

The Elusive Self: A Comparative Analysis of the De-ontological Self Paradigm in Nishida and in Sartre

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In a later phase, Kitaro Nishida tried to clear up a baffling ambiguity associated with his earlier notion of “pure experience” by locating the conjunction of intuition and reflection in the self-awareness he calls “*jikaku*.” In developing this notion of *jikaku*, Nishida confronts a seemingly unbridgeable chasm between the “world of meaning” and the “world of reality.” Finding the notion of an independent and passive realm of transcendent meaning incomprehensible, and yet somehow haunted by the apparent “internal necessity” of certain logical and mathematical ideas, Nishida hoped to bridge the gap between meaning and existence in terms of his concept of *jikaku* conceived as the “self-consciousness” of the internal necessity of certain “eternal ideas.” According to this view, existence and meaning are inseparable aspects of one experience and their unity resides in self-consciousness. So-called “transcendent meaning,” then, is said to reflect the internal development of consciousness. The rudimentary self-consciousness that “I exist” takes the form “I am I,” which is an assertion of the rudimentary law of identity, “A is A.”

Never wholly satisfied with such arguments, he concluded his work of 1917 by attempting to pinpoint the trans-cognitive, “absolute will” as the true locus of the unity of the ideal and the actual, meaning and existence, value and being. The cause and origin of the will, however, remained a total mystery. Hence, Nishida felt that his voluntarism had led him to succumb to “mysticism.” His subsequent works may be viewed as an attempt to overcome the mystic’s “refusal to speak.” It is in these works that a shift from a voluntaristic orientation to an “intuitionism” is discernible. This intuitionism is exemplified in Nishida’s

later theory of “enveloping universals” (1930). In this theory, the “world of meaning” becomes the “intelligible world,” a realm of being determined by the “intelligible universal.” Although volition remains the fundamental form of self-consciousness and is at the apex of the “universal of self-consciousness,” it has become a form of “weak intuition.”

Like Husserl, the Nishida of 1917 was haunted by the internal necessity of “pure ideas” or essences. The Nishida of 1930 presented his theory of “enveloping universals” in terms of a method of standpoints which bears some resemblances to Husserl’s methodology of phenomenological reductions. Despite certain differences with regard to their respective characterizations of the transcendental “self,” Husserl and Nishida both express a kind of phenomenological, constitutive idealism. In all these respects, Nishida appears to have more proximity to Husserl than to Sartre. Like Sartre, however, Nishida is content to characterize his phenomenological investigations in explicitly ontological terms. The resultant ontology, of course, is one embracing three inextricably involved realms of being, all of which have their “place” in the “last enveloping universal,” which is the “vanishing universal” of “absolute nothingness,” wherein the contradictions of the self are resolved.

Sartre’s ontology, on the other hand, is persistently dualistic. The being of consciousness is a nothingness which exists only as a nihilation of being. Sartre’s ontological dualism is a radicalization of the implications of the Husserlian principle of intentionality. For Sartre, the postulation of the doctrine of intentionality allows only two interpretations:

Either we understand by this that consciousness is constitutive of the being of its object, or else it signifies that consciousness in its most profound nature is in rapport with a transcendent being.¹

He rejects the first alternative, of course, and accepts the second. Although the Nishida of 1930 appears to embrace a version of the first alternative, we cannot say that he accepts the premise of the two alternatives.

For Nishida, the structure of intentionality is something like a continuum involving ever-deepening levels of self-consciousness. This can

¹Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. with an Introduction by Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1956), pp. 21-22.

be seen in terms of a “progressive enclosure of noema in the noesis.” Nishidean intentionality culminates in the form of an actualized “appropriation.” It is not, however, merely symbolic of the ideal, but impossible, “in-itself-for-itself” synthesis. We might say that it is such a synthesis in the form of a kind of subsumption. The being of the phenomenon (*etre-en-soi*) is determined by a “universal” which is subsumed by the “universal” which determines the being of consciousness. All being, in turn, is subsumed and determined by the wholly indeterminate “absolute nothingness.” It is with this actualized synthesis, in the form of subsumption, that Nishida associates the authentic self. Certainly there is a noetic transcendence in this view. When the transcending self goes beyond even the “intelligible universal” and reaches the “absolute nothingness” beyond all being, however, it has fully appropriated its content, thereby fulfilling the noetic enclosure of noema.

The theory of the de-ontological self

In 1945, Nishida moves away from his earlier idealist predilections to express a standpoint of Buddhistic existentialism. Not only has his idealist terminology vanished, but even his preoccupation with the problem of meaning subsides to give way to an existentialist focus on the problem of the self. In his essay of 1945, Nishida develops a theory of self-negation which evolves out of the intuitionism of the 1930s. In a substantial sense, Nishida’s views on self-negation are radically dissimilar to those of Sartre. Whereas death, for Sartre, is “that which on principle removes all meaning from life,” it is, for Nishida, only by confronting the eternal death of the self, or its own “eternal nothingness,” that one can become an authentically self-conscious individual.

