



The Dialectic of Hegel and Nishida

How to Deal with Modernity

This essay discerns in Nishida's later work lines of thought that could constitute a project of overcoming modernity, and explores its potentials and problems. My guiding thread is a comparison between Nishida's philosophy and that of Hegel, who, according to Habermas, first developed a clear concept of modernity through his idea of dialectic. Nishida perceived the Hegelian dialectic as conceptually endorsing Western colonialism, one of the ill effects of modernity. I argue Nishida's philosophy, which puts forward another dialectic based on absolute nothingness, had the potential to undermine the justification of colonialism and propose a worldview in which different peoples could coexist free from subjugation. I also argue that Nishida nevertheless ruined this very potential by essentializing his own nation as the privileged embodiment of absolute nothingness. This essay thus emphasizes the necessity to tackle ethnocentrism that lurks in philosophical thinking and sabotages its creativity.

KEYWORDS: Nishida—Hegel—Habermas—dialectic—modernity—
overcoming modernity—absolute nothingness—colonialism—cultural
essentialism—national subjectivity

In contrast to the conception of Western modernity, which has often been taken as *the* sole form of modernity, postcolonial discourses offer alternative perceptions that argue modernity can have different origins or take different shapes in diverse locations. As such, these discourses view the modernization of non-Western regions not as merely an imitation of Western modernity or subjugation to Western hegemony, but as the product of their own powers and possibilities. Thus, postcolonial discourses do not speak of one “modernity,” but rather consider a plurality of “modernities.” While accepting the strength of this position, however, Timothy Mitchell notes its weakness as well: “the language of alternative modernities can imply an almost infinite play of possibilities, with no rigorous sense of what, if anything, gives imperial modernity its phenomenal power of replication and expansion.”¹ Even though there can be infinite forms of modernity, they may sometimes reproduce imperial power relations similar to those of Western modernity. Nevertheless, the alleged “alternativeness” of non-Western modernities can prevent investigations into such relations inherent in these modernities. In this case, they would no longer be “alternative,” as they conserve within themselves the negative legacies of Western imperial modernity.

A case in point is a symposium titled “Overcoming Modernity,” organized by prominent Japanese intellectuals in 1942, soon after the beginning of the Asia-Pacific War. From the Meiji period onward, Japan had embarked on modernization by importing Western culture; modernization, here, was equal to Westernization. Therefore, when it launched the war against Western countries, Japan’s urgent task, as perceived by the Japanese people, was not only to surpass the West, but also to overcome the modernity equated with

1. MITCHELL 2000, xii.

the West. The symposium's slogan, "Overcoming Modernity," effectively outlined the public opinion of the country at the time. Many Japanese intellectuals also took this slogan, which epitomized the reasons for Japan's fight against Western imperialism, as a justification for Japan's colonial aggression in Asia. Harry Harootunian famously notes that the arguments of this symposium were in fact "overcome by modernity," as they practically reaffirmed the ideologies of Western modernity that they had professed to surmount.

While the participants of the symposium included four members of the Kyoto School, the school's founder, Nishida Kitarō, did not take part. Still, historical situations cast a shadow upon his thought: several years before the symposium, in his 1937 lecture, "The Scholarly Method," he described the task of Japanese scholars as, "creat[ing] a new global culture from Eastern cultural backgrounds that have fostered us for thousands of years,"² while working in Western disciplines in which Eurocentric ways of thinking still dominated. Despite his absence during the 1942 symposium, it can be argued that Nishida was also engaged in a philosophical project to overcome Western modernity.

Thus, the objective of this essay is to explore Nishida's work on modernity and his philosophies on how Japan could overcome it. My guiding thread is a comparison between his philosophy and that of Hegel, who, according to Habermas, was "the first philosopher to develop a clear concept of modernity."³ My strategy is to analyze Nishida's confrontation with Hegelianism, and discern the lines of thought Nishida put forward to tackle Western modernity and its ill effects. As such, my attempt is a retrospective interpretation. Although this approach cannot completely avoid the projection of external schema, it can enable one to cast fresh light upon the potentials buried in a past philosophy. At the same time, if we look at its potential, we should turn our eyes to its limits as well. By considering both its strengths and limitations, this essay will reveal how Nishida's philosophy proves that, although they may appeal to the postcolonial vision of numerous "modernities," non-Westerners' challenges to Western modernity do not necessarily guarantee their success in overcoming it. My point is not that non-Western modernities are doomed to imitate and submit to Western modernity;

2. NKZ 7: 385. Unless otherwise indicates, translations of Japanese texts are my own.

3. HABERMAS 1987, 4.

instead, I argue that closer attention needs to be paid to whether different modernities can really be considered “alternative.” Otherwise, much like “overcoming modernity,” the term “alternative modernities” risks becoming a mere slogan—a deceptive slogan that distracts our eyes from the persistence of the same old problems.

To clarify what is at issue here and why it should be dealt with, this essay begins by addressing the formulation of modernity Habermas finds in the Hegelian dialectic. Based on this interpretation, I will explicate the ill effects of modernity in reference to the critical insights into modernity offered by contemporary scholars, Peter Osborne and James Tully. I will then discuss Nishida’s criticisms of the Hegelian dialectic and worldview based on his evaluations of these ill effects of modernity. I will thus demonstrate how Nishida’s project to overcome modernity is present in his work on surmounting the defects he saw in Hegelianism. Subsequently, I will examine a further dialectic and worldview Nishida presented, which he intended to be free from the defects of Hegelianism he perceived, and thus present the potential of his project to overcome modernity. Finally, I will critically examine his work in terms of its consistency and show that Nishida’s reasoning ended up contradicting the goals of his project, and ruined its potential of “overcoming modernity.”

MODERNITY IN ITS EMANCIPATORY AND OPPRESSIVE ASPECTS

According to Habermas, the essence of the historical consciousness of modernity is the tendency to distinguish itself as the most recent stage of advancement in relation to the past, or even from the modern.⁴ Modernity thus understood consists of the distinct differentiating movement from old to new. However, since the most recent quickly becomes less new over time, for modernity to sustain itself, it must continue to differentiate itself from itself. This generates what Habermas refers to as “a *continual renewal*.”⁵ This untiring urge towards incessant progress is for Habermas the principle of modernity.

