, as a result, would both die in prison in 1945 (Davis, “The Kyoto School”, 2023, 2.2, 4.1).

Compared to others in the Kyōto School, while Nishida primarily avoided political language in his philosophy (Nishida’s political opinions are present, however, in his personal correspondences), politics do feature in his work, especially near the end of his life. In his final text, Nishida connects his historical world to the world of politics. Humans exist in the biological world but become a race in the historical world by expressing themselves, with religion acting as the ground of this expression and culture as its content. Nishida sees the global world as transcending the concept of race through world religions, a global humanity forming by transcending racial differences. The historical world expresses itself in the form of religiously grounded nations which provide the bases for morality, “[e]very race of people, as a formation of the historical world, is its own expression of God (Nishida, *Last Writings*, 1993, 116).” The global human world, with a self-transforming content of culture, transcends the merely racial and maintains an identity in the world religions, true culture must be religious, and true religion must be cultural. The global human world, coming to be by self-negating and becoming self-aware, allows the individual nations to both preserve their individual culture and develop through global mediation. The nation’s self-negation allows for each to maintain its own uniqueness while making it aware of the uniqueness of other nations and creating a place

for intercultural communication. Despite this apparent promotion of cross-cultural interaction and collaboration, Nishida does afford a special position to the Japanese nation. Japan's unique capacity as the nation in Asia that has retained Asian traditions despite adapting Western technologies allows it to stand opposed to Western domination of Asia (Maraldo, "Nishida Kitarō," 2024, 6).

While most of Nishida's writing is philosophical in nature, his status as Japan's premier philosopher led to his involvement in Japanese politics with his New Year's lecture to Emperor Hirohito in 1941 as well as the Imperial Navy's think tank starting in 1939 and the Imperial Army's request for him to provide a scholarly rationalization for the creation of the so-called "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere (Davis, "The Kyoto School", 2023, 4.2)" in 1943. In his speech to the Emperor, Nishida lectured on the philosophy of history, saying that, while conflict arises out of interactions between different ethnic groups, so too does the resolution of these conflicts, and, as such, while war is inevitable it is not an end and thus a pluralistic community of unique nations must be endeavored toward. Nishida similarly speaks against the totalitarian policies of the military at the time and ends the lecture by making known his faith in the regenerative nature of history, which has the Imperial family at its heart, and his hope for an active role in international history (Yusa Michiko, "Nishida and Totalitarianism," in Heisig and Maraldo, *Rude Awakenings*, 1995, 110-11). A few years prior to this speech, Nishida was approached by Navy Captain Takagi Sōkichi (1893-1979) who was putting together a think tank to provide a philosophical perspective to guide the navy, to which Nishida agreed, hoping his ideas could influence the course the military would take, and recommended his former student and teacher at

Kyōto Imperial University, Kōyama Iwao (1905-93) (Yusa Michiko, “Nishida and Totalitarianism,” in Heisig and Maraldo, *Rude Awakenings*, 1995, 122-3).

Due to the dangers of speaking out explicitly against the government, Nishida, in an effort to influence opinions on the war, especially of those who could have a notable effect, engaged in what Ueda Shizuteru called a “war over words,” a “tug-of-war over meaning (Ueda Shizuteru, “Nishida, Nationalism, and the War in Question,” in Heisig and Maraldo, *Rude Awakenings*, 1995, 90-1)” in which he would adopt the language popular among the Nationalists and the army and attempt to use them to criticize their current meaning, redeem them and warn against the dangers of the nationalistic and imperialistic uses that were most common. Nishida’s “war over words” is especially evident in his *The Problem of Japanese Culture*, his “Principles for a New World Order,” and “The State and National Polity.” *The Problem of Japanese Culture* is the basis for many of the points found in the “Principles for a New World Order,” reiterated to the imperial army who had requested Nishida provide philosophical justification for the “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere,” and they both attempt to use the language of the day to criticize the war effort.