For Nishida, there is “absolute nothingness” at the root of self-consciousness. If there were something, we would be merely things, rather than selves. By the self-consciousness of the “eternal death” and nothingness of the self, one truly realizes the singularity of one’s existence. Death, then, has a profoundly ontological significance for Nishida, which it does not seem to have for Sartre. It is, furthermore, precisely this “self-consciousness of nothingness” which becomes Nishida’s definition of the self in his last essay. Despite their differences on death, Nishida’s definition is reminiscent of the Sartrean “self,” which is a non-substantial nihilating consciousness. This consciousness, of course, is

non-thetic with respect to itself. As the “self-consciousness of nothingness,” the ontological foundation of the self is de-ontological, as it were, like Sartre’s “being-for-itself.”

This analogy has been virtually ignored by scholars with only a few notable exceptions. It was noted, for example, by David Dilworth and Hugh Silverman in their article, “A Cross-Cultural Approach to the De-ontological Self Paradigm.”² In this article they indicate that the notion of the self-consciousness of nothingness can be translated as a non-thetic or non-positional self-consciousness. They formulate a brief analysis³ of three “pro-ontological paradigms”: (a) the “absolute-universal self,” (b) the “transcendental-constituting self,” and (c) the “natural-organic self.”⁴ After presenting this analysis, they proceed to explicate the “de-ontological” or “no-self” paradigm. The theory of the de-ontological self is a rejection of various claims to substantial self-unity. It is indicative, they say, of the view that

[E]very attempt at ‘self-knowledge’ fails to go beyond a finite, contingent, and provisional presentation of human existence, and results in a fragmentation of the alleged self into its experiential components.

Asserting that Sartre’s nihilating consciousness, which remains non-thetic with respect to itself, typifies the de-ontological position, they propose that

An analogous conception of non-thetic self-determination appears in Nishida Kitaro, whose central notion of *mu no basho*, ‘the *topos*

²David A. Dilworth and Hugh J. Silverman, “A Cross-Cultural Approach to the De-Ontological Self Paradigm,” *The Monist* LXI, no.1 (January, 1978), pp. 82-95.

³*Ibid.*, p. 83.

⁴In the analysis of the authors, the pro-ontological paradigms are as follows: (a) The “absolute-universal self paradigm”: Either the self is identified with the totality, or it participates in the plenitude of the being of the totality (e.g., Brahman, Tao, The “One”). (b) The “transcendental-constituting self paradigm:” Although anticipated by Descartes and Kant, Husserl formulated a doctrine of transcendental constitution. The “transcendental self” is the metaphysical ground of the intentional act with its noetic and noematic components. (c) The “natural-organic self paradigm:” The emphasis is on the interrelation of psychic and physical aspects. The self is understood as a microcosm of the whole (e.g., as in Aristotle, Leibniz, Dewey, Whitehead, Confucius, and others).

of nothingness,' is a modern Buddhist counterpart to Sartre's existential phenomenology. Like Sartre's pre-reflective cogito, Nishida demonstrates a conception of consciousness after the analogy of the 'eye that cannot see itself.'⁵

Dilworth and Silverman rightly contend that Nishida's notion of self-consciousness in the "place" of nothingness is in fundamental respects virtually identical to Sartre's notion of pre-reflective, non-thetic self-consciousness. The self in both cases establishes its identity only in situation.

Identity in these terms is, of course, expressed in Sartre's notion of facticity. Facticity is what links the "for-itself" to the "in-itself," a linkage without which we could not say that the "for-itself" exists. By virtue of facticity, the self can objectify itself, as well as be objectified by another. As pre-reflective cogito, the self cannot be defined as an "in-itself." Not only is its existence defined by its relation to the "in-itself," but it is by nature a relation to itself. Syntactically, the "self" is "reflexive." This reflexivity indicates a duality, a relation between the subject and himself. Sartre asserts, however, that the "self does not designate being either as subject or as predicate." It cannot designate being as subject, since apart from its relationality, the subject would be "condensed into the identity of the in-itself." It cannot designate being as predicate since the subject always appears behind it. Sartre concludes that "the self cannot be apprehended as a real existent."⁶

Logics of the self

Sartre's characterization of the self in these terms correlates with certain concerns which served as the impetus for Nishida to formulate the "logic of *basho* (place)," a notion which first appeared in 1927 and reached maturity in Nishida's final essay of 1945. Nishida's logic is intended as a logic of the "true self," the being of which is neither subject nor predicate and cannot be described in terms of either. In his concern to develop a "logic" of the "true self," he was drawn to survey the possibilities of different categories or types of logic and consider them

⁵"A Cross-Cultural Approach to the De-Ontological Self Paradigm," p. 91.