4. *Ibid.*, 6.

5. *Ibid.*, 7.

Habermas remarks that if Hegel could conceptualize the principle of modernity as such, it is by his concept of “an absolute that... retains as unconditional only the infinite processing of the relation-to-self that swallows up everything finite within itself.”⁶ The absolute mentioned here is absolute spirit as Hegel conceives of it, namely, the substance that posits itself as the subject, while at once making its object diverge from it. Hegel describes this substance as “the doubling which sets up opposition, and then again the negation of this indifferent diversity and of its antithesis.” That is, absolute spirit, after positing itself as the subject and making its object diverge from it, negates the opposition between the two by cognizing the object. Hegel alludes to the “*self-restoring* sameness”⁷ of this spirit, by which he means absolute spirit, through this synthesis, restores its sameness as the subject, while enriching itself by incorporating the object. Habermas describes this movement of spirit as the “processing of the relation-to-self,” or, more precisely, the relating of itself to itself through the mediation of its other that is to be integrated into the self. The logic operative in this movement, posing the opposites and resolving their contradiction through their synthesis, is the so-called “dialectic.” Absolute spirit infinitely repeats this movement so that it creates all the things that constitute the entire world and its history, and sees itself realized in them. Habermas therefore describes “the infinite processing of the relation-to-self” as “swallow[ing] up everything finite within itself.”

Spirit’s self-cognition thus carried out is not only the realization of rationality, but also that of freedom, in the actual world. While the spirit in developing its self-cognition repeats bifurcation and integration, humans having different positions face and surmount their oppositions or conflicts, so as to attain greater truth and freedom. Hegel believed the dialectical movement of the spirit that goes towards this goal moves the world and carries history forward: “World history is the necessary development, out of the Notion of spirit’s freedom alone, of the moments of reason and so of the self-consciousness and freedom of spirit. This development is the interpretation and realization of the universal spirit.”⁸ Although the phrase that world history

6. *Ibid.*, 36.

7. HEGEL 1977, 10.

8. HEGEL 1952, 216; translation modified with reference to HW 7: 504. For consistency in the

develops “out of the Notion of spirit’s freedom” may sound odd, it has its reason in Hegel’s view: for him, it is not that an object comes first and then is grasped by the Notion. Instead, it is the Notion that precedes the object and makes it emerge so it is recognized by the Notion, and thus accomplishes it. Hegel writes: “The Notion is what truly comes first, and things are what they are through the activity of the Notion that dwells in them and reveals itself in them.”⁹ This view, which seemingly turns things upside-down, becomes understandable if we take into account Hegel’s equation between the Notion and absolute spirit itself: “It is essentially only spirit that can comprehend the Notion as Notion; for this is not merely the property of spirit but spirit’s pure self.”¹⁰ By positing its objects, absolute spirit creates everything; by cognizing them, it identifies them with itself. While thus continually diverging from and returning to itself, absolute spirit realizes and comprehends itself through itself, and also enriches itself and its self-knowledge. Then, absolute spirit is equal to the Notion that it has of itself, or the Notion that reflects itself by itself, and multiplies itself. As such, the Notion has a power to realize what it conceives. That world history develops “out of the Notion of spirit’s freedom” means absolute spirit, through understanding itself as freedom, leads humans to work on realizing it in the actual world. Through this process of realization, world history is created.

When Habermas finds the principle of modernity in the movement of absolute spirit conceived by Hegel, what is at stake is not only the incessant innovation articulated by this movement, but also the advancement of the human knowledge and spirit, and the acquisition of freedom, all of which should occur concomitantly. For Hegel, various manifestations of absolute spirit through this movement culminate in the concretizations of reason as the highest human faculty in social and historical reality. Certainly, Habermas does not entirely agree with Hegel’s idea of absolute spirit. Still, Habermas shares with Hegel the belief that the gradual actualization of reason corresponds to the progress of humans and the achievement of

translation of technical terms, I replace “concept” with “notion” to translate *Begriff*. As for the translation of *Geist*, I replace “mind” with “spirit.” I also replace “actualization” with “realization” for the translation of *Verwirklichung*.

9. HEGEL 1991, 241; translation modified with reference to HW 8: 313.

10. HEGEL 1969, 618.

freedom. Hence, Habermas' qualification of modernity, the project of Enlightenment, is an eternally unfinished project that should be pursued endlessly towards ever-further improvement of human conditions. Looking on the bright side of Habermas' project, Bernard Stevens optimistically remarks that, "Modernity in the political sense is the still-incomplete effort to emancipate humanity from what oppresses it, including Western imperialism," and as such is "a project that... has yet to be achieved either in the West or in the East."¹¹

This, however, is not so simple. The complexity resides in the inseparability of the emancipatory aspect of modernity and its oppressive aspect that implicitly endorses Western imperialism. When Peter Osborne claims, "modernity is a Western concept, inextricably linked to the history of European colonialism," he draws our attention to the inextricability of modernity from the socio-political conditions of its emergence. In his view, the sources of the time-consciousness of continual renewal are "the temporalities of capital accumulation and its social and political consequences,"¹² generated against the backdrop of incessant concentration of wealth at the expense of the exploitation of others. As an act that propels this concentration of wealth, Western imperialism is a crucial factor to the formation of Western modernity. Western imperialist ideologies cast a shadow upon the time-consciousness of Western modernity, especially upon the characteristic manner by which this consciousness deals with its others. The time-consciousness of Western modernity, which consists in differentiating itself as the "newest," cannot but regard non-Western others who live elsewhere as corresponding to different moments in its past, simply because they are different. Osborne describes this operation as follows:

The results of synchronic comparisons are ordered diachronically to produce a scale of development which defines "progress" in terms of the projection of certain people's presents as other people's futures, at the level of the development of history as a whole.¹³

The others of Western modernity, regarded as its pasts, are meant to arrive at

11. STEVENS 2011, 235.

12. OSBORNE, 1995, 13.

13. *Ibid.*, 17.

its stage in the future. Here, they are regarded as different stages of development simply integrated into one and the same historical process—into the universal history whose forefront and standard are Western modernity. The West’s consciousness of the “backwardness” of non-Western others, attained in view of this alleged universal history, provides pretext for the West’s domination over them, often in the name of enlightenment and rescuing them from their “backwardness.” Thus, Western modernity’s time-consciousness, in an encounter with non-Western others, turns into a mechanism of hierarchically subjugating them. This, in turn, lends itself to the justification of Western imperialism. What complicates this is that the logic that formulates continual renewal and supposedly promises progress and liberation of all the humans at the same time contributes to legitimating certain people’s oppression of others, thus breaking this promise.

