Coincidentia Oppositorum and Love

NISHIDA KITARŌ

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY MICHAEL FINKENTHAL

THE LECTURE ENTITLED "Coincidentia Oppositorum and Love" was delivered by Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945) at Ōtani University, Kyoto, in 1919. The author was forty-nine years old at the time; his first book, *An Inquiry into the Good,* published in 1911, introduced his ideas on pure experience. "An individual exists because there is experience," Nishida wrote in his preface to the book. At first glance, some of Nishida's ideas sound very Hegelian; an attentive reading, however, unveils well definable departures from Hegel. Nishida's original ideas were to be further clarified a few years later with the publication, in 1917, of *Intuition and Reflection in the Self-Consciousness.* Abe Masao writes that after his first book dedicated to the subject of pure experience, Nishida had to "develop a more logical inquiry into its structure. He had to reflect on intuition logically and to grasp the relation between intuition and reflection."[1]

The talk on "Coincidentia Oppositorum and Love" was therefore delivered while Nishida was actively engaged in the process of systematizing the logical foundations of his original philosophy; it was a logic to become known as the "logic of unobjectifiable reality."[2] This process was unfolding at the confluence of Zen Buddhism and Western (mostly German) idealist philosophy. It is interesting to observe that Zen Buddhism is used in the work discussed here only as a pretext to set out the problem. Buddhism as a field of

[1] Introduction to *An Inquiry into the Good,* trans. Masao Abe and Christopher Ives (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990).

[2] Like Hegel, Nishida equated logic with metaphysics.

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intellectual study requires the use of logic (which implies that it is essentially logical); at the same time, Nishida states that Buddhism "is a religion whose essence is love." Logic and affectivity are thus brought together in a simple, factual way. From the standpoint of the Western philosophical tradition, this move is surprising considering that logic and affectivity were, during the entire history of this tradition—from Socrates to Hegel—in strong and seemingly irreducible opposition.[3]

It is beyond the scope of this brief comment to pursue the long history of this incompatibility. Probably its best description is to be found in the works of Lev Shestov (1866–1938). Spinoza's *"non ridere, non lugere, neque detestari, sed intelligere"* (not to laugh, not to lament, not to curse, but to understand), has been often quoted in this context. Very early on, knowledge became, in Greece, rational knowledge expressed in universal and necessary statements. With Hegel, all that was real has become rational, and all that was rational was real. Rationality with its logical apparatus has imprisoned reality, that of nature as well as that of the individual, in the prison of the "Almighty Law." The prison of Necessity grew larger and larger until it could accommodate in it God himself. Again we hear Spinoza (in *Ethics* I.33): "Things could not have been brought into being by God in any manner or in any order different from that which has in fact obtained." That is why we are surprised to hear that somebody trained at the schools of Western philosophical thought would state, as Nishida did so abruptly at the very beginning of his talk, that "I believe [that] logic is linked at its root to human emotions."

To prove this point was the main task Nishida took upon himself in his lecture. His approach anticipates in a way something which reminds us of Jaspers' method of "formal transcending" in metaphysical thinking. He basically establishes a double identity, one between Logic and Coincidentia oppositorum, and another between Coincidentia oppositorum and Love (representing affectivity). Coincidentia oppositorum being the essential point of intersection between the finite and the infinite, as well as that of any contradiction generating affective states, the link between logic and affectivity necessarily follows. But is this procedure convincing? Is it logically correct? Nishida himself seems to have had some doubts about it, for at the very end of the talk he says: "There are of course major shortcomings in logic when we put forth an explanation of this kind [to account] for the process which links consciousness with love, but I will say no more for the time being."

Nishida went on to say more on the subject in his written works of the twenties and the thirties, but this is too broad a topic to be discussed further here.

[3] Kierkegaard's reaction to Hegel as well as to the different existentialisms of the century originated in this opposition.

