

Absolute Nothingness and World History

Universalizing Asian logic as a world-historical mission

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ABSTRACT | This paper discusses the role that the Kyoto School played in prewar debates on Japanese subjectivity and Japan's global role. The focus is on the school's founder, Nishida Kitarō's (1870-1945) work, and its interpretation in wider intellectual debates. Nishida rarely wrote on Buddhist philosophy and can be called a "Buddhist thinker" only with strong caveats. Nevertheless, we may view his philosophy as expressing Buddhist insight through a framework of Western philosophy in an effort to reach universality. Despite his intentions, Nishida's efforts came to be received, within wider Japanese intellectual discourse, as an exemplary of Japanese particularity that was on par or beyond what was seen as "Western." The approach of this paper considers the discursive context of Nishida's later work as a central motivation for its concerns and its reception, considering what his philosophical position was articulated in dialogue with and how it reflected the wider discourse it participated in.

KEYWORDS | Nishida Kitarō; Kyoto School; Nationalism; World History; Modernity

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1 Introduction

Nishida Kitarō, along with other philosophers of the Kyoto School, began to discuss the issue of Japan's world-historical role in the 1930s partly as a way to point out that the modern Western viewpoint on society, culture and norms was not truly universal in its character and that a plural conception of the world as a unity of particularities was a more appropriate description of actual universality. This discussion itself was framed by a wider debate on Japanese national identity and the role of Japan in East Asia at the time, where Japan was expanding its own imperialist reach in direct competition with Western colonial powers, which meant that the issue was deeply political from the start.

A characteristic feature of the Kyoto School's approach to the discourse on Japan's national identity and the nature of Japanese subjectivity was to ground their discussions and ontology in the notion of absolute nothingness as the fundamental ground for reality and being. While different Kyoto philosophers each took their own viewpoint on the issues bubbling in Japan's prewar national discourse, they were connected through the philosophical framework they brought to bear on the problems. This framework had grown from Nishida's philosophical work, and while Nishida himself at first resisted involvement in the political debates of the day, having a clear distaste for the nationalist fever that was gripping the country (NKZ 12, 471-472), eventually he was also drawn into engaging directly with the issues of the day from the world-historical standpoint he had developed.

This article clarifies how Nishida's own work toward producing a universal logic entangled him in a growing discourse on Japan's national identity and how his resulting vision of globality and the world-historical mission of nations tied in and conflicted with the nationalist politics in Japan's own imperialist strife with Western powers. This article aims to introduce the complexities of producing philosophical work amid political conflicts, in general, and to look into Nishida's case, in particular, with the discursive context as a central motivation for its concerns.

A key theme of Nishida's and, by extension, the Kyoto School's philosophical project in prewar Japan was work toward elevation of Japanese particularity to universality by showing how what was viewed as universal would not necessarily be only a product of Western modernity, but that Japan could likewise produce (in the Kyoto School's case) philosophy that was equally universal in its applicability (Stromback 2020, 2; Feenberg 2019, 57; Sakai 2008, 187-189). At the time, this effort linked their work to a wider discourse centered on the cultivation of a distinct Japanese national identity that had become particularly trenchant in the 1920s and 1930s due to the tension between Japanese modern nation-building efforts and what was perceived as Japan's struggle with westernization and its

impact on the nation's traditions and way of life. This led intellectuals to seek ways to overcome Western modernity, both to maintain Japanese particularity and to transcend the seeming universality of the Western model for modernity. The Kyoto philosophers resisted retreat towards nativism and instead sought ways to show how Japanese particularity could become universalized and thus contribute to what they saw as the global progression of world history. While Nishida's own focus on experiential reality and the self's relation to the world emerged mostly prior to focus on such identitarian issues in intellectual debates (Kasulis 2018, 446-447), his early writings already presaged these issues and displayed Nishida's outlook (at least provisionally) as a liberal and cosmopolitan or pluralist, whose strong individualism was tempered by a view of an organic connection between the individual and society that saw the nation as an entity in its own right (Goto-Jones 2005, 52-66).