We can find this mechanism of subjugation already operative in Hegelianism, in which the first formulation of Western modernity was given. Hegel believed that different peoples are situated on different stages of the single universal history of the development of absolute spirit:

For that history is the exhibition of the divine, absolute development of Spirit in its highest forms—that gradation by which it attains its truth and consciousness of itself. The forms which these grades of progress assume are the characteristic “National Spirits” of World History; the peculiar tenor of their ethical life, of their Government, their Art, Religion, and Science.¹⁴

Hegel here asserts that the development of absolute spirit proceeds through stages, and the form in which this spirit appears as a human spirit at each stage corresponds to each national spirit. In doing so, he reduces the difference between various nations in the world to the degrees of variation in the progress of human spirit, and establishes a hierarchy among these nations while integrating them into the single universal history.

Hegel’s sense of hierarchy manifests itself more bluntly when he refers to the concrete others of Europe. For example, he states that Africa “is no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit.”¹⁵

14. Hegel 1956, 53; translation modified with reference to HW 12: 73. I added the word “World” to the phrase, “National Spirits’ of History” to better reflect the original term, *die welthistorischen Volksgeister*. I also replaced “moral” with “ethical” to translate *sittlich*.

15. *Ibid.*, 99.

Excluding certain regions or peoples from history in this way means refusing them the possibility of progress, which he himself claims should reside in all human beings. Looking down upon them works to regard them as not a part of humanity proper. He also states, “Europe is absolutely the end of History, Asia the beginning.”¹⁶ In his view, Europe is at the forefront of progress, and Asia is the least advanced, or at the starting point of progress. Then he declares, “It is the necessary fate of Asiatic Empires to be subjected to Europeans.”¹⁷ Strictly speaking, Hegel sees the most advanced stage of human spirit in his own nation: “The German Spirit is the Spirit of the new World. Its aim is the realization of absolute Truth as the unlimited self-determination of Freedom.”¹⁸ Naturally, theorizations of a hierarchy among different regions or peoples can easily lead toward rationalizing the allegedly superior should wield power over the allegedly inferior. When one professes certain people correspond to the most advanced stage of the development of absolute subject, this could mislead them into believing that their treatment of others who are allegedly at less advanced stages as mere “objects” is authorized.

As Habermas criticizes the solipsism and dogmatism of the traditionally conceived rational subject, including that found in Hegelianism, one may expect the modernity he reformulates would be free from Eurocentrism. Habermas decenters the subject through his idea of communicative rationality, namely, the rationality to be realized in the communication between plural subjects, rather than in the self-referential monologue of the solipsistic or dogmatic subject. He reconceives modernity as the movement of such decentered subjects of communication. However, even in Habermas’ reformulation, the fact remains that the emancipatory aspect of modernity involves another oppressive aspect that implicitly endorses Western imperialism. By contradicting Habermas from the perspective of Michel Foucault, James Tully draws our attention to the problem inherent in the common argument about Western modernity, which Habermas also shares, namely that world history is the linear progressive path of humans’ individual and social development.

16. *Ibid.*, 103.

17. *Ibid.*, 142.

18. *Ibid.*, 341.

These ambiguous logic-of-development arguments aim to show that individual and social evolution moves through progressive stages of development, the stages can be ranked hierarchically by neutral criteria, and the decentered worldview Habermas associates with modernity represents the highest stage. These kinds of developmental argument have been used since the late seventeenth century to try to establish the superiority and universal significance of European ways and they have often been employed to legitimise European imperialism.¹⁹

Tully's point is that even though Habermas invokes the ideas of the decentered subject and worldview, insofar as such modes of subject and world are put at the highest stage of unilinear development, they are taken as the norms for this development and used to situate other modes of subject and world at lower stages in a hierarchy. As such, Tully insists, "Habermas' theory is of the same general kind as other subject-centered philosophies." In this theory, "a form of the subject... is taken for granted at the outset and protected from, rather than opened to criticism."²⁰ The subject-centeredness mentioned here is, paradoxically, the centeredness of the decentered subject, which is still based on the model of European modernity. When Habermas takes this subject as the ideal interlocutor of communication, he practically disqualifies other kinds of subjects from proper communication: "An interlocutor who questions using the decentered worldview as the standard against which to judge forms of reasoning that anthropologists describe in other cultures, for example, is characterised as an irrational relativist."²¹ Nevertheless, the alleged "decenteredness" of the subject guarantees its status as the standard, and gives this exclusion the appearance of legitimacy. What is going on here is not so different from Hegel's endorsement of European imperialism. Here again, certain people's dominance over others is approved on the pretext of the former's alleged advancement and the latter's alleged backwardness, judged according to the norm of the single subject, or at least the single type of subject, at the forefront of the universal history of progress.

Looking at Hegel and Habermas through the eyes of Osborne and Tully, it seems that what underpins the oppressive aspect of modernity are three

19. TULLY 1999, 106.

20. *Ibid.*, 112.

21. *Ibid.*, 111.

elements closely associated with each other: (1) the idea of a unilinear history of progress with modernity at the forefront, which entails the hierarchical ordering of the degrees of this progress; (2) the centeredness of the single (type of) subject as the agent or norm of this progress; and (3) the equation of a certain human group with the privileged personification of this subject, accompanied by the subordination of other peoples situated at lower stages of progress. Even though Habermas' conception of modernity might be more sophisticated than the concept of modernity discerned in Hegel's philosophy, it retains these elements and incorporates the oppressive aspect of modernity. Given this, when exploring ways of dealing with the ill effects of modernity, it is not a pointless move to return to Hegel's philosophy, in which the concept of modernity, with its double aspect, found its first formulation. This is especially significant regarding his ideas of absolute spirit and dialectic as the logic of its movement, given that they are crucial constituents of his concept of modernity. Keeping this in mind, this essay will now turn to Nishida's criticisms of Hegel, in order to trace in them a line of thought that could challenge the modernity formulated by Hegelianism.

