Beyond Subject and Object:
Language, Thought, and Nishida Kitarō's Philosophical Contribution

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Abstract: This paper explores the interplay between language and thought in Nishida Kitarō's philosophy, particularly how the Japanese language informs his conceptual framework. Nishida's work challenges conventional Western epistemology by proposing an alternative model based on his logic of "place" (*basho* 場所) and "predicate" (*jutsugo* 述語), redefining as such the subject-object relationship. Scholars have observed that the Japanese linguistic structure, with its emphasis on context and predicative logic, plays a crucial role in shaping Nishida's philosophical discourse. This prompts the question of whether his ideas are intrinsically shaped by the features of Japanese or derived from a broader attempt to synthesize Eastern and Western traditions. Through a critical analysis, this paper aims to address this debate, examining the extent to which Nishida's philosophy is limited by language or transcends it. Findings suggest that while Nishida's engagement with the Japanese language significantly influenced his thinking, his philosophical contributions extend beyond linguistic determinism. His framework reveals how cultural, linguistic, and embodied experience coalesce in shaping perception and thought, offering a unique approach to understanding reality that challenges both Western dualism and traditional Eastern metaphysics. The study concludes that Nishida's philosophy not only reinterprets the subject-object divide but also contributes to a more global philosophical discourse.

Keywords: Nishida Kitarō, Japanese philosophy, logic of place, logic of predicate, subject-object dualism

1. Introduction

Numerous studies have examined the profound historical significance of the Meiji era (1868–1912), highlighting Japan's transformation to a modern industrial nation modeled on Western systems. This transformation, driven by the Meiji Restoration and subsequent reforms, led to widespread upheaval and change across all levels of society. The Japanese language, too, underwent significant change, evolving as modern Japanese took shape through the translation of Western concepts. Central to Japan's intellectual modernization, this process involved adopting new terms and adapting existing structures to accommodate Western ideas, resulting in a fusion of Japanese and Western languages that created a dual-layered linguistic structure. Traditional Japanese vocabulary and syntax were retained but integrated with Western concepts at the lexical and conceptual level, particularly in academic and technical fields. This linguistic shift played an

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important role in shaping the intellectual landscape by enabling the articulation of both Eastern and Western ideas. Concurrently, the nineteenth-century intercultural exchange enriched Japan's philosophical tradition by incorporating Western philosophical systems with traditional Eastern perspectives. While Japan's philosophical development had been guided for centuries by the teachings of Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, as well as an inherent ancient sensibility to nature and aesthetics unique to Japan (Nagatomo 2024; Yusa 2017, 5), the Meiji period marked a turning point with the introduction of philosophy as a formal discipline and its foundational ideas.

The Japanese term *Tetsugaku* 哲学 was first introduced by Nishi Amane (1829–1897) during the early Meiji period as part of his efforts to introduce Western philosophical ideas to Japan, serving as a Japanese equivalent of the Western term "philosophy" (Takayanagi 2011, 81; Yusa 2017, 2). Scholarly consensus holds that the Japanese term *Tetsugaku* is understood in four distinct senses; the first involving Japanese scholars using Western methods of philosophy without engaging with Japanese traditions; the second viewing classical Japanese thought, especially Confucianism, as a philosophy independent of European influence; the third applying Western philosophical methods to premodern Japanese thought, blending both Western and Asian intellectual traditions; and the fourth emphasizing a distinctly Japanese approach to philosophy by highlighting unique contributions that distinguish Japanese philosophy from non-Japanese traditions (Dilworth et al. 1998, 19). Thomas Kusalis observes that, unlike Indian or Chinese philosophy, which is heavily based on classical texts and interpretive analysis, Japanese philosophy places greater emphasis on the cultural and social aspects of personal identity, rendering this a central theme in Japanese philosophical discourse (Yusa 2017, 4). By this is meant not that Japanese philosophy lacks traditions of textual interpretation, but rather that its philosophical orientation—especially in modern contexts—tends to prioritize questions of cultural and social understandings of personal identity over classical textual exegesis.

In this context, research indicates that scholars commonly assert the distinctive character of Japanese philosophy, separate from other traditions, and that this is most clearly represented in the thought of Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945) (Yusa 2017, 3). John C. Maraldo (2004, 241) describes Nishida as Japan's first philosopher[1] and notes that his thought fits within the fourth sense of Japanese philosophy, seeking to develop an original Japanese equivalent to modern Western philosophy while uniquely integrating Japanese elements. Additionally, scholars are in broad agreement that Nishida's philosophy is not only characteristic, but that his discourse is notably complex in terms of language usage (Goda 2020, 461; Kobayashi 2015, 1; Morimura 2020, 103).

