**Chapter 17.**

**Anontology and the Issue of Being and Nothing in Nishida Kitarō**

[Published in JeeLoo Liu & Douglas L. Berger (eds.). *Nothingness in Asian Philosophy*. London: Routledge]

**John W.M. Krummel**

Undeniably the concept of the nothing or nothingness (*mu* 無) stands out as one of the most important concepts in Nishida Kitarō’s (西田幾多郎) philosophical oeuvre. Its importance for the rest of the Kyoto School can be attested to in the way that it was inherited, critiqued and developed by his contemporaries and successors. What did Nishida mean by *mu*? In this chapter, I will explicate what Nishida meant by the term and trace its development from its pre-Nishidian origins through his appropriations of the concept during the various periods of his philosophical career from the 1910s to the 1940s. I will also provide my own reading of Nishida’s concept of the nothing in terms of what I call *anontology*. But in order to comprehend what Nishida generally meant by *nothing*, a grasp of his sense of the accompanying term of *being* (*yū* 有) would be in order. I shall thus begin with a short summary of how he understands the two contrasting terms of being and nothing.

**Being and Nothing, Form and Formlessness**

Nishida often characterizes the distinction between being and nothing in terms of the cultural contrast of West and East. In the preface to *Hatarakumono kara mirumono e* (『働くものから見るものへ』 ; *From the Working to the Seeing*) of 1927, he contrasts the “brilliant development of Western civilization that takes form as being…” and “the root of Eastern culture that harbors within itself that which sees the form of the formless and hears the sound of the soundless” (Z3 255)[[1]](#endnote-1) — a formlessness that has nurtured the traditions of the East. The distinction he makes here between West and East is that between form (*keisō* 形相, *katachi* 形) and formlessness. Being (*yū*) corresponds to form and the nothing corresponds to the formless. Beings accordingly are what are present in *determinate form*, contrasted and differentiated from one another. In *Tetsugaku no konpon mondai* (『哲学の根本問題』; *Fundamental Problems of Philosophy*) of 1933-34, Nishida reiterates this contrast by stating that the thought of being is at the root of Western culture while the thought of the nothing is at the root of Eastern culture. (Z6 348) Here as well, reality for the West is grounded in *being qua form*, while reality for the East is grounded in *the nothing as formless*. Because the European tradition conceives the root of reality to be being (*yū*) or the “possession of form” (*yūkei* 有形), it prioritizes “the form-possessing [*katachiarumono* 形あるもの], the determinate [*genteiseraretamono* 限定せられたもの], as reality [*jitsuzai* 実在].” (Z6 335-36) On the premise that “something cannot be born from nothing” (*ex nihilo nihil fit*), the ancient Greeks came to conceive of the source of all beings in terms of a constant and unchanging primordial being. The prime example here would be the Platonic *ideas* serving as principles of the actual world, and among which the ultimate source would be the “*idea* of the Good.”[[2]](#endnote-2) The Platonic concept of the *idea* (ἰδέα) etymologically means “form” (*eidos*, εἶδος), which also literally means the “look” of a thing, and hence that which can be objectified in its visibility to the eye, or by extension, its intelligibility. In Nishida’s view, ancient Greek philosophy that became the source of Western culture took form in this sense as the ground of what is real. By contrast, the Eastern tradition takes a certain formlessness or non-substantiality — as in the Buddhist sense of the emptiness of substance (Skt. *śūnyatā*, Jp. *kū* 空; Skt. *nihsvabhāva*) — to be the source of everything. Nishida makes the same contrast in 1940 in *Nihon bunka no mondai* (『日本文化の問題』; *The Problem of Japanese Culture*) when he speaks of Western antiquity as conceiving the root of reality to be being (*yū*) and the formed (*yūkei* 有形), and Eastern antiquity as conceiving the root of reality to be the nothing (*mu*) and the formless (*mukei* 無刑). (Z9 60)

This division of the globe that reduces its hemispheres into distinct metaphysical categories of form and formlessness appears simplistic.[[3]](#endnote-3) Nishida ignores aspects of Presocratic thought that might exemplify his sense of an originary formlessness, e.g., Anaximander’s *apeiron* — even though Nishida does mention it only to reduce it to the sense of a self-contained circle — or Hesiod’s *chaos* that was also a kind of void. An outright exclusion of any sort of philosophical understanding of nothingness for the West would be unfair.[[4]](#endnote-4) Counter-examples to such reduction nevertheless would all fall outside of the main current of the Western tradition. Nishida was primarily reacting to the mainstream of Western philosophy. His stance is not without significance as a response to what he found in that current: substantialism and dualism. In consequence, Nishida announces his project of what came to be called “Nishidian philosophy” (*Nishida tetsugaku* 西田哲学) in the following manner: To provide a philosophical grounding for the demand to seek after the formless hidden at the root of Eastern culture. (Z3 255)

To understand what Nishida means by *nothing* (*mu*), we need to keep in mind what he means by *being* (*yū*). It is clear from the above that Nishida understands by *being* that which is determined, distinguished or differentiated from others, i.e., a *thing* with determinate properties, having form.  *The nothing* by contrast is the formless and undifferentiated potential for such formations and differentiations. *Nothing* in Nishida’s sense, while meaning *to not have form*, cannot mean utter nothingness or that there is nothing existing. More precisely, Nishida takes *nothing* to be a dynamism that perpetually forms itself while remaining essentially formless — it is that which every being qua formed must presuppose. In his 1926 *Basho* (「場所」; “Place”) essay, Nishida states that “to be” is “to be implaced.” (Z3 415) What he means is that to be determinate, formed, or differentiated is to stand in relation to others, and this in turn presupposes a place wherein things can be differentiated but also related. This leads him to his notion of the nothing as a kind of an opening, which envelops and makes room for the determinate and mutually distinct or differentiated beings. In other words, the ground is a place that is an abysmally open *un*ground. According to Nishida, the ground of being cannot be conceived in terms of what has form in that we will be forced to inquire after the cause of that form and the cause of its cause, *ad* *infinitum*, since every form in itself is determinate and hence determined.[[5]](#endnote-5) We avoid this problem by conceiving the ground as an unground, an undelimited place providing space for the causal interactions between things with form. Only the formless can envelop forms, only a no-thing can envelop things. And so, rather than partaking in the philosophical search for an “absolute being” that would ground all beings — a metaphysical principle whether it be *idea*, God, or reason or subjectivity that would secure their rationale — Nishida chooses to plumb the depths beneath being to face that abyss, un/ground, which he designates “absolute nothing” (*zettai mu* 絶対無). But before we follow the unfolding of his philosophy of absolute nothing, let me touch briefly upon possible sources of his conception.

**Sources from East and West**

In looking for the sources of Nishida’s conception of the nothing, the easiest route would be to simply take his own dichotomization between East and West for granted and to assume that his idea of *mu* is nothing but Eastern in origin. The most obvious source from the East would be Buddhism since *mu* (Ch. *wu* 無) itself is one of the principle concepts of Japanese Zen. Japanese Zennists often emphasize the term “nothing” or “no” (*mu*) and related phrases like “no-mind” (*mushin* 無心) and “no self” (*muga* 無我). The use of this notion however was made pivotal in the famous dialogue between Chan[[6]](#endnote-6) master Zhaozhōu (Jp. Joshū) (趙州) (778-897) and a monk. The dialogue was made into a *kōan*,[[7]](#endnote-7) often called “Zhaozhōu’s dog” (or “Joshū’s dog”) (趙州狗子) and recorded in the thirteenth century collection of *kōans*, *Wumenguan* (Jp. *Mumonkan* 『無門關』; *Gateless Gate*)[[8]](#endnote-8) as its first *kōan*. In the dialogue the monk asks Zhaozhōu whether a dog has buddha-nature, and Zhaozhōu replies “no[thing].”[[9]](#endnote-9) It is well known that Nishida undertook Zen meditation practice from his late twenties through his thirties and also undertook *kōan* training. I think it is significant that one of the culminating points of his *kōan* training was his passing of this *kōan* of *mu* under his Zen teacher. This was when he was 34 years old and two years before he began drafting his first major philosophical work (*Zen no kenkyū* 『善の研究』; *Inquiry into the Good*, 1911).[[10]](#endnote-10) In turn this Zen notion of *mu* can be traced to the Daoist influence upon Chinese Chan. Nishida’s understanding of being as being-formed thus can be traced to Chinese Daoism as well. According to A.C. Graham, the Chinese graph for being (Jp. *yū*, Ch. *yǒu* 有) has the sense of either being a possessor of properties or being itself a property belonging to something.[[11]](#endnote-11) And its opposite, *not to have* or *not to be had*, means “to be without distinction or determination” for the ancient Chinese. For ancient Daoist texts such as the *Daodejing* (『道德經』), indistinction or undeterminateness is *the nothing* (*wu*), which also serves as the potentiality for becoming something. The Daoists characterized the *dao* (Jp. *dō* 道) that is the oneness and source of all reality in such terms as a *nothing* (*wu*),a formless and nameless empty vessel, the chaos preceding distinctions between *this* and *that*, *yes* and *no*.[[12]](#endnote-12)Nishida’s fondness for the Daoist classics (the *Laozi* or *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi* 『荘子』) is evident in his diary.[[13]](#endnote-13)Another interesting point in regard to this ancient Chinese concept of *wu* is that originally it referred to a cleared opening made in what was previously covered by thick vegetation.[[14]](#endnote-14) Nishida himself was probably unaware of such ancient etymological significances or pre-philosophical meanings of the term. Nevertheless it is interesting to note this ancient association of the sense of a nothing with an open space in light of Nishida’s own development of the concept in terms of place.

