Overcoming the dead ends of modernity 
(but not reversing it into the dead ends of ethnocentrism)
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1. Overcoming, or reversing ?
In the history of ideas, the theme of an « overcoming of modernity » (kindai no chôkoku) is specifically attached to the Kyoto school (Kyôto gakuha), a philosophical trend, of which the main figure was Kitaro Nishida (Nishida Kitarô, 1870-1945) and which was focussed on the University of Kyoto, where Nishida and his main disciples have been teaching. It is also the title of a symposium which was held in July 1942, and in which several of Nishida's disciples participated. This trend of ideas was historically connected with nationalism and war. For this reason, the expression « overcoming modernity » was so to say tabooed after 1945, and even Nishida's philosophy as a whole, which had had an emblematic role in pre-war Japan, did not come again to the fore until the eighties. This is no coincidence, since Japan, in the eighties, having achieved its hundred-year-old goal of catching up with the West, was overtly looking again for other paradigms than those it had borrowed from it. Though the words could not be the same as in 1942, and though, notably so since the end of the sixties, modernity was questioned in the West itself, overcoming Western modernity was in fact the gist of the so-called postmodern trend in Japan, especially under the name of the search for a « new paradigm ». And this is the profound reason why Nishidian studies are presently booming in Japan, while also thriving in the world. That is, Nishida's thought has much to do with Japanese identity.

What I intend to argue here is the reasons why it can be so ; and, further, that this thought puts into light the grounds of cultural identity, which, on the contrary, have been, and are more and more, disrupted and erased by modernity. In this sense, « Nishida-philosophy » (Nishida tetsugaku), especially in one of its main features, the « logic of place » (basho no ronri), shows us the way beyond some of modernity's most conspicuous dead ends.

On the other hand, I will also argue that Nishida-philosophy as such is not an overcoming, but a reversal of modernity, leading, in particular, not to the dialogue of civilizations but to the closure of cultural worlds upon themselves.

As a synthesis of these two arguments, I intend to show that, for overcoming the dead ends of modernity, we must combine two types of logics, that of the identity of the subject, which we owe to Aristotle and which is an essential principle of modernity, and the logic of place as advocated by Nishida.

1 In what follows, I shall be referring as NKZ to Nishida's complete works Nishida Kitarô zenshû, Tokyo : Iwanami, 1966.
2 On this symposium, see for example HIROMATSU Wataru, 'Kindai no chôkoku' ron. Shôwa shisôshi he no ichi shiakku, Tokyo : Kodansha, 1989.
3 For an international discussion of this connection, see James W. HEISIG and John C. MARALDO, eds. Rude Awakenings : Zen, the Kyoto School, and the Question of Nationalism, Honolulu : University of Hawaii Press, 1994.
4 Although Nishida's disciples kept on publishing after their master's death, it can be said that Nishida's revival dates back only to the publication of NAKAMURA Yûjirô's Nishida Kitarô, Tokyo : Iwanami, 1983.
2. Absolutizing worldhood...

Nishida also called his logic of place a « logic of the predicate » (jutsugo no ronri), since it is a logic centring on the identity of the predicate instead of that of the subject, as in Aristotelian logic, the latter being also known as simply the principle of identity (A is not non-A).¹

Nishida's basic idea is that the predicate (what is said about something, that is, about a subject) subsumes or « engulfs » (botsunyû suru) the subject which it predicates. For example, when we say « Nishida is Japanese », the subject « Nishida » is subsumed into the predicate « is Japanese ». In other words, Nishida belongs to the category or « place » of « being Japanese », out of which there would be no Nishida.

Aristotle considered that the predicate does not really exist, since a general category (e.g. « man ») is not substantial, contrary to the particular being (e.g. « Socrates ») which belongs to it.² For Nishida, more radically, being (u) is on the side of the subject, whereas the predicate is the negation of it; it is non-being (mu). As a negation of being, the predicate is for Nishida « relative non-being » (sôtai mu). Yet, it is itself subsumed into a wider predicate, and so on. At the end of this subsumptive chain, there is « absolute non-being » (zettai mu); which is the negation of non-being by itself. In this way, it becomes the source of being, as non-non-being.