It was within the later identity-focused discourse that the younger Kyoto philosophers became interested in finding a way to express and elaborate on Nishida's philosophy that was based on the experiential nature of reality, and together with Nishida's articulation of the logic of place and the idea of absolute nothingness which drew on Buddhist philosophical concepts like nondualism, no-self and emptiness, a new ground for a seemingly universal philosophy was created. But while Nishida sought to move away from particular forms of thought, ironically, his efforts came to be received within wider Japanese intellectual discourse (and even among others in the Kyoto School) as expressing a "Japaneseness" equal or superior to what was viewed as "Western", directly casting his ideas to the role of supporting Japanese particularity. In effect, the result was that Nishida's philosophical logic, which was meant to convey what can be called Buddhist insight into the nature of reality and the self's relation to the world, came to be interpreted as an exemplary of Asian (and explicitly opposed to Western) thought, and as such, it was represented as expressing a particularly Japanese subjectivity grounded on a more authentic understanding of the world. This politicized his ideas within the prevailing problematization of modernity in Japanese discourse and the anxieties it provoked about the erosion of culture and identity. In this sense, the Kyoto philosophers' "pursuit of universality and their concern for overcoming modernity have an inherent connection" (Osaki 2019, 16), as the apparent universality of the modernity in question had resulted from Eurocentric historical processes having been universalized as measures of societal advancement. It was a standard that other countries could only fail to reach, and overcoming it became reified as a goal in itself within Japanese pre-war intellectual discourse, leading up to the notorious 1942 *Bungakkai's* "Symposium on Overcoming Modernity" that was widely interpreted as intellectual legitimization of Japanese war efforts after the war, and in which Kyoto School scholars Nishitani Keiji, Suzuki Shigetaka, and Shimomura Toratarō also participated (Osaki 2019; Krummel 2021; Ichijo 2022).

This article will first discuss Nishida's views on absolute nothingness and universality to orient the general discussion, addressing the ways in which Nishida's philosophical interest in the issue of universality came to be entangled with the wider discourse on Japanese modernity and national identity, and how Nishida's notion of absolute nothingness grounded the Kyoto School's approach to these issues. After this, the article moves to consider how this led Nishida to develop his ideas on world history and how the issue of tradition was connected to the contribution particular nations would make through their world-historical mission towards developing a global world. This also calls for a discussion of Nishida's position in comparison to its context, which returns us to the controversial topic of Nishida putting Japan forward as a potential place of mediation for a global world, and how this ties together with how he sees universality and absolute nothingness expressed in the unfolding of world history.

2 Fundamentality and Universality

A key notion in articulating Nishida's new, universal and what could be seen as markedly Asian logic was the concept of absolute nothingness (*zettai mu* 絶対無) that was fundamental to the philosophical system Nishida was developing. Absolute nothingness functions for Nishida as a polyvalent, but central idea that grounds other concepts he uses in systematizing his view on the constitution of reality. Moreover, it provides, for Nishida, the absolute metaphysical ground that neither comes to being nor passes away and encompasses everything without being defined in opposition to anything, absolving it of any opposition that could relativize it. Importantly, it negates the opposition between subject and object as the first step towards reaching its originary ground, and with the loss of that defining relationship between all things, all things are affirmed just as they are (without any subjective bias of a self)—negating the negation itself. This also means that the identity of each thing at its core is “absolutely contradictory”,¹ emerging from a dialectic of being and nothingness, and existing only in relation to the existence and non-existence of other things. It also implies that as one becomes aware of this dialectic at work in the ground of one's own self and is able to perceive the nothingness within oneself, one may directly experience the connection one has with the absolute ground, connecting this view particularly to the Mahāyāna Buddhist discourses of self-awakening.

In short, absolute nothingness functions as the absolute metaphysical ground for Nishida, based on which reality is defined as a dialectic of being and nothingness. Although it is conceptually rooted in Buddhist views on emptiness and no-self, James W. Heisig points out that it was a major shift to move from

¹ Nishida uses the term “absolutely contradictory self-identity (*zettai mujunteki jikodōitsu* 絶対矛盾の自己同一).

the idea of self-negation to an idea of nothingness as a metaphysical absolute, and this was not something that came from Buddhism nor did Nishida present it as such; instead, what was important was that it was a markedly “Eastern” idea (Heisig 2001, 62; Cestari 2010). It is also here that we can draw on the importance of Japanese aesthetics informing and motivating Nishida’s views, as the modern division of East from West—the Orient from the Occident—was always as much an aestheticized separation as anything else. This was especially so with philosophy if we understand modernity and its specific rationality as a Western project, as this formulation tends to frame universal rational values as distinctly Western while discounting other, competing rationalities, but leaves the aesthetic realm and its values as a place for actual plurality.

With the emphasis on the Eastern character of the idea of nothingness, it becomes easier to see its connection to issues of cultural aesthetics and national identity. Nishida himself already brought up explicitly the Eastern flavor of the idea of nothingness in his book *From Actor to the Seer* (*Hataraku mono kara miru mono e*) in 1927, when he talked about formlessness as distinctive to Eastern ontology (NKZ 4, 6). This kind of “Easternness” is relatively easy to see as a modern construction used to emphasize the aesthetic separation of the East from the West, and while the idea of nothingness used by the Kyoto School did draw on traditions like Mahāyāna Buddhism and Daoism, its discursive construction as markedly “Eastern” was a modern conceit used to articulate positions, separations, categorizations and images that were distinctly modern and tied to the national identity formation of Japan as a wider cultural discourse.