Within Zen that Daoist sense of *wu* historically became intermingled with the Mahāyāna theme of emptiness (Jp. *kū*, Ch. *kong* 空). And its sense of nondistinction became associated with the Mahāyāna motif of the middle way that escapes reduction to being on the one hand and non-being on the other, an idea traceable to the *Heart Sutra*’s equation that “form is emptiness and emptiness is form.”[[15]](#endnote-15) Nishida appears to walk that middle path of Mahāyāna with his understanding of a primal nothing that not only negates substantialism (being) but also its opposite (non-being). And the source for Nishida’s frequently used metaphor for the nothing as an empty mirror that mirrors itself might be found in the Buddhist classic *The Awakening of Faith in the Mahāyāna*.[[16]](#endnote-16) In his later works Nishida makes frequent and explicit references to other Buddhist ideas, including emptiness, in association with his concept of the absolute nothing. For example, in his 1940s piece *Kūkan* (「空間」; “Space”) he speaks of “the true emptiness of Buddhism” (*bukkyō no shinkū* 真空) (Z10 157), and in 1939 he speaks of his interest in the vision of emptiness (*kūkan* 空観) hidden in the depths of Eastern culture and upon which he would like to build his philosophy.[[17]](#endnote-17)

Yet it would be misleading to ignore Western sources of influence on Nishida’s concept of the nothing, to which Nishida himself refers. The Neo-Kantian notion of validity as non-being is significant in this regard. In brief, the Neo-Kantians, inheriting Hermann Lotze’s dichotomy, dualistically distinguished the realm of validity (*Geltung*), e.g., “truth,” as a realm of non-being (*Nichtseiende*, *Nichtsein*) from the realm of being (*Sein*), what-is, confined to the realm of the sensible material. The two, validity and being, are distinct but relate. *Being* can be predicated of the sensible matter of perception or cognition, for example, “The desk I see in front of me *exists*.” *Validity* on the other hand constitutes a distinct realm and involves value (*Wert*). Values — for example, truth, beauty, goodness — while not falling under the domain of what-is (being), provide the ultimate meaning or intelligibility behind what-is. What we can say of them is not that they exist but that they are valid. While a being “is” (*Seiendes ist*), values “are valid” (*Werte gelten*).[[18]](#endnote-18) However “the last” Neo-Kantian, Emil Lask, who had a profound influence on the development of Nishida’s theory of place during the 1920s, viewed validity qua intelligibility as inseparable from beings in our pre-thematic “immediate intuitable lived experience” (*unmittelbare anschauliche Erleben*). That is to say that we encounter things as already imbued with meaning prior to making judgments about them.[[19]](#endnote-19) Meaning or intelligibility here is the context one lives through and within which the thing is experienced prior to its thematization. I believe that this Laskian sense of validity that is *not being* gave Nishida a clue to developing his own notion of *the place of nothing*, within which objects thematized (i.e., beings) belong. Nishida makes it his project to bridge the dichotomy he inherits from Neo-Kantianism, and in that respect repeatedly refers to Lask in the period when he is formulating his theory of place. For the Neo-Kantians what determines being to provide it with intelligibility is validity qua non-being; for Nishida it is the nothing that does the same. The difference here is that in Nishida — radicalizing Lask’s sense of the inseparability of being and validity (meaning) — the nothing is *self-forming*. He aimed to show that that duality in its inseparability cannot be traced to two distinct entities — subject and object — but must have its source in a self-forming dynamic whole. It is this holistic dynamism that Nishida will conceive in terms of *the place of nothing*, as that *wherein* each pole of a dichotomy — such as subject and object — can have its rightful place relative to one another.

The hylomorphism[[20]](#endnote-20) in Neo-Kantian epistemology can be traced in turn to Plato. But Plato’s hylomorphism, in reverse to that of the Neo-Kantians, takes the transcendent *ideas*, and not their matter of formation, to be true being. By contrast, the receptacle of that formation by *ideas* is a kind of nothing, an indeterminate space that Plato called *chōra* (χώρα). In Nishida’s initial formulation of the concept of the nothing in terms of a primal place (*basho*), he did refer to Plato’s *chōra*. (See Z3 415) But Nishida reverses the Platonic hierarchy of *idea*-*chōra* by developing the Laskian collapse of the Neo-Kantian dichotomy in terms of an abysmal place that is *self*-determining rather than being the mere receptacle of determination.

A third Western source — in addition to Plato and Neo-Kantianism — for Nishida’s *nothing* is the mystical tradition. Nishida frequently refers to mystics like Pseudo-Dionysius, Nicholas of Cusa, Meister Eckhart, and Jacob Böhme, and their notions of a “dazzling obscurity” or *das Nichts* (the nothing) that is at the same time the divine source of creation but reached *via* negation. We see this already in his first book-length work, *Zen no kenkȳ* of 1911, wherein he refers to the thirteenth century mystic Nicholas of Cusa and his idea that God transcends both being and non-being while at the same time God is also both being and non-being. (Z1 151) One could argue that this sense of a transcendence of *both* being and non-being, together with the East Asian notion of nothing (both Jp. *mu* and Ch. *wu*) as the non-distinction of opposites, is an important contributor to what I shall call Nishida’s *anontological* sense of the nothing.[[21]](#endnote-21) Aside from Cusa, Nishida in his first book also refers to Jakob Böhme’s notions of God as an “unground” or “without ground” (*mutei* 無底) (*Ungrund*), “stillness without anything” (*Stille ohne Wesen*), and “will without an object” (*Wille ohne Gegenstand*); and Meister Eckhart’s notions of God as “Godhead” or “Godhood” (*shinsei* 神性) (*Gottheit*) and his idea that the true God is where even God has been lost.[[22]](#endnote-22) (Z1 148 151, 153) All of this is significant for Nishida’s own development of his concept of God (*kami* 神) and the absolute (*zettai* 絶対) or absolute one (*zettaisha* 絶対者) that he seems to equate with, or at least associate with, his notion of the absolute nothing (*zettai mu*). In his final essay, *Bashoteki ronri to shūkyōteki sekaikan* (「場所的論理と宗教的世界観」; *The Logic of Place and the Religious Worldview*) of 1945, immediately after stating that the true God is what the Western mystics called *Gottheit*, Nishida adds that this “is the emptiness of the *Prajñāpāramitā*” (*hannya no kū*般若の空). (Z10 104-105) But neither can we understate the significance of the Biblical idea of *kenosis*, or “self-emptying,” that appears in the *Gospels* (*Paul’s Letter to the Philippians* ch.2, v.6-8) for Nishida’s explication of the self-negating act of the nothing. In other words we cannot deny that there is a Christian element within Nishida’s thoughts concerning the nothing even if he gives it his own distinct coloring.[[23]](#endnote-23)

Now that we have touched upon some of the background sources from both Western and Eastern traditions that informed Nishida’s formulations about the nothing, we are ready to look into the evolution of his own theory.