⁶*Being and Nothingness*, p. 123.

in reference to the self. In "The Intelligible World" (1930), he adopts the phenomenological terminology of "noesis" and "noema." In later writings, however, he chose to speak in terms of a "subject-oriented logic" and a "predicate-oriented logic." Although "subject-oriented logic" stresses the noematic aspect and "predicate-oriented logic" the noetic aspect, the presupposition of a kind of oppositional relation between noesis and noema became too restrictive for him. Hence, we see that his notion of *jikaku* in 1930 suggests the progressive enclosure of noema by noesis.

Surveying the possibilities, Nishida turned to consider the relation between the subject and predicate of judgment. He observes that in a "subject-oriented logic" the particular existent is put in the position of the subject of a judgment and taken as the unique and irreducible object of knowledge (viz., S is P, as in "the fire is hot"). Aristotelian logic exemplifies this "subject-oriented logic," the metaphysical implications of which are suggested by Aristotle's notion of substance (*hypokeimenon*) as the final subject of predication, or the "subject that cannot be predicate." Nishida contends, however, that there are also "predicate-oriented" logics. A "predicate-oriented logic" views judgment in noetic terms, as referring to the activity of consciousness. "S is P" implies a relation of subsumption wherein the particular subject of judgment is subsumed by the predicate which, as content, belongs to the "field of self-consciousness." Nishida's own thinking in his earlier theory of the "intelligible world" is "predicate-oriented" in this sense. The so-called "universal of self-consciousness" is subsumed in the noetic direction by the "intelligible universal." It should be no surprise, then, that Nishida takes Platonic realism, wherein particulars depend on universal ideas, as indicative of "predicate-oriented logic."⁷ Hence he explains that, "Instead of being as subject, we can think of being as predicate." In his view, "what Plato understood as being can be thus classified." In speaking of "predicative being," Nishida also cites Kant. He asserts that, "What Kant meant by the "I" of the "I think" that accompanies every representation can be argued to be this predicative existence."⁸

⁷Kitaro Nishida "The Logic of Topos and the Religious Worldview," Part 1, trans. Yusa Michiko, *The Eastern Buddhist* (New Series) XIX, no. 2 (Autumn, 1986), p. 9.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 10.

So, while “subject-oriented logic” highlights the objective singularity of the particular, “predicate-oriented logic” stresses its subjective universality. With his “logic of *basho* (place),” as it is formulated in 1945, Nishida articulates a position which departs from these orientations in a manner which is not intended to invalidate either emphasis, but only show their inadequacies. While this position is not intended as a refutation of these types of logic, it is his view that the reality of the true self-conscious, human self cannot be comprehended in terms of either one by itself. The “true self” can be grasped, rather, only through a logic of “place” involving the “contradictory self-identity” of subject and predicate. This means that while the reality of the true individual cannot be construed merely as subject or merely as predicate of a judgment, it can be seen as both the “self-predicating subject” of a judgment and the “self-objectifying predicate” of a judgment (wherein “S is P” pertains to an individual self).

Nishida explains that we can think of that which exists in terms of the subject aspect (object of knowledge) or in terms of the predicate aspect (activity of consciousness), but “that which exists of itself and moves of itself” (the self-conscious self), which is “real being” does not exist on either side:

It exists in the contradictory self-identity of these two aspects. Thus, the self does not exist as merely predicative being according to the activity of judgment. Rather it exists contradictorily self-identically in such a way that ‘that which is created creates’ — it exists as a volitional being which in forming itself gives shape to the self-forming historical world.⁹

In Nishida’s estimation, when we insist on viewing the human self in terms of the subject aspect, we tend to think of it as merely impulsive and instinctive. If, on the other hand, we insist on viewing the self in terms of the predicate aspect, we tend to think of it as merely rational. The logic of *basho* takes a perspective which, refusing to emphasize either aspect over the other, defines the existence of the self in terms of a self-contradictory rapport between the two aspects.

A subject-oriented logic of the self, for Sartre, would tend to collapse the self into the self-identity of the “in-itself.” It is in “bad faith,”

⁹*Ibid*, p. 15.

of course, to treat the transcendent “for-itself” as a mode of the “in-itself.” A predicate-oriented logic, on the other hand, might suggest an idealism wherein consciousness is constitutive of the being of its object, a notion to which Sartre is adamantly opposed. So, although Nishida generally expresses more sympathy for predicate-oriented thinking, Sartre and Nishida both ultimately concur in refusing to associate the “real being” of the self with either direction. Neither do they elect to designate the “real being” of the self in terms of the Hegelian dialectical synthesis. Like Kierkegaard, Nishida views Hegel’s emphasis on the rational “Absolute Spirit” as indicative of an unwarranted assumption of the primacy of the universal over the individual. The individual appears abstract and determined in the face of the absolute. Nishida proposes that his own dialectic enhances the individuality of the individual.