Nishida introduced the concept of absolute nothingness in 1927 through his logic of place (*basho no ronri* 場所の論理), designating it as the foundational ground for all reality, encompassing both being and non-being. Over the following decade or so, this idea developed into how, for example, the idea of nothingness was presented as “Oriental Nothingness” by Hisamatsu Shin’ichi in *Tōyōteki Mu* (1939), where the “orientality” builds on a dichotomy between European and Asian cultures on the basis of their grounding in being and nothingness, just as Nishida had suggested earlier. Over the 1930s, this cultural dichotomization became increasingly entrenched in the Kyoto School of philosophy, and it was used to articulate an aestheticized cultural divide, through which one could draw on a variety of cultural resources and use them to support an ideal model of Japanese subjectivity in contrast not only to the Western other, but also to the rest of Asia. This identity discourse itself traded heavily on the relationship of Japan to the West and the rest of Asia, and especially on aesthetic differentiation as a source of particular value for Japanese identity. A lot of heavy lifting was done by the nationalistic and identitarian orientation of Japanese intellectual discourse of the 1930s, with the Kyoto School and its views settling within a wider debate on Japanese subjectivity and its place in the world. Their work was thus carried out in dialogue with this broad field of identitarian signification—for ex-

ample, how the discussion of absolute nothingness as central to Japanese national subjectivity presumed a whole active discourse on national identity, national polity, ethnicity, tradition, modernization and history.

3 Nishida's Universality

Still, it is necessary to point out that what Nishida was developing was at least not intended as a culturally chauvinistic exercise. Brett W. Davis notes that Nishida saw East and West essentially as branches of the same tree, which meant that although they had a common root, the historical direction was towards diversification rather than unification, whereas Nishida's own philosophy of the historical world sought to disclose the trunk they have in common (Davis 2013, 195-194; see also NKZ II 14, 404-406). This also applied to the philosophy Nishida saw himself as developing, where he sees the relationship between Western and Eastern logics as differentiated products of a shared root and thus complementary to each other (NKZ II 12, 289).

This view relied on Nishida's specific understanding of universality, which also requires some explanation to better grasp his philosophical argumentation. The approach he developed from the late 1920s onward can be seen as reinterpreting the Hegelian dialectic through his own logic of place and the way the determination of a place (*basho* 場所) is grounded in absolute nothingness. For Nishida, self-determination of place means that nothingness works to determine itself by becoming the world as a concrete universal and thus the ground in which all things are placed. This results in a plurality of particular worlds that are neither forced to integrate into greater wholes nor unify with each other, but instead emerge from Nishida's dialectic of self-negation as many concrete universals in themselves (see NKZ 7, 419). In Nishida's later philosophy, the world itself acts as a dialectical universal (*benshōhōteki ippansha* 弁証法的一般者), which means essentially that the world forms as a place of mediation in which individuals can creatively interact, but at the same time the world is a place that arises through those interactions. These can be seen as two different aspects of the world: the world as a place of mediation and interaction is what Nishida refers to as the world as a place of nothingness or the dialectical universal (Nishida 1987, 62; NKZ 11, 389), while the world that emerges from that interaction would be the immanent world as a place of being or becoming. Both of these are ultimately grounded in absolute nothingness, and emerge through the dialectical process of self-negation.

To understand the importance of self-negation for Nishida, it is useful to think of it in similar terms to Hegel's dialectical movement of the absolute spirit realizing itself through the unfolding of world history, but replacing the absolute spirit with absolute nothingness. The self-realization is dialectical and self-

negating, as the movement towards realizing synthesis requires the negation of the earlier positions. Still, in terms of these dialectics, synthesis should not be seen as simply implying unification, but rather emphasizing that a difference between the opposites is also preserved in the process of negating that difference. Nishida took to heart Hegel's idea that while unification in synthesis may produce a new determination or identity, at the root of all movement and vitality is contradiction that necessitates activity (Schultz 2012, 331; Hegel 1969, 439). This view is encapsulated in Nishida's central concept of absolutely contradictory self-identity, as this concept is the product of the dialectical synthesis that produces identity without annihilating the fundamental difference or contradiction alive at its root. In this sense, a dialectic of negation and affirmation can also be seen as constitutive of the lived, historical reality that an individual experiences.

4 Nishida's View on World History

For Nishida, the space occupied by contradiction and difference as part of vitality of existence means that even in a global world, each culture can and must retain its uniqueness. This happens through becoming aware of the plurality of the world and, in response, relativizing and thus self-negating oneself in this global world of dialectical mediation so as to preserve one's own particular perspective. This is not a preservation of clinging to the past, however, but of developing oneself and finding in one's own cultural tradition that which is its own particular contribution. This leads to each nation having this as their "world-historical mission" in contributing their particularity to a global community, which essentially means that unlike Hegel, Nishida included non-Europeans as full participants in how world history was being realized.