**Nishida’s Formulations of the Nothing: Plumbing the Depths of Being From Inner Self to Outer World**

Nietzsche once stated: “When you gaze into an abyss, the abyss also gazes into you.”[[24]](#endnote-24) According to Nishida, the abyss looking back does so from the bottomless depths of one’s own self. In the early stages of his oeuvre, Nishida expressed the formless source of forms in a series of formulations that make the inward-directedness of his approach conspicuous: “pure experience,” “self-awareness,” “absolute free will,” etc. In all these formulations, the nothing is explicitly non-dual because it ontologically and phenomenologically precedes the subject-object duality. However, Nishida places the focus on the introspective. His project to uncover this formless source of forms began as an epistemological one to bridge the seemingly insurmountable gap recognized in Western epistemology between the knowing subject and the object known. Nishida arrives at a solution to the dichotomy through a kind of phenomenological introspection: the primal non-discrimination of subject-object in one’s concrete immediacy, entailing a rejection of the entire debate between materialism and idealism that has occupied much of the history of Western philosophy. As the formless potential for realities — both material and mental — the nothing refuses reduction to either. On this basis, Nishida can take the self-formation of the formless as *also* a kind of *self-seeing* or *self-mirroring* that unfolds in the depths of the individual’s self. Thus from the 1910s to the 1920s, Nishida takes an introspective approach to the nothing that grounds reality. This is in contrast to the more outward looking approach that he will take in the 1930s. For the convenience of the reader I will subdivide this section into subsections corresponding to important phases in Nishida’s thought.

***Pure Experience and Absolute Will (1911-1920s):***

As just stated, one of Nishida’s primary concerns during those early years was epistemological: How does the knowing subject cross the gap of otherness in order to know the object? The solution for Nishida lay in their pre-cognitive primal non-distinction. The very distinction between subject and object unfolds only through the self-differentiation or determination of that primal non-distinction. In his maiden philosophical work of 1911, *Zen no kenkyū*, Nishida expresses that sense of an originary non-distinction in terms of pure experience (*junsui keiken* 純粋経験). By this he meant one’s most immediate experience before the advent of reflection that would dichotomize the event in terms of subject (“I”) and object (“it”). In pure experience, one is absorbed in the act, “at one” with the experience itself. Distinction is only latent to permit its unfolding, “after the fact,” through reflection and judgment. Yet this significance of pure experience for Nishida was neither only epistemological nor a subjective state of mind. Pure experience bears ontological significance in its subsequent unfolding. In harboring the potential for differentiation and diversification, pure experience is also taken to be the infinite and unifying force of cosmic reality itself. Nishida named the foundation of that infinite activity of the cosmos, “God” (*kami* 神). But he also characterized it as “the nothing” (*mu* 無) in its indeterminateness, whereby he claimed, “God is completely nothing” (*mattaku mu* 全く無). (Z1 81) In other words, the non-distinction in the individual’s pure experience mirrors, or is non-distinct with, the non-distinction at the root of the cosmos, God as nothing. In his later works Nishida will go on to speak of the absolute one mirroring itself or manifesting itself through the interactivities of many individuals. But already at the initiation of his career, Nishida equated God and the nothing, both as the root of reality and of the self — an equation he will return to and develop in detail in his final essay of 1945.

In the series of works following *Zen no kenkyū*, from *Jikaku ni okeru chokkan to hansei* (『自覚に於ける直観と反省』; *Intuition and Reflection in Self-Awareness*) of 1917 to *Ishiki no mondai* (『意識の問題』; *The Issue of Consciousness*) of 1920, Nishida inquires after that fundamental reality by plumbing through the interior depths of the self. In the 1917 work he takes what he calls the “absolute free will” (*zettai jiyū ishi* 絶対自由意志) to be not only the root of our self-awareness (*jikaku* 自覚), but also the creative act of the cosmos (*uchū no sōzō sayō* 宇宙の創造作用), transcending the individual’s will. Again, just as he did with the concept of pure experience (*junsui keiken*), he broadens the significance of the will (*ishi* 意志) beyond its ordinary meaning to something cosmic and ontological. The will that operates in the depths of one’s soul is in some sense not distinct from the will in its cosmic significance. Combining Fichte’s sense of the “fact-act” (*Tathandlung*) and Rickert’s notion of the “ought” (*Sollen*, Jp. *tōi* 当為) that precedes being, Nishida takes the will (*ishi*) to be the driving force of the activity of differentiation and identification.[[25]](#endnote-25) He tells us that the will as such is the creative source of being precisely at the point where “being is born out of nothing” and where “…the will comes from, and returns to, the creative nothing [*sōzōteki mu* 創造的無].” (Z2 217, 264) This sense of the will may seem novel and strange to those unfamiliar with the history of European philosophy. But before Nishida there was a whole tradition within German thought of treating the will in this impersonal and cosmic sense, the prime exemplars being Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, and Schelling. And even prior to the nineteenth century, we can point to Böhme.[[26]](#endnote-26) Nishida has inherited, and develops further, their conception of the will.

***Theory of Place (1926)***

Nishida’s treatment of the nothing as the root of self-awareness as well as of the cosmos’ reality reaches a significant stage of development with the formulation of his philosophy of place (*basho* 場所) in his 1926 *Basho* (「場所」; “Place”) essay. As mentioned above he wanted to solve the epistemological issue of how the subject-object dichotomy is bridged. But he also wanted to avoid the apparent psychologism of his earlier formulations. This led him to the notion of *place* in the sense of an ultimate context that embraces and envelops both knower and known in a formless non-distinction preceding their differentiation. This would precisely be the place where the will emerges from a creative nothing. Because this ultimate place in its non-distinction is unobjectifiable, escaping assertion, Nishida characterizes it as the transcendent predicate pole (*chōetsuteki jutsugomen* 超越的述語面), “the predicate that cannot be made into a grammatical subject.” He intends to contrast his metaphysics of the predicate to Aristotle’s metaphysics, which is founded upon the notion of substance (*ousia*) or substratum (*hypokeimenon*) that “becomes the grammatical subject but never a predicate.” In *Torinokosaretaru ishiki no mondai* (「取残されたる意識の問題」; “The Unsolved Issue of Consciousness”) of the same year, Nishida states that his attempt is to initiate a new sort of metaphysics that could ground epistemology in the direction of the predicate rather than seeking for the ground of being in the direction of the grammatical subject. (Z7 224) By “predicate” (*jutsugo* 述語) he means the unobjectifiable concrete immediacy that contextualizes the grammatical subject. As such it escapes reduction to the grammatical subject and thus cannot be treated in terms of realism or idealism or any sort of dualism. Expanding its sense beyond its grammatical significance, Nishida is thus using the notion of predicate here as a heuristic device to defocus our attention *away* from being qua object — the grammatical subject — that normally lies on the foreground of our attention. The point is to turn us towards the set of conditions constituting the thing and ultimately to its contextual *background*. The ultimate context of contexts however, as a predicate not subsumed under further predicates and transcending all possible grammatical subjects, would have to be a *nothing* enveloping things objectifiable as possible subjects of assertion. The nothing in that absolute sense — absolute nothing (*zettai mu* 絶対無) — thus is that ultimate contextual place assumed by any predicative determination or ontological differentiation.

The movement away from the object and towards that ultimate contextual place proceeds through a series of “implacements.”[[27]](#endnote-27) By “implacement,” I mean the state of occupying a place. Every object, in virtue of being the subject of a statement, belongs to a determining context. That context is its place. But if we turn to that place and objectify it, turning it into a subject of another statement, we find that it belongs to a broader place. Each determining place is thus further determined by a broader horizon that is in turn determined by an even broader horizon. This series of “implacements” can go on and on but Nishida argued that the final place would have to be indeterminate, a nothing embracing all determinations. Nishida sought to overcome classical dualism by reformulating the various dichotomies — subject-predicate, object-subject, particular-universal, matter-form, noema-noesis, content-act, determined-determiner, etc. — in terms of the relationship of implacement between the implaced (*oitearumono* 於いてあるもの) and the place of implacement (*oietaru basho* 於いてある場所). (See Z3 390, 464-65, 498; Z4 81) And in the reverse direction he saw implacement to involve individuation through self-differentiation. (See Z3 347-48, 391, 400, 402-03, 431, 465, 517) In other words, rather than staring with the premise that the terms of a dichotomy are ontologically independent and discrete entities, he begins with the premise that the terms or poles form an integral whole from the start. That is to say that place and implaced fit together as a whole that only subsequently are differentiated, abstracted and articulated as distinct things. But that whole itself, qua whole, cannot be articulated because it embraces the very process of articulation. For physical things, the force field would be their *place*. Once they are objectified as objects of consciousness, their place would be the field of consciousness (*ishiki no ba* 意識の場) serving as the matrix for the interrelations of phenomena and acts of consciousness. That field of consciousness is termed “relative nothing” (*sōtai mu* 相対無) in that it is in relation to those objectified beings that it determines.[[28]](#endnote-28) Once our focus of attention shifts from the object of consciousness to its (epistemological) subject, consciousness itself becomes objectified to be potentially determined as a grammatical subject of the statement, “I think X.” This is also why for Nishida consciousness is only a relative nothing or an oppositional nothing (*tairitsuteki mu* 対立的無), but not the absolute nothing. Consciousness itself is determined and contextualized upon a further receding background, the concreteness of which is no longer objectifiable. The ultimate unobjectifiable and unsayable horizon would be the holistic situation that precedes the subject-object dichotomy and serves to root and envelop it along with all oppositions. That holistic situation is the absolute nothing or true nothing (*shin no mu* 真の無). (Z3 424, 432)

