

The Logic of Absolute Nothingness

As Expounded by Nishida Kitarō

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THIS YEAR MARKS the fiftieth anniversary of the death of Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945), the foremost philosopher of contemporary Japan, who established a unique philosophical system through East-West encounter. Deeply rooted in the traditional Oriental way of thinking and yet widely read in the Western philosophical systems, Nishida opened up a new spiritual horizon to work out a distinctive philosophical logic called the logic of Absolute Nothingness or the logic of place (*basho*).

In the following, we will discuss why his logic is called the logic of Absolute Nothingness and what is meant by the logic of place. In this regard, special attention will be placed on the affinity and disparity between Hegel's philosophy of absolute Idea (*Idee*) and Nishida's philosophy of Absolute Nothingness.

I

From the beginning of his philosophical career, Nishida was concerned with the problem of "true Reality" and the systematic treatment of various philosophical issues on that basis. In his writings we see that Nishida persistently sought Reality in the direction of consciousness, first taking pure experience, then self-awakening, *Tathandlung*, absolutely free will, and intuition to be Reality. He progressively deepens

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his thought by first rejecting intellectualism for voluntarism, and then by shifting from voluntarism to intuitionism. The standpoint in which the knower and the known become one emerges through this development. It is the standpoint of knowing without a knower and seeing without a seer—in other words, the standpoint of consciousness that is truly the subject, not the object, of the consciousness. To remove the threat of subjectivism otherwise inescapable in such a standpoint and lay a logical foundation for the Reality found therein, Nishida takes up Aristotle's *hypokeimenon* (substratum or substance), since for Aristotle Reality is pursued not in the direction of consciousness but in the direction of objects. Defining Substance as "the subject that cannot become predicate," Aristotle seeks true Reality and the formation of judgement in the direction of the grammatical subject, i.e., in the direction of objects in the sense that the subject of a proposition is an object of thought. Since Aristotle's logic concerns itself with the grammatical or logical subject, it is a kind of objective logic, the logic of objective thinking. Nishida makes use of Aristotle's *hypokeimenon* and his notion of the individual (i.e., the grammatical subject) as mediating factors, but goes beyond them as well.

Nishida was convinced that in order for the individual as the grammatical subject (Substance) to be known, there must exist that which encompasses it, the place in which it lies, and that this place must be sought in the plane of the "transcendent predicate," not in the direction of the logical subject. In Nishida's philosophy, which thus probes the structure of judgement in terms of Aristotle's logic of grammatical subject, the foundation of judgement is found in universals rather than in individuals, in the direction of the predicate rather than in that of the grammatical subject. The direction of the predicate is the direction of consciousness, and the plane of the transcendent predicate which subsumes the individual as grammatical subject is "place" or "Nothingness" as the field of consciousness. By grasping *the plane of consciousness as the plane of predicates* through the mediation of Aristotle's *hypokeimenon*, Nishida gives a logical foundation to immediate and direct consciousness, to seeing without a seer, which otherwise cannot escape subjectivism and mysticism. In the process, he also lays a logical foundation for Reality.

II

Nishida is not satisfied with Aristotle's view of individuals, however. Aristotle's individual is a seen individual, not an acting one. If an individual is moved by an unmoved prime Mover, it must be said not to change or act by itself. To Nishida, an individual is always the acting or actor that acts by itself. Moreover, Nishida considers Aristotle's examination of *single* individuals to be insufficient. Because an individual can be an individual only in opposition to other individuals, Nishida examines the relationship between one individual and another. (This is a natural result of his understanding of an individual as an actor.) He thus understands this relationship between individuals as a process of dynamic inter-action. His analysis includes the factors of time and space, in that the spatial and temporal world is inseparable from the individual.

Nishida spoke of a subsumptive judgement as "a particular lying in the place of a universal." He viewed a particular as "that which lies within" a universal, and a universal as the "place within which the particular lies." "That which lies within" expresses the subject dimension of the judgement while "place" expresses the predicative dimension of the judgement. The predicative dimension is consciousness: the subjective dimension is that towards which consciousness is directed. As the predicative dimension (place) grows more encompassing or subsumptive, consciousness grasps more and more fully the dimension of the subject.

III

According to Hegel, a concrete Universal, unlike an abstract universal, contains a principle of individualization through which it develops distinctions within itself while maintaining self-identity.

This self-differentiation is completely self-determined. To Nishida, if a judgement is to be established, there must be something single and undifferentiated at its base. In other words, something intuitive precedes judgement.

