

Nishida Kitarō (1870-1945) as a Philosopher of the State

KLAUS KRACHT

Considering the great number of works on Nishida in western languages, we can say that Nishida is one of the best-known Japanese intellectuals outside Japan. But nevertheless, our present image of Nishida — in Japan as in the West, (although more in the West than Japan) — is the image of a rather unpolitical philosopher. For example, Gino K. Piovesana refers to a statement of Nishida's disciple Mutai Risaku (born 1890) and says,

'Mutai, who followed Nishida's special lectures for eleven years, testifies that he never heard the master utter a single word concerning political problems, although the world situation, let alone social changes in Japan, could have given more than a pretext for extra-curricular comments Piovesana continues. I mention this detail, 'because the post-war critics of Nishida have tried to blackball him as a supporter of nationalism. According to Mutai, the only person who showed an interest in political matters at Kyōto University then was Tomonaga Sanjūrō (1871-1951), Nishida and the other professors of philosophy being solely concerned with academic work.'¹

This statement may demonstrate not only how far the political Nishida has been overlooked in western (and Japanese) studies but also the whole complex of the political involvement of academic discourse under the war-time regime.

In order to understand Nishida's attitude towards his own society we have to examine his diaries and letters, (where we sometimes have the opportunity to meet the 'private' Nishida,) and several publications, which have appeared since 1937, beginning with his dictum in the lecture *Gakumonteki hōhō*, that 'Philosophy is not something apart from politics. But also politics is not something apart from philosophy.'²

Looking at Nishida's life and letters to his disciples after 1936 we see many contradictions. There is the sceptic and Buddhist humanistic scholar, who prefers to keep himself apart from bureaucrats and military men. We see a philosopher who is attacked by Minoda Muneki, a 'Japanese-McCarthy', whom Nishida calls 'a fascist' and 'a rabid dog', so reacting, by the way, quite differently from Tanabe Hajime who politely thanked Minoda for what he called his 'enlightening' criticism.³

At the beginning of the war against China Nishida wrote to Horio

Takashi: 'Where will this war lead us? If all the many human lives and expenditures of the state fail to achieve their aim, it would seem a tragedy to me.'⁶ This may be a rather ambiguous statement, especially when seen in the light of some later facts. But it is true that Nishida was far from enthusiastically justifying the war at that time. In June 1937 he wrote to Kōsaka Masaaki that he had not until then had the time to think over the 'essence of the state', but that from now on he planned to do so.⁴

At the same time we see a scholar, who even in time of war was on good terms not only with his former student Prince Konoe Fumimaro, the Prime Minister of the war regime and founder of the 'New Order', but also with quite a lot of politicians and intellectuals of the wartime regime.

In 1940 Nishida received the Culture Medal (*bunka kunshō*), the highest official academic decoration, and was honoured by an invitation from the Imperial House to give the New Year's Lecture (*gokōsho hajime*), a lesson on the philosophy of history, before the Imperial Family. It was about the same time that Nishida began to look upon himself as the Japanese philosopher of the state *par excellence*. In 1941 he published his treatise on 'reasons of state' (*Kokka riyū no mondai*), which became part of his articles on what he called 'practical philosophy' (*jissen tetsugaku*) in *Tetsugaku rombunshū* (IV) and is an answer to Hegel's conception of *Staatsräson* and its criticism by Friedrich Meinecke *et al.*

In the same year, he wrote to Suzuki Daisetsu, an old and close friend that there were no people in Japan, 'who consider the matters of the state from a great and high stand'.⁶ In 1942 he wrote to Suzuki: 'When all men in the world are becoming crazy, I ask myself, what shall become of us. Isn't there at least one single reasonable man?' and in the rhetoric of an Old Testament prophecy he continued, 'In the end a Noah's flood might come.'⁷

At certain moments Nishida presents himself as a scholar who was preoccupied with the ideal of individual autonomy, an ideal which he saw realised through the Mito Confucian 'true great spirit of Heaven and Earth' (*tenchi seidai no ki*), while he spoke of Hitler as the irrational heir of Nietzsche's 'imperialistic' ethic. Also statements can be found in which the present (1942) is said to be a time, 'when everybody should forget human relations, and do his best for the state', a time, 'when the one hundred million [Japanese] must become one-hearted'.⁸

In 1943 and 1944 Nishida wrote two treatises which deserve our special attention. One of them is entitled 'The Principle of the New World Order' (*Sekai shin chitsujo no genri*). The other was originally written under the title of *Kokutai*, 'National Polity', but in December 1944 came to be published in the scholarly magazine of Kyōto University *Tetsugaku kenkyū* under the title of 'Supplement to the Collection of Essays on Philosophy No. IV' (*Tetsugaku rombun shū IV ho'i*). In both cases there are complicated and somewhat mysterious backgrounds to the genesis of the texts, which I cannot discuss in detail. However, it should be stated very clearly that both texts were written according to the author's free will, and that there is no need, as has been attempted, to conceal this. Even the *Sekai shin chitsujo no genri*, which was meant as a piece of philosophical advice

for Prime Minister Tōjō Hideki and was not published during Nishida's life time, should — according to Nishida's will — have been published in the widely read magazine *Shisō*.⁹

The following paragraph is a short introduction to the elements of Nishida's political discourse in the early 1940s, a description of some of Nishida's political concepts from the inner perspective of his own language. My intention here is to give an idea of what, according to Nishida's specific form of discourse, is explained in rather complex chains of argument.