It is interesting to point out and comment upon a few of the details of the argumentation used in this lecture, as well as on the relationship between Nishida and contemporary Western thinkers involved in the research of cognitive processes. In particular it would seem to me of great interest to follow Nishida's use of mathematical constructs in his philosophical works.[4]

It was only natural that after a brief mentioning of the historical evolution of the idea of Coincidentia oppositorum, from Cusanus to Hegel, Nishida would mainly dwell on the latter's discussion of the coincidence of the opposites. A brief but comprehensive comparison of Nishida and Hegel, relevant for the present context, can be found in Abe Masao's article, "The Logic of Absolute Nothingness" (in the Nishida Kitarō memorial issue of the *Eastern Buddhist*, Autumn 1995). There is no need to further comment on this point. However, I would suggest that Schelling's use of Coincidenta oppositorum in relationship to the finite-infinite is no less important than Hegel's for understanding Nishida's thinking about "intuitive knowledge." Schelling tried to overcome the great epistemological difficulty left by Kant insofar as the possibility of the knowledge of the Absolute was concerned. The Absolute was for Schelling (as it was for Kant), the identity of the Self and whatever is external to it. Kant in the "Critique of Judgement," argued against the possibility of an "intellectual intuition," stating that such an intuition directly linked to reason would be impossible—in contradistinction with that related to sensorial knowledge—because reason implies necessarily the distinction between subject and object. For that reason, the object scrutinized must be external to the thinking subject. Schelling claims that such an "intellectual intuition" is possible, and makes his point by following the way a mathematician would arrive at the "thought" of the abstract concept of a "triangle." Euclid, or my-

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[4] It is well established that Nishida held a strong inclination toward mathematics from an early age, and that later, as a philosopher, he extensively used mathematical imagery and concepts borrowed from different scientific domains to clarify complex models and ways of argumentation. This is not a simple curiosity or a technical device; I believe it is important from a phenomenological point of view. In a future paper we shall see how the use of mathematical imagery has helped Nishida to "compress" his argumentation relative to the logic of place. A very important work on this subject is the paper "Group Theory and Nishida's Conception of the World" by Ryōsuke Ōhashi: "Zoku 'Shūgōron-teki' jikaku, 'gunron-teki' jikaku" [Self-awareness according to set theory, continued, and according to group theory], in his book *Nishida tetsugaku no sekai* [The World of Nishida Philosophy] (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 1995), pp. 85–95. See also John C. Maraldo's article in Japanese, "Jiko shazō to jikaku: Dedekinto, Roisu to Nishida [Self-Mirroring and Self-Consciousness: Dedekind, Royce and Nishida]," in *Nishida tetsugaku e no toi* [Questioning Nishida Philosophy], Ueda Shizuteru, ed. (Tokyo: Iwanami, 1990), pp. 33–68.

self, or the reader of this commentary, may draw a triangle on a blackboard or on his table and claim that this object determined by three straight lines, having the sum of the three angles equal 180 degrees is a "triangle." How would we know that *any* triangle, small or large, we would draw on the blackboard will have the same property? We must know it through some sort of an intuition which is not related to our senses (since we will not spend our entire life checking the veracity of the above definition on each individual triangle we may draw). This intellectual (abstract, nonsensoral) intuition is born from the simultaneous perception of the finite, individual triangle(s) drawn on the blackboard, and that of the infinite number of triangles necessarily implied in the concept of "triangle." Intellectual intuition is thus associated with Co-incidenta oppositorum, the coincidence of the finite and the infinite. That Nishida was aware of this point we can infer from the fact that in a contribution from 1911 called "Gutoku Shinran," he wrote: "Just as in investigating the geometric properties of triangles, one small one on the page is enough . . ."[5]

At the end of his brief presentation of the Coincidenta oppositorum, Nishida concluded that "Hegel's ideas on infinity are not clear" and turned to Cantor's ideas about "the nature of the infinity." This move is perfectly justified: Cantor had indeed initiated the set theory precisely with the idea to clarify the mathematical meaning of infinity. Philosophers in the West were late to understand these new ideas and Cantor himself had great difficulty in convincing the German mathematical establishment of the soundness of his ideas; it was only at the very end of the century (more exactly at the first International Congress of Mathematicians held in Zurich in 1897) that his work on set theory was generally recognized. It was only around this time that a book entitled *L'infini mathematique* (Mathematical Infinity) published in France by L. Couturat made for the first time extensive use of Cantor's new ideas. In the following, I would like to say a few words which may help to clarify the mathematical argumentations Nishida makes in his lecture.