On logical grounds, this is impossible : the negation of being by non-being can never turn into the negation of non-being by itself. In other words, the predicate can never totally subsume the subject. As we shall see later, here lies the basic reason why Nishida-philosophy as such leads to a dead end. Yet Nishida's argument is much wider than a mere set of logical considerations. His most important achievement is to have shown that worldhood (sekaisei) works as a logic of the predicate. Though he does so on very complex grounds, the gist of the question can be exposed in simple terms. When we say « Nishida is Japanese », it means that, by predicating the subject « Nishida » into the predicate « being Japanese », we take Nishida as a Japanese. This taking-as is the essence of predicativity. It implies not only words, but all the ways we have to apprehend reality; that is, our senses (we feel something as a certain thing), consciousness (we figure it as), language (we say it as) and acts (we do it as). In a word, it implies our existence. The general combination of all such taking-as is nothing else than our world. That is, the world is a predicate, since to predicate is basically to take something as such or such a thing.

Taking as is necessarily relative to that which is taken as, on the one hand, and to that which takes as, on the other hand. This entails that a world is necessarily relative. For example, taking the sun as a star implies a certain world, while taking it as a goddess implies another world. The former is that of modernity, the latter is that of Japanese mythology (among others). Now, in Nishida-philosophy, the world becomes an absolute, since, as a predicate, it amounts to the negation of being, which itself issues from absolute non-being:

It is precisely because the world comprises this self-negation (jiko hitei) that it exists by itself (sore jishin ni yotte ari), that it moves by itself, and that one can consider it as absolute existence (zettaiteki jitsuzai).³

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¹ Nishida exposed his logic of place mainly in Basho (1926) and in Bashoteki ronri to shûkyôteki sekaikan (1945), respectively collected in vol. IV and XI of NKZ. For an international appraisal of this question, see Augustin BERQUE and Philippe NYS, eds., Logique du lieu et œuvre humaine, Brussels : Ousia, 1997 and Augustin BERQUE, ed., Logique du lieu et dépassement de la modernité, 2 vols., Brussels : Ousia, 2000. The reason why Nishida equated the predicate to a place is quite evident. For example, when I say « Socrates is a man », the predicate « being a man » is the « place » in which Socrates exists as such. In fact, Nishida's basho cannot be reduced to the predicate in strictly logical terms; it is rather the conditions which make possible predicication itself; that is, the world of our existence. But the decisive fact is that Nishida equates it to the predicate.

² On this point, see Robert BLANCHÉ and Jacques DUBUCS, La Logique et son histoire, Paris : Armand Colin, 1996 (1970), p. 35-36. This means that what really exists is Socrates (or any other individual man), whereas « man » is only a general term for qualifying these real beings.

³ NKZ, XI, 457.
3. ...is to absolutize one's world

In his political writings, Nishida equated the Japanese imperial system to the very core of his conception of worldhood; that is, to a pure predicate=pure place=absolute non-being. It is for this reason that his philosophy was linked with nationalism, since it led him to think that the Japanese emperor might become the « place » of all nations on Earth. As he wrote such things at a time when, starting with Japan's neighbours, the imperial army was precisely « placing » or « engulfing » other nations in such a predicate, it is no wonder that Nishida-philosophy was, after 1945, considered as the philosophy of Japanese imperialism. It is no wonder, either, that the upholders of Nishida-philosophy have been, and still are, denying that there is a link between the logic of place and Nishida's political stance, considering the latter at best as an accident - that is, disconnected from the gist of his philosophy -; if not itself denied - that is, what Nishida wrote about history, the Emperor and « the world war for negating the world war (sekai sensô wo hitei suru tame no sekai sensô) » does not mean what it seems to.

I personally consider that there is an essential coherence between Nishida's political stance and the logic of place. This is because this logic necessarily implies one's existence within one's own world. In such terms, the world cannot become a universal object (as it is in modern dualism). It necessarily is that particular world one belongs to; which was, in Nishida's case, Japan in the late Meiji, Taishô and early Shôwa eras, when the imperial ideology was rampant and led to the war, as was precisely shown by the argument of the 1942 symposium on Overcoming modernity.

This link is quite explicitly exposed by Nishida himself when he writes for example the following:

The world (...) this does not mean a world opposed to our selves (ware ware no jiko). It is nothing else than that which wants to express (arawasô to suru) absolutely located being (zettai no bashoteki u), and for that reason one can say that it is the absolute (zettaisha).

Now, who is that « we » (ware ware) whose world is thus absolutized? History (e.g. Nishida's own case) and anthropology, not Nishida-philosophy, give us the answer: it is that community one belongs to. This means that the logic of place is the logic of ethnocentrism. It is so because it forgets that a human world is necessarily relative. It absolutizes relativity, but not relativity as such: what it absolutizes is a certain human worldview, which in fact is relative. It is this logic which led Nishida-philosophy to consider the Japanese imperial institution (tennôsei) as an absolute basho, whereas it was only a certain historical figure.