In this sense, each nation-state, together with its history, forms a concrete universal that is a whole in itself, but is still placed within a wider universal and, ultimately, in the universal of universals, which is absolute nothingness. Nishida sees the need for this universal of universals in mediating this plurality of concrete universals. Whereas Hegel saw an ultimate universal in the world as a whole, Nishida finds it in the absolute nothingness that encompasses all concrete universals. This would also be connected to the concrete universals themselves being particular self-determinations of absolute nothingness, which works to expand the scale of Nishida's understanding of individuals themselves being similar self-determinations, albeit on a smaller scale. This is because Nishida's place of absolute nothingness is not to be seen as a passive ground, but rather as a self-determining formless potential. In his later works like "The World as a Dialectical Universal" (NKZ 7, 305-428), Nishida saw this as happening historically, with history itself shaped by the dialectical interaction between individuals and what Nishida termed as their cultural "species" that had them-

selves been formed historically and dialectically. The interaction between the individual and “species” was the key, as individuals are determined by their culture, and that culture, in turn, is counter-determined by individuals.

Although issues like history, society and politics remained marginal to Nishida’s work until the 1930s, Nishida’s own universalist viewpoint remained remarkably consistent throughout his career, even if it criticized “Western” universality and viewed progress towards a “universalism of particulars” as an evolutionary process that rejected forceful universalization of any particularism (Goto-Jones 2005, 97, 99-100). Criticisms from Tosaka Jun (Tosaka 2020; Shimizu 2015) and especially from Tanabe Hajime (Tanabe 2020; Heisig 2001, 109) for the abstractness, lack of historical dimension and aestheticist nature of his philosophy, drove Nishida to attach significantly more attention to the importance of historical and embodied context. This led to his interest shifting to the “historical world” and “historical body” and away from his more abstract, decontextualized philosophy:

The critics suggested that Nishida ignored the world determined by individual human action by replacing individual human subjectivity with trans-individual experience or consciousness and eventually shifting human agency to the world as a universal. In response, Nishida began to articulate the world as a dialectical universal. The basic idea is that the world is a place of mediation between acting individuals. It is not a transcendent topos that one-sidedly determines individuals but a topos that arises with them through their creative interactions. (Maraldo 2019)

When Nishida first turned to the issues related to history and society, he was generally more interested in articulating the logic behind the formation of the historical world than in the actual movements of world history. The formation of the historical world is, after all, much closer to foundational issues of the self’s relation to the world, which had been a bedrock of Nishida’s philosophical focus through his career. Still, this does not mean that an individual would have been disconnected from the movements of world history, since the formation of a particular historical world and its shape was seen by Nishida as directly related to its world-historical mission.

Nishida positioned his view on the self-formative production of historical reality as an alternative to Hegelian and Marxist interpretations of history, where its dialectical relationship between past and future works to constitute the present. In Nishida’s hands, this dialectic was cast as an identity of contradictories, where the mutual opposition of the past and future forms an identity as a historical world in the absolute present (NKZ 9, 163-165). Nishida avoided references to Buddhist influences in order to emphasize the universality of the logic he was developing (Arisaka 2014, 9-10), but his dialectic of nothingness and me-

diation was rooted in Buddhist metaphysics—for example, the logic behind the identity of contradictories necessarily involves the mutual determination of the opposites in question, which is in line with the Buddhist principle of dependent origination. Hence Nishida's philosophical approach focused on dialectics that function to unite elements that seem contradictory, but are necessarily co-constitutive of the world. The opposition is neither removed nor lessened through this procedure, but the opposites are instead integrated into an ongoing process. This led to Nishida's vision of the world progressing in a dialectical manner through these oppositions towards the creation of a global world as a process through which everyone participates in forming and transforming the world. This means that society is by its nature a form of production (*poiesis*) that is specific to its own epoch and always a particular example of the ongoing mode of production of the historical world (NKZ 9, 167).