Hegel views the ultimate concrete universal as an Idea (*Idee*), and judgement (*Urteil*) as a primordial division (*Ur-teilen*). Nishida's con-

crete universal roughly corresponds to Hegel's, although he describes it quite differently. To both thinkers, a concrete universal is not determined from the outside by something else. As something undifferentiated, it forms itself from within. Nishida thought that judgement is based on this sort of intuitive concrete universal, and it is from this perspective that he sets forth his notions of "place" and "that which lies within."

Aristotle's individual is "the subject that cannot become a predicate," i.e., the "transcendent subject" beyond predication, the ultimate subject. Beyond all conceptualization, it is true Substance. Such an individual, however, is trans-rational in that it cannot be subsumed by a conceptual universal and can be known only by intuition. And yet Aristotle also held that a Substance must be definable. For individuals to be known, there must be a universal which can encompass them. But can the Hegelian concrete universal truly subsume the Aristotelian individual? This problem can be solved only if we shift from the standpoint of the abstract universal to the standpoint of the concrete universal.

Hegel conceives of the ultimate concrete universal as absolute "Idea" which develops dialectically *an sich* (in itself), *für sich* (for itself), and *an und für sich* (in and for itself). This dialectical logic includes negative mediation and the sublation-preservation (*aufheben*) of contradiction. The Idea goes outside itself while developing dialectically: it "self externalizes" itself (*selbstentäusserung*). It does not, however, merely leave itself: in going outside itself through self-negation it simultaneously returns to its own interior, and in this way it never loses its self-identity. In this self-determination, it encompasses everything within itself.

Can this concrete universal totally subsume the Aristotelian individual, "the subject that cannot become a predicate," the Substance that defies all predication and conceptualization? Hegel points the concrete universal as that which is most universal and general. In terms of the form of judgement, it is the last predicate, the most subsumptive predicate which encompasses everything. Even if it is deemed the most subsumptive final predicate, it is never the most generic concept, for clearly it differs from an abstract universal. It is dialectical, not analytical; it includes self-negation within itself. Nevertheless, when this concrete universal is defined as "Idea," can it truly subsume a particular *in its*

individuality? Can this universal *completely* subsume an individual without marring its uniqueness and trans-rational concreteness?

IV

However dialectical and self-negating Hegel's concrete universal might be, insofar as it is "Idea" (*Idee*), the individual's unique singularity is inevitably universalized, and its transrational concreteness rationalized. For this reason, his philosophy has been attacked as being panlogistic. Due to this panlogistic character, Hegel's concrete universal cannot encompass Aristotle's individual in its transrational concreteness.

Nishida's philosophy, which attempts to free itself from all subjectivism by grappling with Aristotle's individual, harbors a critique of Hegelian philosophy from its own point of view. Nishida argues that when the concrete universal is the idea, even though it is dialectical, it is nevertheless *something* called "*absoluter Geist*" that rationalizes the individual's trans-rationality. And insofar as it is *something*, there must be a "place" in which the absolute idea itself lies. This does not mean that Hegel's Idea is *something* in the ordinary sense, for it includes self-negation within itself. But, since it is not Absolute Nothingness but *absoluter Geist*, strictly speaking, it is still not completely free from "somethingness." However universal and all-inclusive the Idea may be, insofar as it is not pure "place" but is still *something*, i.e., that which lies within, we must ask about its "place." Hegel's Idea, therefore, is not the final transcendent predicate and hence not the ultimate concrete universal.

To Hegel, the Idea is the ultimate concrete universal which subsumes everything in its self-unfolding. *In one sense* we may say that Hegel's Idea is the place in which all things lie, and hence the most subsumptive place. Insofar as this place in which all things lie is nothing other than the "Idea" or "*absoluter Geist*," but not yet "absolute nothingness," we must still ask about the *place* in which *that Idea itself* lies. Since the ultimate Idea is the most subsumptive place in which all things exist, the place in which this Idea lies cannot be a substantial place. Rather, it must be the place of *no-thingness*. As discussed above, however, the Idea itself is not a mere something (*etwas*); as the concrete universal with a dialectical character, it includes the principle of self-negation

within itself and therefore has a fundamental character of unobjectifiable no-thingness. Accordingly, the place in which *this Idea* lies cannot be the place of relative nothingness, i.e., "nothingness" as a counter-concept to "somethingness." Rather, it must be *Absolute Nothingness*, which is completely beyond the duality of somethingness and nothingness, and encompasses even Hegel's Idea with its character of nothingness. This ultimate place which is Absolute Nothingness but not the Idea, is the final concrete universal. We no longer need to, nor are able to inquire into the existence of place in which Absolute Nothingness lies, for Absolute Nothingness is in no sense "something" at all or "that which lies within," but is instead "the place in which everything, positive and negative, lies." Absolute Nothingness itself is place: nothing else can be called the true place.