It is that same logic which has led, in human history, each nation to consider itself as the nation amidst (if not above) all other nations, or even as the only human beings; e.g. « the Inuit » or « the Ainu », which, in Inuit or Ainu language, means nothing else than « the Humans », as if not to be an Inuit or an Ainu was to belong to another predicate than « being human ». And it is that same logic which, before Copernicus, « placed » the human world at the centre of the universe.

As these examples show, such an absolutization of the relative is indeed the logic of worldhood as a predicate. In that sense, Nishida was right, and his philosophy has much to teach us about our present world; but he was decisively wrong in considering that there is nothing beyond worldhood, and thus that it is an absolute.

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8 NKZ, XI, 439.
9 NKZ, XI, 403.
4. Modernity as a negation of existence

Nishida conceived of his logic of place as more encompassing than that of the identity of the subject. The latter works at the core of modernity, because it has brought forth modern dualism. It amounts indeed to saying that a thing is what it is, regardless of any point of view about that thing. It is precisely that logic which made possible the emergence of the modern notion of object as universal, irrespective of any subjective consideration. It amounts to abstracting that object from the concrete relationships in which it is set within a certain world. In that sense, the Aristotelian logic of identity is essentially alien to worldhood. It is indeed the opposite of Nishida's logic of place.

Aristotle's conception of identity is closely linked with his conception of place (*topos*), which he defines as « the immobile immediate limit of the envelope (to tou periechontos peras akinêton prôton) » of a thing. This implies both that the identity of the thing (which is mobile) can be disconnected from that of its place (which is immobile), and that the identity of the thing does not extend beyond that of its place (because if it did, that would be another place and another thing). A is not non-A. This has nothing to do with Nishida's conception of place (*basho*), which implies what he calls « absolutely contradictory self identity (zettai mujunteki jiko dôitsu) »; that is, A is non-A.

That A is non-A is indeed the logic of the predicate. For example, when I say « This (subject) is a pen (predicate) », the word « pen », which predicates the thing « pen », is not that thing; its identity is not the same. If it was the same, the word « pen » could write just like a pen does; but it does not.

This means that there is an essential difference between the subject and the predicate. That is, the subject is a certain being, whereas the predicate is not, as both Aristotle and Nishida have recognized. Yet, whereas Nishida philosophy absolutized the subsumption of the former into the latter, what modernity did, after Descartes (on ontological grounds) and the establishment of the Galilean-Newtonian modern scientific paradigm, was to establish an absolute distinction between the two terms. That is, in the modern dualistic worldview, things have become pure objects, absolutely abstracted from the subjectiveness of human representations. In other words, in modernity, the world has ceased being a world, for becoming an objective universe; because it has ceased implying our existence.

This phenomenon is what Heidegger has called « Deworld(l)ization (Entweltlichung) ». Like Nishida, Heidegger endeavoured to show that reality is not such an abstraction. Since we do exist, reality concretely implies our existence. This concreteness cannot be grasped by modern dualism, whose basic move is to analyse (disconnect) its components into discrete elements; first of all to disconnect the existence of things from our own existence. In this sense, modern universality is not really universal, since its objects cannot comprise the subjectiveness of human existence, and since - reciprocally - it abstracts the individual self from the existence of the world. It cannot put together its two theoretical poles, pure individual objectiveness on the one hand, pure individual subjectiveness on the other hand. This is the essence of modernity, and by the same token it also is its dead end.

In practical terms, this essence of modernity tends to disrupt that which makes human existence possible. It leads to an inhuman world, juxtaposing pure systems of objects on the one hand, pure individual egoism on the other hand. Such a world is clearly unsustainable, be it on ethical or on ecological grounds. Notwithstanding all sorts of practical reforms, what we have basically to overcome is its overall logic, which is that of the identity of the subject.

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10 *Phusika*, IV, 212 a 20.
5. Beyond subject and predicate
As we have seen, Nishida-philosophy showed the way out of the empire of this logic, but it fell into the error of absolutizing its opposite. In that sense, this philosophy does not overcome modernity; it only capsizes it into its reverse. What we have to do is to go beyond such an alternative. We have to combine the logic of the subject and that of the predicate into a higher synthesis.

The way toward such an overcoming can be shown in two complementary ways. On the one hand, by relating to each other Nishida's and Heidegger's respective conceptions of worldliness; on the other hand, by relating them with anthropology and cognitive science.