Like Husserl, early in his career Nishida sought to extricate himself from psychologistic and subjectivistic biases. As early as 1917, he was critical of his own *Study of the good*—his groundbreaking work of 1911—for the influences of such biases.¹⁰ We can say that Nishida’s campaign against his own subjectivism extends beyond the period of his early concept of “pure experience,” the period of his concept of “*jikaju*,” and even the volitionist period of his notion of “absolute free will,” to reach its fullest expression in his “logic of *basho*.” During the volitionist period, having described the “self” as “absolute free will,” Nishida was at a loss to explain the origin of this “will.” Subsequently, he came to think of it as coming from a subjectless “creative nothingness” and returning to it. However, he reasons that in order to establish this “will” as absolutely free, it must itself possess the character of no-thingness.

It might be said that some aspects of Nishida’s position at this juncture are in proximity to Sartre’s view of the character of consciousness as a subjectless revelation of being and to his belief in the absolute freedom of consciousness. It is interesting, in this connection, to recall Sartre’s assertion that “Consciousness is afraid of its own spontaneity because it feels itself to be beyond freedom.”¹¹ It might be suggested

¹⁰Nishida’s *Zen no kenkyu* was translated by Valdo Vigiemo and published in 1960 (Japan: Ministry of Education), using the English title, *A Study of Good*. A translation by Masao Abe and Christopher Ives was published in 1990 under the title, *An Inquiry into the Good* (New Haven: Yale University Press)..

¹¹*Being and Nothingness*, p. 120.

that a certain notion of origination “beyond freedom” drove Nishida to attempt to utterly transcend subjectivity and envision a certain “place” wherein everything that is — subject or object — exists. Inspired in part by Plato’s discussion of the “receptacle of ideas” (*Timaeus*, 50c), he calls this the *topos* or “*basho*” of nothingness (*mu no basho*). As is the case with the “last enveloping universal” in his earlier theory of “enveloping universals,” the “*basho* of nothingness” is the place in which every being is determined and defined as a being, a place which remains itself indeterminate and ineffable.

The self and the world

We can think of *basho* as the locus in which self-consciousness arises and as a locus which emerges only in relation to self-consciousness. *Basho* designates something like the “horizon of consciousness,” but is ontologically prior to it. Through the determination of self-consciousness, self and the world come into being. Self and the world emerge together as self-consciousness and the world, giving rise to each other. In this connection we may recall the Buddhist notion of “dependent co-origination” (*pratitya-samutpada*). Nishida’s notion of *basho* designates the formless seat of being wherein self and the world stand in “absolutely contradictory self-identity” (*zettai mujunteki jiko doitsu*).¹² It is the concrete world of everyday existence in which we live and die. Each individual is a world in himself and these worlds interact in a mode of “mutual negation which is simultaneously affirmation.”

We might think of the Sartrean notion of “situation” as something like “*basho*” in that it is the context in which both self and world appear. There is also a kind of interdependency. The self cannot exist, for Sartre, apart from its situatedness in the world. The world, on the other hand, is non-conscious being only as it appears to the self and is organized by it in “instrumental complexes.” The two primary aspects of the Sartrean notion of situation are the facticity of things as evidenced by their “coefficient of adversity,” and the meanings which the self designs for them. Regarding the first aspect, the “adversity” offered by things, for Nishida, pertains not only to the relation between the self and things, but also to the interrelation between things themselves. According to

¹²“The Logic of Topos and the Religious Worldview,” p. 5.

Nishida, uniqueness is maintained reciprocally by virtue of a mutual opposition taking the form of a mutual negation which is simultaneously an affirmation.

The self, however, is that which acts. As such, it belongs to a different "world" than the "world of matter." We can think of "world" as the concrete expression of basho. The active self-conscious self has to do with the purposive and creative "world of life." It has to do with the "historical world." Nishida holds that the active and creative character of the self is such that,

each of us — an expressive point of the world — forms the world by expressing it in our self: the world is subjectively appropriated by our self. This means that the world which stands over against us as something thoroughly objective is transformed into a world of signs within us, is grasped as a significative world. That is, the world expresses itself within us; each of us is the locus of its self-formation.¹³

Here we see an expression of something like the second primary aspect of Sartre's notion of "situation."

The "historical world" of the self, then, is for Nishida that which "exists and moves of itself."¹⁴ Containing self-negation within itself, it "moves from the created to the creating by reflecting itself within itself." This concept of "reflection" or "mirroring" is fundamental to Nishida. The self is seen as a "focal point of the world" wherein "the world reflects itself." The notion of "reflection" is also pivotal to Sartre. Sartre speaks of consciousness as exhibiting a "pattern of duality" in a "game of reflections." He observes that,

consciousness is a reflection (*reflet*), but *qua* reflection it is exactly the one reflecting (*reflechissant*), and if we attempt to grasp it as reflecting, it vanishes and we fall back on the reflection.¹⁵

Although Sartre's observation correlates with Nishida's notion of consciousness as an "eye which cannot see itself," the implications of his use of the metaphor are in some respects dissimilar from the intentions

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹⁵*Being and Nothingness*, p. 122.

of Nishida. For Sartre, it is precisely this structure of “reflection-reflecting” (*reflet-refletant*) which indicates that the being of consciousness remains a distinct being from non-conscious being.