If we assume for the moment a very "loose" definition of a set, such as, for instance, a set is a collection of objects (books, for instance), numbers (*1,2, 3,4*) or letters (*a,b,c,d*), we can define their *power* (*Mächtigkeit* in Cantor's language) and thus establish a connection or equivalence between them. If we compare the above mentioned sets of numbers and letters, we may establish a one-to-one correspondence between the two sets; we will say that they have the same power or that they are equivalent. If now we compare the set, $S = \{1,2,3\}$ with $S' = \{1,2,3,4\}$, we may say that S is a subset of S' and consequently S has a power which is less than that of S' (we could call the power of

[5] NKZ I.407–409. For a study and translation, see Dennis Hirota, "Nishida's 'Gutoku Shinran'," in *Eastern Buddhist* 28, 2 (1995), pp. 231–244.

the set S, 3 and that of S', 4). The two sets discussed above are finite sets, that is, the number of elements they comprise is finite. When we go from finite to infinite sets, such as those used as examples by Nishida in his talk, or the set of the natural numbers, N = {1,2,3. . . . n, ...) the problem of the equivalence becomes a bit more complicated: a given set and one of its subsets may have the *same* power. For instance, M = {2,4,6. . . . 2n, ...}, which is the set of the even natural numbers, is obtained by multiplying by two each natural number in the set N above. This new set has the same power as N (because there will always be a one-to-one correspondence between the elements of the two sets, for that's how we built them!). But M is a subset of N, because all the numbers in M exist in N, while the opposite is not true. Therefore, in the case of infinite sets, a set and its subset may have the same power. This fact constitutes an indirect, but rigorous definition of infinity. That this is so, has been observed by both Bernard Bolzano (mathematician and philosopher) and Richard Dedekind (mathematician) independently of Cantor. (Cantor, however, went much further and extracted from the set theory many more far-reaching conclusions, relevant both for mathematics and philosophy.) That is what is meant by Nishida when he says that "in the infinite, the whole equals the part."

Infinite sets therefore helped Nishida to establish an identity between the "self-that-knows" and the "self-that-is-known." This state of identity, Nishida tells us, is that of *jikaku*. We are again reminded of Hegel's *Being*, the unified but undetermined totality in which "subjective" and "objective" are undifferentiated. *Jikaku* has sometimes been translated as "awareness," sometimes as "self-awakening" or "self-consciousness" or even "self-awareness." Thus, in the Introduction to *An Inquiry into the Good*, Abe Masao explains the standpoint of *jikaku* as follows: "Self-awakening" (or "self conscious-ness") is "an ontological and religious concept in which true reality awakens to itself and is awakened by us. In *jikaku* the subject and object of the awakening are one" (p. xxi). In an article on Nishida, Ueda Shizuteru writes: " 'Self-awareness' combines in itself the aspect of being 'the self-awareness of pure experience' and the aspect of being 'reflection on reflection.' . . . These two aspects completely interpenetrate each other."[6] Again, the problem has been discussed at length by many authors: I would only point out here that regardless how we render the meaning of "*jikaku*," the essential question is to clarify whether this is an ontological or a purely epistemological concept. Nishida's argumentation in the discussed text is epistemological. We *think* simultaneously the opposites. But then, after having defined the totality which

[6] Ueda Shizuteru, "Nishida's Thought," trans. Jan Van Bragt, in *Eastern Buddhist* 28, 1 (1995), pp. 29–47.

holds together the opposites as being the field of the judgements, Nishida singularizes it and materializes it into something which cannot be the object of consciousness. This something, called first "*tokoro*" then "*tōitsu*," seems for a moment to be ontological only to become a moment later epistemological, "the intuition of totality."