For Nishida, a dialectic terrain is thus formed by the co-constitution of the subject and the world via a process of renewal of tradition, which emerges through a tension between future aspirations and past tradition as the contradictory self-identity of the present. Nishida divides this dialectic of history into an immanent pole representing the temporal and the teleological where renewal takes place via a subject's poietic practice through which the universal world expresses its form, and a transcendental pole representing the spatial and the material where the creative function of the universal world causes the emergence of particular empirical objects dependent on their environment (NKZ 10, 280; Iida 2008, 79). Iida Yumiko notes that

These two-way dialectical processes make a constant mutual regeneration of the universal in the particular, the past tradition in the present, while constituting a harmonious state of nation at each given historical time. (Iida 2008, 79)

In line with his logic of place, Nishida sees the individual subject functioning as a part of the world as its “productive element” (*sōzōteki yōso* 創造的要素) (NKZ 8, 315-316)—but with a free will that emerges from the foundations of the world in absolute nothingness—and providing for the nation as a place or substratum a distinctly bodily and temporal aspect of poietic practice (Iida 2008, 79-80). This locates the *poiesis* of history into the body and present, producing history anew through the locus of the present.

Nishida also emphasized the importance and the role played by Japanese national polity (*kokutai*) in the realization of Japan's world-historical mission, and he saw the national polity centered on the Imperial House which gave it its fundamental grounding in myth and the religious realm that Nishida viewed as necessary for the self-formative process of a historical society and for the development of Japan's specific historical inheritance (Jacinto 1994, 142-143). The lineage of the Imperial House contributed to its transcendent role that united

history and myth as a prototype of the national polity, which in turn functioned as an ideal structure for the whole of Japan and which Nishida saw as representing the unique national subjectivity of Japan and thus its activity on the world-historical stage.

5 Nishida on the Importance of Tradition

A few more words are necessary about the notion of tradition in Nishida's philosophy. Nishida saw tradition as based in socially produced myths that are foundational elements in the construction of a social world, growing out of the emotionally charged activities of a group and its common hopes, while tradition itself functions as a principle that brings together the past and the present by unifying and organizing contingent social phenomena into a historical reality (Jacinto 1994, 134-135). Echoing his view on the relationship between individuals and their cultural "species", he also holds the view that "genuine perception is only possible from within tradition, for each and every thing is something historical", but he also connects this seeing with active doing, pointing out that it is only through the manifest perception, insight, and activity of individuals that tradition can work to create a historical world (Jacinto 1994, 135).

It bears noting that calling this process of social construction "tradition" (*dentō*) directs our attention to certain aspects of it: what Nishida is talking about can be generally seen as falling within the realm of the historical constitution of the social, but framing it as "tradition" tends to reify an understanding of that historically constituted process and emphasize the importance of cultural continuity in a way that still prioritizes the past. On the other hand, though, Nishida's focus on tradition as constitutive of a nation's historical reality is not surprising given his historical context where the production and articulation of a unified historical reality were a priority among intellectuals in Japan's modern nation-building efforts. In this sense, claiming a tradition or lineage provided historical and discursive legitimacy for the unity and present form of the Japanese nation-state.

Nishida then connects this with his idea of societies emerging from a ground of ritual and myth to argue that historical reality itself requires a collective subject to bring together social and individual demands of a concrete historical world, and in his view, it is tradition that works to manifest the specific subjectivity of a group of people or *ethnos*. This is vital for him as the subjective self "is not born into this world by coincidence but in an historically specific manner, namely socially, through tradition" (NKZ 10, 293-294), meaning that the self emerges from and as part of an *ethnos*, as part of its historical inheritance and mission in the dialectical development of the world. Since the historical world is produced again and again over time, tradition also develops and sets a new task

as the historical mission. In contemporary times, Nishida's progressive view of history saw that task to be the forging of a global world, but recognition of this task itself required the perspective of tradition that arose from a self-identity shaped by tradition as its performative intuition, namely the self's fundamental orientation and productive participation in the creation of the historical world.

6 A Nation's World-Historical Mission

The critique of modernity from the younger Kyoto philosophers mentioned above ties together with the view Nishida developed of the historical world and the world-historical mission nations have in the world, which arguably amounted to a vision of cosmopolitan pluralism (Goto-Jones 2005, 33, 94, 122; Yano and Rappleye 2022). While Nishida's philosophical focus in his historical turn was directed to the relation between individual consciousness and the historical world, grasped through concepts like performative intuition (*kōiteki chokkan* 行為の直観) and Japan's cultural development as a global orientation,² the younger generation of the Kyoto School focused more on issues related to society, state and nation—in general, toward the explicitly political realm and application of their teachers' philosophies. This interest culminated in their participation in two highly visible public symposia – the *Chūōkōron* debates in 1941–1942 (related to issues of world history, Japan's world-historical role, and the war) and the above-mentioned “Symposium on Overcoming Modernity” in 1942 (Kawakami and Takeuchi 1979; Hiromatsu 1989; Horio 1994; Williams 2004; Calichman 2008; Osaki 2019). What has been later revealed by the publication of the so-called “Ōshima memos” was that they were also cooperating with the Yonai faction of the Imperial Navy that sought to curb the military adventurism and ultranationalism of the Imperial Army (Tōjō faction) through efforts aimed at shifting public opinion (Horio 1994; Ōhashi 2001).

