

The World According to Nishida Kitaro: A New Proposal

Hitoshi Oshima
Fukuoka University

Abstract

The typical way of solving conflicts in today's world is based on Hegelian dialectics and Parmenidean logic, both based on the notion of Being and Identity. As the result of the solution is not really satisfactory, I propose another way proposed by Nishida Kitaro, a Japanese philosopher. His vision of the world as self-identical and self-contradictory at the same time seems more useful to our world. His dialectics based on the notion of Field seems more helpful to us.

Keywords: dialectics, being, field, nothing, Nishida Kitaro

Hitoshi Oshima Professor in Fukuoka University, Japan, specializing in comparative and Japanese literature. Interested both in understanding Japanese literature in a global context and general literature in terms of cognitive and neurosciences. He is also, an executive council of ICLA and the president of JCLA. Publications in Western languages are: *El pensamiento japonés* (Edición universitaria de Buenos Aires, 1987), *Le Développement d'une Pensée Mythique: pour comprendre la pensée japonaise* (Editions Osiris, Paris, 1994), *The Image of Westerners in Modern Japanese Literature* (Rodopi, Amsterdam, 2000), *The remains of Japan in Kazuo Ishiguro* (UBC, Vancouver, 2001), *Kobayashi Hideo, apologist for "the savage mind"* (*Comparative Literature Studies* 41.4, 2004), *The literary value of Bashō's poetry* (*Forum for World Literature Studies*, 3.3, 2011). E-mail: hitoshima08@gmail.com

1

One of the problems of today's world is the aggressive way of solving conflicts, which is, in my opinion, more or less in accordance with Parmenidian logic and Hegelian dialectics. Hegel viewed conflicts of any kind as contradictions that are to be solved by dialectics, a means of proceeding from opposition to contradiction, from contradiction to synthesis. This procedure implies denial of oneself and others in the name of synthesis, which I esteem unethical following Emmanuel Levinas who saw it would necessarily eliminate "duality" (Levinas 22). Duality is one of the things we have to protect from any synthesis.

As for Parmenidian logic, I agree with Levinas again when he said the following:

To deal Being as an entity is to enclose it in Unity, the oneness, which would let Parmenides go away from every parricide that his descendants would be tempted to commit against him. (Levinas 22)

By saying this, he insinuated the assassination of Parmenides as a right thing to do. Parmenidean "Unity" denies "duality." All philosophy based upon the "Unity" should be rejected. That is the way Levinas thought from his ethical point of view.

I am entirely for the ethics he proposed, the refusal of making synthesis. His *Le temps et l'autre* (1980) says insistently that synthesis should lead to "ecstatic fusion" without "duality." Making synthesis out of the two terms is a denial of the otherness, *l'alterité* that is sacred. Levinas was led to think likewise because of his Nazi experience.

Some of the biggest problems of today's world are violence and terrorism. I dare say it is due to incessant unthinking trials of making Hegelian synthesis and application of Parmenidian logic to any conflict. So long as we are attached to Hegelian and Parmenidian solutions, we are likely to be condemned to remain prisoners of violence and terrorism. My proposal is clear: "Abandon Hegel and Parmenides and listen more to Levinas."

All of you must know the famous phrase of Hamlet, the prince of Denmark: "*To be or not to be, that is the question.*" I am afraid his way of questioning himself reflects the philosophical basis Levinas puts in question. Hamlet followed Parmenidean logic based on a choice between two terms: *Being* and *Non-Being*. This could not but lead him to violence against the world surrounding him.

The problem with Parmenides is that he set up antagonism between Life and Death, *Being* and *Non-being*. Thus he compelled us to choose the former abandoning the latter. Hegelian dialectics is an extension of this in the sense

that it is based on *Being*, not on *Non-Being*. Both, Hegel and Parmenides, were monists who denied “duality.” They actually ignored Death.

Parmenides said that you had to choose *Being* to start with, abandoning *Non-being* because you could only think of the former, never of the latter. Let us quote a passage from the fragment 2 of his work *On Nature*:

Come, I shall tell you, and do you listen and convey the story,
 What routes of inquiry alone there are for thinking:
 The one—that (it) is, and that (it) cannot not be,
 Is the path of Persuasion (for it attends on truth);
 The other—that (it) is not and that (it) needs must not be,
 That I point out to you to be a path wholly unlearnable,
 For you could not know what-is-not (for that is not feasible),
 Nor could you point it out. (Parmenides 55)

The selection that Parmenides made out of the two terms—*Being* and *Non-Being*—has deeply marked Western thought, which is manifest not only in Hegelian dialectics but even in Hamlet’s way of thinking. We should inquire whether Hamlet’s questioning is a right one or not. His “*to be or not to be*” might have been posed in a wrong way.