Nishida qualifies the term “nothing” here with “absolute” (*zettai* 絶対) to convey the sense that it is free of — in the sense of being cut-off from — (*zetsu-* 絶) opposition (*-tai* 対). This is similar to how the Western term *absolute* has its etymological meaning in the sense of being *absolved* of anything that would relativize it. The point is that there is no longer anything beyond to delimit it, to oppose it, or to determine it since there is no more “outside.” Absolute nothing is undelimited, undetermined, and in that sense *no-thing*. Beings are all *within* its embracing context. Nishida calls it “the place of true nothing” (*shin no mu no basho* 真の無の場所) or “the place of absolute nothing” (*zettai mu no basho* 絶対無の場所) (See Z3 467, 482), as it is the ever-implicit horizonless horizon that contextualizes and makes possible every determination of being as well as their negation, i.e., the basic opposition between being and non-being. What Nishida means by *place* (*basho*) here, at its most concrete level, eludes positive description. As it slips from any attempt to make it into a subject of judgment, one cannot state that it *is* or *is not*. In other words, it cannot be predicated as *being* or *not being*. (Z3 424, 503) Rather, it is that which must be presupposed by any such utterance, as that which makes room for those things determined, enveloping them as their place. (See Z3 415, 421) Eluding both the ontological (what pertains to being) and the meontological (what pertains to the negation of being), while encompassing both being and non-being and permitting their very opposition, we might characterize this place as *anontological*.[[29]](#endnote-29) But this negativity is simultaneously the positivity of its self-determination that inverts its nothingness into being. As a nothing, the only attribute it can have is negation. The absolute nothing is perpetually involved in the act of negating itself, whereby it gives birth to beings within itself as its own self-determinations. The nothing negates itself to give rise to beings. Or put differently, the undifferentiated differentiates itself into the many. In other words, Nishida is arguing that its creativity is a consequence of its negativity. As a living creativity, the place of nothing is thus *self*-forming. It forms itself into those beings it environs. Beings are thus expressions of this nothing in its self-forming formlessness. We can see that by “true nothing” or “absolute nothing” here Nishida does not mean a literal nothingness. Like the Mahāyānists before him, he wants to avoid any nihilistic tendency just as much as he wants to avoid reifying being. But as such it is also the dimension where one encounters in the depths of one’s self the existential nullity environing and finitizing one’s being. That is to say that when one intuits the absolute nothing mirroring itself in the abysmal depths of one’s self-awareness, one sees a contradiction inherent to one’s existence. The contradiction is of being and non-being, or life and death. Nishida’s point seems to be that one is *not necessarily* being *nor necessarily* non-being, but rather finite and contingent. One lives a precarious existence. He calls the concrete place of this intuition, “the place of generation-and-extinction” (*shōmetsu no basho* 生滅の場所) (Z3 423), borrowing the latter term from Japanese Buddhism wherein it had been used to refer to the Indian concept of *samsāra*, the “wheel of birth-and-death,” or more generally to refer to impermanence. In other words, one intuits in the absolute nothing one’s non-substantiality preceding the bifurcation of ideal and real, self and world. One’s self is constituted out of the absolute nothing to face the world. It is the place of an amorphous nothing that opens the space for things — including one’s self –- determined and differentiated from one another.

Nishida views judgments to be articulations or amplifications, even abstractions, of a fundamental (self-)intuition (*chokkan* 直観) of that primal non-duality, the place of absolute nothing, in its self-differentiating self-mirroring self-awareness. He characterizes that intuition in terms of the self-seeing of the absolute nothing, explaining its self-formation as a self-mirroring that occurs within the abysmal depths of each of our individual selves. But since what lies there is unobjectifiable and undeterminable, its seeing is a “seeing without seer” (*mirumono nakushite miru* 見るもの無くしてみる) (Z3 255). Nishida explains that “to see the self itself… [means] to see that the self seen disappears, that the self becomes absolutely nothing. Hence we conceive of the true self to be where we have truly forgotten the self itself.”[[30]](#endnote-30) (Z4 297) In other words, true self-awareness is not simply of the individual self, but of the absolute nothing seeing itself by mirroring itself within the individual. It means simultaneously the self-awareness of the place of absolute nothing *and* our own self-awareness of the nothingness of our selves.[[31]](#endnote-31) In addition to being the ultimate contextual horizon or place, the nothing for Nishida then has the character of seeing or awareness.[[32]](#endnote-32) The non-distinction of the nothing includes the non-duality of mind and matter, or seeing and formation. In the following years Nishida moves to characterize this self-seeing in terms of the “self-determination of the universal” (*ippansha no jikogentei* 一般者の自己限定) or “the self-aware determination of the nothing” (*mu no jikakuteki gentei* 無の自覚的限定). In the 1930’s he further developed this notion in terms of the self-determination of the world (*sekai no jikogentei* 世界の自己限定). And by the 1940s, he returned full circle to the notion of a self-mirroring self-awareness with the sense of the world’s self-mirroring in each individual as its microcosmic mirror.

***The Dialectic of the World (1930s)***

Nishida became aware of a problem in his own characterization of the place of absolute nothing as the transcendent predicate pole, and this spurred a shift in his attention to the outer world. His focus on the predicate corresponds to his focus on the pole of subjectivity, or, in metaphysical terms, the focus on the universal or the ideal. Some of his contemporaries thus criticized him for ignoring the real world of historical events and concrete individuals. The tendency in his theory of place formulated in the late 1920s was towards some sort of idealism or subjectivism, harboring the potential for misunderstanding the place of absolute nothing as a universal substance hidden in the depths of transcendental subjectivity.[[33]](#endnote-33) Nishida thus wanted to show the concrete reality of the absolute nothing as it manifests itself in historical events. His solution was to conceive of the place of nothing as the very *medium* for the interaction between subject and predicate, individual and universal, object and subject. And that medium is the world. To avoid falling into idealism or subjectivism, Nishida turned his attention 180 degrees from the standpoint of consciousness that looks within, to the standpoint of the world that looks outward. The content — the nondual nothing — remains the same. But he unfolds its significance beyond the epistemological or judicative framework to speak of *place* more explicitly as the contextual whole of what he calls the “dialectical world” (*benshōhōteki sekai* 弁証法的世界), that is, a world consisting of — and constituted by — interrelationships and unfolding historically through these interrelations. Within this world we interact with one another and with the environment to take part in the world’s self-formation.

Nishida initiates this move in his 1932 *Mu no jikakuteki gentei* (『無の自覚的限定』; *The Self-Aware Determination of the Nothing*) wherein the self, instead of being privileged, is analyzed in its relation with its *other* in the “I-thou” (*watashi to nanji* 私と汝) relationship operating in co-determination with the environing socio-historical world (*shakaiteki rekishiteki sekai* 社会的歴史的世界). The absolute nothing as manifest in the world envelops “I and thou” as their ultimate context of contexts necessary for their meaningful interaction. And yet precisely as that context, sinking into the background, it escapes intelligibility or appropriation. In this regard Nishida calls it the “absolute other” (*zettai ta* 絶対他). In other words the absolute nothing that negates each individuality qua substance is *also* the absolute other in that it cannot be rendered into a subject of a statement. Alterity in this sense is paradoxically non-duality. In other words, the nondual nothing uncovered within the interiority of the self is nondual with the world’s own abysmal ground. Having taken this move, Nishida thus follows the unfolding of the absolute nothing from the side of the historical world throughout the 1930s. With this shift from the inner to the outer, the self-formation of the formless that was described earlier in terms of the self-seeing or the self-awareness of the absolute nothing within the self takes on a world-historical significance as unfolding in the events of the world. Moreover this is described in a conspicuously dialectical manner as that which involves the interrelationships and interactivities of individuals. In turn, Nishida views the acting individuals as participating in the world’s self-determination. And since that world of determinations is ultimately founded upon the nothing, “seeing without a seer” now becomes “determination without a determiner” (*genteisurumono naki gentei* 限定するものなき限定) (Z7 8, Z8 9), another way of rendering the “forming of the formless.” The nothing as such is the ultimate context of the world as the dialectical medium (*benshōhōteki baikaisha* 弁証法的媒介者) wherein individuals interact. In other words, the nothing serves as an open space for the interactivities and relations of individuals that in their dialectic constitutes the world. This concentration on the dialectical world becomes pronounced in his 1933-34 *Tetsugaku no konpon mondai* (『哲学の根本問題』; *Fundamental Problems of Philosophy*), whereby the place of absolute nothing that in 1926 was a predicate place (*jutsugoteki basho* 述語的場所) discovered in the depths of the self now opens up as a place of mediation (*baikaiteki basho* 媒介的場所), relating man and world.[[34]](#endnote-34)