Then, what exactly is unique about Nishida's use and understanding of language, and how is this reflected in his philosophy? This paper addresses the question and explores the issue in greater depth. By focusing on Nishida's innovative concepts—particularly his notion of "place" (*basho*) and "predicate" (*jutsugo*)—and his interpretation of Western dualism in terms of the subject-object divide, this study examines how Nishida's philosophy offers a distinctive perspective on language, self, and the world.

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1 While Maraldo (2004, 241) highlights Nishida as Japan's first philosopher in a modern, original sense, it is noteworthy that Sōda Kiichirō (1881–1927)—an early colleague of Nishida's and a scholar affiliated with the philosophy department at Kyoto Imperial University—had already recognized the originality of Nishida's thought in his 1926 review article, "*Nishida tetsugaku no hōhō ni tsuite Nishida hakushi no oshie o kou*" [Asking for Dr. Nishida's clarification on the method of Nishidan philosophy] (Yusa 2002, 205). Sōda described Nishida's work as breaking new philosophical ground and coined the term *Nishida tetsugaku* (Nishidan philosophy). Although offering a critique from a Rickertian neo-Kantian perspective, Sōda's engagement stimulated Nishida to clarify his philosophical method and further develop the concept of *basho*.

2. The Interplay between Language and Thought
in Nishida's Philosophy

(1) Nishida Kitarō: Intellectual Development and Philosophical Foundations

The interdependence of language and thought has attracted considerable scholarly attention, with critics such as Hideo Kobayashi observing that numerous Japanese philosophers have overlooked how linguistic characteristics shape philosophical inquiry. Masakatsu Fujita (2004, 460–461) concurs, acknowledging that while philosophy is often regarded as a universal discipline, the language in which philosophy is expressed profoundly influences the understanding of concepts and the nature of philosophical contemplation itself. He further notes that although, for example, figures like Kuki Shūzō (1888–1941) and Nishida Kitarō did not explicitly address the issue of philosophizing in the Japanese language, their ideas and works nevertheless reveal a recognition of the influence of language on philosophical expression. For instance, Kuki's reflections on the cultural significance of language, in his famous work *Iki no kōzō*「いき」の構造 (The Structure of *iki*, 1930), demonstrate an awareness of how language expresses a people's worldview. Similarly, Nishida engaged with the unique features of the Japanese language, especially in his essay *Kokugo no jizaisei* 国語の自在性 (Flexibility of the Japanese Language), where he reflects on its suitability for philosophical expression (Nishida 2003a, 333–334).

Nishida was born in 1870 in Unoke, near Kanazawa, at a time of intense modernization. His intellectual development was deeply shaped by the forces of Westernization and Japan's ongoing efforts to preserve its cultural identity. After completing his studies in philosophy at Tokyo Imperial University, from which he graduated in 1894, Nishida began working as a teacher and was appointed Professor of Philosophy at Kyoto Imperial University in 1914. Following the publication of a range of essays, Nishida's reputation began to spread quickly. His philosophical contributions were recognized for their profound insight and creative approach. More notably, his work was central to the establishment of the Kyoto School of Philosophy (*Kyōto Gakuha* 京都学派),[2] a distinctive intellectual movement that sought to develop a philosophical approach rooted in Japanese culture but still deeply engaged with Western philosophical traditions (Davis 2023).

Nishida's work is typically divided into four distinct periods. The first, spanning from 1911 to 1915, is characterized by a focus on "consciousness" (*ishiki* 意識) and his concept of "pure experience" (*junsui keiken* 純粋経験). The second period, from 1917 to 1923, is centered on key themes such as "self-awareness" (*jikaku* 自覚) and "absolute will" (*zettai ishi* 絶対意思). The third period, from 1924 to 1932, involves the development of his logic of "place" (hereafter, logic of *basho*), and the fourth period, from 1934 to 1945, explores the dialectical unity—where opposing ideas or forces are integrated to form a more complete understanding of reality—of *basho* (Nishida 2012, 7). Scholars concur that during the initial phase (1911–1915) of his philosophy, Nishida drew

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2 Although the term *Kyōto Gakuha* was first used by Tosaka Jun (1900–1945) to highlight what he saw as the ideological functions of the philosophies of Nishida Kitarō and Tanabe Hajime, the School itself emerged informally through the work of Nishida and his intellectual circle at Kyoto Imperial University (Heisig et al. 2011, 877). While Nishida never sought to found a "school" in any formal sense, his philosophical influence shaped successive generations of thinkers who shared a commitment to integrating Western philosophical frameworks with East Asian thought, particularly Mahāyāna Buddhism. Despite internal divergences, members of the Kyoto School were broadly united by a speculative style of philosophy oriented toward the whole of experience, often articulated in terms of absolute nothingness and a critical engagement with modernity (Heisig et al. 2011, 641–644).

his fundamental insights from his extensive and continuous practice of Zen, laying the groundwork for his philosophical investigation (Yusa 2002, xvii–xviii). As such, the fusion of Zen Buddhism and Western Philosophy can be seen as the very essence of his intellectual endeavors. Through his philosophical inquiry, Nishida came to recognize that Western philosophy was inadequate to fully account for the distinct experiences of Japanese values and thought, and sought to develop a framework that would more effectively represent the nature of these experiences (Yusa 2017, 8).