2

Quite different from Parmenidian premise is a mythological vision that we can find in ancient Japan. Japanese mythology recorded in the oldest book of Japan titled *Kojiki, Records of Ancient Matters*¹ compiled in 712 AD indicates that Life and Death eternally coexist, facing each other. Let us have a look at the passage from the book that shows it:

Finally, the goddess Izanami (who had made love to the God Izanagi to create the islands that would form Yamato, the ancient name of Japan) died of giving birth to the god of Fire. Then, the God Izanagi, her husband, said “I never imagined that I would lose my lovely wife because of a baby!” He cried and cried on all fours, creeping around his wife’s body. . . .

She went down to the Land of Yomi where the dead dwelled. After a while, Izanagi, her husband, went after her in order to see her again. On his arriving at the closed door of the Land of the Dead, she opened it so that he could talk to her. “Oh, my dear, we haven’t finished our enterprise of making the country yet. Please come back to the Land of the Alive.” To this, answered the Goddess saying “You should have come earlier. It’s too late. I’ve already eaten the food of the Land of the Dead. Of

¹ The translations of *Kojiki*’s and Nishida Kitaro’s text in this article are mine.

course, I'd like to go back to you if I could. I really appreciate your coming to see me. Wait. I'll consult the Lord of this Land. Please wait here for a moment."

The God Izanagi waited and waited, but she did not appear. Impatient, he entered inside with a torch in hand because it was dark in there. . . . And then, he saw the Goddess, his wife, full of worms and monsters. . . . Horrified, he ran away fast.

The Goddess was angry. She said "You shamed me. How did you dare that?" She sent ugly women of the Land of the Dead after him. . . . And seeing they could not catch him up, she decided to run after him, herself.

The God Izanagi put a huge rock on a narrow path called the Slope Yomotsu-Hira to prevent her from entering the Land of the Alive. Across the rock, the couple exchanged their farewell words. The Goddess Izanami said first "Oh, my dearest man, if you do so, I will strangle 1,000 people of your Land every day." The God Izanagi replied then saying: "Oh my dearest wife, if you do so, I will construct 1,500 houses for giving birth every day." This is the reason why we have 1,500 new-born babies every day while 1,000 die. (Kurano 61-67)

The quotation shows clearly that Life and Death are facing and fighting against each other, both equally present to us. We should not overlook they are always in love-and-hate relation, the God Izanagi and the Goddess Izanami.

You may say Hamlet also knew Life and Death are inseparable from each other. As a matter of fact, even though the logic he learned taught him to choose one of the two, he could not make it because he found it impossible. Quite naturally, he wondered if the world after death could be another version of the ugly world he was living in. Having no answer to the question, he could not make any decision. The dilemma looked endless, which made him rush almost blind to the destruction of others and himself.

Now, here are my question and suggestion. Isn't Hamlet's dilemma quite different from the one today's terrorists hold unconsciously. After all, didn't he succeed in upsetting the royal system of Denmark with violence? Even if it was not his real intention, he made it. I do not, of course, mean he intended a political rebellion. But seeing his interior, I conclude he was not only neurotic but also terrorist-minded so that he could not help but act violently for the destruction of himself and others.

You may be reluctant to accept my suggestion because you have an established idea of Hamlet as a beloved and wonderful hero in literature. But if you have a careful look at his state of mind and his way of thinking, you will not deny the mechanism of dilemma that would push him to violent acts. To me, terrorism is not only a political problem but a psychological one. It is a result from a psychological dilemma caused by a dialectic way of thinking and a yes-or-no alternative. Its initial aim might have been the making of a better world,

but it loses the way quite soon, quite easily, to end up with destruction not for a better world but for the sake of destruction. Needless to say, I mean by “dialectics” a utopian vision of Unity after the struggle due to contradiction, and by “yes-or-no alternative” the basis of logic established by Parmenides.

To prevent you from thinking my position is stuck to an East-Asian tradition, I would like to refer to the fact that some philosophers in the West just after World War II had a thought similar to mine about the traditional logic and Hegelian dialectics. Theodore Adorno was one of them. In his *Negative Dialectics* (1966), especially in the second chapter, he develops a new dialectics through a careful examination of Hegelian one. He criticizes Hegelian dialectics as “affirmative,” in other words, a dialectics aimed to realize “Identity” (Adorno 149-51). To my knowledge, Adorno’s dialectics has not been considered seriously enough. I am afraid the world is still working with a simplified version of Hegelian dialectics, while Adorno’s remains in oblivion.