“Reflection” for Nishida, indicates the self’s reflection of the world “within itself.” In other words, the self reflects itself in reflecting the world. This might seem to suggest that the self sees its own consciousness (noema) in everything, and therefore that what really exists, so far as humanity is concerned, is consciousness. This interpretation, however, is somewhat misleading since the “world” *qua* self, as we have seen, is an “historical world.” Reflection, then, is the self reflecting the “historical world” within itself. Consciousness and the “natural world” are abstracted aspects of this “historical world.” The reflection is not so much a reflection of the noema in the noesis, as it is a reflection within the endless movement “from the created to the creating.”

Sartre’s reinterpretation of Husserl’s concept of “noema” is such that the concept is rendered gratuitous insofar as it is regarded as a subjective entity. This is not to suggest that Husserl’s “noema” is necessarily intended to be a “subjective entity.” For Husserl, its function pertains to a transcendental theory of constitution and meaning. Husserl never fully resolves the ambiguity between the claim that objects are “given in intuition” and the claim that objects are “constituted by consciousness.” Although the *being* of phenomena is held to be transphenomenal, Sartrean phenomenology does not distinguish between noema and object. The import of Sartre’s concept of “reflection” is that the mode of the being of consciousness differs from that of the “in-itself.” It is

not a unity which contains a duality, not a synthesis which surpasses and lifts the abstract moments of the thesis and of the antithesis, but a duality which is unity, a reflection (*reflet*) which is its own reflecting (*reflection*).¹⁶

Although Sartre’s utilization of the metaphor of “reflection” appears to lead us away from the implications of Nishidean reflection, his notion of consciousness as “duality which *is* unity” is not at all alien to Nishida’s thinking. According to Nishida, we can think of an activity as the “unity of mutually negating things.” Such a unity, however, suggests a “contradictorily self-identical medium [field].” In reference to such a

¹⁶*Ibid*, p. 123.

field or *basho*, "the self stands in opposition to itself; it is one with itself through its self-negation."¹⁷ We are to grasp the self as a "contradictory self-identity, as a negation which is also an affirmation."¹⁸ The self for Nishida, pertains not only to a purposive, dynamic and historical world, but it is fundamentally self-conscious. Hence, he asserts that, "That which becomes self-conscious faces the absolute other."

Whether we are speaking of the self's relation to itself or its relation to the "world," Nishida has in mind a kind of "mutual determination" in the mode of an internal negation which is also an affirmation. For Sartre, "otherness" pertains to the obligation of consciousness to be nothing but "a revealing intuition of something."¹⁹ Sartre recognizes the proximity of this view to Plato's category of the "Other" as described in the *Sophist*. Consciousness is the "Platonic *Other*." For Sartre and Plato alike, this "otherness" has no being except in its being other; it disappears in self-reflection, and although it is severed from being or reality, it cannot exist independently. For Sartre, however, Plato failed to see the logical consequence of his position. Sartre insists that "the only way in which the other can exist as other is to be a consciousness [of] being other. Otherness is, in fact, an internal negation."²⁰

The problem of the totality

If consciousness is bound to the "in-itself" by an "internal negation," does not this mean that the two constitute a totality, and is this totality not real? Such a question would seem to be suggested by Nishida's logic of *basho* which emphasizes the reality of the totality. At the conclusion of *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre inquires as much of himself. In fact, he admits of an "*a priori* unity," but is non-committal with respect to the reality or *being* of this unity. Viewing the "for-itself" as "*nothing* except a reflection of this nothing which is itself polarized and defined by the in-itself," the relevant question for Sartre is "which shall we call *real*?"²¹ The question of the reality or being of the totality is invalidated

¹⁷"The Logic of Topos and the Religious Worldview," p. 8.

¹⁸*Ibid*, p. 7.

¹⁹*Being and Nothingness*, p. 786.

²⁰*Ibid*, p. 787.

²¹*Ibid*, p. 791.

by the hiatus which haunts him. Sartre illustrates his sense of the ambiguity which characterizes the supposed reality or being of the totality with his inquiry: "What definition are we to give to an existent which as in-itself would be what it is and as for-itself would be what it is not?"

If a totality is to be considered an existent, it is necessary that each distinct structure considered apart is "only an abstraction." Certainly Sartre admits that the "for-itself" considered apart is only an abstraction. Apart from "being-in-itself" the concept of "being-for-itself" is a mere abstraction, for it is nothing save the emptiness of this being. The "in-itself," on the other hand, "has no need of the for-itself in order to be." Sartre qualifies this assertion by adding that "The *phenomenon* of in-itself is an abstraction without consciousness but its being is not an abstraction." For Nishida, there is no such autonomous "being-in-itself." Neither is there an autonomous being of consciousness. For Nishida, what Sartre calls "being-in-itself" is an abstraction when regarded apart from the "historical world." Even the non-conscious "material world" exists *within* the "historical world."