Hence, his broad philosophical focus can be seen as indirectly engaging with the question of what it means to think philosophically in Japanese. On the other hand, Nishida's complex and challenging discourse style often leaves readers bewildered, calling attention to the potential interrelation between linguistic features and philosophical thought. Looking at how scholars have addressed this issue may shed some light on how Nishida's philosophical concepts—especially those tied to place (*basho*) and predicate (*jutsugo*)—interact with his unique use and understanding of language, offering crucial insights into how his ideas transcend conventional philosophical boundaries and challenge Western subject-object dualism.

(2) Language and Thought in Nishida's Philosophy: Scholarly Perspectives

Keiko Ishizaki explores how modes of thinking influence thought and applies this to how Japanese linguistic features are reflected in Nishida's philosophy. Ishizaki describes how language in general can be divided into two functions: a nominative logic, based on structure, and a predicative logic, which conveys images and feelings (Ishizaki 2007, 57). By examining the structure of the Japanese language, she highlights how it reflects this dual function—creating a paradox between the nominative and predicative logics—which Nishida sought to reconcile through his concept of the logic of *basho*. In this context, Ishizaki notes that in his essay *Kokugo no jizaisei*, Nishida sees Japanese as uniquely capable of expressing profound connections to reality, a characteristic particularly observable in poetry forms like haiku. According to Ishizaki, Nishida views language and thought as interactive, where language not only expresses but also shapes understanding and cultural values. This perspective is manifested in Nishida's logic of *basho*, she argues, which challenges fixed identities in logic by asserting that truth arises from the dynamic interplay of opposites within a given place. This logic does not depend on subjective determination; instead, it suggests that identity and truth emerge from a concrete, contextual reality.

Another study that addresses modes of thinking and functions of language is Tomoyuki Oka's (2011) discussion of how the Japanese language is rooted in predicative logic (*jutsugo ronri* 述語論理)[3] in contrast to subjective or normative logic (*shugo ronri* 主語論理), where the former prioritizes situated thinking and identity is defined in relation to the context or place, and the latter emphasizes location = place = predicate as a property inherent to the subject. Oka introduces Kido's (2003) distinction between locational (e.g., Japanese) and subjective (e.g., English) modes of thinking to illustrate his argument, stating that both are dichotomous yet complementary, the former represented by the logic of *basho* (*basho no ronri* 場所の論理)[4] and the latter by the logic of subject (*shutai no ronri* 主体の論理) (Oka 2011, 613). Expanding on this, he refers to Nishida's concept of logic of *basho*, while highlighting specific features of predicative logic in Japanese—for example, rhetoric vs logic, induction vs deduction, and images vs concepts. Another significant feature of

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3 Oka (2011) uses the term *jutsugo ronri* for logic of predicate or predicative logic, in contrast to Ōkubo (2014) and Nishida (2012) (see further), where *jutsugoteki ronri* is used instead.

4 In the literature, "logic of *basho*" is commonly referred to as either *basho no ronri* or *bashoteki ronri*. This paper provides the terms used in the respective references.

logic in Japanese is the distinction between the concepts *koto* こと and *mono* もの, both meaning "thing" in English. In his explanation of this feature, Oka emphasizes the dynamic nature of reality in the logic of *basho*, where objects are understood as abstract (*koto*) rather than concrete (*mono*) things. This distinction highlights a fundamental difference in modes of thinking: in Japanese, the progression of events is perceived in terms of location where things (*koto*) are established, in contrast with subject logic, where objects become subjects through language and conceptualization (Oka 2011, 614). Finally, Oka underscores the interdependence of place and subject in the logic of *basho*. More specifically, in English, subject logic predominates, with the grammatical subject existing independently of place, whereas Japanese emphasizes place, with the subject embedded within it. This difference is reflected in the basic grammatical structures of the two languages: in Japanese, the subject is less emphasized, with the core verb "to become" (*naru gata* ナル型) conveying present states, while English uses a "subject-object-verb" as core structure represented by a "do-verb" (*suru gata* スル型) and with a focus on subjectivity (Oka 2011, 615).