NISHIDA'S ATTACK ON THE HEGELIAN DIALECTIC AS THE LOGIC OF MODERNITY

If we look into Nishida's later works in which he ponders history, the state and the world, we can discover that his criticisms of Hegelianism address the aforementioned three elements of the oppressive aspect of Western modernity. While Nishida deals with these separately, his thought also connects them logically.

In "The Problems of Japanese Culture," published in 1940 based on his lectures in 1938, Nishida critically mentions the Eurocentric idea of the universal history of progress in which the East is situated at a less advanced stage compared to the West. This corresponds exactly with first element of the oppressive aspect of Western modernity, namely the idea of a unilinear history of progress with Western modernity at the forefront:

As a consequence of the conflicts and frictions among various cultures for thousands of years [in Europe], a theoretical archetype [of European culture] was formed. [European people] regard it as the single cultural archetype. According to this archetype, they conceive of the stages of cultural forms and

situate Oriental culture at an undeveloped stage. They believe that Oriental culture, if it develops, should necessarily become the same as their culture. Even such a great thinker as Hegel had a similar thought. I think here is the problem.²²

According to Nishida, the “theoretical archetype” of European culture, taken for granted by Europeans, is itself a product of history, formed at a certain point in time as a result of a particular course of events. He describes this as “conflicts and frictions among various cultures.” Nevertheless, once it is formed, people come to mistake such an “archetype” as the single cultural archetype, which then becomes the standard according to which they judge other cultures as undeveloped and inferior. Hegel’s aforementioned idea of universal history—in which Asia is situated at the beginning, Europe at the end, and from which Africa is excluded—comes from the imposition of a similar single standard of progress upon regions other than Europe. This imposition allowed him to one-sidedly judge cultural others as less advanced. Nishida believes this mentality of assuming the single standard and imposing it upon others is not specific of Hegel, but common to contemporary Europeans. Naturally, a philosopher’s thought cannot but reflect the collective consciousness of his time and place, more or less.

Furthermore, for Nishida, Hegelianism is not just one example among many to express this consciousness, but rather its very epitome. Along this line, Nishida perceives Hegelianism’s affinity with European imperialism, which was a dominant and accepted ideology in Europe during Hegel’s time. Nishida also sees overlaps between the problems of Hegelianism and those of the dogma that advocates European imperialism. Nishida criticizes Hegelianism for being complicit with this dogma based on its subject-centered ways of thinking originating from Hegel’s concept of absolute spirit. In “The Problems of Japanese Culture,” he presents his opinion that, when “people came to think that the center of human action is in the subject” in Europe, “the imperialistic human form in the nineteenth century” appeared.²³ He continues:

22. NKZ 12, 284.

23. *Ibid.*, 376.

Hegel's ethical philosophy would express the morality of such a time. Behind the historical subject as he conceived of it was absolute spirit.... However, absolute spirit conceived by Hegel was still subjective [主体的], to put in my own terms, in the category of the grammatical subject [主語的]. It could be said that thinking the world to be environmentally one is the culmination of a way of thinking characteristic of Western culture, a way of thinking in which the world is taken to be subjectively one.²⁴

In Hegel's philosophy, since absolute spirit is the permanent subject of world history, there is ultimately only one world corresponding to this single subject that produces, cognizes, and identifies with that world, and thus carries history forward. Absolute spirit as this ultimate subject expands itself so as to swallow the whole world far beyond being the center of it. In this concept, Nishida sees the culmination of the subject-centered way of thinking, and takes this extremity of subject-centeredness as coordinated with "the imperialistic human form" at Hegel's time. Thus, Nishida connects the acceptance of the dogma of Western imperialism with the extremity of subject-centeredness in Hegelianism. In doing so, he makes a direct link between European imperialism and the idea of the centeredness of the single subject as the agent or norm of progress, the second element of the oppressive aspect of Western modernity.

In Nishida's view, this subject-centrism also permeates Hegel's dialectic formulating the movement of absolute spirit. In the note to "The Hegelian Dialectic from My Standpoint," published in 1931, Nishida draws out this point:

If you ask me, the Hegelian dialectic is still subjective [主語的] and noematic. At least, I cannot help but say that it puts stress on that direction. On the contrary, however, I think that true dialectic must emerge where we break away from such a standpoint.²⁵

"Noematic" is the adjective form of "noema," which is the object or the objective aspect of thought. As such, this is something that can be the grammatical subject (主語) to be predicated in the proposition. Given the Hegelian dialectic characterizes the movement of absolute spirit

24. Ibid., 376–7.

25. Ibid., 84, n.

positing the object and integrating it into itself, this dialectic cannot but be understood with regard to the object that is grasped by absolute spirit. Hence, Nishida's qualification of this dialectic as noematic, which he theorizes is the movement of the permanent subject (主体) of consciousness grasping the object and making it the grammatical subject (主語) of the proposition. Whereas Hegel believes the production of reality consists in this noematic movement, for Nishida being noematic means not only falling into the category of the grammatical subject (主語的), but also being subjective (主觀的) in the sense of depending on and solely deriving from the subject of consciousness.

This noematic character has manifested itself in Hegel's view of world history that results from the Notion qua absolute spirit through its dialectical movement. While absolute spirit is the permanent subject (主体), the Notion is its objective aspect to be made into the grammatical subject of the proposition (主語). To the extent that the world history as Hegel conceives of it develops through the continual opposition and synthesis of these two kinds of subjects, it can also be qualified as noematic in Nishida's sense.