3

Leaving Adorno aside, I would like to introduce now a dialectics born in East-Asia. It was proposed by Kitaro Nishida (1870-1945), known as the representative philosopher of modern Japan. I find it not only interesting but also useful to our world today.

Nishida is said to have achieved a sort of synthesis of Western philosophy and the old East-Asian tradition. There are certainly in his thought elements of Buddhism, Taoism and Japanese religion called Shinto, but the ingredients of his philosophy are not the issue here. He has also been accused of “collaboration” with the totalitarian regime of his time, which is not totally erroneous, but that is not the issue here, either. Of importance to us is his dialectics and its validity to our world. In my opinion, his dialectics gives an alternative, a better solution than the Hegelian one, to the conflicts we are suffering from.

Nishida’s dialectics is named *Dialectics of Field* or *Dialectics of Nothing* because its very basis or starting point is *Field* that is *Nothing*. Let us remember Adorno already pointed out Hegelian dialectics was a dialectics based on *Identity* and *Being*. Opposing himself to Hegel, the Japanese philosopher proposed a dialectics based on *Field* that is *Nothing*.

To understand what he meant by *Field*, let us have a look at one of his essays titled “Basho” (1926). The title could be translated as “place” or “location,” but is better translated as “Field” because it indicates an indefinite and endless space in which dialectic developments take place. Here are his words concerning it:

In order that Hegelian Reason may be really immanent, it must not be something that contains contradiction in itself but that reflects it and memorizes it. That something must be a field that comprises everything. It must be an endless and plain space in which there is nothing and on which is reflected something formless. It must be a *Field* in which even things that contain self-contradiction find themselves. I call that *Field* “*mu-no basho*,” *Field of Nothing*, *Field of Non-Being*. (Nishida IV 269)

As you see, what he meant by *Field* is “endless plain space in which everything is comprised” and that “things are not only identical but also contradictory to themselves.” In other words, he meant an empty space in which dialectic movements take place. As it is empty, he defined it as *Nothing*. Without such space, he would say, nothing would happen, no dialectic movement would be possible.

The difference from Hegelian point of view is clear. Hegel did not take in account that empty space Nishida considered as the very first condition for dialectics. This difference corresponds to another difference. Hegel viewed everything impregnated with *Being* while Nishida, with *Nothing* or *Non-Being*. To the Japanese philosopher, every being was a shadow or echo of the *Field of Non-Being* or *Nothing* while to the German dialectician, every being a part of *Being*.

As for “negation” that is an important moment in dialectics, we find a difference again between the two philosophers. Hegel insisted negation was a necessary step in dialectics, but that it was a mediation of *Being* on Reason’s part. Nishida thought of it differently. To him, negation was a mediation of *Being* on the part of the *Field* that was *Nothing*. Nishida expressed this in the following way:

Hegelian dialectics is based on *Idea*, that is *Being*. I do not find it real because it excludes a movement from the irrational to the rational. (Nishida VI 156)

Nishida saw Hegelian dialectics was rationalistic and found it unreal. To him, *Field*, *Nothing* and the irrational formed a world more real than the one formed by *Identity*, *Being* and Reason.

4

Once Nishida’s dialectics is explained, I would like to add to it that his *Field* is dynamic. Influenced by Maxwell’s electromagnetic theory, he conceived it as full of energy, able to transform itself even if it is *Nothing*. Dialectics becomes thus one of the *Field*, one of *Nothing*, which may be difficult to understand for those accustomed to *Being* as the unique subject of action.

Based on this dynamic vision, Nishida formulated his world vision in the following way: *zettai mujun-teki jiko-dooitsu*, which can be translated as “absolutely self-contradictory and self-identical.” To him, the world was one and

multiple at the same time, which means it was identical and contradictory to itself. Let us have a look at the following quotation that shows the vision clearly. It is from the essay titled “absolutely self-contradictory and self-identical.”