An example of Nishida’s “semantic struggle” can be found in these texts, one being *hakkō ichiu* (*hakkō iu*), meaning “all the world under one roof.” This phrase had been commonly used by the nationalists as a slogan to support a union of the countries of East Asia which, in *The Problem of Japanese Culture* Nishida criticized by saying Japan had to open itself up to the world and could not become a subjective power as that would “turn the ‘Way of the Emperor’ into a form of hegemony or imperialism (Nishida, *NKZ* 12:341, as

cited in Yusa Michiko, “Nishida and Totalitarianism,” in Heisig and Maraldo, *Rude Awakenings*, 1995, 126).” Nishida once again uses this phrase in “Principles for a New World Order,” expressing that the true meaning of the phrase *hakkō iu* is not that promoting nationalism but instead promoting the realization of a global unity of independent countries, each contributing to the formation of a world history. Similarly found in *The Problem of Japanese Culture* as well as the “Principles for a New World Order,” is a repeated use of the word “spirit,” meaning for his readers to associate this with the ideology of a unique “Japanese Spirit” (*Nihon seishin*), and the term “Imperial Way” (*kōdō*). Nishida warns against thinking of the Imperial Way as an ideal, as that would make the nation into a subject and “the Imperial Way no more than a way of domination; it would turn the Imperial Way into an imperialism (Nishida, *NKZ 12:341* as cited in Ueda Shizuteru, “Nishida, Nationalism, and the War in Question,” in Heisig and Maraldo, *Rude Awakenings*, 1995, 93),” and criticizes the Japanese Spirit as shallow and dogmatic, empty of theory and not a mode of thought.

In “Principles for a New World Order,” Nishida reinterpreted the “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere” as Asian countries coming together, sharing strengths, and resisting the imposition of the cultures and ideals of Western countries, becoming more than just victims in the making of world history rather than the promotion of Japanese cultural and military dominance over other countries in Asia that the term had been more popularly used as. In “The State and National Polity,” Nishida argues against the ultranationalist reading of *kokutai* (national polity) as military strength rooted in its uniquely Japanese family-like structure, shifting emphasis away from the current structure to a more religious

dimension, locating what should be sacred in a larger dimension than the current polity, and insisting the roots of said polity lie rather in our common humanity than Japanese uniqueness (Yusa Michiko, “Nishida and Totalitarianism,” in Heisig and Maraldo, *Rude Awakenings*, 1995, 130).

Despite Nishida’s efforts to alter the understanding of the meaning of nationalist ideological terms, the undertaking ultimately failed. In an effort to avoid the retaliation of government officials, Nishida wrote in a highly ambiguous manner. Writing this way, while it allowed for other scholars and those who knew of Nishida’s efforts to understand what he was trying to do, government officials and the populace at large could not understand the nuance of Nishida’s writing and interpreted it in their favor. Nishida was criticized on both sides of the war effort, for his writing being both too nationalist as well as being not nationalist enough. Even with Nishida’s ambiguous style of writing, in 1944, the Ministry of Education’s “Thought Inquisition” started to investigate Nishida’s writing as being “unpatriotic,” although Nishida’s relationship with the navy allowed Captain Takagi to intervene, leading to both Nishida and his fellow Kyōto School philosophers avoiding repercussions (Yusa Michiko, “Nishida and Totalitarianism,” in Heisig and Maraldo, *Rude Awakenings*, 1995, 123). While a careful reading of Nishida can clearly see his resistance to imperialism and totalitarianism, critical evaluation of Nishida’s writing remains difficult as, despite his resistance, Nishida did believe Japan should have a key role in the formation of world history as well as in the role of the Emperor in Japanese culture.

In addition to the political writings of Nishida, Tanabe’s logic of species was inherently political, Tosaka and Miki were quite politically outspoken, and Nishitani

repeatedly insisted on “overcoming modernity,” each having some effect on the Kyōto School’s reputation following the Second World War. To various levels of success, the majority of Kyōto School philosophers, including Nishida, Tanabe, and Nishitani, rather than retreating out of the public eye or engaging in the overt critique of Miki and Tosaka, engaged in a sort of cooperative resistance. This can most clearly be seen in Nishida’s “war over words” and, like many of such writings, failed to adequately convince the Japanese public following the war that the Kyōto School had not provided philosophical justification for continued Japanese military aggression and imperialism. Contributing the most to the Kyōto School’s negative reputation following the Second World War was the *Chūōkōron* discussions (1941-2), a series of roundtable discussions published in the journal *Chūōkōron* which would become an infamous symbol of the “intelligentsia’s cooperation with the Japanese war effort,” the central theme of the discussion being “Japan and the Standpoint of World History (Horio Tsutomu, “The Chūōkōron Discussions, Their Background and Meaning”, translated by Thomas Kirchner in Heisig and Maraldo, *Rude Awakenings*, 1995, 289).”