For Sartre, the "in-itself" must be considered logically prior to the "for-itself." The latter is dependent on "being-in-itself," both in its origin and in its continued history. Its being is defined wholly in negative terms. Sartrean ontology proceeds "*via negativa*" as regards the "for-itself." Since it is essentially a refusal to be substance, Sartre speaks of it as a non-substantial "absolute."²² Rather than proceeding *via negativa* as regards the being of consciousness, Nishida opts to describe material being and the being of consciousness as aspects of historical life which stand in opposition to each other. In terms of the structure of judgment, the material aspect pertains to the subject-term and the noetic aspect pertains to the predicate-term. In terms of "objective logic," Nishida explains that the material aspect is the "world of objects" and the noetic aspect is the "world of activity."

We may recall that by abandoning the "primacy of knowledge," Sartre claims to have "discovered the *being* of the *knower* and encountered the absolute."²³ This absolute, he says, is the same absolute which

²²For examples of references made by Sartre to the "for-itself" as the "absolute," see *The Transcendence of the Ego*, trans. with an Introduction by Forrest Williams and Robert Kirkpatrick (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1987), p. 96, and *Being and Nothingness*, pp. 17, 757.

²³*Being and Nothingness*, p. 17.

the seventeenth-century rationalists mistakenly defined and logically explicated as an "object of knowledge." In Nishidean terms, these rationalists mistakenly treated the "world of activity" as a "world of objects." Apart from his critique of seventeenth-century rationalism, however, there is little reason to regard Sartre's "for-itself" as the "absolute." It would be difficult to construe the dependency of this "absolute" on the "in-itself" as properly characteristic of an absolute. Indeed, Sartre speaks of another hypothetical "absolute" in this connection. We may recall that the Sartrean notion of "appropriation" is symbolic of an ideal but impossible "absolute," the "in-itself-for-itself" or "God." Yearning to be its own foundation, the "for-itself" seeks the status of this "absolute." It exists as a nothingness which is in flight from itself toward an "in-itself" which it can never attain. If an "in-itself-for-itself" were possible for Sartre, it would mean that the dependency of the "for-itself" on the "in-itself" would be dissipated.

The absolute and the relative

For Sartre, we are in "bad faith" when we regard "being-for-itself," which is the very being of the knowing self, as an object of knowledge. Like Sartre, Nishida insists that "the self cannot become an object of the self itself." Unlike Sartre, however, Nishida asserts that "we cannot clarify what the self is merely by defining it negatively."²⁴ Nishida is not content to view the self in purely negative terms. The existence of the self must be seen in terms of the "self-identity of absolute contradiction." He observes that some may say that the self is "beyond thought," but remarks that in asserting this they have already thought of the self. He also observes that some may suppose that the self exists in the "higher dimension." In a Sartrean manner, Nishida asserts that such views compel us to confront the absurdity of an infinite series of selves in reference to progressively "higher" dimensions. Nishida's conclusion is that, "logically speaking, the self must be grasped as a contradictory self-identity, as a negation which is also an affirmation."

To think of the self as a "contradictory self-identity" is to think of it as something like what Sartre calls a "duality which is unity." Nishida treats the contradictions of the self in terms of his logic of "the self-

²⁴"The Logic of Topos and the Religious Worldview," p. 7.

identity of absolute contradictions." This is evident, for example, in reference to his discussion of the self's existence as an existence toward death. *Basho* is the mirror of the self-identity of the existential contradictions of the individual self. When the self confronts its own "eternal death," its absolute nothingness, it "faces itself self-contradictorily." That which negates the self, Nishida explains, must share the same origin with the self. He asserts that "what is utterly unrelated to the self cannot negate it."²⁵ All negation, then, can be seen as an internal negation with respect to the *basho* of the existence of the self.

Nishida contends that insofar as something external appears to negate the self, the self is not "absolute." The absolute must contain self-negation internally. He explains that when individuals face the absolute, or God, "they die." This is because the relative cannot stand over against the absolute. A "true absolute" does not negate the relative. An absolute which stands opposed to the relative would itself be relative. We recall from above that Sartre asks if we can consider the totality, "in-itself-for-itself," to be a real being. Similarly, Nishida asks what it is that constitutes a *real* absolute. He responds that "The absolute is truly absolute in facing nothing. By facing absolute nothing it is absolute being." This means that "The self becomes absolutely nothing." There is no longer anything to stand over against it and negate it.

In order to express this in logical terms, we cannot rely on "objective logic." We require a kind of dialectical logic. Nishida utilizes what he calls the "logic of *soku hi* ["is" and "is not"]." The logic of *soku hi* is the logic of the *Prajnaparamita Sutra* used to express the relationship between the individual self and the absolute. Nishida's dialectic is intended to suggest that the items which are in this relation indicate absolutely contradictory directions from the standpoint of an identical being. The absolute, then, contains absolute self-negation within itself. It opposes itself in a "correspondence relation of inverse polarity." Consequently, "because it is absolute nothingness, it is absolute being." Absolute and relative stand opposed in the paradoxical relation of the dialectical identity of absolute contradiction. The paradox consists in that, although the absolute is non-relative, it does not merely transcend the relative. Containing self-negation of itself within itself, the "true absolute freely returns to itself in the form of the relative."²⁶

²⁵*Ibid*, p. 19.