According to Toshiaki Kobayashi, since Nishida's discourse is written in Japanese, the structure of the Japanese language undoubtedly plays a pivotal role in shaping his thinking (Kobayashi 2015, 2). If this is the case, he argues, it is plausible to propose that the distinctive features of the Japanese language as identified by critic Nakamura Yūjirō (1925–2017) based on Tokieda Motoki's (1900–1967) theory of Japanese grammar—i.e., (1) emotional subjectivity, as Japanese sentences are inherently enveloped by subjective particles; (2) strong contextual dependency, as sentences are linked to their subject and the broader situational context; (3) the challenge to objective conceptualization, due to the fusion of *shi* 詞 (conceptual words) and *ji* 辞 (subjective particles or copula); and (4) the importance of particles in determining the true subject of a sentence, rendering the formal grammatical subject less significant—may contribute (if not fully account for) the uniqueness of Nishida's discourse (Kobayashi 2015, 6). Kobayashi summarizes that Nishida's philosophy reflects these linguistic characteristics but asserts that further exploration is needed to fully grasp the uniqueness of Nishida's thought. This is where he elaborates on another characteristic of Japanese, notably the particle *wa* は, an aspect that, he posits, has not been sufficiently discussed in relation to the Japanese language and philosophical thinking.

While the particle *wa* is often translated and consequently misunderstood as a nominative marker, it does not necessarily function in this way. Such interpretation arises from applying European grammatical categories to Japanese (Kobayashi 2015, 11). Kobayashi elucidates this point through some specific examples and highlights how, in Japanese, the subject is usually marked by the particle *ga* が, while *wa* is used adverbially, akin to European grammar, and therefore not related to the nominative case. Based on this characteristic, *wa* is commonly classified as a binding particle (*kakari joshi* 係助詞) rather than a case particle, while *ga* is generally viewed as a case particle that marks the subject. More specifically, *wa* introduces the topic of the sentence without specifying the subject, indicating that *wa* functions as some kind of introduction to the meaning of what follows (i.e., the predicate), which is similar to how interjectory particles or exclamations (*kantanshi* 感歎 詞) function. However, unlike *kantanshi*, he argues, which express vague and momentary emotions or will, *wa* provides a more structural context in that it guides the direction of the predicate that follows.

Kobayashi suggests that this characteristic of *wa* is likely what informs Nishida's writing style and philosophy. More specifically, Nishida introduces his concepts and terms—for instance, *basho* and *jutsugo*, among others—as some kind of direction, like the usage of *wa* but without further explicit definitions or conceptual explanations that can be read as a predicate. Such a kind of writing signals a self-limitation rather than a fully conceptualized statement, which could help explain the frequent repetition of key terms in Nishida's works, characterized by a lack of a clear Japanese

systematic organization. Kobayashi concludes that, rather than a finished discourse, Nishida's philosophy reveals the ongoing, dynamic process of thought, which may account for the complexity of his writings. Yet, this characteristic, Kobayashi emphasizes, is precisely what makes Nishida's work intellectually compelling (Kobayashi 2015, 14).

Jacynthe Tremblay examines Nishida's writing style and its relationship to his logic of *basho*, raising the question of whether the "encompassing" nature of the Japanese language itself prompted Nishida to develop this logic, or whether it was the logic of *basho* that shaped his linguistic approach (Tremblay 2009, 255). Through a detailed analysis of Nishida's syntax, focusing on the case ending *ni* に, the passive voice, and expressions like *ni oite* において, Tremblay derives that this distinctive syntax, which Nishida developed by applying all available linguistic tools, was instrumental in the creation of a new philosophical grammar, one that reflects both his logic and broader philosophical framework. Nishida himself admitted that he prioritized clarity and accuracy in expressing his thoughts, even at the cost of literary elegance, preferring original phrasing that directly conveyed his ideas as he conceived them (Tremblay 2009, 256). Both hypotheses—the influence of the language on Nishida's philosophy and the influence of his philosophy on his discourse—seem to have contributed to the development of his *basho* philosophy. Tremblay concludes that since Nishida's thinking was in Japanese, the language seems to have played a significant role in shaping his ideas.

Similarly, Osamu Morimura (2020) explores the relationship between philosophizing in Japanese and the shaping of thought. In concordance with the literature, he argues that the way people approach philosophy is deeply affected by the structure of the languages they speak. Western philosophy is influenced by the inflected structure of Indo-European languages, where the internal form of words is modified to express different meanings. In contrast, Japanese thought is influenced by the agglutinative nature of the Japanese language, in which morphemes are added to words without altering their internal structure (Morimura 2020, 92). Morimura cites Nishida's disciple Shimomura Toratarō (1902–1995) to illustrate how Nishida's complex writing is linked to the nature of the Japanese language. In his 1963 lecture, *Nishida's Philosophy and the Japanese Language*, Shimomura highlighted how Japanese differs from Western languages, especially in its lack of a clear subject-object relationship and required subject, and how this fact influences philosophical expression in Japanese. Shimomura suggests that Nishida's philosophy, in particular its language and conceptual expressions, should be understood not in terms of grammatical structures, but rather from a psychological perspective. He further emphasizes that Nishida's core concept of *basho* is particularly relevant when considering the relationship between language and thought, illustrating how this concept is shaped by the grammatical and syntactical peculiarities of the Japanese language and, as such, cannot be entirely separated from its linguistic context (Morimura 2020, 104).