The real world is where things work on one another. Each of its forms corresponds to an interrelation among them or its result. Now, a thing can work on others only by self-denial. It denies its being a thing so as to work on others. But if things working on one another make up one world in this manner, it means they lose their being things to become parts of the world (which means they are no more things). It means then they make up an unreal world because there is no more plurality in there. The real world should not be likewise. It should always be one and plural at the same time. Each thing should never lose its individuality even if it works on others and others work on it to make up relations. The real world should not only be self-identical but also self-contradictory. (Nishida IX 147)

Now, what can we take from this as a lesson, as a possibility for our world of today? It is certain we can learn from it a new attitude toward our conflictive world. Not to try to make up “one world” at the cost of the individuality of each thing or being, that is the lesson we can take. In other words, to respect the multiplicity, leaving the world as it is, even if it is in continuous contradiction, far from harmony, far from unity. Hegelian dialectics and Parmenidian selective logic of Yes or No, both based on *Being* and the rational, both neglecting the irrational and the presence of *Death*, had better be avoided. For those would intensify a conflict instead of appeasing it.

5

An American neuroscientist Gerald Edelman insists on variety and unity at the same time as one of the most important biological principles. He asserts that our consciousness results from a miraculous concert of many different parts of the brain, each one of which plays a different music independently from others (Edelman and Tononi 49). The brain is one; and yet it remains multiple. That is the vision we can take out of his book, which reminds us, of course, of Nishida’s philosophical vision.

I would not say however there is no difference between Nishida and neuroscientists. I perceive that many neuroscientists view the brain as a necessary means for survival and that they do not take *Death* in account seriously. Nishida thought of *Death* as a starting point. That is why he started from *Nothing*. Today’s neuroscientists follow Darwin in a way or another. Consequently, they believe the aim of our being is above all to live better, not to die out. They ad-

mit multiplicity as an indispensable condition for Life, which is not unconvincing, but their neglect of *Death* leaves our philosophical mind unsatisfied.

Indeed, those neuroscientists do not see every biological being as self-contradictory and self-identical at the same time. They do not see that in each being, there is eternal split between *Life* and *Death*. Nishida saw it and that is the main point of his philosophy. Nishida knew and lived the ancient mythology of his country and developed it in a way demanded by his time of modernity.

Now, let me say that he was not the only one to whom *Death* counted. Sigmund Freud was another who took it seriously. Some neuroscientists are harsh to the Father of psychoanalysis, but in my opinion, they had better consider more seriously his thesis of the antagonistic tendencies in humans: *Eros* and *Thanatos*. Both Nishida and Freud saw the truth modern people would not like to accept. They saw we are in eternal split between *Life* and *Death*.

6

Suppose there are two beings in a field. They may be friends, enemies or remain indifferent to each other. In any case, they will establish a relation; for no relation is a form of relation. All their relation is only possible because there is a field in which they are. The field is the fundamental condition for their being.

Now, according to Nishida, the field is *Nothing* because it is not *Being*. It is empty and just because of its emptiness, it can offer a space for beings to be there, to develop relation with each other. Now, the field is *Nothing* but dynamic so that every being in it gets involved in the dynamics. *Being* is thus mediated by *Nothing*; denial is made to it by the Field. In other words, beings are denied just at the moment they enter the Field, before facing each other.

Hegel would have said *Being* is mediated by Reason that tries incessantly to overcome contradiction. To him, denial is rationally made to beings by facing each other. The difference between Nishida and Hegel is clear. We could say the former's "denial" is intransitive while the latter transitive. With reason, the former chose the term "self-denial" to express the intransitive character of his "denial." Nishida's dialectic starts from the "self-denial" of each being. Each being denies itself because after all, it is *Nothing*.

Now, let us be careful with the term. By "self-denial," Nishida did not mean self-abnegation. In his view, there is no room for self-abnegation because there is no room for *Self*. Self is mediated from the very beginning by the field that is *Nothing*. His "self" is a being pre-mediated by *Nothing*. We are from *Nothing* and will go back to it.

The question is where to start from: *Being* or *Nothing*? Our modern world tends to start from *Being* without consideration of the Field we are in. So long as we are happy with that, we would not need any other way of thinking. But if we feel unhappy with the world we live in, we should think of another way, for example, Nishida's way that proposes us to submit ourselves to the mediation of the Field. Instead of denying others, he proposes us to be mediated by the Field that is *Nothing*. "Self-denial" may be a good way to solve conflicts.

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根據西田幾多郎的世界：一個新提案

摘 要

當代解決衝突的典型做法，多半根據黑格爾的辯證法則或是古希臘哲學家巴門尼德的邏輯，兩者皆以存有與同一等概念為基礎。然而，解決衝突的效果往往不令人滿意，因此我提出另一種方案，以日本哲學家西田幾多郎的概念來解決衝突；他所看到的世界同時是自我同一也是自我矛盾，這顯然較符合我們的世界，而他的論證以場域 (Field) 做為基礎，顯然亦較有幫助。

關鍵字：辯證，存有，場域，空無，西田幾多郎