²⁶*Ibid*, p. 20.

Sartre, of course, is unable to discuss the absolute in these terms. As the totality, "in-itself-for-itself," the Sartrean "absolute" remains an "impossible ideal." If the totality is a real being, then the very existence of the "in-itself" should require the "for-itself," just as the existence of the "for-itself" requires the "in-itself." The "in-itself," however, has no need of the "for-itself" in order to be. Sartre argues that there is no vantage point outside of the totality with which to adopt a view of the totality. Still, he says, since we are *engaged* in this putative totality, it is not inappropriate to ponder it. He contends, however, that the question of the totality "does not belong to the province of ontology."²⁷ For Sartre, it is up to metaphysics to determine whether to preserve the ancient duality between consciousness and being or to employ a notion of a single being viewed as a kind of "disintegrated totality."²⁸

From a Sartrean perspective, Nishida's discussion of the absolute as containing self-negation within itself is metaphysical in character. Nevertheless, it is of interest to consider the metaphysical implications of Nishida's logic vis-a-vis Sartrean ontology. From Nishida's standpoint, the nihilating character of consciousness described by Sartre might be explicated in terms of the self-nihilation of the absolute. This form of nihilation indicates that the absolute's "absence" to itself is the "presence" of the relative and *vice-versa*. Here there is no longer an "in-itself" whose being is independent of consciousness. The existence of non-conscious phenomena is relative to the absolute's self-negation. Even individual consciousness is relative to the self-negation of the absolute. On the other hand, the absolute includes the relative as the denouement of its own internal self-negation.

The problem of immanence-transcendence

According to Nishida, his approach is thoroughly dialectical, whereas Hegel's dialectic never departs from the standpoint of "objective logic." Nishida also insists that this view is not pantheistic, although it may be

²⁷ *Being and Nothingness*, p. 794.

²⁸ For Sartre, ontology describes the conditions under which there is a world or human reality [*Dasein*]. Metaphysics is concerned with origins and seeks to explain why there is such a world. Sartre does not disapprove of metaphysics *per se*, but regards it as purely speculative and hypothetical.

“panentheistic.” Pantheism, he says, is also based on “objective logic.” He also disallows the notion of an absolutely transcendent, supernatural God. “A God who is merely transcendent and self-sufficient is not a real God.”²⁹ Thoroughly characterized by self-negation or *kenosis* (self-emptying), “The truly dialectical God is totally transcendent and immanent, immanent and transcendent.”

Like Nishida, Sartre identifies the totality with the absolute, or with God. From the perspective of Sartre’s ontology, however, the being of this totality is ideal, rather than real. It is interesting in this connection to consider Sartre’s assertion that there is only one observation which ontology can hazard with respect to the metaphysical question of the totality. He observes that if we are to employ the notion of a “disintegrated totality,” “it will be necessary to speak of it *both* in terms of immanence and in terms of transcendence.”³⁰ As noted above, this is precisely the move that Nishida makes. For Sartre, however, although he admonishes metaphysicians to speak of the absolute in terms of both immanence and transcendence, he is not suggesting that we can speak of both *total* transcendence and *total* immanence simultaneously. Sartre makes no endeavor to conceive of a “logic” with which to render such an absolute contradiction intelligible. It is, however, pivotal in his thinking that the absolute be regarded as at least hypothetically — *both* transcendent and immanent.

For Sartre, any doctrine of total immanence is indicative of something like Husserlian idealism and a doctrine of total transcendence induces a false view of the absolute “as a new kind of *object*.” In his view, transcendence is always restricted by the dimension of the “for-itself” and immanence by the dimension of the “in-itself.” Sartre concedes that as metaphysicians we may choose to treat the “in-itself” and the “for-itself as dimensions or realms of a single — albeit disintegrated — being. From this standpoint there is only one *phenomenon*: “being-in-the-world” [*Dasein*]. Unlike Heidegger, however, Sartre is still haunted by what he regards as a lack of reciprocal ontological dependency between the two dimensions. The immanence of the absolute appears to be interminably mitigated by the indifferent self-sufficiency and self-

²⁹“The Logic of Topos and the Religious Worldview,” p. 20.

³⁰*Being and Nothingness*, p. 795.

identity of the dimension of the “in-itself.” The transcendence of the absolute, on the other hand, seems inhibited by the “for-itself’s” incessant desire for self-identity and its “project of being its own self-cause.”