From that point on, Nishida switches to the discussion of intuition as a tool of knowledge, and one can anticipate that reference will be made to Bergson. Abe Masao (and others) have pointed out the effort Nishida made, in particular in his second work published shortly before the lecture under discussion here, to solidify his own standpoints in relation to the prevailing German Neo-Kantianism and Bergson's philosophy. The references to Poincaré are based mainly on the chapter of *Science et Methode* (Science and Method), published in 1908, which dealt with the role intuition played in mathematical knowledge. In the essay "Mathematical Invention" reproduced in this book, Poincaré explained how the rules of induction and all conventional logic break down when the scientist arrives at the formulation of a completely new hypothesis. An invention is intuited in its totality and it is impossible to explain it in logical terms. The things are "rather *felt* than explicitly stated" (my emphasis). It seems that this is what Nishida meant when he said: "When such intuitions arise . . . they are said to assume the form of emotions." God must be intuited in the same way; Nishida concluded his talk by saying at the end: "God or Buddha can never be the object of consciousness." And then he added, "We can experience God or Buddha through the intermediary of the emotions."

Small works, like the one translated here, may sometimes be as informative as long and elaborate books. In a lecture the author must present his ideas clearly. The public in front of him represents a fast feedback system. Also, a lecture is a rethinking and a reappraisal of the ideas expressed elsewhere by the author. It presents ideas and it raises questions. I shall not summarize; instead I will try to adopt this method of presenting brief texts and commenting upon them. This is therefore the first short text in a series in which we will try to follow mainly (but not exclusively), the use of mathematical constructs and scientific imagery in Nishida Kitarō's works.

Coincidentia Oppositorum and Love

Nishida Kitarō

COINCIDENTIA OPPOSITORUM is a term often encountered in the history of philosophy; it means the coincidence of opposites. I have chosen this theme [for today's lecture] for the following reason: Buddhism is a rigorous field of study that demands logic; at the same time it is a religion whose essence is love. I wish therefore to discuss the relationship between logical arguments on the one hand, and the love which is the essence of this religion familiar [to us], on the other. Logic is often portrayed as cold and aloof; still I believe that logic is linked at root to human emotions; hence I chose this topic.

Coincidentia oppositorum was a term used at the beginning of the modern era, that is, around the Renaissance, by Nicolaus Cusanus [1401–1464]. This notion originated with the Christian mystics for whom God presented an impenetrable mystery which could only be expressed in negative terms. This is quite similar to Buddhism's use of the character *fu* 不, or "not," to express reality. The mystics asserted that since God could not be said to be all-knowing and all-powerful, neither could God be said to exist or not to exist. To fully express this notion Cusanus coined the term "coincidentia oppositorum."

Generally, God is thought of as being infinite, with the opposition of God to the world being the opposition of the infinite to the finite. But even though God is infinite, this is not an infiniteness that denies the finite. Otherwise, how could the infiniteness of God give birth to the world, and how would it be possible for God's infiniteness to be linked

with the finite? God's infiniteness is not one that denies the finite, but an infiniteness which brings the finite and the infinite to coincide, that is, coincidentia oppositorum. God brings all opposites to coincide; God is the agent which brings all things that are logically contradictory into coincidence. It was thought, therefore, that God's nature expressed itself by unifying incompatible elements.

This kind of thinking can also be found in [expressions of] Buddhism's logical structure as well. It is when our usual mode of thinking has played itself out and we are at our wits end, that we stand on the threshold of this kind of thinking. Cusanus explained this concept in mathematical terms: a single line, for instance, is infinite, as is any part of it. Seen from the standpoint of the whole the part ought to be finite, but he postulates that the infinite is contained within the part.

While his formulation of the infinite may no longer be wholly tenable in light of today's mathematics, I believe the spirit of his [argument] contains an element of truth. At any rate, the notion of coincidentia oppositorum has [since] made deep inroads into philosophy.