V

Absolute Nothingness, not Hegel's Idea, is the ultimate concrete universal. We can demonstrate this by asking whether Hegel's Idea is the last predicate. In terms of the form of judgement, Hegel's Idea, as that which subsumes everything within itself, is the ultimate predicate. On the other hand, the ultimate subject, i.e., Aristotle's individual, is the subject that can never become predicate, the "transcendent subject" which is beyond ordinary subject-predicate judgement. Likewise, according to Nishida, the ultimate predicate in the *true* sense must be *the predicate that can never become subject*. Hegel's Idea is not the ultimate predicate in this sense, for it can be the object of a judgement (i.e., a grammatical subject in statements asserting that the Idea is such and such.) Since it is thus objectifiable, the Idea cannot be regarded as completely beyond subject-predicate judgement as such. The true ultimate predicate, that is, the predicate that is never a grammatical subject, cannot be subsumed by any superordinate predicate, and hence can never be determined or defined in any way. It is completely undeterminable and undefinable. It is nothingness, and cannot even be determined as the "Idea" or "God." Absolute Nothingness is determined neither as nothingness nor as being. (That is, we cannot say that Absolute Nothingness is such and such.) Understood in this sense, we can conceive of Absolute Nothingness as the true final predicate.

With this notion of Absolute Nothingness, Nishida transcends the

predicative dimension of judgement and stands upon the place of the "transcendent predicate," i.e., upon the place of Absolute Nothingness in contrast to the "transcendent subject" or individual which transcends the dimension of the grammatical subject. Both the direction of the grammatical subject and the direction of the grammatical predicate are transcended, and the one unique individual as "transcendent subject" is subsumed by Absolute Nothingness as the "transcendent predicate." Nishida fully agrees with Aristotle's definition of the individual subject as that which can never become the predicate. But he does not stop at this notion and instead develops the idea of "the predicate that can never become the subject" as the 'place' wherein the singular individual exists. The idea of the "transcendent subject" as well as that of the "transcendent predicate" are thoroughly radicalized. Both the transcendent subject and transcendent predicate can be transcendent with respect to each other within the nonabiding place of Absolute Nothingness. Dual transcendence of the subject with respect to the predicate and of the predicate with respect to the subject is established through the boundless openness or the uncircumscribable emptiness of Absolute Nothingness. This dual transcendence is characteristic of the subsumption of interactive individuals by Absolute Nothingness. This is not a problem of mere method, but a problem of philosophical principle. We herein *make immediate contact* with the individual for the first time. That is, through the realization of Absolute Nothingness, the individual is fully known by us in its concrete immediacy without any conceptualization. Expressed in Nishida's terms, the individual is realized as "that which lies within" Absolute Nothingness (i.e., it rests in Absolute Nothingness, its place), and in Absolute Nothingness determines itself without being determined from the outside by any other thing. This self-determination of the individual just as it is, is the self-determination of "place" or Absolute Nothingness and the self-determination of the world.

VI

This is the logic of Absolute Nothingness which can be called the logic of place in Nishida's philosophy. The basis of this logic of place is Nishida's notion that the individual is the self-determination of the universal (place or Absolute Nothingness) and as such, transcends

generic concepts. The logic of place is a predicative logic in the radical sense, not a logic of the grammatical subject. Hence it stands in contrast to all forms of traditional Western "objective logic" which, strictly speaking, never fully transcend the subject-predicate structure. It is not a logic about the act of seeing or of knowing nor is it a logic about that which is seen and known objectively in terms of the grammatical subject; rather, it is a logic of "place," which is prior to, and the source of, both seeing and knowing and that which is seen and known. It is a Subjective or existential logic prior to the opposition of subject and object, a logic of totally unobjectifiable self-awakening. In comparison with the logic of place, which is Absolute Nothingness, Aristotle's logic of the grammatical subject, Kant's highly subjectified transcendental logic, and Hegel's dialectical logic are all logics of objective consciousness and in this regard do not escape objective thinking. Consequently, they fall short of the logic of truly existential self-awakening.

The logic of place, however, neither confronts objective logic nor excludes it. Although we term it predicative logic, this does not signify logic without a subject. As its own self-determination, the logic of place grasps all grammatical subjects without marring their uniqueness. Place reflects all individuals and their mutually determining way-of-being within itself and realizes them as its own self-determination. In this regard, the logic of place is the logic of the self-establishment of the objective world and includes objective logic as a necessary factor or moment. The logic of place is not the form of the thinking of the subjective self. Rather, it is the form of the self-expression of true Reality in and through Absolute Nothingness. Since Nishida's philosophy of place is a logic of thoroughgoing subjective and existential self-realization, it is at the same time the logic of the establishment of the objective world.