Though Heidegger never explicitly acknowledged an influence of Japanese philosophy on his own thought, it is probable that such an inspiration there was to some degree\(^{11}\). Be it as it may, what Heidegger writes in sibylline terms about what he calls a « fight (\textit{Streit}) » between world and earth\(^{12}\) can be clarified if one interprets it as the contradictory and yet necessary relationship between subject and predicate.

For equating Heidegger's « world (\textit{Welt}) » with a predicate, we only have to remind how Nishida does so with his « history-world (\textit{rekishi sekai}) ». But what about Heidegger's « earth (\textit{Erde}) » ? Here we have to remind how Western thought conceived of being as a substance. The Latin etymology of this term (\textit{substantia}) means « that which stands (\textit{stare}) beneath (\textit{sub}) ». It is the same image which led Aristotle to conceive of the subject as \textit{hupokeimenon}, which originally means about the same as \textit{substantia} : « that which lies (\textit{keimai}) beneath (\textit{hupo}) ». And indeed, Aristotle conceives of the subject as a substantial being (\textit{ousia}).

Now, as we have seen, in Nishida-philosophy, the predicate is non-being, and absolute non-being is the ultimate source of being itself. In the Heideggerian figure of a \textit{Streit} between world and earth, that would imply that the world (as the predicate) is the ultimate source of the earth (as the subject); but Heidegger's view is completely different. For him, though the world is necessary to the opening of the earth as an earth, the earth retires into itself in that very movement of aperture. In other words, the subject cannot be subsumed into the predicate, and the substance of things cannot be reduced to the terms in which we apprehend them: it is the very base (the earth) which founds this predication itself, while this base surges into its being such only through predication.

We have to introduce here another figure for understanding this relation between the earth and the world. This figure can be found in the last words of Plato's \textit{Timaios}, which ends as follows: « the world is born : its is the sky, which is one and alone in its kind (\textit{ho kosmos… gegonen heis ouranos hode monogenês ōn}) ». Indeed, in Greek, \textit{kosmos} had both the meaning of « world », as the general order of things, and that of « sky », as a synonym of \textit{ouranos}.

Heidegger's abstruse figure of the \textit{Streit} can be clarified if one reminds that, for him, worldliness implies « horizontality (\textit{Horizontalität}) ». Now, the horizon is nothing else than what separates the earth from the sky. It is the very place where the \textit{Streit} occurs, and the sky (the predicate) takes the lie of the land (the subject) into the unity and openness of a certain meaning. It is the place of predication: the place of the \textit{taking-as} which makes concrete things out of discrete objects, and unifies them into a world.

What is at work in such an emergence is the movement by dint of which, as Leroi-Gourhan has shown\(^{13}\), the human species emerged in the triple interaction of the evolution of the body itself and the development of technical and symbolic systems which were an « externalization (\textit{extériorisation}) » of the functions of this very body. That is, if we refer to Merleau-Ponty who has shown how our flesh (\textit{chair}) « predicates » the things around us into

\(^{11}\) On this topic, see Reinhard MAY, \textit{Ex oriente lux : Heideggers werk unter ostasiatischen Einfluss}, Stuttgart : Steiner Verlag, 1989.

\(^{12}\) In his essay on « the origin of the work of art », collected in \textit{Holzwege}, Frankfurt/Main : Klostermann, 1949.

our milieu, the emergence of human bodyhood (corporéité), as combining flesh with technical and symbolic systems, is nothing else than the birth of a human world; and Leroi-Gourhan's « externalization » is nothing else than the movement of existence as an ek-sistence (« coming-out-and-staying-there ») of our very being - that which Heidegger calls « being-outside-of-oneself (Außer-sich-sein) » and « being-in-the-world (In-der-Welt-sein) ». It is that movement in which an ape became human: by standing with its two feet on the earth and raising its head toward the sky, thus becoming able to see the unity of the earth on this side of a horizon.

This is the most « primary metaphor » at work in the human mind. It equates our bodyhood to our worldhood, and reciprocally. It implies that, since we must have our feet on the ground=earth=subject=substrance in the very movement when/where we stand toward the sky=world=predicate=void (or non-substance), we can absolutize neither the former nor the latter. Both are necessary, both are insufficient for our existence and that of things, since it is their very combination which is the predications of subjects into predicates; that is, the birth of reality - the eco-techno-symbolical reality which is that of a human world.