Prior to a discussion of the *Chūōkōron* discussions, it is important to discuss another wartime symposium, that on *Overcoming Modernity* (1942). While the symposium on *Overcoming Modernity* consisted of thirteen members, only two of them were members of the Kyōto School, Nishitani Keiji and Suzuki Shigetaka, both of which participated in the *Chūōkōron* discussions as well. This symposium was modeled on similar League-of-Nations-inspired conferences and dealt with the nature of civilizations. As each of the members came from a wide variety of backgrounds, each had similarly varied

interpretations of what it means to “overcome modernity,” with members all in the middle-of-the-road politically yet with backgrounds in science, philosophy, and even music. The discussion was largely concerned with the concept of modernity as well as how this concept related to the West and Japan, some arguing that modernity was not something that needed to be overcome and some that modernity was worth adopting, similarly discussing the impact of modernity on global cultures and Japanese traditions.

Due to the varied points of view, this symposium is often criticized as disjointed and inconclusive, although it provides important insight into the standpoints of Japanese intellectuals on the issue of “Western modernity” in wartime Japan. Most important for the purposes of this essay is the point of view espoused by Nishitani Keiji. Nishitani posits that a new foundation must be laid in order to answer the questions of the day and craft a view of the world. For this foundation, an ethical system based on religion must be constructed, this system being that of subjective nothingness. It is within this subjective nothingness that one finds the unification of science, culture, and religion. Nishitani similarly believed that subjective nothingness could be developed into a system of ethics for the people (of Japan), that would raise the people’s moral energy. Similarly resulting in an increased moral energy is Japan’s escaping and challenging the domination of Asia by Western powers, promoting the creation of a new and just world order, which Nishitani sees as Japan’s “destiny (Minamoto Ryōen, “The Symposium on ‘Overcoming Modernity,’” translated by James Heisig in Heisig and Maraldo, *Rude Awakenings*, 1995, 217-19).” Nishitani also argued that Japan must go beyond a self-centered standpoint to establish international relations, opening up to a mutually beneficial collective of nations. Nishitani

spoke largely of traditions, especially Eastern traditions, and the value of these traditions in coming into contact with Western thought and transforming it. While it is easy to see Nishitani's nationalism, as well as his support for the war effort ongoing at the time, in his contribution to this symposium, he does seem to promote an idealistic view of Japan's role in the world.

Nishitani and Suzuki similarly participated in the *Chūōkōron* discussions along with two other Kyōto School members, Kōsaka Masaaki and Kōyama Iwao. The three roundtable discussions presenting a philosophy of world history from a world-historical perspective represented a challenge against the contradictions in modern Japanese history as well as in the modern historical world, the central theme of which would be the fulfillment of "the historical vocation of building a new and plural world order by raising consciousness of [moral energy] (Horio Tsutomu, "The Chūōkōron Discussions, Their Background and Meaning," translated by Thomas Kirchner in Heisig and Maraldo, *Rude Awakenings*, 1995, 314)." While the *Chūōkōron* discussions were nationalistic in their promotion and romanticization of the war effort, so too can the members' idealization of Japan's role in world history be found. Despite the promotion of the war effort, the specific language used in the *Chūōkōron* discussions encourages an idealistic politically naive viewpoint of the realization of Japan's wartime policies. In these meetings, the members promoted policies such as the "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere" of collaborating East Asian countries and Japanizing the peoples of other nations to assist in the institution of this "Co-Prosperity Sphere," downplaying the political realities of both policies and Japanese aggression in the war. The *Chūōkōron* discussions' clear nationalism, support for

the war, and promotion of Japan as the leader of East Asia and as an actor in the making of global history, all led to the infamous reputation of the Kyōto School following the war, given by the many intellectuals who, after the war, felt betrayed by the Kyōto School thinkers who had supported the failed efforts during the war. Despite this, the *Chūōkōron* discussions do have value in their critique of Western Imperialism as well as their insistence that Japan's leading role in East Asia not become that of an imperialist or colonizer like that of the West (Davis, "The Kyoto School", 2023, 4.3).