After Cusanus, Giordano Bruno [1548–1600] adopted the notion into the groundwork of his philosophy. Jacob Boehme [1575–1624] also incorporated this notion of the coinciding of contradictory events into the foundations of the universe. In later generations we find that F. W. J. Schelling's [1775–1854] thought arrives at Cusanus's coincidentia oppositorum via Bruno. Yet another thinker who articulately expressed the relation of the finite and the infinite was G. W. F. Hegel [1770–1831].[1] Hegel divided infinity into two types: *schlechte Unendlichkeit,* or "bad infinity," and *das Unendliche,* or "true infinity." True infinity is the coincidence of the finite and the infinite, that is, coincidentia oppositorum. Whereas [true infinity] is independent and freely imparts itself, bad infinity is an infinite that is relative to the finite. What is implied thus in the concept of bad infinity is that the world of conventional truth must be abandoned, as it is a realm of evil,

[1] Hegel would have been familiar to the members of this particular audience through the works of religious philosopher Kiyozawa Manshi (1863–1903), the founder of the school, who frequently discusses the notion of Infinite and finite. We may assume that Nishida was aware of Kiyozawa's writings which had appeared in a three-volume Collected Works between 1912–1915. There is also evidence that Nishida examined one of Kiyozawa's original manuscripts firsthand at an earlier date; see his diary entry for 16 March 1914 (Taishō 3) in NKZ 17:335.

and that asceticism must be instituted to rid the world of evil; briefly, this amounts to a denial of the sphere of everyday reality. In contrast, true infinity is what abides in this realm of desires and yet is not defiled by it.[2] Its stature is that of the great secret whose truth is open to all. Hegel thus characterized true infinity as *endlich* and *endlos* at the same time. His ideas on infinity, however, are not clear. In our age, the person who clarified [the nature of infinity] was the mathematician Georg Cantor [1845–1918].

In his formulation, in the infinite the whole equals the part. For instance, in the series:

(A)   1   2   3   4   5 . . . . . infinity
(B)   2   3   4   5   6 . . . . . infinity
(C)   3   4   5   6   7 . . . . . infinity

In this case, both B and C are part of A. That is, B is one [unit] less than A, and C is two [units] less. But A, B and C all correspond to one another, that is, the whole is equal to the part.
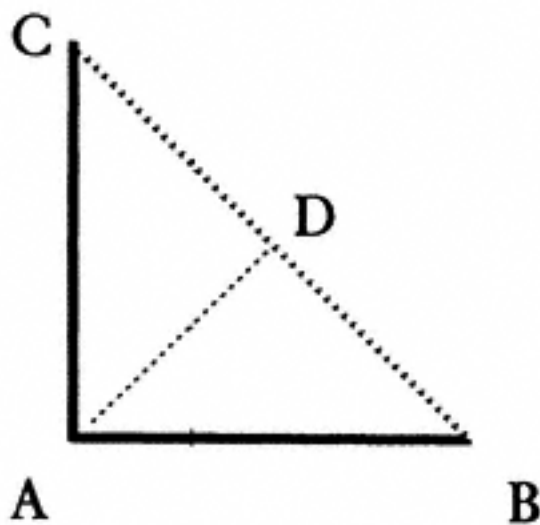
This concept has found application in differential and integral calculus, and even in geometry. If the two lines AB and AC of the figure are infinite, for instance, then the area of BAC is infinite. Next, when we draw the line AD, the area of BAD is again infinite. The area BAD, however, is clearly a part of the area BAC. However, as both of them are infinite, the part and the whole are equal in area. This clarifies Cusanus's idea to a further degree.

It is possible to experience this in the consciousness of self. The self knows the self. The self-that-knows is the same as the self-that-is-known. For instance, when one says "I know the cup," I am more than the cup, but when one says "I know myself," the self-that-knows and

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[2] This Buddhist characterization of true Infinity as being undefiled by this world would have struck a familiar chord with the audience.

the self-that-is-known are one, hence the part and the whole are identical; this is true infinity, or experientially speaking, "awareness" (*jikaku*).