A. *The Absolute (zettai)*

1. The Absolute is the word of God (*kami no kotoba*). It is the moral (*dōtoku-teki*), it is the reasonable (*riseiteki*), it is the universal (*ippanteki*).
2. Reality is the Absolute (*genjitsu soku zettai*).
3. The Emperor's words are the Absolute.

B. *The house (ie)*

1. The house is [the manifestation of] the religious, i.e. the forming action of the historical, of the living. The house continues over an immeasurable span of time. Without ancestor worship it cannot exist. It symbolizes the oneness of immanence and transcendence.
2. The house has a centre with which everything and everybody must unite.
3. The house is the prototype of the state.
4. The Imperial House is the prototype of the house.

C. *The people (minzoku)*

1. The people is [the manifestation of] the religious.
2. The people is the subject of history.
3. It is the maintainer of individuality, a universal people (*fuhenteki minzoku*) does not exist.
4. The sole maintainance of the national principle is mere national egoism.
5. A people needs a leader (*shidōsha*).

D. *The state (kokka)*

1. The state is [the manifestation of] the religious. It is the product of a world which gains an awareness of itself through the state, which is a value-creating force. As an absolutely contradictory self-identity (*zettai mujunteki jiko dōitsu*) of the parts and the whole it is one united world. It is the expression of a people which has realized the world in itself.
2. That community which does not express the world in itself is not a real state (*shin no kokka*), and it cannot be an autonomous subject of international law.
3. Every state has its individual world in the body of the nation (*kokutai*). 'To become a state' means 'to become the rational and the individual'. To become rational means that the particular returns to the ground of itself, i.e. really becomes the universal and therewith the individual.
4. The state of Japan is a real state.

E. *The Imperial House (kōshitsu)*

1. The Imperial House is the center of the Divine Country (*shinkoku*).

2. The thought of the Divine Country is defined through the Imperial Way (*kōdō*) of the just and dignified unity of ruler and subject (*kunshin ittai*).

3. The ten thousand generations [of the Imperial House] form one single line (*bansei ikkei*). It is coeval with Heaven and Earth.

4. The Emperor is the manifest God (*arahitogami*) and the manifestation of the Absolute.

F. *The world (sekai)*

1. Matter and human heart are like one thing (*busshin ichinyoteki de aru*).
2. The world is a contradictory self-identity of the one and the many.
3. The history of the world is the history of growing self-consciousness and self-expression of the world in a process of world-orientated world-formation (*sekaiteki sekai keisei*). Among the ten thousand countries each one receives its appropriate place.
4. The world needs a people which serves as its leader (*shidō minzoku*).

After this presentation of a few elements of Nishida's political discourse let me attempt to reach some generalisations from the perspective of political thought. I shall first concentrate on Nishida's concept of contradiction.

Nishida's thought is characterised by a kind of dialectic, which is obviously inspired by Hegel, but is at the same time intermediated by the specific perceptive faculty of indigenous emotion. It presents itself as a product of the secularisation of what Suzuki Daisetsu called the 'logic of contradiction' (*sokuhi no ronri*).¹⁰ The essential problem of such a logic, it seems to me, is that Nishida feels inclined to conceive a complex political and social reality as being already comprehended at too early a stage. He thereby falls into what Topitsch calls the 'pontifical pathos' of a dialectic of justification, which can be found in the case of the old Hegel and his so-called 'accommodations' to Prussian reality.¹²

Nishida argues that:

'Seen from the standpoint of an abstract logic, the whole and its parts are fundamentally contradictory. In this there is only conflict. Or, on the other hand, there is only mutual profit. But seen from the standpoint of historical creation, both must be one. . . . From such a point of view, 'class-struggle' must also be solved. . . . Even a factory is a place of production for the creation of the historical world. It must not be a place of production in the service of mere material desire.'¹³

Nishida does not simply demand that a concrete historical contradiction between two diverging forces should be solved, but moreover that the category of 'class' as such should be abolished. Individuals must become aware that an essential contradiction of what seems to be contradictory cannot be maintained from the standpoint of so-called 'concrete logic'. Thereby Nishida re-interprets the Marxist-Leninist world of real contradiction into a world of harmonious entities, whose parts act not as antagonistic but as polar elements. Under such conditions conflict has no real place as a legitimate event in the sphere of politics. A theory of revolution or even 'permanent revolution', which has been derived from

other theories of contradiction, cannot be formulated by Nishida under the condition of his 'world of oneness' (*ichinyo no sekai*), as Maruyama Masao termed it.¹⁴

On the contrary, his concept of contradiction leads to a theory of permanent reconciliation. And while in the case of the economic order the factory, being a spiritual community of world creators, expresses the absolute in an economic form, the Imperial House is the political embodiment of the absolute, it is the adequate symbol of the Japanese nation and its specific character. To quote Nishida:

'When we consider the history of the emergence of our state, we understand that there was never anything like "struggle" or "subjugation" of different races and peoples [in our country], but that the clans, by melting into one united body under the banner of the Heavenly Grandson's clan, came to form the well-rounded body of one people.'¹⁵

So the 'substance' and the 'prototype' of the state are given through the Imperial House in a paradigmatic way by its attitude towards the clans of the country.