6. The base for dialoguing between civilizations
A Greek orator of the IVth c. B.C., Isocrates, spoke one day of « all the earth which lies under the sky (hê gê hapasê hê hupo to kosmô keimenê) ». Besides the fact that the verb he used for saying « to lie under », hupo...keimai, is that very verb which, some time later, Aristotle used for inventing the notion of subject, it is interesting to see that the sky (kosmos) is for him that which encompasses the lie of the land into one entire earth. We can also understand that, owing to the primary metaphor which we have seen, this is not the earth as a pure physical entity, but the earth as predicated into a human world (kosmos).

For saying this, the Greeks used to speak, more specifically, of the « inhabited earth », oikoumenê gê, as distinct from uninhabited areas, erêmos. This is the origin of the word « ecumene ». According to the case, it could mean either the domain of humankind in general, or particularly that of the Greeks themselves, as well as, later, that of the Roman then the Byzantine empires, or of Christendom.

This shows us that human worldviews can be more or less universal, while being necessarily a predication of that subject among all subjects, the earth. The modern worldview, whose paradigm is supposedly that of science itself, is no exception. Like all other worldviews, it necessarily is metaphorical to some degree, since it is human. Its dead end is that it tends to absolutize itself as if it were truly universal, whereas, as we have seen, its founding principle excludes the very possibility of a human world, and thus makes it inherently partial.

On the other hand, denying the validity of this principle leads to an absolutization of worldhood itself, and therefore to ethnocentrism, as was the case of Nishida-philosophy. This is in fact the main trend and the dead end of postmodern thought, like Derridian deconstructivism, though it is unaware of the principle at stake; that is, to found the world on absolute non-being. In other words, it amounts to saying that worldliness revolves on itself like an Escherian figure, with no base at all.

15 I refer here to George LAKOFF and Mark JOHNSON’s concept of primary metaphor, as in their Philosophy in the flesh : the embodied mind and its challenge to Western thought, New York : Basic Books, 1999.
16 It should be reminded here that the sinogram kong (read kû or sora in Japanese) expresses both the sky and the Buddhist concept of Void, related in Japanese thought to the Taost concept of non-being (wu, read mu in Japanese).
17 It is worth reminding that, in the Timaios, Plato calls genesis (birth) the relative being of the world (kosmos), as distinguished from absolute Being which needs no place (chôra) for being what it is, and thus transcends the world.
18 On these questions, see my Écoumène : introduction à l'étude des milieux humains, Paris : Belin, 2000.
19 Oratores attici, 78.
20 Since even physics has to rely on technical and symbolic systems (e.g. mathematics), i.e. a human predication, to grasp its object. See for example Bernard d'ESPAGNAT, Le Réel voilé. Analyse des concepts quantiques, Paris : Fayard, 1994.
« No-base » (mukitei in Nishida's terminology) is indeed the principle of worldliness as such; but to satisfy oneself with it is to forget that there must be the fight of earth and world, subject and predicate, for reality to be born. Deconstruction is indeed necessary for showing that no predicate is absolute; but it must not overshadow the fact that the first relativity of human predicates is that they are relative to a subject, rather than to themselves\(^{21}\). What this relation does is to cultivate the earth into a civilization - in other words, to open a certain kosmos out of ge - ; it does not create its predicates out of nothing. Civilizations need the earth as a ground for this very cultivation.

This means that, contrary to certain postmodern views, there can always be a dialogue between civilizations, because all civilizations have a common ground: the earthliness which necessarily founds our bodyhood=worldhood. On the other hand, it also means that no world order (kosmos) is entitled to erase other ones, because no worldview can be universal, no history and no territory can be natural, no hegemony can be just and no right can be absolute. Humans are prone to believe the contrary, but by doing so they only express the logic of their sole predicates; that is, as Nishida himself wrote,

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\text{[…] the predicate becomes illimited (mugendai to naru), the place itself becomes pure non-being, and what is there becomes simply an intuition of its own self (kore ni oite aru mono wa tan ni jiko jishin wo chokkan suru mono to naru).}\]

which is to forget that our heads are not the sky itself (i.e. the predicate), but only tend towards it, and that for doing so, we need to stand with our feet on the ground (i.e. the subject). That is, dialogue there must be, because no human being can pretend to know the truth.


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\(^{21}\) This is not only common sense (the favourite target of deconstructivism); it has been proven, both mathematically and logically, by Gödel's theorems of incompleteness and undecidability, which amount to say that a world, for being a world, needs a referent outside of itself. This radically discards Nishida's absolutization of worldliness, as well as Derrida's principle of difference, which says that meaning arises from the interplay of « floating signifiers ». In fact, as biosemantics have shown, meaning arises from life, which arose from the universe. What signifiers do is to elaborate it into higher significations, but they do not create it from nothing.

\(^{22}\) NKZ, IV, 288.