Elsewhere, in "The Problems of Japanese Culture," Nishida further discusses the problem of the dialectic thus conceived: "There is no absolute negation. Insofar as the subject remains, still [this logic] consists in thinking from the subject."²⁶ Although Nishida refers merely to Hegelian logic, we can see the criticism he raises here as also applicable to the Hegelian dialectic. In fact, negation, whose lack in this logic Nishida deplors, is an essential constituent of the Hegelian dialectic. This dialectic is commonly formulated as "the negation of the negation," in which the subject is first negated by the object, this subject negates the opposition between the subject and the object, and this subject finally affirms both in their synthesis. In this process, negation is supposed to enable subject and object to transform themselves so they can be synthesized beyond opposition, to create something new. However, in Nishida's view, since absolute spirit persists throughout the entire process of this dialectic as its permanent subject, the subject is not really negated. He criticizes this state of affairs as the lack of absolute negation. Here, the synthesis between the subject and the object, which is supposed to be the affirmation achieved by the negation of this negation, is

26. *Ibid.*, 362.

not truly the synthesis of the opposites. Rather, it is simply the enlargement of this permanent subject and enrichment of its self-knowledge through the integration of the object.

If universal history is conceived of on the basis of this dialectic, it cannot be modeled after the self-expansion of this single permanent subject that does not undergo true negation. Naturally, the path of the history thus conceived would be the course of linear, gradual and unceasing development of this subject at the expense of the subjugation of its others as “objects.” Viewed from this perspective, ultimately, it is the Hegelian dialectic’s lack of true negation as a necessary consequence of the extremity of subject-centeredness that made Hegelianism complicit with the dogma of European imperialism. As a result, the Hegelian dialectic not only articulates the single subject’s impulse for expansion and domination over others, but also endorses, or even celebrates, the uninterrupted run of this impulse.

In relation to this lack of negation resulting from the noematic nature of the Notion, Nishida raises another important point on the defects of the Hegelian dialectic in “The World as Dialectical Universal,” published in 1934:

Hegel’s “Notion” [概念] also did not avoid being an organic unity. Even if it returned to itself by its own self-negation, it still did not avoid being a universal, or, if not that, a singular individual. This is the reason why the Hegelian dialectic cannot be thought to be a dialectic of true absolute negation.²⁷

In addition to the lack of true negation in the Hegelian dialectic, Nishida here implies the Notion or absolute spirit, which is the single permanent subject of this dialectic and allegedly the most universal among all entities, is merely “a singular individual” alongside many others. Hegel asserts the universal, including absolute spirit, is “the ground and soil, the root and

27. Nishida 1970, 167; translation modified to reflect NKZ 7, 313. I replaced “concept” with “notion” to translate 概念, a Japanese word corresponding to the German *Begriff*. This was done to keep the consistency in the translation of technical terms and to show the relevance of Nishida’s statement here to Hegel’s argument about *Begriff*. I also replaced “a singular entity” with “a singular individual” to translate 唯一の個物. *Kobutsu* (個物) is a key term in Nishida’s philosophy and is usually translated as “individual.” The term “entity” obscures Nishida’s reference to the arguments in logic, including those of Hegel, concerning the relation among the universal, the particular, and the individual.

substance of the individual,”²⁸ and as such “permeates all the particulars and embraces them within itself.”²⁹ Therefore, for him, there is nothing wrong with the universal’s subsuming all individuals under it, given that they are included in it in the first place. However, even though Hegel qualifies it as absolute, for Nishida, absolute spirit is merely an individual entity far from being such a universal. When a particular individual is wrongly professed to be such a universal, it ineluctably ends up imposing its own particularity onto others in the name of universality. In Nishida’s view, this is what happens in the Hegelian dialectic and the world history conceived based on it. In a prior statement, Nishida alludes to this risk:

Even if, on the contrary, a dialectical process is conceived as an infinite dynamic unity, as long as a dynamic unity is conceived as spirit or as matter, it cannot avoid being one thing. It cannot avoid the monistic viewpoint.³⁰

This universalization of an individual entity named “absolute spirit” is not only analogous to the universalization of the archetype of European culture as the standard to be applicable to all cultures,³¹ which Nishida discerns in the collective consciousness of Europeans at Hegel’s time. Remember that Hegel in a similar vein justified the subjugation of Asia and Africa to Europe, while finding in Germany the most advanced realization of absolute spirit, and situating neighboring European countries on similarly advanced stages. The universalization of a single particular type of culture or human group in a way that justifies the subordination of others is supported and reinforced by the assertion that this very culture or group exclusively embodies absolute spirit as the most universal, *par excellence*. However, this assertion would contradict itself if the universal really were what Hegel describes it as, namely, “the ground and soil” that “permeates all the particulars and embraces them within itself.” This means the universal invoked in

28. HEGEL 1991, 253; translation modified to reflect HW 8: 327. I changed “of the single instance” with “of the individual” to translate *des Einzelnen*.

29. *Ibid.*

30. Nishida 1970, 167; translation modified with reference to NKZ 7: 312. I replaced “infinite” with “infinite” to be true to Nishida’s phrase 無限なる動的統一, because “infinite” qualifies “unity.”

31. Naoki Sakai, in his insight into the self-consciousness of the West, illustrates how a particular, called “the West,” universalizes itself and subjugates others as particulars (SAKAI 1989, 95).

the above assertion is not truly universal in this sense, but itself a particular individual entity. That is why it can be easily projected onto another similar entity. Nishida here discloses the falsehood of the alleged universality of absolute spirit. In doing so, he indirectly undermines the third element of the oppressive aspect of Western modernity, namely the equation of a certain human group with the privileged personification of the single (type of) subject as the norm or agent of human progress.

Nishida's criticisms of Hegelianism address the three elements of the oppressive aspect of Western modernity. This suggests his thought, developed around such criticisms, tends not only towards resolving the problems of Hegelianism, but also towards surmounting the ill effects of Western modernity formulated by Hegelianism. It is to this extent that we can discuss Nishida's project to overcome modernity. As we have seen, Nishida's criticisms of Hegelianism mainly target Hegel's ideas of absolute spirit and the dialectic. Thus, there is an expectation that exploring Nishida's ideas of the ground for all reality and of the dialectic will enable us to illuminate what is at stake in his project. Concretely speaking, this investigation can illuminate the kind of logic or worldview, alternative to those that characterize Western modernity, that Nishida's project can lead to. This exploration and illumination will be our next task.