Following the end of the Second World War, as well as the deaths of Nishida, Tosaka, and Miki, the philosophy of both Tanabe and Nishitani would undergo a change, Tanabe with his Metanoetic turn and Nishitani with his delve into religious philosophy. Tanabe's Metanoetic turn, and similarly his turn further into Shin Buddhism, began prior to the end of the war, with the first parts of his *Zangedō to shite no tetsugaku* being delivered as a series of lectures in 1944. These lectures, and the text itself, serve as a self-critique of Tanabe's earlier philosophy, "a call to self-critique on the part of the entire nation (Davis, "The Kyoto School", 2023, 4.5)," and it entails an "absolute critique" of human rationality in which the self-power of finite reason opposes its contradictions and is reborn via absolute nothingness, with which Tanabe has associated the Shin Buddhist notion of Other-power (*tariki*). While Tanabe had once utilized his logic of the specific to propose the relative absolute of the Japanese nation could act as a supreme archetype for other nations, his turn toward metanoesis seems to have been an effort to separate his philosophy from the political tone of his past writings and move towards a genuine philosophy of religion, in the direction of faith rather than the religious intuition of Nishida.

Following the war, Nishitani continued his philosophical efforts in the direction of Zen Buddhism, specifically in dialogue with Christian mysticism, existentialism, and phenomenology, as well as a continuation of his interactions with nihilism. While there is notable continuity between Nishitani's pre- and post-war thought, especially in relation to "overcoming modernity" in connection with his thought on nihilism, Nishitani does engage in a form of self-reflection in the overcoming of modernity in his later writing lacking the political role of his earlier thought (Davis, "The Kyoto School", 2023, 3.4, 4.5).

Despite the political implications of the Kyōto School's membership, as well as the political situation in Japan in the first half of the 20th century, the Kyōto School is important both for insight into the resistance, and compliance, of leading intellectuals in wartime Japan and for its contribution to a global philosophy. In taking influence from both Eastern philosophy and religion as well as that of the West, the Kyōto School made one of the first efforts to both critique and adapt Eastern and Western ideas into a distinctive philosophy. Even with the philosophical significance of the Kyōto School, following the war, Nishitani and many others were relieved of their university positions as a reaction to what the public considered support for wartime Japan's militaristic fascism and, even when reinstated later, this stain on the Kyōto School's reputation persisted long after the war. More serious discussion of the Kyōto School and its ideas has only in recent decades been pursued, as its reputation in Japan has improved over time due to recovery from immersion in post-war policies, "a general reaffirmation of cultural identity (Davis, "The Kyoto School", 2023, 4.5)," and positive attention from Western scholars. With this increased attention, more sway has been given to the Kyōto School and the thought of its members, as well as a

further interest into how the cross-cultural ideas found in this philosophy can be analyzed from different perspectives all around the world. From this increased interest and study, we can see the impact that Nishida and the others in the Kyōto School have had both in philosophy and beyond it.

V. Impact

While it is difficult to quantify the specific impact that Nishida and the Kyōto School have had, in analyzing similarities between those connected to the Kyōto School, the resurgence of interest in Kyōto School thought, and academic ventures related to Japanese philosophy, one can see the worldwide impact of these ideas. One such impact, and one which in turn had an influence on the reputation of the Kyōto School was that on German philosophy, and specifically on Heidegger. Much of the Western philosophy that those in the Kyōto School engaged with came from German philosophical traditions, Nishida had taken much from Kant, Fichte, and Hegel, and several Kyōto School members studied in Germany, both Nishitani and Tanabe with Heidegger. Tanabe was the first scholar in the world to write on Heidegger's thought, and Nishitani was heavily influenced by Heidegger's thought on nihilism and introduced Heidegger to many Zen ideas (Davis, "The Kyoto School", 2023, 3.1, 3.5).

Given Tanabe's studying occurred in the early 1920s, it is quite possible that this interaction influenced Heidegger's writing on his concept of nothingness, however, regardless of this, there was undoubtedly an exchange of ideas and an impact on both parties. Similarly, Heidegger's own reputation affected that of the Kyōto School, with what

Yusa Michiko calls the "Heidegger factor," that, after the war, given Nishida and Heidegger's respective positions as highly regarded philosophers in their nations (as well as the political stance of these nations in the Second World War), Heidegger's "thought and his political behavior became subject, perhaps with some justice, to sharp criticism, and this was unjustly carried over to Nishida (Yusa, "Reflections," 1995, 295)." Due to the vast influence of German philosophical ideas in the Kyōto School's engagement with Western thought, in the last several decades there has been much analysis of Nishida and the Kyōto School comparing the Japanese philosophers to their German inspiration, as well as other philosophers likewise inspired by German thought, highlighting their commonalities and key differences, making a cross-cultural philosophical dialogue possible.