The *Chūōkōron* debates, along with the participants' monographs like Nishitani's *View of the World, View of the State* (*Sekaikan to kokkakan*, 1941), Kōsaka's *Philosophy of the Ethnic Nation* (*Minzoku no tetsugaku*, 1942), as well as Kōyama's *Philosophy of World History* (*Sekaishi no tetsugaku*, 1942) and *Japanese Issues and World History* (*Nihon no wadai to sekaishi*, 1943) sought to articulate and assess Japan's world-historical standpoint as an agent for creating the kind of global world Nishida envisioned, a pluralistic world order that had stepped beyond an Enlightenment teleology leading inevitably to a Western modernity.³ Nishida himself finally weighed in directly by applying his philosophy to Japan's situation and its war in Asia with his 1943 essay, “The Principle of

² Nishida discussed this, for example, in his 1938 lectures on the “Problem of Japanese Culture” (*Nihon bunka no mondai*, NKZ 14, 387–418).

³ For detailed and critical analysis, see Osaki (2019).

the New World Order” (NKZ 12, 426-434; translated in Arisaka (2019) and Nishida (2019)).

The views Nishida expressed there were based on his 1941 essay “The Question of Raison d’Etat” (*Kokka riyū no mondai*), where he had outlined his view on the progressive nature of history. Nishida had already begun discussing philosophy of history in his 1913 essay “History and Natural Science” (*Rekishī to shizen kagaku*), but it was in his 1931 essay “History” (*Rekishī*) that Nishida delved into it in more detail, noting that the philosophical recognition of the significance of history had emerged through works of thinkers like Wilhelm Dilthey and Wilhelm Windelband around the turn of the century (Yusa 2021, 213). In the “The Question of Raison d’Etat,” Nishida stated this significance in terms of three periods moving from individual to national to global self-awareness (NKZ 10, 337), and he reiterated this point in his 1943 essay.

There, Nishida outlined a progressive development in world history from an 18th century era of individualistic self-awakening in the West as a time of individualism and liberalism to a 19th century era of state self-awareness that produced imperialism and a sense of historical mission for states to strengthen themselves through the subordination of other states, eventually resulting in the world wars. Against these, the 20th century was to be seen as an era of emerging global self-awareness, in which states could become aware of their common world-historical mission to work towards creating a global world that was not limited to the Western domination that the previous era had produced. Nishida thought that if states did not reach self-awareness that allowed them to realize their world-historical mission, they would remain mired in class struggles that were based on 18th century foundations of individualistic self-awareness which resisted the prioritization of states’ self-awareness over the individual (Nishida 2019, 306-307). The implication is that the actual self-awareness of the states about their world-historical mission to constitute a global world would also involve the harmonization of the nation with the state, with the state controlling the world-historical formative power of the ethnic nation (NKZ 12, 397-398).⁴

The formation of a global world, in Nishida’s view, first required an intermediate process of forming a particular world, through which each ethnic nation-state would transcend itself to connect with its neighbors to follow a supranational tradition to establish non-Western worlds. This global world would not be based on universalizing the Western world, but rather would allow each nation to maintain its own historical uniqueness and thus realize its own particular world-historical mission through its contribution to the construction of a universal, global world. Nishida saw the ethnic nation less as a biological and more as a socio-historical concept that required a political state in order to be functional in the world, meaning that the ethnic nation would be contained within the

⁴ This point is connected to what can be seen as the Kyoto School’s effort to harmonise ongoing tensions between populist ethnic nationalism and government statism at the time, see Söderman (2022, 8-9).

greater universalizing force of the state and could thus avoid falling prey to ethnic nationalism (*minzokushugi*) as a narrow and exclusivist ideological direction that would seek to isolate Japan from the world (Doak 2008, 155; NKZ 12, 398).

The conflicts caused by the 19th century expansionism were still left unresolved by the end of WWI and had thus resulted in a second world war. Nishida argued that the Wilsonian solution, which the League of Nations proposed in terms of national self-determination, merely worked to transpose the 18th century individualism onto the international stage and was thus ineffective. But the situation could be resolved through the formation of a global world in the sense that he proposed, where the states would have to both develop their own unique positionality and transcend themselves to follow their regional tradition at the same time, in order to form a truly global world in which each could fully express its own unique particularity as part of a pluralist whole (Nishida 2019, 307). Nishida used this view to reinterpret the imperial slogan *hakkō ichiu* ('Eight corners of the world under one roof') as expressing a pluralist principle whereby the "Emperor graciously declared to allow all states to obtain their own places" (Nishida 2019, 307-308), citing here a passage from the 1940 "Imperial Rescript for the Conclusion of the Tripartite Pact" between Japan, Germany and Italy. This resulted in an arguably cosmopolitan interpretation of the imperial slogan that was markedly at odds with its ultranationalist interpretation, which took it to mean bringing all under the rule of the Emperor.⁵ Nishida's reading can thus be seen as offering a very different reading from the dominant propagandist view, even if he did not dwell on the issue. Instead, he pressed on to emphasize the need for East Asian nations freed from European colonization to carry out their world-historical mission and stated that this is the principle of the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere (Nishida 2019, 308).