As Nishida unfolds the dialectic of the world during this period, one important feature of the dialectical world that he highlights is the pervasive function of mutual self-negation (*jiko hitei* 自己否定) that permits relationships and interdeterminations in general. In the dialectic between organism (or life: *seimei* 生命) and environment (*kankyō* 環境) in his *Ronri to seimei* (「論理と生命」; “Logic and Life”) of 1936, for example, the environment conditions the individual, and conversely the individual acts upon the environment to alter those conditions. Each negates the other for the sake of self-affirmation. (Z8 58) And yet Nishida points out that such negation of the other cannot happen without *self*-negation. One must also negate one’s self vis-à-vis the conditions delimiting one’s state of being. In order to get from point A to point E, one must traverse the terrain of points B, C, and D even if one does not want to. In terms of relationships, that is to say that in order to receive, one must give. In order to enjoy the joys of friendship or intimacy one must be willing to sacrifice one’s self to a certain degree. We may recall how in Mahāyāna Buddhism, the co-dependent origination of things means the emptiness of their *own* (independent) being. Likewise for Nishida the co-relative determination of things involves their mediation through mutual self-negation. (See Z8 19) Otherwise, their mutual independence (i.e., self-assertion) would obstruct their relationship. Mutual self-negation inverts independence into interdependence and correlativity (Z8 13) to enable self-determination and hence self-affirmation. Paradoxically we cannot determine ourselves without being determined by others, we cannot affirm ourselves without negating ourselves. Nishida calls such negation of negation that de-substantializes negation itself (a self-negation that negates a one-sided negation of the other), “absolute negation” (*zettai hitei* 絶対否定). Such self-negation occurs not only on the part of individuals, but also on the part of the universal embracing them. Nishida means by “universal” (*ippansha* 一般者), in this context, the world. The universal as the world, instead of asserting itself over the individuals it embraces, negates itself to make room for the interrelationships and interactivities of individuals. As we mentioned above, what he means by universal qua world then is an extension of his earlier concept of place (*basho*). And at the same time, as it makes room for the individuals, the universal is differentiating itself into these individuals. (See Z8 13, 91)[[35]](#endnote-35) Through such self-negation, the one becomes the many to establish a world of individuals. But Nishida also calls the universal in this function “the dialectical universal” (*benshōhōteki ippansha* 弁証法的一般者) because the world is constituted by the complex interrelationships of its individuals. It historically unfolds through these interrelations involving mutual self-negation in manifold directions: amongst individuals and between universal and individuals.

The entire dialectic involves a complex *chiasma* of vertical and horizontal lines of interrelations: the self-negation of the dialectical universal on the vertical plane, making room for the many individuals, simultaneously means the mutual self-negation among individuals on the horizontal level. And in turn that mutual self-negation among individuals constitutes the universal (qua world). What this means is that the self-determination of the universal is at the same time the self- and mutual determination of individuals within the world. Self-negation mediates the dialectic on all levels, as a dialectic of, within, and upon the nothing as its place. The dialectic on all levels is made possible through mutual self-negation and implacement within the absolute nothing. One could also say that the self-negation of each term is therefore the activity or process of the place of true nothing as the non-substantial medium of the worldly sphere. Through self-negation, the absolute nothing ontologizes itself, affirms itself, into beings. The world thus is the self-formation of the formless.

***Religion and Self-Awareness (1940s)***

Coming full circle from the dialectic of the world, Nishida later returned to his concept of self-awareness. In 1943 (*Jikaku nit suite* 「自覚について」； “On Self-Awareness”) he discusses the world’s self-formation in terms of the world’s own self-awareness and states, “when the world is self-aware, our self is self-aware; when our self is self-aware, the world is self-aware. Each of our self-aware selves are contextual centers of the world.” (Z9 528) Moreover, during the 1940s, his notion of self-awareness came to possess an explicitly “religious” significance in a Nishidian sense. This is so especially in his final essay, *Bashoteki ronri to shūkyōteki Sekaikan* (「場所的論理と宗教的世界観」; “The Logic of Place and the Religious Worldview”) of 1945, where he speaks of the absolute nothing in terms of “the absolute one” (*zettaisha* 絶対者) or the creator God (*kami* 神) who relates to the world through kenotic self-negation. In this final essay, Nishida applies Suzuki Daisetsu’s logic of *soku-hi* or “is/is not” (*sokuhi no ronri* 即非の論理)[[36]](#endnote-36)to his understanding of God in order to explain the meaning of the absolute (*zettai*). Nishida claims that God’s self-identity as a true absolute is mediated by absolute negation in a dialectic expressed by the *soku-hi* logic of the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtras*.[[37]](#endnote-37) (Z10 333) An utterly transcendent God without reference or relation to anything else, that is independent in self-identity, is no true God. Yet the absolute by definition cannot stand opposed to anything that would relativize it. Standing unopposed, the *absolute* — in its etymology as Nishida already noted in the 1920s (and as we discussed above) — is beyond all opposition (*zetsu-tai* 絶-対), *ab-solved*, cut-off (*zetsu* 絶) from all opposition (*tai* 対) from without. In being opposed by nothing, God is absolute being (*zettai yū* 絶対有), but in being undelimited by anything, God is the absolute nothing (*zettai mu* 絶対無). The absolute thus possesses the contradictory self-identity (*mujunteki jikodōitsu* 矛盾的自己同一) of being and nothing. (See Z10 315-16, 335) Nishida’s God here is thus a dialectical God. Undetermined by anything, its determination occurs only through *self*-negation. Through self-negation, it contains all oppositions within. As an “immanent transcendence” (*naizaiteki chōetsu* 内在的超越), the absolute perpetually negates itself in self-inversion to make-room for co-relative and finite beings. Its nothingness is the background for the foreground of beings. Nishida takes this to be the true meaning of *agape* and *kenosis* in Christianity.[[38]](#endnote-38) In other words, Nishida interprets what in Christianity is God’s self-giving love that embraces the world and God’s self-emptying that redeems the world in his own terms. He understands them in terms of his own notion of the absolute nothing that negates itself to give rise to the world of many and at the same time envelops those many individuals as their place.