NISHIDA'S ALTERNATIVE DIALECTIC AND WORLDVIEW

Nishida regarded absolute nothingness as the ultimate ground for all beings and created his own dialectic based upon it. Although it is well known that his recourse to nothingness was inspired by his religious Zen experiences, it also has a philosophical significance. In his view, Western philosophy has mainly grounded itself on Being, and developed in the center of it, while regarding all beings as derivative of or dependent on it. Seen from this viewpoint, creating a philosophy grounded in absolute nothingness can be an objection to the premise of Western philosophy, or at least of its dominant tendency.³² As such, Nishida's dialectic of nothingness was not merely

32. It is worth noting that, as HEISIG warns, "It is a mistake—alas, a common mistake—to confuse western philosophy with Nishida's generalizations about western philosophy" (2001, 39).

intended to rival the Hegelian dialectic. Still, given his critical comments on this dialectic, it is undeniable that one of Nishida's motives for creating his own dialectic was to surmount the defects he saw in the Hegelian dialectic. His criticism of the Hegelian dialectic for assuming the subsistence of absolute spirit can be regarded as a manifestation of his critical attitude towards Western philosophy's tendency to ground itself on Being.

The question of how Nishida conceives his own dialectic as distinguished from Hegel's in order to solve its problems remains. As Nishida states "the true dialectical movement begins with nothingness' becoming beings."³³ The true dialectic for him is the process that starts from nothingness, which is the radical negation of all beings. In this process, nothingness, through the negation of itself as the most fundamental negation, creates beings and reaches the affirmation of beings. Nishida believes true dialectic is only possible in this way, in the literal sense of the synthesis of the opposites and the affirmation through the negation of negation. Here, if nothingness is the ground for all beings, it is only insofar as it negates itself as the ground. As such, it is the groundless ground, so to speak. In the process in which nothingness turns into beings through self-negation, and this negation turns into affirmation, "the equation between nothingness and being" holds and "self-affirmation is immediately self-negation, and self-negation is immediately self-affirmation."³⁴ This state illustrates what Nishida formulates as absolute contradictory self-identity.

A brief summary of Nishida's dialectic is enough to show he intended it to surmount the defects he found in Hegel's dialectic, even though this may not have been the only thing at stake. First, Nishida's dialectic, by taking absolute nothingness as the ground for all beings, challenges the Hegelian dialectic's assumption of the subsistence of absolute spirit as the permanent subject and saves dialectic from subject-centeredness. Secondly, Nishida's dialectic, by basing itself upon the most fundamental negation and going through the negation of this negation, introduces true negation, which the Hegelian dialectic lacks, because of its subject-centeredness. This restores to dialectic its dynamics to synthesize the opposites through this true negation.

In creating his own dialectic, Nishida neither simply denies the Hegelian

33. NKZ 12: 74.

34. *Ibid.*, 81.

dialectic, nor invokes nothingness out of nowhere. Rather, he inquires into the Hegelian dialectic's presupposition and introduces the idea of nothingness in a way that complements the deficiency of this presupposition. In a classical tradition of Western philosophy, which Hegel also follows, the essence of knowledge has been sought in the unity between the knowing subject and the known object. Thus conceived, knowledge is not so different from the subject's self-awareness. Given the unbridgeable gap between subject and object as discrete entities, their unity, supposed that it is possible, would be conceivable only if the subject imposes its unity upon the object. Then the subject, by cognizing the object, only recognizes itself projected upon it. This concept of knowledge fits Hegel's noematic dialectic that proceeds through the subject's cognition and incorporation of the object. However, for Nishida, knowledge or even self-awareness is not possible in this subject-centered way:

Against the conventional idea that self-awareness is the unity between the knowing and the known, I take self-awareness as seeing the self in the self... The self's seeing the self in the above sense of self-awareness must mean the self's becoming nothingness, the self's becoming what determines itself while itself being nothingness. Insofar as the self sees itself in conformity with the object, in other words, insofar as it is conscious of itself, it cannot be said that the self is truly aware of itself. The self of which it is conscious is not the true self.³⁵

For Nishida, knowledge is not the unity between the knowing subject and the known object, nor is self-awareness the awareness of the sameness of the knowing self and the known self. Rather, if the self can know the object—whether it is this very self or something else—it is because the self has emptied itself so it can envelop the object as it is. In other words, both knowledge and self-awareness are possible because the self has already become nothingness. Only by being nothingness can the self determine the object as such, while at once determining oneself as the subject knowing it, of which the self is conscious as another object. What Nishida calls “the true self” is not the subject that is itself a known object, but the nothingness that underlies both this noematic subject and all its objects. To this

35. *Ibid.*, 66–7.

extent, true self-awareness is the self-awareness of nothingness; this awareness undergirds the self-awareness in the usual sense, as that of the subject's knowing itself as the object. Thus, self-awareness and knowledge are not possible in subject-centered ways through the confirmation of the subject's self-sameness, nor through the imposition of the subject's unity upon the object. Instead, they become possible by virtue of nothingness, which is absolutely different from beings, including subject and object, through its enveloping them and enabling their determination while negating itself in this determination. Here again, the dialectic of nothingness is working, while echoing the logic that presides over the ontological dimension in the epistemological: nothingness, through its self-negation, achieves the affirmation of beings. Hence Nishida's following statement:

I think that what is regarded as the Hegelian dialectic can be also understood by putting at its beginning what I call the self-awareness of nothingness. What is regarded as true dialectic must genuinely signify the self-aware determination of nothingness.³⁶

For Nishida, the Hegelian dialectic, which he qualified as subjective and noematic, should be grounded in his dialectic of nothingness. As such, he sees drawing upon the latter dialectic as allowing us to correct the errors of the former and see things in more comprehensive ways.

Nishida's "The World as Dialectical Universal" discusses what kind of new worldview he believed would be opened from the standpoint of this dialectic of nothingness. He often describes absolute nothingness as the "universal of all universals" in the sense of the most universal. In fact, as shown by his statement in this book, "When the universal truly negates itself, it must become a world of individuals,"³⁷ he thinks that when nothingness negates itself and creates beings, it becomes itself a world that envelops them as individuals. The title, "The World as Dialectical Universal," indicates that the book thematizes the world that nothingness becomes dialectically. It is thus reasonable to read into this work an expression of Nishida's worldview based on his dialectic of nothingness, even though what is included in this worldview is in fact not limited to one such "world."