Coincidentia oppositorum was originally used as a term in religion, but it presently appears in mathematics and even in the "awareness" of reality. In fact, I would contend that coincidentia oppositorum is present at the ground of all [forms] of consciousness. Conceptual consciousness, the simplest example of which is judgment, takes the form A is B. To explain how the judgment A is B is arrived at, logic usually says this is by the linking of subject and predicate; but in fact, to arrive at the judgment A is B a unifying whole has to be assumed. Hegel, while referring to judgment, *urteilen,*[3] says that judgment is arrived at by carving out the part from the whole. Wilhelm Wundt [1832–1920] says that a judgment like, "The horse is running," is divided-off from the direct perception the "running horse," by opposing the subject to the predicate. Therefore, at the ground of establishing consciousness, there has to be a unifying whole. For instance, when we say "black is not white," there is a totality wherein white and black are being compared that gives birth to this judgment. And this totality is neither white nor black; yet it must have the potential to become white and to become black. This place (*tokoro*) that has the potential to be the opposite and to make the two poles coincide into one is Cusanus's coincidentia oppositorum. It would seem that the totality should be the object of consciousness, but this is not the case. Consciousness is judgment. For judgment to take place it is necessary to have a totality (*tōitsu*) unifying subject and predicate. Thus the totality cannot be expressed as judgment. It can only retreat into infinity. And so in establishing consciousness, there is something that cannot become consciousness. This ["something"] is the intuition of totality. This is the reason it cannot serve as the object of logical judgment. When we acquire a new consciousness, we acquire this so-called intuition. This is the case even ordinarily, but it is especially so when a person makes a great discovery: that is, rather than following the trail of logical associations, first the totality is intuited and then it is reconstructed logically. When the famous Frenchman H. J. Poincaré [1854–1912] made a dis-

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[3] The German word *urteilen*, "to judge," comes from *Ur*, or "first," and *Teil*, or "part."

covery related to mathematical functions, he said it happened when he no longer rode stagecoaches. As in Poincaré's case, all discoveries arise when one arrives at a new unifying whole. When such intuitions arise, with regard to the form they take, they may be said to assume the form of emotions; and then they are reconstructed logically. Henri Bergson [1859–1941] believes that when our logical mind is fixed in one pattern, it rejects the incursion of other new patterns. The expansion of new consciousness or new life is guided by something that is like a mist at the bottom of our life.[4] The most remarkable instance of this is genius.

I will now leave the subject of coincidentia oppositorum as the ground of consciousness, and turn my attention to how it is linked to love. For us, to truly love means bringing the contradiction of self and other to coincide. In other words, to love the other is to love our self. It is in the essence of love defined in such a way that coincidentia oppositorum expresses itself in its purest form. This coincidentia oppositorum is still expressed negatively in terms of logic, but is being apprehended positively in terms of love. At first all forms of consciousness are independent of one another and are incompatible. By consolidating them into a unifying whole, in the way of coincidentia oppositorum, we create the feeling of love. Love is the result of bringing into the unity of coincidence the opposition of self and other, the contradiction arising from incompatibility of benefit and harm.

Such a love cannot be explained logically, but what we call in logical terms "coincidentia oppositorum" takes the form of love on the stage of everyday life becoming thus the basis of all things. There are of course major shortcomings in logic when we put forth an explanation of this kind [to account] for the process which links consciousness with love, but I will say no more for the time being.

When we think of the problem in this way, I think it possible to say that the God or Buddha that religion speaks of is, in essence, love. At the extremity of consciousness is the persona, a persona that is already [standing in] coincidentia oppositorum, but the unifying agent of coincidentia oppositorum is God or Buddha, love being the essence of God or Buddha. And so while God or Buddha can never be the object of

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[4] Nishida used Bergson's *Creative Evolution* for his philosophy seminar at Kyoto University for several years around this time. We may assume that it was also a focus of his classes at Ōtani University, where he held a lectureship for a number of years until 1919.

consciousness, we can experience God or Buddha via the appeal of emotions that brings us into unity with God or Buddha. For this reason, to know God consciously is, as the medieval negative theologians asserted, impossible. However, coincidentia oppositorum forms the foundation for all human activity, and we encounter its culmination in the form of love. Thus, an extremely logical concept turns out to be an extremely intimate fact of our real and everyday life. Is it not true that this meaning permeated Buddhism from such systems as the Hua-yen (Avatamsaka) to the Jōdo Shinshū?

TRANSLATED BY W. S. YOKOYAMA