In Nishida’s philosophical development, we thus witness the turn from interiority to exteriority and a re-turn back to the inner dimensions of the self. In the interior depths of the self, where one encounters the abysmal nothing that deconstructs any sense of self-sufficient or self-righteous egoity, one meets God, the absolute. The absolute is encountered only in utter self-negation, ego-death. (See Z10 315, 325; Z13 235) Self-negation in this case means the awareness of one’s finitude or powerlessness, a recognition of sin or evil within one’s self. This amounts to self-awareness of an interior contradiction that culminates in the self’s “vanishing point” (*shōshitsuten* 消失点) (Z10 356), birthing what Nishida calls the “religious mind” (*shūkyōshin* 宗教心) (Z10 312-13). This is equivalent to the realization of the nothing in the depths of one’s self in self-awareness. In this realization one dies to one’s ego — the self believed to be a self-subsistent entity — in what Nishida calls the self’s “eternal death” (*eien no shi* 永遠の死). And in this process, the true self — the self that has awakened to the nothing from which it emerged, the self as non-substantial — is authenticated in its finite existence. Nishida equates this realization with what Zen calls “seeing into one’s nature” (*kenshō*見性). (Z10 352-53) Nishida repeatedly quotes Dōgen’s (道元) statement from the *Genjōkōan* (「現成公案」) that “to study the Buddha way is to study the self; to study the self means to forget the self; and to forget the self means to be authenticated by the ten thousand *dharmas*.” (Z10 336; see also Z8 512, 514; Z10 326) Nishida finds such “religious” self-awareness evident not only in Dōgen’s Zen but in the True Pure Land (*Jōdoshin* 浄土真) Buddhist idea of relying on other-power (*tariki* 他力) as well. (Z8 514) In both Dōgen’s “forgetting oneself” and Shinran’s (親鸞) “relying on other-power,” one discovers true self-identity in self-negation. And in such self-negating self-awareness — awareness of one’s contingency, conditionality, non-substantiality — one faces one’s ultimate *other*, the absolute. (See Z10 314-15) In the death of ego and owning up to finitude, one realizes one’s true nature as the self-negation of the absolute, a mirror image of God. In other words, one realizes that one is sustained as being through the self-negating act of the absolute nothing that perpetually gives rise to the world of beings, which translated theistically means the self-seeing of God.[[39]](#endnote-39) Nishida thus understands “salvation” to be an event of co-respondence of self-negation on the part of finite and infinite, relative and absolute, man and God: self-doubt and ego-death on the part of the saved, and sacrifice on the part of the savior. Just as the dialectic of individual and world developed through the 1930s was predicated upon mutual self-negation, here the dialectic of religious encounter operates through the mutual self-negation of man and absolute — what he now calls their inverse correspondence (*gyakutaiō* 逆対応). In Christian terms, God meets man in kenotic grace symbolized in the figure of Christ (i.e., God’s incarnation and death as man), and man meets God in his own death (and thus resurrection). (See Z10 325-26) Nishida discovers the same motif in the Pure Land notion of Amida’s infinite compassion (*jihi* 慈悲) expressed in his vow to save all, including the most sinful, and man’s corresponding faith in Amida’s vow expressed in *nenbutsu* (念仏).[[40]](#endnote-40) (See Z10 345) Nishida thus takes these religious doctrines to be sectarian expressions acknowledging our existential implacement within a non-substantiality that has some sort of sacred significance.[[41]](#endnote-41) Inverse correspondence is thus predicated a-symmetrically — in the mutual fit between place and implaced — upon the absolute’s own nature as a de-substantializing nothing. Religiosity for Nishida means the realization of that implacement or non-substantiality.

**Concluding Remarks**

Let me provide here a short summary of Nishida’s philosophical development before discussing the final picture of his thought. Nishida had begun his analysis of reality by looking inward into the depths of the self, which in 1911 led him to his notion of pure experience and in the 1920s led him to the notion of the absolute will. Both, in preceding the subject-object distinction, were characterized in terms of a nothing. Moreover that same non-distinction on the cosmic scale was identified with the source of the universe of many. With the formulation of his theory of place in 1926 he was able to reconceive this in terms of a place of absolute nothing that differentiates itself to encompass the manifold it implaces. While his discussion of place in 1926 was still focused on the realm of consciousness that gives rise to cognition and permits the subject-object relationship, in the 1930s he turns his attention to the external world. He focuses on the world and its dialectical structure encompassing the interactivities of individuals and takes the latter to be the self-differentiation — or self-negation —of the place of absolute nothing into the manifold. And then in his final essay of 1945 he connects this theory of place qua world-dialectic with the religious or existential themes borrowed from Christianity and Buddhism. But running through all of these phases is the motif of the nothing (*mu*) indicating the primal undifferentiatedness or non-distinction that precedes and gives rise to the many. Moreover the absolute nothing as such is often identified with, or its term used interchangeably, with God, the true self, and, after 1930, the world or at least its ground. Hence it seems to have an overall significance for Nishida as the primal reality in a variety of levels.

The final picture that Nishida leaves us of his concept of the nothing is inseparable from his philosophy of place (*basho*). We might summarize Nishida’s mature standpoint as involving a multi-layered structuring or horizon of meaning that constitutes an environment wherein one finds oneself *always already*. Each particular horizon — a place — in being itself limited, implies a “beyond” that constitutes its condition.[[42]](#endnote-42) The “beyond” of each horizon implies further horizons as the ultimate horizon continually recedes into the dark and the unknowable. That indeterminable determining condition is what Nishida calls *mu* (nothing). And yet to acknowledge it, is itself an act of “self-awareness” (*jikaku*) since it is one’s deepest non-substantiality. Especially in his last writing this is shown to have a kind of religious significance.[[43]](#endnote-43) In his attempt to construct a complete system of self-awareness that would surmount the gap of Kantian dualism, Nishida had ingeniously allowed for the impossibility of its completion as an aspect integral to his account.[[44]](#endnote-44) Nishida’s theory of place is then an attempt to construct a theoretical system that is inherently irreducible to thought in virtue of its unreifiable concrete source, the un/ground or nothing, an open horizon. That place of absolute nothing in his philosophical works after 1930 takes on the significance of a *trans-temporal* and *trans-spatial* space, enfolding and unfolding its dialectic. Our being-in-the-world involves our implacement within the world that, in turn, is implaced within that open horizon or what he calls a “sphere without periphery.”[[45]](#endnote-45) The absolute nothing designates that abyss wherein self, world, and beings are implaced and unfold in mutual distinction as the self-differentiation of the nothing itself — a primal sphere preceding the bifurcations between ideal and real, experience and reality, subjective and objective. At the same time, it is the most concrete level of human awareness-*cum*-existence, where life meets death and from which we emerge in birth and into which we sink in death. For Nishida to intuit this nothing in one’s depths — a seeing where there is neither seer nor seen — is to be self-aware of one’s selflessness, a self-realization as the nothing from out of which one’s self is constituted to face the world in self-differentiation.

Questions have been raised, however, whether the way in which Nishida treats this nothing (*mu*) as the absolute — even if groundless — ground implies a form of substantialism or harbors a tendency towards its substantialization, or at least the danger of its being misunderstood in such terms as some sort of a metaphysical substance. Nishida had criticized the philosophies of the West as “philosophies of being [*yū*],” founded upon the groundless assumption of metaphysical principles. But some of his contemporaries[[46]](#endnote-46) suggest that Nishida’s notion of the nothing carries the danger of becoming a new metaphysical principle in its own right or being reduced to another form of “being.” Does the nothing that was to negate every metaphysical principle in the end turn out to be a new metaphysical principle?[[47]](#endnote-47) This concern especially applies to his view during the late 1920s when he first formulated his philosophy of place. Amongst the paired opposites of subject-predicate, particular-universal, object-subject, the nothing was generally taken to lie on the latter side. The place of nothing as the transcendent predicate pole was to be reached through introspection into the depths of consciousness. But the consequence was that it could easily be mistaken for some sort of a universal substance belonging to a quasi-Platonist ideal realm, some sort of a static and eternal being transcending the world of change.[[48]](#endnote-48) As we already discussed above, Nishida was not unaware of this issue and attempted to clarify the dynamic function of the nothing by underscoring its endless self-negation that constitutes the manifold in a radicalized dialectic of the world beyond the subjective realm but immanent to the world itself. And yet some may still find a metaphysical tendency lingering in the explicitly “religious” character of his final essay — with its use of ontic notions like the absolute one (*zettaisha*) or God (*kami*).

To be fair to Nishida, however, we need to remember that for him this “religious” character means the very opposite of a substantialism in that it involves de-substantialization (i.e., self-negation). What I find particularly interesting in Nishida is his development of the notion of place and of nothing as a space that encompasses oppositions and distinctions and his analysis of human existence in those terms. His general theory of a place of nothing escapes the charge of substantialism. If a substance is something distinct and discrete with its own properties, Nishida’s absolute nothing is non-substantial in its non-distinction and amorphousness. The non-distinction is such that it even escapes categorization as being or its opposite, non-being. This is why he used the designation “absolute nothing,” while he called the opposite of being, “relative nothing” in the sense that it is *relative to*, opposed to, being. So whenever he speaks of “God” or the “absolute one,” we need to keep in mind this qualification that he means the absolute nothing. And intrinsic to Nishida’s notion of absolute nothing is its movement of negating all apparent being, substance, principle, ground. Moreover in self-negation, that negation encompasses and negates the opposite of being as well. What Nishida means by absolute nothing then is truly abysmal; it cannot be reduced to either being or its opposite, non-being. We might underscore this aspect in Nishida’s thought as what escapes any reductive tendency. The Greek term for Aristotle’s substance, *ousia* (οὐσία), is also the abstract noun form for the verb *einai* (εἶναι), “to be.” In contrast to Aristotelian *ontology* that is an *ousiology*, a “logic of substance,” Nishida’s “logic of place” (*basho no ronri* 場所の論理), one might argue, is an *an-ontology*. By *anontology* I am referring to Nishida’s structure of double negation that negates both being and non-being. To use Greek terminology, Nishida’s place of absolute nothing enfolds and unfolds both *on* (being) and its opposite, *mēon* (non-being). In Japanese this would be *yū* (being) and *sōtai mu* (relative nothing). The Greek *anon* in *anontology* thus refers to what Nishida calls *zettai mu* or “absolute nothing” as what is reducible to neither *on* nor *mēon* while enveloping them as their place (*basho*).[[49]](#endnote-49) Nishida’s absolute nothing is the anontological place embracing the *chiasma* that unfolds being and non-being — as the very space making contradictory and oppositional relations possible in the first place. As such, it perpetually slips away from any principle or law of contradiction that would reduce it to exclusively being or non-being.[[50]](#endnote-50)