36. *Ibid.*, 76.

37. NISHIDA 1970, 167.

It is noteworthy that Nishida also calls this world as dialectical universal the concrete universal, using the same term Hegel used to describe the state, which for him is an exemplary concretization of absolute spirit as the most universal. This appellation suggests that Nishida's idea of the world that nothingness becomes through its dialectical movement is also meant to present a view of the state different from Hegel's.

Now let us turn to how Nishida conceives such a world. He qualifies it as "particular" and explains the self-determination of this particular world as the self-determination of place. The place is that which is in itself nothing, and therefore that in which anything can be placed. Thus, Nishida's equation between place and nothingness follows. Self-determination of place means that nothingness determines itself by becoming the world as the concrete universal in which things are placed, while these things recognize it as their own concrete place. Strictly speaking, what thus becomes is necessarily plural: "The self-determination of the particular is conversely the self-determination of place. The self-determining particular always possesses the other in the determination of place."³⁸ If the most universal is not Being, but nothingness, it cannot impose its own unity upon the beings it encapsulates. Besides, if nothingness is one, what becomes of it through self-negation should be multiple. Consequently, what thus becomes must be multiple concrete universals that are not unified by, or integrated into, the single higher universal. This is why the self-determination of absolute nothingness cannot but lead to the self-determination of the particular, insofar as the particular designates that which possesses other particulars and is distinguished from them by its genuine difference. The self-determination of absolute nothingness as the most universal necessarily leads to the self-determination of multiple particular places, whose particularities are determined by their different locations. Thus, the worldview that results from Nishida's dialectic of nothingness is that in which plural particular worlds, as many concrete universals, coexist: "In the determination of place as the self-determination of the dialectical universal, innumerable worlds are possible."³⁹ Considering the Hegelian equation between the concrete universal and the state, what Nishida presents here is the worldview in which different states, with their

38. *Ibid.*, 229; translation modified with reference to NKZ 7: 419.

39. *Ibid.*, 229–30; translation modified with reference to NKZ 7: 419.

respective particularities, are affirmed as they are, freed from unification or integration. That nothingness allows for different worlds or states is echoed by each particular world's enveloping beings as individuals, or, concretely speaking, each state's comprising its members with respect for their individuality.

In Nishida's philosophy, this relation between different states also applies to different national spirits, due to the inseparability between the state and national spirit. He mentions this inseparability in the second appendix to the supplement to his *Philosophical Essays* vol. 4, presumably written between 1943 and 1945⁴⁰:

When a national spirit is formed by the heroic efforts of a certain ethnic group at a certain point of time and place, a state is established. National spirit is nothing but a historical and corporeal formative force formed as the reciprocal determination between subject and environment. The form thus forming itself is the structure of the state.⁴¹

In Nishida's view, a state is established when a human society, formed in the interaction between subject and environment, attains the power of self-formation beyond the extent of this interaction. For this to happen, the people living in this society must form themselves into one collective subject that determines itself by itself. Nishida defines national spirit as the force of this self-formation, the formation of the state with its own sovereignty, and the mentality peculiarly ascribed to these people as the result of such formations. Then, the relation between states resulting from the dialectic of nothingness is the same as the relation between the national spirits as their formative forces. This is why different national spirits, formed in different locations and characterized by respective particularities, are affirmed as they are. They are not hierarchically ordered according to the alleged degrees of

40. The supplement and first appendix were written and published in 1944. The third appendix was written and mimeographed in 1943, and the second appendix was discovered later and added to the old version of NKZ 12. For the summary of the courses in which these texts were written and published/mimeographed, see the afterword by Shimomura Toratarō, one of the editors of the older version of Nishida's *Complete Works* and a member of the Kyoto School, NKZ 12: 470–3.

41. *Ibid.*, 420.

progress that correspond to the unilinear course of the gradual realization of absolute spirit, as is the case with Hegelianism.

Nishida not only contrasted his own dialectic with Hegel's, but also differentiated his worldview based on it. If Nishida meant his dialectic to be more fundamental than the Hegelian dialectic, the same would be true of his worldview resulting from this dialectic. The message implied in this worldview would be that, even if a certain group of people or states rule over others in the status quo, the state of affairs in which the diversity of states or nations is respected without unification or hierarchization, or in which many different worlds coexist, is more fundamental. This is true to the authentic reality of the absolute ground for all beings.

THE COLLAPSE OF NISHIDA'S PROJECT TO OVERCOME MODERNITY

In presenting alternatives to the Hegelian dialectic as the logic of modernity and the Hegelian worldview that endorse Western imperialism, Nishida's philosophy seems to tackle the first and second elements of the oppressive aspect of modernity, namely the hierarchical ordering of different states allegedly corresponding to the degrees of progress in unilinear universal history, and the centeredness of the single subject as the agent or norm of this progress. However, with regard to the third element, that is, the equation of a certain human group with the privileged personification of such a subject, Nishida's stance is ambiguous, or indeed, problematic. One may question whether it is possible that Nishida still equated certain people with the personification of such a subject, despite being so opposed to Hegel's assumption of the absolute spirit as the single permanent subject of a universal history of progress. Strictly speaking, the problem is precisely that Nishida equated a certain group of people with the privileged personification of absolute nothingness. In doing so, he did not only substantialize and subjectify nothingness, but also introduced a hierarchical ordering of diverse states that, while differently conceived than Hegel's, worked against Nishida's supposed goal of eliminating such hierarchies. Here, Nishida is unfaithful to his own criticisms of Hegelianism.

In "The Problems of Japanese Culture," Nishida sees the particularity of Japanese culture in the attitude of "thoroughly negating oneself and becom-

ing the thing,” or “emptying oneself and seeing a thing, immersing oneself in the thing.” He equates this attitude with the quintessence of Japanese spirit: “The quintessence of Japanese spirit must consist in being united into the thing or matter. To do so means to become one where there was neither the self, nor someone else in the first place.”⁴² In thus discerning the quintessence of Japanese spirit in the attitude of negating and emptying oneself, Nishida practically claims that Japanese spirit embodies absolute nothingness par excellence. This claim does not seem not so different from Hegel’s idea that the national spirit of Germany is the highest realization of absolute spirit.