The Japanese national polity that Nishida outlined bore little similarity with the political and international reality of the Japanese empire; where he articulated a vision of the national polity spreading its influence as a self-negating mediator that renounced imperialism and colonialism along with the use of military force and would work to preserve regional traditions and agency of other peoples and states, the Japanese empire did the exact opposite within the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere. This rift between the vision Nishida gave and the reality on the ground have since provided ammunition for both his critics and defenders, since on surface level his position can be read either as seeking to legitimate the practices of Japanese empire or, on the contrary, implicitly criticizing the state for failing to align with these ideals. On a closer and more contextual reading, though, the picture becomes a lot murkier, as Nishida can be viewed as having engaged in what Ueda (1994, 90) has called a tug-of-war over meaning, or as Ishihara puts it:

⁵ While this was mostly formulated as referring to Asia within the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere, Allied Forces actually interpreted it as meaning the whole world (see International Military Tribunal for the Far East 1948, 85-86).

... a closer reading of his writings where he employs those controversial terms reveals that he was attempting to not merely reiterate the discourse, but rather, to redefine the terms based on a global and multicultural standpoint. Far from a narrow-minded nationalism, Nishida believed that each nation and culture must go beyond itself to contribute to the making of the world. (Ishihara 2021, 156)

In this sense, Nishida's own philosophy can be seen as calling for nurturing a pluralist world in order to maintain its vitality through the 'contradictions' at the root of its constitution. Absolute nothingness functioned as the ground to both enable and harmonize the differences, while Nishida saw Japan as having the potential to take a mediating role on the global stage, partly due to its historical position as a power outside of Western universality, and partly due to its own tradition and cultural aesthetics that Nishida saw as emphasizing formlessness and self-negation.

7 Analyzing Nishida's Historical Views against Their Context

Nishida's analysis of Japan's historical formation and its world-historical role placed the Imperial House at the heart of Japanese world and its national polity, which drew criticism after the war for Nishida's faithfulness to the Emperor. It should be remarked, though, that he was specifically talking about the Japanese world and its state formation as part of its world-historical mission, not about other countries and their world-historical missions, and at the time, the Imperial House was undeniably at the center of the Japanese state and its national polity, already on the basis of its 1889 Meiji Constitution. From a contemporary perspective, Nishida's formulation of the Imperial House as embodying the absolute present in the way it contains elements of the past and future does stick out as a peculiar way of abstracting and mythologizing what is still essentially a political institution, but it follows directly from the way he views tradition, with the Imperial House's continuity correlating with the notion of the absolute present in unifying past and future.

As mentioned above, Nishida also placed ethnic nations (*minzoku*) as the driving force in the formation of historical worlds, but warns that

mere nationalism [*minzokushugi*] is national egoism because it does not contain true globality, places its own nation at the center, and considers the whole world from such a self-centered position. What derives from it would inevitably fall into aggressionism or imperialism. Today, it is obvious that Anglo-American imperialism is based on national egoism. (Nishida 2019, 310)

This, it has been argued (Yusa 1991, 207; Ueda 1994, 90) should be properly read as implicit criticism, even if directing the criticism of nationalism against the Atlantic powers might seem like glossing over how the same criticism would certainly apply to the Japanese.⁶ However, Nishida wrote this at a time when direct criticism of the government was essentially impossible, and together with his pluralistic reading of world history and its development, the general thrust of his argumentation should have made it clear that he was implicitly criticizing what he saw as nationalist arrogance among the Japanese elite and the military. While his avoidance of direct confrontation gave some cover against assaults from the militarists and ultranationalists, it seems also clear from their reactions that the implicit criticism did not escape them, so it is perhaps not surprising that from June 1943 onward, the government suppressed the Kyoto School's ideas from the press (Horio 1994, 303).