The Buddhist influence on Nishida and the Kyōto School's thought has similarly impacted contemporary analysis of Japanese philosophy. Arguably beginning with D.T. Suzuki's friendship with Nishida as children, Buddhist thought, and especially Zen traditions, heavily inspired the Kyōto School's ideas of, at least, *mu* (nothingness) and *sokuhi*. The different branches of Buddhism allowing for different interpretations and dialogue both within the Kyōto School and outside it, given Tanabe's Shin Buddhist inclination. Despite not being part of the Kyōto School, D.T. Suzuki's impact on Nishida and Zen extends beyond the philosophy of the Kyōto School, as he helped to introduce Zen to the West. This introduction, as well as Nishida's engagement with Christian ideas in addition to that of Zen, has led to more academic interest in the Buddhist-Christian dialogue found in Kyōto School philosophy. Nishida and the Kyōto School's taking

inspiration from both Eastern and Western ideas, as well as the increased study of Japanese philosophy in the West has led to more academic focus on philosophy as a cross-cultural dialogue on topics such as German phenomenology and existentialism and religion, comparing varieties of Christian thought and varieties of Buddhist thought as well as the influences on and from these ideas. This comparison of ideas features heavily in Nishida's writing, as despite the variety of influences in his thought, he engages critically with both Western and Eastern ideas as well as the ethnocentrism that can be found in both traditions of thought, encouraging global cooperation "as many branches of the same tree supplementing one other on the basis of both their deep-rooted commonality *and* their irreducible diversity (*NKZ XIV*, 402–6 and 417 as cited in Davis, "The Kyoto School", 2023, 5.1)."

This influx of Buddhist and Japanese philosophical ideas as well as the idea of a global philosophy has led to an increased interest in translating the writings of the Kyōto School and particularly of Nishida. The earliest translations were typically in German, the first of which were translated during Nishida's lifetime, with the first English translation coming in 1958, an adaptation of an earlier German translation of Nishida's "The Intelligible World (Yokoyama, "Nishida Kitarō in Translation", 1995, 299-302)." In this early period of translation (at least in English), nearly twenty years following this first English text, much translation took Nishida's writing too literally or without proper understanding/reverence for the source material and its own sources of inspiration. However, by the end of this period, translation of Nishida's work, as well as interest in it, had increased exponentially, with three translations of Nishida's thought being published

in English in the same year (1987), one of his second major work (*Jikaku ni okeru chokkan to hansei*) and two of his final major work (*Bashoteki ronri to shūkyōteki sekaikan*) (Maraldo, “Translating Nishida,” 1989, 477).

This increased interest in Nishida’s philosophy has been maintained in the time since with both increased translation of his work into other languages as well as increased scholarship on Nishida’s thought and its shared ideas with other philosophers. An example of the continued interest in Nishida and the Kyōto School’s philosophy is the organization the European Network of Japanese Philosophy (ENJP), their journal: the “European Journal of Japanese Philosophy (EJJP),” and the publisher associated with them: Chisokudō Publications. The ENJP focuses on promoting scholarship of Japanese philosophy in European languages, setting up conferences, research projects, and journals to accomplish this. Similarly, Chisokudō Publications was founded to help achieve this. The EJJP aims to provide critical articles and translations related to Japanese philosophy and is the first multi-lingual journal in Europe to do so. The most recent publication of this journal was published at the end of the prior to this paper’s completion (Dec. 2024) and over half of the journal’s contents refer to Nishida, another Kyōto School member, or someone connected to the school and its members (Morisato and Krings, *EJJP*, 2016). In the field of international philosophy, interest in Nishida and the Kyōto School remains strong and the continued translation and publication of Japanese philosophy allows for Japanese philosophy as a whole to be seen on the same stage as European philosophy. As such, the impact of Nishida and the Kyōto School in making the study of Japanese philosophy a global endeavor is clearly seen.