Although Nishida argues that Oriental culture in general has a tendency in which “the subject negates itself and becomes environmental, becomes the thing,”⁴³ he asserts that two major Oriental cultures—Chinese and Indian—“lacked the spirit of going towards truth to the end, and therefore were stiffened and fixed.”⁴⁴ Japanese spirit, he states, pursued this direction to the end. Nishida here simplistically reduces the difference between national spirits to the difference in the degrees to which they embody nothingness. Nishida once criticized Hegel and his contemporaries for setting up the single archetype of European culture as the standard to judge other cultures as undeveloped and inferior. Yet, Nishida here does the same thing, judging other cultures according to the archetype he invented based on the model of Japanese culture.

Nishida’s advocacy of Japanese spirit is not merely a matter of genuinely encouraging the morality of self-negation or annihilation. Given the inseparability between the state and national spirit as its formative force, promoting the value of Japanese spirit is promoting the value of the Japanese state, or indeed its structure that makes it as such—that is, the form formed by this spirit, as attested by Nishida’s following statement in the appendix to “The Problems of Japanese Culture”:

Today we should not only be proud of the particularity of the structure of our state, but also have an eye to the global profundity of this structure

42. *Ibid.*, 346.

43. *Ibid.*, 345.

44. *Ibid.*, 280.

and illuminate it, and then promulgate it in the world in both theory and practice.

Later, he writes: “Then, consequently, a new world order will be constituted based on this form.”⁴⁵ This passage makes it obvious that Nishida recommends the promulgation of the structure of the Japanese state, which entails constructing a world order based on this structure. While it is not stated outright, doing so ostensibly requires this state to gain global hegemony strong enough to make this happen.

If we leave aside this claim’s affinity with wartime expansionist propaganda, for which some scholars argue Nishida was forced to express his support, what remains problematic is his assertion that a certain nation—indeed, his own—personifies the absolute ground for all beings par excellence.⁴⁶ This assertion permits him to situate Japan at the most advanced stage of the embodiment of nothingness and make it the privileged agent and norm of this embodiment, which other states, one-sidedly judged as less advanced, should follow or model themselves after. Consequently, this assertion ruins the worldview he presented based on the dialectic of nothingness—the worldview in which different states coexist with their diversity affirmed, freed from unification and hierarchization. Moreover, by granting Japan the status of this privileged agent and norm, this assertion permits not only strong subjectivity to be attributed to Japan, but also substantializes and subjectifies nothingness. If a single state that embodies nothingness par excellence is granted strong subjectivity, the nothingness thus embodied is not really nothingness, but the single incomparable absolute subject, comparable to absolute spirit.

Concerning Japan’s subjectivity, Nishida’s following statement is frequently invoked as attesting to his refusal to make Japan a subject: “What we should above all caution ourselves against is making Japan a subject.” Strangely enough, another statement made shortly after this tends to be disregarded: “That we demonstrate the principle of world formation lying at the basis of our [Japanese] history does not mean that Japan stops being a

45. *Ibid.*, 410–11.

46. Curiously enough, this assertion is largely accepted as a decent formulation of “Japanese cultural uniqueness,” even today.

historical subject.⁴⁷ That is to say, if Japan is to demonstrate the dialectic of nothingness that has cultivated Japanese spirit in Japanese history, Japan need not stop being a subject. Nishida's claim expressed by these two seemingly opposite statements is that Japan can be a subject insofar as it negates itself as a self-centered subject, and realizes the morality of self-annihilation grounded in absolute nothingness. Some scholars may read this claim as Nishida's secret resistance to the wartime regime, remonstrating against its egoistic military expansionism. However, combined with his prior claim that Japanese spirit embodies nothingness par excellence, more likely this claim implies that Japan has realized this morality of annihilation in its history, is an essentially moral state, and therefore is already worthy of subjectivity. Whether Nishida supported the wartime regime from the bottom of his heart or not, this dogmatic conviction of the superiority of one's own state and its subjectivity was a basic tenet of wartime ideologies. Besides, one trick of such ideologies was to use moral ideals to embellish and justify brutal acts of colonial aggression. Nishida's assumption of the essential morality of his own state and assertion of its selfless subjectivity would never remonstrate against such acts, but rather practically justify them under the banner of the moral state and its selfless subjectivity.

Nishida, in view of surmounting the defects of Hegelianism, presented alternative ideas of the ultimate ground for reality, the dialectic and the world. In doing so, he undercut the centeredness of the single absolute subject, equated by Hegel with such a ground, and the hierarchical ordering of states, modeled after the unilinear course of this subject's dialectical movement. However, Nishida equated his own state with the privileged personification of the alternative ground for reality. In doing so, he allowed room for making this ground another single absolute subject and reintroducing another hierarchical ordering of states in the name of this subject. As Nishida gave new life to the third element of the oppressive aspect of modernity—the equation of a certain group with the privileged personification of the subject—he essentially nullified the positive outcomes of his efforts to tackle the first and second elements. Thus, the project of overcoming Western modernity discerned in Nishida's philosophy collapses because

47. *Ibid.*, 341.

of its own inconsistency. It fails to be true to itself and interrupts the very lines of thought it pursues.

Hegel's and Nishida's philosophies provide a comparative case in which the professed emancipatory potential of a philosophy is undermined by the philosopher's ethnocentric assumptions. When some scholars nonchalantly celebrate Nishida's philosophy as heralding an alternative modernity, surpassing modernity, or even postmodernity, the ethnocentric pitfall into which his philosophy fell is largely ignored. However, given that Nishida's fallacy ruined any positive outcomes of his project of overcoming modernity, we need to take this failure seriously and make efforts to search for ways to tackle this problem, rather than disregard it and highlight only the bright side of things. Otherwise, we risk repeating the same mistakes, possibly without even realizing it, while indulging in the illusion that we have overcome them.

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