In addition, according to Katsuaki Okada, Nishida's disciple Shimomura attributed the originality of Nishida's philosophy and writing style to the Japanese way of thinking, which he believed is rooted in personal experiences (Okada 2006, 66). Shimomura suggested that Nishida's concepts such as "self-determination of place" (*basho no jiko gentei* 場所の自己限定) and "self-determination of absolute nothingness" (*zettai mu no jiko gentei* 絶対無の自己限定) among others, reflect Japanese linguistic features, especially in terms of not explicitly marking a subject. Okada expands on Shimomura's point, noting that Japanese, with its "place-dependent" (*basho izonteki* 場所依存的) attitude, commonly centers the narrative on the speaker, unlike languages like English which adopt a more objective perspective (Okada 2006, 53). Therefore, the fundamental difference between both languages lies in whether the speaker objectifies the (con)text as a separate world or internalizes it, positioning themselves within the described world. The idea that makes a subject-object fusion possible, as in the Japanese language, is the spontaneity of the subject-object relationship.

To substantiate his claim, Okada (2006, 62) illustrates that by analyzing the core verb "be" (*aru* ある) in Japanese, we can understand that Japanese is, drawing on linguist Kanaya Takehiro's description, "nature-centered" (*shizen chūshin*). The verb *aru* expresses the state of things, reflecting the Japanese conception of "existence" (*sonzai* 存在) as spontaneous and naturally occurring. This understanding of natural occurrence as the basis of existence is embedded in this verb, enabling the Japanese language to express the subject "I" without separating it from the object. Here, the "I" becomes a "place," where the expression of the objective merges with the subjective, creating a fusion of subject and object (Okada 2006, 58). Okada summarizes that, in Japanese, existence represents a thought inseparable from its location, a relationship that can be described as "spatiality" or "world," which Nishida coined as *basho* (Tremblay 2009, 260).[5] This worldview holds that existence is tied to a specific place, which is attributed to nature (*shizen* 自然) as the origin of existence (*mono no sonzai* ものの存在). Okada adds that when examining Japanese thought, one is inevitably reminded of Nishida's philosophy, and that this relationship between existence and place is crucial for understanding his ideas (Okada 2006, 65).

In short, what emerges from the literature is that the interplay between language and thought in Nishida's philosophy cannot just be ignored. Rather than reducing Nishida's philosophy to linguistic constraints, the literature suggests that the structure of Japanese should be considered a pivotal factor in understanding his thought. To fully interpret this interdependence, the next section will examine how Nishida's key concepts *basho* and *jutsugo* function within his broader critique of Western thought, particularly in terms of how they challenge the traditional boundaries between subject-object, as well as how they reveal a deeper interrelation between language and thought.

3. The Dynamics of Place and Predicate in Nishida's Thought

(1) Subject-Object Unity and the Role of Place in Nishida's Thought

As the body of research suggests, Western languages and Western-origin philosophies are grounded in a subject-object separation framework, which assumes the existence of an independent subject. This framework is characterized by viewing the world from the perspective of a separate, autonomous entity and explaining phenomena from this perspective, forming the basis of Western philosophical thinking. Nishida's philosophy, in contrast, is based on the subject-object unity framework (*shukyaku gōitsu ron* 主客合一論), where the subject (*shutai* 主体) is deactivated or nullified (*muka* 無化). Unlike the subject-object separation framework (*shukyaku bunri ron* 主客分離論), the latter asserts that the conscious "I" (*ishikisuru watashi* 意識する私) and the perceived "I" (*ishikisareru watashi* 意識される私) are not separate entities but synthesized into a single unified experience, resulting in the constitution of knowledge (*chi* 知) (Hasebe 2023, 103).[6] This synthesis is actualized within a specific space—which, as we have seen, Nishida calls *basho*—blurring as such the traditional boundaries between self and world.

Michiko Yusa affirms that Nishida's reflections on the self and the world are deeply influenced

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5 According to Tremblay, it should be noted that Nishida's underlying philosophical intuition about *basho* and its encompassing nature was already taking shape before the term was introduced in 1924, in his essay *What Lies behind Physical Phenomena?* where it is equated with physical space. The author also suggests that Nishida's logic of *basho* extends beyond just the word itself to other expressions with similar encompassing qualities.