The philosophy of Nishida and the Kyōto School is similarly felt outside of philosophy, inspiring artists, architects, and scientists. Nishida's idea of nothingness inspired the architect Andō Tadao, his idea of the self and world mutually forming each other inspired the aesthetics of the calligrapher Morita Shiryū, and his idea "of place" influenced Shimizu Hiroshi in complexity theory and information science and Nonaka Ikujiro in management theory (Maraldo, "Nishida Kitarō," 2024, 11)." The Kyōto School's philosophy has suggested directions for research in psychology, psychopathology, neuroscience, and psychiatry, as well as ecology with the ideas of intersubjectivity and interdependence. Likewise, Nishida's philosophy continues to have implications in the field of quantum physics as, following Einstein's visit to Japan in 1922 (which Nishida partially influenced), the development of Japanese field theories greatly advanced, and Nishida's theory of place seems to have drawn from the concept of gravitational fields in relativity theory, in turn inspiring the theory expressed by Nobel laureate Yukawa Hideki "to explain how elementary particles are not localized point particles but rather spatially extended in 'elementary domains,' the smallest quanta of spacetime (Maraldo, "Nishida Kitarō," 2024, 11)." Nishida's idea of place, his distinction between subject and object, and his ideas of the self and the world have all impacted fields in and beyond philosophy and the increased interest in both his philosophy and that of the Kyōto School as a whole can help to both further these fields as well as global cooperation and the making of a world philosophy.

VI. Conclusion

Nishida Kitarō is arguably one of the most important philosophers of the 20th century, engaging critically and creatively with ideas and traditions popular at the time in Western philosophy as well as East Asian traditions in learning and religion, engaging in one of the first real efforts towards a world philosophy, and yet, despite increased study in recent decades, his ideas have yet to break into widespread knowledge and teaching in Western philosophical circles. Given the widespread interconnectedness of today's society, it is even more important now that all types of learning and ideas are presented in an effort to foster international interest among peoples. While there are many opportunities for one to learn about other cultures, the efforts to do so are separated from typical learning. Despite the many ideas that Nishida adapts from the West, especially from German philosophy, Nishida, or any other Eastern philosopher, is rarely mentioned in relation to these ideas (outside of when they are specifically the focus of discussion). While it makes sense to focus on the original philosophers and ideas in the study of these topics, it is important to learn how these ideas are taken and evolved by both Western and Eastern cultures. If, in the study of a topic, the present-day utilization of the topic by cultures other than that of the idea's origin is not engaged with, it keeps cultures, religions, philosophies, and sciences, away from the global cooperation that would be so valuable in today's world. The methods utilized by Nishida and those in the Kyōto School are such that any person from any culture should be able to engage with them. Critically engaging with one's own cultural and academic traditions, as well as that of another culture with its own traditions allows one to gain a deeper understanding of and appreciation for other cultures and peoples.

Nishida's philosophy should be engaged with all over the world, even if you do not agree with the particulars of the philosophy. Nishida's engagement with ideas from Germany with Fichte, Hegel, and Kant (among others), from India with Buddhism and the thought of Nāgārjuna, Zen traditions and Confucian ideas coming from China, Bergson from France, James from America, and many more, all through the lens and background of Japanese tradition and thought make his philosophy a true world philosophy. In experiencing a world philosophy like that of Nishida, people all over the world can get beyond the surface level thought of a culture. In seeing Nishida's political writings, one can see that, regardless of how a culture is portrayed or thought of as unified, there can still be dissenting views, that even that dissenting view carries with it the profound respect for one's culture. In Nishida's writings in German phenomenism, one can see how a philosophical tradition rooted in Western traditions and ideas is interpreted by a culture wholly separated from that of the West. In Nishida's adaptation of James's pure experience, one can see how someone's religious affiliation can affect their interpretation of an idea rooted in an entirely separate religious tradition. In this broadly influenced philosophy, one can see how different ideas are interpreted by different cultures, as well as the fact that even within a culture broadly portrayed as homogenous, people think in different ways.

By studying Nishida's philosophy, people all over the world can be exposed to these ideas and in realizing how cultures differ both within themselves and with those apart from them, people can apply this way of thinking to their own lives, accepting that other cultures are as multifaceted as one's own. With the impact that Nishida's ideas have had up to this

point, as well as their continued contributions to academic endeavors of all kinds, I believe that the philosophy of Nishida should be more widely taught in the West, especially as an introduction to world philosophy, in how ideas all over the world can interrelate into a new philosophy, as well as to further learning into cultures that are not typically covered by Western philosophy in order to promote intercultural dialogue in our society that in the present day is so globally interconnected.

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