Despite his earlier idealistic proclivities, Nishida’s “logic of *basho*” suggests a different orientation. Each individual consciousness is a “focal point of the world.” Any constituting activity, or meaning-bestowal, on the part of consciousness is merely an aspect of the historical world’s self-formation. Mediated by *basho*, the self and the world stand in “absolutely contradictory self-identity” (*zettai mujunteki jiko doitsu*). This relation means that Nishida’s notion of the “total immanence” of the absolute cannot be suggestive of the subjectivism or constitutive idealism which Sartre is wary of. It also means that Nishida’s notion of the “total transcendence” of the absolute does not imply that we can view the absolute as a “new kind of object” in the sense which Sartre would disallow. For Nishida, such a view would be indicative of the delimitations of the standpoint of “objective logic.”

Concluding comparative implications

In Nishida’s logic *basho* is the locus of the self-identity between absolute and relative. From such a standpoint, the apparent indifference and self-identity of the material world is merely an aspect of a deeper ground of the “self-identity of absolute contradiction.” The apparent lack of self-identity characterizing the world of consciousness, on the other hand, indicates the failure to penetrate to this deeper ground and acquire the standpoint of total freedom and authenticity, a standpoint which — oddly enough — is the “ordinary way of looking at things.” Such a standpoint does not imply the eradication of the contradictory structure of the self. As we have seen, Nishida insists that our existence is contradictory by nature. Although we “reflect the world within ourselves,” we have our true selfhood in the “absolute other.” In self-negation the self transcends the ego-self and returns to the “absolute other,” the origin of the self.

According to Nishida, in facing absolute nothingness we become truly self-aware. According to Sartre, “consciousness which would be a consciousness of nothing would be an absolute nothing.”³¹ He also

³¹*Ibid*, p. 90.

observes that the “for-itself” is “a nothing” and declares that “there is ‘outside of the in-itself’ *nothing* except a reflection of this nothing which is itself polarized and defined by the in-itself.”³² “Being-in-itself,” for its part, has no need of nothingness since it is absolute self-sufficient plenitude. For Sartre, being takes precedence over nothingness. Although he criticizes Hegel for never going beyond a logical formulation of non-being so as to relate it to human reality, he also objects to Hegel’s treatment of being and non-being as contemporaneous, instead of characterizing non-being as logically dependent on being. For Sartre, nothingness must be founded on being, logically and ontologically.

For Nishida, the reverse is the case. Being is founded on nothingness. *Basho* is the “place” wherein all existence, subjective or objective is located, the “place” wherein all being is determined. All being is the “self-determination of *basho*.” As such, *basho* itself is indeterminate. It is not, however, a relative nothingness in opposition to being. Sartrean nothingness is a nothingness which is polarized and defined by being. It is a “worm in the heart of being.” Such a nothingness must be a relative nothingness in Nishidean terms. If, for Sartre, nothingness is logically dependent on being, and for Hegel the two are logically contemporaneous, for Nishida it is being which is logically dependent on nothingness. Similarly, it is in facing absolute nothingness that the “true absolute” is revealed as absolute being, or absolute plenitude [*pleroma*]. The true absolute, then is both absolute nothingness and absolute being, both absolute being and relative being. It is the *coincidentia oppositorum*, the self-caused totality which Sartre viewed “as always indicated and always impossible.”³³

We have seen that Nishida and Sartre both endeavored arduously to free themselves from all vestiges of subjectivism. Both labored against the inclination to mistake the objectified self for the true self. Like Plato, both associate this self with the “absolute other.” Despite, or because of, his “religious atheism,” there is an uncanny proximity between Sartre’s efforts to expose the inauthenticity of “bad faith” and Nishida’s Buddhistic unveiling of “delusion.” In his final essay, Nishida asserts that delusion “arises from taking the objectified self for our self. The source of delusion lies in the mode of seeing characteristic of objective

³²*Ibid*, p. 791.

³³*Ibid*, p. 792.

logic.”³⁴ Buddhist *satori* is indicative of a radical departure from “objective logic.” It means that “one clearly sees the ground of one’s nothingness.”

At times Sartre’s cryptic expressions are suggestive of the logic of *soku hi*, as in the phrase: “The For-itself is what it is not.” In *The Transcendence of the Ego*, Sartre comes close to Nishida’s logic of *basho* in the following assertion:

The transcendental Field, purified of all egological structure, recovers its primary transparency. In a sense, it is nothing, since all physical, psycho-physical, and psychic objects, all truths, all values are outside it; since my me has itself ceased to be any part of it. But this nothing is all since it is consciousness of all these objects.³⁵

Toward the end of *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre describes the “transcendental field” as the “shell of nothingness” which surrounds the “in-itself.” This “shell of nothingness” is something like Nishida’s “*basho* of absolute nothingness.” Nishida’s *basho*, however, is not the being of consciousness surrounding the “in-itself” from a distance. All objects, truths and values are somehow within it and determined by it. In other words, it is transcendent, yet all-inclusive, absolute nothingness and absolute being. In a sense, Nishida’s “logic” of the paradoxical oneness of being and nothingness is precisely what Sartre would require if he were to allow an expression of what remains for him “always indicated and always impossible.” ↪

³⁴“The Logic of Topos and the Religious Worldview,” p. 29.

³⁵*The Transcendence of the Ego*, p. 93.