6 Here, the conscious "I" (*ishikisuru watashi*) can be understood as a subjective "I," distinct from the object, in which consciousness actively recognizes and objectifies external phenomena. In contrast, the perceived "I" (*ishikisareru watashi*) operates as a dependent entity, wherein subjectivity itself is objectified.

by Zen Buddhism, particularly in how Zen practice underlines his rejection of the strict Western subject-object distinctions (Yusa 2017, 12). To give a more specific example, Zen, particularly its practice of awakening (*satori* 悟り), emphasizes direct experience in which the boundaries between self and world dissolve. This alignment with Zen is central to Nishida's philosophy, which aims to bypass the intellectual separations between self and object, i.e., consciousness and world. Zen Buddhism was for Nishida the unifying force behind his philosophical vision, a fact he openly acknowledged (Yusa 2002, xx). Nishida's deep engagement with Zen Buddhism began in 1896, when he started visiting the meditation center of Zen master Setsumon Genshō in Kanazawa after his daughter's birth, marking a pivotal moment of personal and spiritual transformation (Yusa 2002, 49). Zen practice introduced a new dimension of self-awareness, compelling Nishida to confront the core of his spirituality. At the same time, Zen Buddhism cultivated a more fluid approach to thought, enabling him to recognize the value of ordinary life. Nishida understood the self to be formed by experience, where individual identity is shaped not only by personal encounters but also by the cultural and social contexts in which one exists.

It can be said that this cultural awareness of the historical and communal conditions of identity is central to Nishida's approach to philosophy and crucial for understanding his ideas. Although his philosophy incorporates both Western and Eastern traditions, Nishida rejected the idea of a Western-centric model of philosophy, arguing instead that each culture develops its own philosophical path. Nishida argued that, while Western philosophy traditionally relies on abstract reasoning, Japanese philosophy reflects the cultural and social realities of Japan. In Nishida's view, the relationship between subject and object (predicate) should be understood as the relationship between the individual and the universal. Within his philosophical framework, Nishida conceives of the self as not a fixed, isolated entity but a constantly evolving product of experience with one's social and cultural environment. Unlike Western logic, with its binary oppositions between subject and object and self and other, Japanese thought offers a more holistic, non-conceptual approach to knowledge, where understanding emerges from direct, lived experience rather than abstract reasoning, transcending the intellectual dichotomies that structure much of Western thought (Yusa 2017, 13). This perspective helps explain why Nishida's critique of Western dualism is closely tied to this rejection of object-centered thinking, which assumes a relationship between two distinct entities.

Nishida's logic of *basho* effectively encapsulates this idea of a relational and culturally grounded approach to existence and selfhood. He proposed that a subject (*shutai*) can only be understood in relation to the place (*basho*) in which it is situated, with this existence being inherently tied to the place itself. Building on this foundation, he introduced his concept of the logic of place (*bashoteki ronri* 場所的論理), which he later expanded into the logic of predicate (*jutsugoteki ronri* 述語的論理), emphasizing the pivotal role of the predicate in discourse (Ōkubo 2014, 115). By examining the predicate, Nishida contended that one could uncover the fundamental nature of the world. This interpretation of the predicate, which he referred to as "transcendent predicate-plane" (*chōetsuteki jutsugomen* 超越的述語面), further led to his concept of the "place of nothingness" (*mu no basho* 無の場所). In this view, when the universal—as fundamental nature in the world—becomes a place of *mu*, it inherently reflects the *mu* of the individual, where the individual, as we have seen, is positioned within the described world. Consequently, the individual and the universal are interconnected in a negative dialectical manner (*hitei benshōhō* 否定弁証法), referring to the process where contradiction and conflict between the individual and the universal resolve into a new and unified understanding of experience (Okada 2006, 71). Through his examination of place and predicate, Nishida ultimately arrived at the concept of "nothingness," which he considered as an "absolute nothingness" (*zettai mu* 絶対無), asserting that total nothingness represents the very

foundation of existence.

Referring to his concept of consciousness as *mu no basho*, Nishida, in a letter to one of his students, describes consciousness as a "predicate which does not become a subject," and explains the overcoming of both the subject and predicate in relation to the particular and the universal as "a nothingness which infinitely becomes universal and envelops being" (Dilworth et al. 1998, 4). In other words, *mu no basho*, as a domain of thought or awareness, is essentially the place that encompasses all of reality. Furthermore, in his essay, *Place, Me and You* (1932), Nishida writes, "What appears as sentiments and in our will is the reflection of ourselves," suggesting that our emotional experiences (*jōi* 情意) are deeply connected to our being (Okada 2006, 74). This view aligns with his philosophy of the unity between the external world and the inner self. Nishida further writes:[7]

> Intellectually, we think we see things outwardly, but emotionally, we see them inwardly. The core of our emotional consciousness lies in our self-determination toward things, not by perceiving them as objects but by personifying them and recognizing them as ourselves. This inward perspective helps explain why we don't merely see things externally but rather perceive them internally.