To recapitulate, by “true nothing” or “absolute nothing,” Nishida does not mean that there is literally nothing existing. Nishida wanted to avoid any nihilistic tendency that would reify negation into utter nothingness. To him, nothing signifies the fundamental non-duality of reality that is the most concrete and immediate in experience. It is at the same time undelimitable, indeterminable, unobjectifiable in its undifferentiatedness — reducible neither to the merely material nor to the merely ideal, neither to being nor to non-being, and preceding any sort of dichotomy. As the ultimate place it *enfolds* all, and as a self-forming formlessness it *unfolds* all, determining and mirroring itself — through endless self-negations — in the *manifold*. In that capacity as an all-encompassing amorphous place it gives rise to things (i.e., objects) through self-determination and to awareness (i.e., subjects) through self-mirroring. The absolute nothing as such is non-dual with being, in non-differentiation prior to its self-determination in beings. Nishida’s move in a certain sense then takes off from the Mahāyāna notion of the middle path or the emptiness of emptiness (*śūnyatāyāh śūnyatā*) that avoids the reductive extremes of utter nothing in nihilism (*uccheda*) and of substantial being in eternalism (*śāśvata*). But he develops this into his own creative position in a stance that Ueda Shizuteru has called a “dynamic non-foundationalist multi-dimensionalism”[[51]](#endnote-51) and what I call *anontology*.

Today when worlds are merging into one big mega-world under the phoneomenon of globalization, when we find ourselves prone to fall into conflict amidst the confusion of this phenomenon, it may do us well to lend an ear to Nishida’s non-foundationalist and multi-dimensional anontology that refuses the reificiation or hypostatization of positions as well as nihilism. The acknowledgment of an absolute nothing that opens a space for our being-in-the-world and interbeing, reminds us of our finitude and contingency, the fragility our being in its very concreteness. It encourages humility vis-à-vis the *other*. It calls us to bear in mind the indefinite and irreducible expanse of the nothing, *wherein we all are* in *co-implacement* amidst mutual *difference* — a place we must share.