Nishida's emphasis on the importance of national sovereignty and each state's agency is visible in his condemnation of "national egoism." In a more anecdotal sense, Shimomura Toratarō recollected in his comments to Nishida's "Principle of the New World Order" and other similar political writings a conversation between Nishida and government officials who had come to visit him, where Nishida angrily aired his views:

If it is a co-prosperity sphere, it means that every participant must be satisfied. If we just decide on the nature of the co-prosperity sphere by ourselves and coerce the others, we would be just restricting their free will. That is no co-prosperity sphere ... In a real co-prosperity sphere, other participants would urge Japan to lead them. Only then can we call it a Holy War. (NKZ 12, 471)

Although Nishida was critical of the government and the war, he also seems to shift into Japanese exceptionalism at the end of his essay, when he makes the argument that the essence of Japanese national polity lies in its unique principle of subjectivity that empties itself and embraces others, or can contain others by emptying itself (Nishida 2019, 311; NKZ 12, 434). On the one hand, this returns Nishida to his emphasis on the necessity of mediation for the emergence of a plural and global world, but at the same time it turns the discussion to the special character Nishida and the Kyoto School accord to Japanese subjectivity in having a particular closeness through its tradition to the notion of absolute nothingness (NKZ 4, 6; Osaki 2019, 117), thus making Japan especially suited to exemplify the logic of Nishida's global, world-historical world. Aside from the questionable prioritization of Japan, there is the further problematic aspect in Nishida's use of the idea of Japan as a place of mediation. There is a dissonance between Nishida's position and the way he expressed his views: Nishida con-

⁶ See Arisaka (1996, 87-99) for analysis of positions both defensive and critical of Nishida, which also remains an ongoing division to this day: cf. Osaki (2019) and Yusa (2021).

trusted a true “imperial way” (*kōdō*) of self-negation and mediation with an illegitimate way of imperialism (*teikokushugi*) that sought confrontation and domination, but even so, he expressed that self-negation as Japan enveloping other subjects:

While a practice of self-emptying in order to open oneself up to others is surely an essential moment in dialogue, and while in a religious sense we may think that there is a depth-dimension of the true self that compassionately embraces all beings, on a political and cultural level the presumption that one nation can “envelop others” is precisely the presumption of a political or cultural empire. (Davis 2013, 188)

An uncharitable reader might draw the conclusion that Nishida believed that all nations should be brought under Japan (as would be indicated by a conventional reading of the imperial slogan *hakkō ichiu*), but a closer consideration suggests that Nishida sets up Japan as an example for others through what he sees as its affinity for emptying itself that both allows it to maintain itself and to embrace others. In his view, taking this approach could resolve the world-historical challenges left by 19th century imperialist conflicts and allow for a formation of a truly global world where each country would be able to realize its own world-historical mission, maintain its agency and connect freely with each other. Ultimately, though, he expressed his views in a way that was both compromised by its use of imperialist language and readily adopted for arguing for further Japanese particularist positions in a highly fraught political climate.

8 Conclusion

As history proves, Nishida’s vision did not come close to fruition during his lifetime, and he passed away just months before Japan surrendered to the Allied powers. The Kyoto School’s, and even Nishida’s, reputations were tainted by their involvement in the wartime political debates, and for decades their works that related to politics and society were directly overshadowed by their later religious philosophy and philosophy of religion. Only since the 1990s has much attention been given to this period in their philosophical efforts, and the judgment has often been harsh on its value. Whether their pluralist vision of a global world and efforts to sway Japan’s course towards a less disastrous direction can overcome their questionable ideological stances and often statist theoretical positions remain an open debate to this day. Nishida’s passing and lack of direct involvement shielded him from most of the postwar vitriol, but as Osaki Harumi (2019, 127-161) argues, his influence was foundational for the philosophical approaches taken by the other Kyoto School members.

Nishida's concern with overcoming the universalization of Western rationality was both motivated by the context of Japan's nation-building effort and in turn contributed to it by challenging the imposition of what he saw as the universalization of Western particularity. From his standpoint, it would have made sense that just as a Western particularity had been universalized, the same could be done with other particular approaches, in order to build up a truly plural and global world. This required both an understanding of their tradition and the ability to see what their potential contribution would be in terms of challenging oversights of the Western framework.

While Nishida's focus was on philosophy and he seems to have sought to open the intellectual realm to a plurality of positions, the discourse his work participated in had only one position as the target, and there was little he could do to avoid his work being interpreted as valorizing a Japanese particularity. In effect, this resulted in the reification of his philosophical concepts to denote that particularity and its more authentic superiority in comparison to imported Western concepts. As Nishida himself worked within the same discursive context and the Overton Window it afforded, it remains difficult to fully deny his own complicity in this process, but it seems clear that his work was directed against the narrow-minded nationalism and militarist expansionism he found objectionable to individual freedom, which, following his own logic, also extended to the supra-individual level of nations.

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Abbreviations

NKZ = *Nishida Kitarō Zenshū* [*Complete Works of Nishida Kitarō*]. Tokyo: Iwanami, old edition 1966–67, new edition 2002–09. (Citations are from the older edition, unless otherwise indicated.)

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