(2) Predicate Logic and the Limits of Dualistic Thought

On the other hand, as John W. M. Krummel points out, one might question why Nishida developed an epistemology based on subject-predicate logic, especially considering that the Japanese language lacks the grammatical constraints found in Indo-European languages (Nishida 2012). In Japanese, a single word can convey an entire sentence,[8] raising the question of how the subject-predicate logic applies in this context. According to Krummel, Nishida's focus on subject and predicate, or as mentioned earlier, his logic of predicate, was a critique of Western philosophy, which, he believed, places undue emphasis on the object (as the thing acted upon or center of judgement), thereby reinforcing an object-centered worldview (Nishida 2012, 19).

One could also argue that an emphasis on the predicate in Nishida's framework might result in an overemphasis on the universal, potentially at the expense of the individual. Krummel adds that, in this respect, we need to remember that by "predicate," Nishida means something beyond the grammatical or conceptual universal, emphasizing that both universals and particulars, as well as grammatical subjects and predicates, are situated within the transcendent predicate-plane, which aligns with his concept of *basho*. This reciprocal relationship between opposing terms within a certain place becomes clearer in his later works from the 1930s and 1940s, where he discusses the interplay between individuals and the universal, drawing attention to the reciprocal determination of the universal by the individual, and the interdependent relationship between the absolute and the relative, as well as place and the situated. Thus, by focusing on the predicate, Nishida sought to transcend the limitations of consciousness and the binary opposition of subject and object (Nishida 2012, 21–22). The recognition of a transcendent predicate, according to Nishida, resists full articulation within the constraints of the traditional subject-object dichotomy.

Interestingly, though, the concept of subject and object did not exist in Japanese until the Meiji era. As mentioned earlier, during the Meiji period, the Japanese language underwent

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7 Author's translation, as quoted in Okada (2006, 74–75).

8 It should be noted that, although Japanese does have a (limited) ability to express sentences through one word, this does not make Japanese unusual. This feature can be found in many languages.

significant changes, being modernized based on Western models. According to Okada (2006), in this transitional period, when translation practices were not yet fully established, Nishida likely struggled to paraphrase his ideas and express them within the framework of the newly introduced Western philosophy using modern Japanese. In attempting to fit Japanese perceptions into the Western subject-object structure and fill the linguistic gaps, Nishida sought to convey both his own ideas and broader aspects of Japanese thought, thereby creating his own philosophical language. Okada points out that by reflecting on the relationship between the "individual and the universal" in relation to "existence and place," Nishida was simultaneously engaging with Western thought while shedding his Eastern-Japanese orientation, articulating it in a highly complex yet logical manner (Okada 2006, 78). Arguably, Nishida's goal was to find a way to unite both traditions. And, as Nishida's disciple Shimomura remarked, presumably, Nishida's aim was to provide a philosophical framework to Eastern cultural thought through his ideas of *basho* and *mu*, which, in Nishida's perspective, lie at the heart of Eastern culture. Meanwhile, we should bear in mind that, as Tremblay observes, it is difficult to determine to what extent the logic of *basho* can be considered inherently Japanese, despite its closeness to the Japanese language.

With this in mind, we can understand the above in the following way: the transcendent predicate, as proposed by Nishida and representing the ultimate nature of reality, is more difficult to grasp within the framework of Indo-European languages than in, for example, Japanese. As it transcends the conventional subject-object division, its full conceptual scope eludes capture within the conceptual traditions of Western thought.[9] Additionally, in contrast to Western epistemological frameworks that define knowledge as an abstract and systematic understanding of an objective reality, Nishida views logic as a mode of understanding rooted in direct experiences. This logic does not rely on rational categories, but emerges from a deep, embodied awareness of reality—one that, as previously discussed, reveals a profound connection between cultural embodiment, language, and the formation of thought. In his essay *Kokugo no jizaisei* (Nishida 2003a, 333), Nishida reflects his conviction that language is the central expression of culture and a key force in shaping cultural unity, writing that "while various elements such as customs and ways of life contribute to forming a people's unity, language must be seen as the most decisive factor," and suggesting that the Japanese language, particularly through poetic forms, encapsulates a way of seeing that grasps the infinite within concrete reality. Nishida further emphasizes that true cultural development arises when a people express their inner sensibility through their own linguistic medium. This implies that language, then, is not simply a neutral medium of communication but a space of cultural becoming, in which a distinct worldview takes shape.