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Let me now concentrate on Nishida's concept of historical formation (*keisei*). One essential element in Nishida's thought is his confrontation with the problem of historical time. The solution of the actual crisis is not sought in the modernistic pathos of radical innovation, but, according to the concept of the contradictory self-identity, in a renovation through restoration, in a restoration through renovation. This is a revival of the traditional time symbolism of the indigenous myth, of the Confucian theory of history, and the time conception of Zen Buddhism, which are all formative elements of Nishida's idea of the 'absolute present' (*zettai genzai*), that he understands in a relation to the concept of 'simultaneity' in existential philosophy. In this sense Nishida can state, by using the words of medieval *Nihongi* exegesis in the *Kuji hongigengi*, 'The Age of the Gods is in the present, nobody shall say that it is in the past.'¹⁶

It is one of the paradoxes of Nishida's philosophy that even such a conception of time can join with Hegel's historical optimism. Nishida holds the view that every epoch has its own historical theme and subject, for which it tries to find a solution. Thus the twentieth century is thought to be an epoch when 'the one historical world, i.e. a world-orientated world (*sekaiteki sekai*) must be built'. President Wilson's concept of 'self-determination of the peoples', Nishida said, proved to be a step back to an abstract idea of the world developed in the eighteenth century, an idea, which also became a basis for communism.

But the new order of the world is considered to be the 'highest idea of man's historical development', and this very goal, Nishida argues, is given in the idea of the Founding of the Country in the indigenous myth. 'Such is our country's idea that the Eight Corners of the World shall be united under one roof. Graciously the Emperor deigns to proclaim that he will let the ten thousand peoples attain their proper places. I respectfully venture to ask the question as to whether the Holy Instructions of the Present Emperor [i.e. his proclamation of the war] are not contained in this

[idea].'¹⁷ This is the rhetoric of *Tennō* loyalism of the late Tokugawa era and the reformulation of its political programme, a rhetoric which fitted smoothly into the official language of the war regime.

And in accordance with Hegel's *Philosophie des Rechts* Nishida argues:

'To build the "one particular world" [of East Asia], there must be one [state] standing in its centre, which takes this task upon itself. In East Asia this [leading force] is none other than our country of Japan'.¹⁸

Nishida holds the view, that the Imperial House of Japan is not only the centre of one national state, but that the Imperial Way (*kōdō*) is an intrinsic part of the principle of world formation. For this reason, the 'leading people' (*shidō minzoku*) should not be 'elected in an abstract way', as Nishida calls it, but must arise as the emanation of the principle of a 'world-orientated world formation'.¹⁹ And again with reference to the medieval *Nihongi* exegesis he states:

'In the national body of our country, about which the *Jinnō shōtō ki* says that there is nothing comparable in foreign countries, the absolute historical world-orientation is contained.'²⁰

CONCLUSIONS

Nishida's thought claims to destroy all ideologies and isms, because the partial assertion of a particular principle is incompatible with the style of 'contradictory self-identical' thought. On the other hand, this renunciation of the antagonistic representation of a more concrete outline of the political order beyond his amorphous 'world formism' (*sekai keisei shugi*) leads into the mental labyrinth of an eclectic ensemble of ideas, in which Nishida finds himself in emotional harmony with the essence of a culture which, in the majority of its manifestations, presents itself as a culture of relativism.

The self-image of the old Nishida as being a political philosopher is the result of a deep misunderstanding of a scholar who had become estranged from the political traditions of his own country and who has found no new identity in western political thought, a philosopher who follows trans-political motivations and whose thought at last flows into the stream of the philosophy of religion, to which it belongs.

Nishida's 'practical philosophy' proves to be an attempt to recover unity of speech by a negation of the dichotomy of mythological and academic discourse. Nishida fails, and in his prophetic interpretation of the indigenous myth his 'philosophy', develops into an ethnocentric form of provincial speech.

When Jürgen Habermas, looking at Hegel's attitude to the French Revolution, states that Hegel did not develop an adequate attitude towards it until he had fastened it 'in the heart of the *Weltgeist*',²¹ we find an analogy to Nishida and his relation to so-called 'Japanese fascism', which Nishida, eventually comes to interpret as the action of a Hegelian *Weltgeist*, while at the same time he avoids any contact with the basic questions of principle value for political theory. In this sense Nishida's Hegelian-inspired theodicy proves to be an implicit satanodicy; with the function of an empty dialectic-teleological formula.