1. All references to Nishida Kitarō’s works are from the latest edition of *Nishida Kitarō zenshū* [Collected Works of Nishida Kitarō], multiple volumes (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 2002~). They will be identified in the text with a Z followed by the volume number and page number. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See Kosaka Kunitsugu, *Nishida Kitarō no shisō* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 2003), p. 56). Another ancient Greek example that Nishida raises is Parmenides, whose notion of *the* *one* was nothing but *being* itself. (See Z6 336) [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. It also does not help when some contemporary scholars continue to perpetuate this sort of simplistic cultural dichotomy. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Aside from the Presocratics, we might cite a variety of other post-Greco examples, e.g., the medieval mystical notion of God or Godhead/Godhood as a *nothing* that exceeds the bounds of being, as in Meister Eckhart; or Heidegger’s thinking of being/nothing; or Castoriadis’ notion of a non-theistic creation of the world *ex nihilo* with nihility understood as chaos. These would all pose a challenge to the East-West dichotomy that Nishida posits. Nishida however was at least not unaware of the medieval mystics of the Western tradition as he often refers to them. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. On this see Kosaka, *Nishida Kitarō no shisō*, pp.60-61. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Chan is the Chinese word for what in Japanese is *Zen*. The term *Zen* (禅), which has come to be used in common parlance to designate this particular form of Mahāyāna Buddhism that emerged in China, is in fact the Japanese pronunciation of the Chinese word *Chan*. In other words, *Zen* is the Japanese transliteration of the Chinese *Chan*, which in turn was the shortened Chinese transliteration of the Sanskrit *dhyāna* and Pali *jhāna*. Originally it referred to certain states of meditative consciousness but came to mean simply meditation. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. A *kōan* (Ch. *gongan* 公安) is a kind of a riddle or puzzle used in Zen for practitioners to meditate on, formulated in a way that intellectual reasoning alone cannot solve. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Notice that the word *mu* (Ch. *wu*) appears in the title of this collection as well. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. According to Nagatomo’s reading (Shigenori Nagatomo, "Japanese Zen Buddhist Philosophy," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2010 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2010/entries/japanese-zen/>), the sense of “no(thing)” in Joshū’s reply here is predicated upon the transcendence of the very “either/or” distinction between being and non-being or yes and no. We might add that it thus points to a non-distinction that grounds such distinctions in the first place. At least that is the direction in which Nishida’s own understanding of “nothing” (*mu*) in terms of what he calls the “absolute nothing” (*zettai mu*) — absolute in that it is not relative to being — will unfold. But I should point out that the interpretation of this *kōan* has been a matter of debate and there are many different readings. Another way to read it, for example, is to take “no” as a rejection of the very question as not applicable. There are also other versions of the dialogue itself, one in which Zhaozhōu answers “yes”! Needless to say, this compounds the issue of the true meaning and intent behind the original story. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. This certainly should not be taken to mean that Nishida was therefore a Zen master. The Rinzai Zen tradition, in which he trained, generally uses this *kōan* in the beginning stages of seekers. Once passing this *kōan* Nishida was given other *kōans* to grapple. And in fact Nishida makes it clear in his diary that he was somewhat dissatisfied with the confirmation received from his Zen teacher of his passing the *kōan*. On this see Michiko Yusa, *Zen and Philosophy: An Intellectual Biography of Nishida Kitaro* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2002), p. 72ff. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Thus in Japanese for example, the same graph which means “being” when pronounced *yū* can also mean “to have” when taking on an additional phonetic ending and pronounced *yūsuru* 有する. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. See A.C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China* (Chicago & LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1989) p. 411. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. On this see Lothar Knauth, “Life is Tragic—The Diary of Nishida Kitarō,” *Monumenta Nipponica* vol. 20, no. 3/4 (1965), pp. 335-358, p. 349). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. See Reinhard May, *Heidegger’s Hidden Sources: East Asian Influences on His Work*, trans. Graham Parkes (London & NYC: Routledge,1996, 1989), p. 32. May here cites Morohashi Tetsuji, *Dai kan-wa jiten* [Chinese-Japanese dictionary], 13 vols., (Tokyo, 1986), entry no. 19113, also 49188, 15783, 15514. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. The *Heart Sutra*’s point was that things with materiality or physical form (*rūpa*) arise in dependence on a variety of factors and hence are empty (*śūnya*) of their *own* *being* (*svabhāva*). This idea led to Nāgārjuna’s famous equation of emptiness and dependent origination. The stance becomes understood throughout the Mahāyāna tradition in a variety of ways but generally as a middle stance that refuses to reify reality into fully independent and unchanging essences but on the other hand also refuses to postulate that reality is therefore totally illusory or utterly nothing. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. See David Dilworth, “Nishida Kitarō: Nothingness as the Negative Space of Experiential Immediacy,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* vol. XIII, no. 4 (December 1973), p. 474; and *The Awakening of Faith Attributed to Aśvaghosha*, trans. Yoshito S. Hakeda (NYC: Columbia University Press, 1967), pp. 42f. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. The latter is in a letter in the old edition of Nishida’s *Zenshū* (*Collected Works*), vol. 19 (Tokyo: Iwanami, 1980), p. 90. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. See Hermann Lotze, *Drei Bücher: Vom Denken, Vom Untersuchen, und Vom Erkennen* (Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1874, 1838); English: *Logic in Three Books: Of Thought, Of Investigation, and Of Knowledge*, trans. Bernard Bosanquet (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1888). Also see his *Metaphysik: Drei Bücher der Ontologie, Kosmologie und Psychologie* (Peipzig: S. Hirzel, 1879), e.g., p. 27; English: *Metaphysic in Three Books: Ontology, Cosmology, and Psychology*, 2 vols., trans. Bernard Bosanquet (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1887), p. 32. Or from the Baden school of Neo-Kantianism, see Heinrich Rickert, *Der Gegenstand der Erkenntnis: Einführung in die Transzendentalphilosophie* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1928), pp. ix, 232, 274, 300. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. See Emil Lask, *Die Logik der Philosophie und die Kategorienlehre* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1911), pp. 33-34, 55, 70, 98-99, 192, 215ff; and his *Die Lehre vom Urteil* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1912), p. 127. Emil Lask serves as a bridge between Neo-Kantianism and phenomenology and interestingly also had a profound influence on Heidegger. Unfortunately he died prematurely in combat during the First World War. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. *Hylomorphism* refers to the relationship between matter (Grk. *hylē* ὑλη) and form (Grk. *morphē* μορφή). In Neo-Kantian epistemology the matter is sensible material, the entity that can be predicated as *being*. And the form is validity, which gives meaning or intelligibility to what is (the entity, being). The two terms (*hylē* and *morphē*) come from Aristotle, but one might trace the idea of their dichotomy to Plato, who however spoke in terms of *chōra* and *idea*. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. See the final section where I discuss what I mean by *anontology*. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Eckhart himself characterized what he meant by *Gottheit* as a “nothing” (*Nichts*) or a “desert” that precedes the personal creator God. Meister Eckhart (c.1260-c.1327) and Jakob Böhme (1575-1624) were both German mystics. While Eckhart lived before the Protestant Reformation, Böhme belonged to the Lutheran tradition. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Aside from the above-mentioned mystics, Nishida refers to all sorts of Christian thinkers throughout his oeuvre, ranging from St. Paul Augustine, Luther, Montaigne, Pascal, Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, Barth, and Tillich among others. It is known that during his period of Zen practice, he was also an avid reader of the *Gospels*. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (NYC: Random House, 1966), p. 89, §146. Altered translation. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Fichte’s notion of *Tathandlung* (fact-act) designates the originary pre-reflective self-determining act of the I, accompanied by its intellectual intuition, which grounds immediate consciousness. On this see J.G. Fichte, *Science of Knowledge*, ed. & trans. Peter Heath and John Lachs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982, 1970), pp. 38, 41. This coupling in Fichte of an originary self-positing act with intellectual intuition also provides the seed for Nishida’s later notion of acting-intuition. But in *Jikaku ni okeru chokkan to hansei*, Nishida interprets *Tathandlung*, under the influence of the Neo-Kantian Rickert, in terms of an “ought” (*Sollen*) that precedes being (*aru* ある; “to be”), that is, it precedes the product of differentiation. Here we need to keep in mind that the Neo-Kantians took the *ought* not merely ethically but in logical terms to mean validity. But Nishida, collapsing the distinction between the logical and the ontological, also argues that “*is* and *ought* are two aspects of one experience.” (Z2 46-47) That is, one intuits at the same time one’s own existence (being) and one’s self-identity in the judgment “I = I.” Here self-identity is the *ought* that *logically grounds* the former in the distinction of thinker and thought. (Z2 45-46) [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Of these Schopenhauer was probably the biggest influence, although Nishida refers to the others as well. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. I use the spelling *implacement* as opposed to *emplacement* although both forms of spelling can be found in scholarly works. I use this spelling because I first became aware of the concept in that spelling in the late 1990s while reading Ed Casey’s *Fate of Place: A Philosophical History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997). [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. This is perhaps akin to how Jean-Paul Sartre conceived consciousness as a nothing in relation to its objects. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. I will discuss what I mean by *anontology* more in the final section. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. This passage reminds one of Dōgen’s statement from his *Genjōkōan* in the *Shōbōgenzō* that “to study the Buddha-way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self…” And indeed Nishida often quotes that passage from Dōgen. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. See Kosaka Kunitsugu, *Nishida Kitarō o meguru tetsugakusha gunzō* (Kyoto: Mineruva shobō, 1997), p. 13. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. See Kosaka, *Nishida Kitarō o meguru tetsugakusha gunzō*, pp. 15, 109. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. On this, see for example, Tanaka Kyūbun, *Nihon no “tetsugaku” o yomitoku: “mu” no jidai o ikinukutameni* (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 2000), pp. 44-45. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Tanaka, p. 54. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. This is Nishida’s development of Hegel’s concrete universal. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. The term *soku-hi* connotes the dialectical inseparability and bi-conditionality between contradictories, i.e., affirmation and negation, *is* and *is-not*, via mutual reference and interdependence, founded upon the Mahāyāna notion of emptiness (i.e., the absence of ontological independence; non-substantiality). Suzuki developed his notion in his own reading of the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtra*s, especially the *Diamond Sūtra*. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. In particular Nishida has in mind the paradoxical formulations of the *Diamond Sūtra*, such as that X is not X, therefore it is X. He was influenced by D.T. Suzuki’s interpretation of this as expressing a particular sort of logic that Suzuki called the logic of *soku-hi*. See the previous note on this topic. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. *Agape* is God’s self-giving love. The term *kenosis*, meaning to empty oneself, appears in Paul’s *Letter to the Phillippians* ch.2, v.6-8: “God [or Christ depending on the reading]… emptied himself [or: made himself nothing], taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.” [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Nishida has in mind here the conception of God of the medieval mystics and negative theologians, for whom God creates the world in order to see himself. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Hence Nishida treats the word “Buddha” as understood by the Pure Land Buddhists, in their worship of Amida Buddha, in much the same way as he understands the Christian “God.” In both cases God or Buddha serves as a personification of the absolute, and it is precisely in that sense that Nishida uses these terms — Buddha and God — interchangeably in his last essay. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Although religious themes — not only Christian but Buddhist as well — become more pronounced, his interest in the Christian God here in itself is nothing new as he also speaks of God in his first philosophical work, *Zen no kenkyū*. Throughout his oeuvre he understands by the word “God” (*kami*) as another way of speaking of the “absolute” (*zettai*) and interprets the God of Christianity accordingly but especially through the mediation of the traditions of mysticism and negative theology. In a letter of the same year (1945) to Suzuki, Nishida says that he is writing this essay to clarify the concept of religion in terms of his “…logic of contradictory self-identity, i.e., the logic of *soku-hi*.” (Z23 348) But he also writes to a student around the same time that with this essay he wants to show what is unique and excellent about Buddhism vis-à-vis Christianity. (Z23 372) One can argue that his discussion of Christian doctrines here falls under the light of Suzuki’s reading of the *Prajñāpāramitā*s along with Nishida’s own concept of contradictory self-identity. (It is also very likely that Suzuki’s own reading of the *Prajñāpāramitā*s were in turn influenced by Nishida’s earlier understanding of contradictory self-identity. In other words, the influence between two friends was a two-way affair.) In any case the fact that in his encounter with Buddhism Nishida brings Christianity into the picture, makes the situation in regard to his stance vis-à-vis Buddhism no simple matter. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Shizuteru Ueda, “Pure Experience, Self-Awareness, Basho,” *Etudes phénoménologiques*, vol. 18 (1993), p. 80. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. The Japanese term *jikaku* (自覚), in addition to “self-awareness,” has the senses of self-realization and self-awakening. We need to keep this in mind when reading his final essay. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. On this and the following, see Yoko Arisaka, “System and Existence: Nishida’s Logic of Place” in Augustine Berque (ed.), *Logique du lieu et dépassement de la modernité* (Brussels: 1999), p. 44. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. For example, Ueda characterizes this in terms of the world’s implacement in an “unrestricted openness.” See Ueda, pp. 78-79. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. A prime example here may be Tanabe Hajime. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. On this see Tanaka 10-11, 65-66. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. See Tanaka, pp. 44-45; Kosaka, *Nishida Kitarō o meguru tetsugakusha gunzō*, p. 111. Also see Tanaka, pp. 65-66 on the following. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. And since *mē* is still a conditional adverb (e.g., “I think *not…*”), the designation *meontology* would not do justice to Nishida’s system of non-system. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. That is to say that for the same reasons it is anontological, it is an-archic (in preceding *archai*, principles)—a point I argue in “Being and Nothing: Towards an Anontology of Anarchy” in *Hegemony and Singularity: The Philosophy of Reiner Schürmann*, eds. Vishwa Adluri & Alberto Martinengo (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, forthcoming). [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. Ueda, p. 67. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)