This cultural-linguistic insight reinforces my earlier claim that Nishida's philosophy is inseparable from the historical and communal context of Japan. It also clarifies why his notion of *basho* should be seen not just as a spatial concept but one of cultural and existential extent: it is the space where subjectivity and objectivity, thought, expression, and identity intersect. Expression, in this sense, is an affirmation of being rather than a symbolic representation. It transcends mere thought and directly embodies existence in the world, where the individual (identity) and its environment are interdependent, as Nishida discusses in his essay *Ningenteki sonzai* 人間的存在 (Nishida 2003b, 291):

> The subject and the environment are, in some sense, always in opposition. Yet the subject, by
> negating itself through its individuality, determines the environment; and the environment, by

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9 It is important to note here, too, that the general position taken by linguists is that all languages can express similar ideas, though they may need to do it using different linguistic means.

likewise negating itself through its individuality, determines the subject. In this way, subject and environment mutually define one another through opposing acts of self-negation. Thus, the world, rather than being a fixed product, becomes an active process of self-formation through this same dynamic of individual self-limitation.[10]

Taken in context, this suggests that Nishida sees both as co-constituted through the medium of language in which the individual and universal dynamically relate. Similarly, Nishida's conception of inward perception and emotional consciousness, where the Japanese see things "inwardly" by personifying them, can be better understood through this relational lens. For example, in his essay *Jiai to taai oyobi benshōhō* 自愛と他愛及び弁証法 (Nishida 2002, 207), Nishida describes the world of self-determination of nothingness (*mu no gentei no sekai*) as one in which expression and action are not separate but intertwined. Here, the body itself is a dynamic site of self-limiting activity in which the subject and object fold into one another. This aligns with his argument in *Ningenteki sonzai* (Nishida 2003b, 289) that "What we regard as the real world must, at some level, … be grounded in sensory experience. … [S]ensation must be apprehended as a form of sensuous and human activity; something practical in nature and grasped subjectively." In other words, sensation is not passive reception but active, intuitive engagement with the world. Emotional perception, then, does not arise from a pre-given self, but from an embodied, expressive relation within the world. Through mutual negation, the subject and the environment ultimately co-define each other in a relational field: a living *basho*, so to speak.

Hence, *basho* is not to be understood as a private introspection or abstract metaphysical space but as a concrete, cultural, and situated world of expression, action, and perception. In summary, these insights deepen our understanding of how Nishida's logic of *basho* is, above all, cultural and phenomenological in nature. His philosophy affirms that the unfolding of thought, emotion, and identity takes place within a relational world shaped by cultural language, sensory praxis, and the mutual shaping of self and environment.

4. Conclusion

Nishida's philosophy offers a profound rethinking of Western epistemology, particularly in terms of the relational and fluid nature of reality. His concepts of *basho* and *jutsugo* present a framework where subjectivity and objectivity coexist in a unified field, challenging rigid logical categories by suggesting that identity and expression are inextricably linked, and by positioning language not just as a communicative tool but as a fundamental force in shaping both individual and collective experience. This relational understanding of reality contrasts with Western dualisms, offering a logic grounded in direct experiential engagement.

By challenging conventional epistemology, Nishida highlights how the Japanese language facilitates a mode of knowing that transcends intellectual categories, focusing instead on embodied experience. While Nishida's engagement with Japanese linguistic structures has led scholars to argue that his philosophy is inseparable from its linguistic context, this study has demonstrated that his ideas simultaneously engage with broader philosophical concerns that transcend linguistic determinism. Ultimately, Nishida's philosophy invites a reconsideration of the relationship between language, culture, and thought, not as separate domains, but as dynamically intertwined. His logic

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10 Author's translation. This notion of "self-limitation" also resonates with Kobayashi's interpretation of Nishida's writing style as intentionally open and dynamic, reflecting the ongoing process of thought rather than fixed definitions. (See (2) Language and Thought in Nishida's Philosophy: Scholarly Perspectives)

of *basho* affirms that being, perception, and identity emerge through a relational field shaped by cultural language, embodied experience, and self-negating activity. In addition, while not explicitly expressed in his writings, Nishida's overall philosophical project can be considered as engaging with the idea of philosophizing in Japanese, and his work can be read through this interpretive lens. The structure of the Japanese language, with its contextual and emotional subjectivity, appears to be an essential part of how Nishida conceptualizes his concepts and thought in general.

Reflecting on Nishida's philosophy reveals not simply a critique of Western traditions but a significant contribution to global philosophical discourse, offering a path toward rethinking thought and existence across cultures—one that is deeply connected to the linguistic and cultural contexts from which it arises.

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