

Chapter 6

From Grammatical Subject to Philosophical Subjectivity: Relationality in Japanese Thought from Nishida Kitarō to Nakamura Yūjirō

Nobuyuki Matsui

1. Introduction

This chapter draws on the author's extensive research in philosophy, especially Japanese philosophy. In modern Western philosophy, subjectivity is linked to an actor who can think autonomously and act based on free will and self-determination. At first glance, the theme of the subject in philosophy does not seem to be related to a grammatical subject. However, it is. Language expressions require context and situations for speakers, also known as locutionary actors, and language should not be reduced to a mere instrument used to depict the condition of an external entity and communicate its significance to others. As we use language, we become involved in the world around us, and no subject using language exists in complete detachment from the world. While this line of thought connects to the linguistic relativity proposed by the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, it does not imply that the use of a specific language completely confines speakers within its linguistic worldview.¹

The question is whether or not the concept of subjectivity and the

1 In addition, the notion of the “subject” explored in the philosophical inquiry below does not intersect with Chomsky's generative grammar or Pinker's theory of the language instinct, which oppose linguistic relativism.

subject in the grammatical sense become unnecessary in a world where entities are so interlinked. Although this question may sound strange at first, it is one of the central questions in the history of Japanese philosophy which will be discussed in this chapter. For Japanese philosophy to be defined, it is first necessary to identify the ambiguous position of the subject in Japanese grammar, which is the distinctive issue of when thinking of something as a Japanese.

To overview this issue, this chapter first examines skepticism regarding the status of the subject in Japanese, alongside its relation to the concept of the subject as a philosophical theme. In doing so, we will explore the philosophy of Nishida Kitarō, who established a unique Japanese philosophy while studying Western philosophy imported during the early modern era. Finally, we will reference the philosophy of Nakamura Yūjirō, who reinterpreted Nishida's philosophy after the defeat of the Asia-Pacific War, especially during the 1980s. Through this approach, this study aims to clarify that subjectivity in Japan represents an intentionality that redefines the "self" within relational contexts.

By way of introduction, the arguments in this chapter are not meant to conclusively settle the academic debate on the Japanese language and subjectivity. Rather, this chapter is intended primarily to explain the significance of thinking in Japanese to a non-specialist audience, drawing on the perspective of Japanese philosophy, which is author's area of specialization.

It is often noted that, compared to Western languages in which the explicit specification of the subject is indispensable, the grammatical function of the subject in Japanese is much less clear. Based on this characteristic, a widely accepted view assumes that Japanese lacks the explicit function of the subject found in Western languages, and that this absence derives from the traditional Japanese nature.

However, even if this is partly the case, the open nature of the

Japanese language toward the ellipsis of the grammatical subject must be kept distinct from any supposed lack of inclination toward subjectivity in Japanese thought. In a word, when I say that “I think” in Japanese, the thinking “I” does not vanish.

In this chapter, I would like to propose the following framework regarding this point: namely, while in the typically understood logic of subject-oriented Western languages, the “subject” thinks, in thinking through Japanese, priority is given to the idea that the subject emerges from the act of thinking itself. Furthermore, thinking is something that is driven precisely *within* relationships.

2. Does Japanese Lack a Clear Grammatical Subject?

First, let us address a common view of the Japanese language. Many think Japanese lacks a clear grammatical subject. However, according to textbook examples of Japanese grammar, a grammatical subject exists. Originally, the introduction of the nominative case in Japanese involved applying a model of linguistics based on Western languages, which had been established from the Meiji period onward. In response to this hasty adoption of Western grammatical models, the linguist Kanaya Takehiro emphasizes that Japanese not only routinely omits the subject in a way that differs from Western languages but is in fact a language that cannot possess a subject in the first place. He says that

[t]he “subject,” which is unnecessary in Japanese and other East Asian languages, was introduced following the Meiji Restoration under the slogan of “Leaving Asia, Joining Europe” (*Datsu-A Nyū-Ō* 脱亜入欧), imitating English grammar. (Kanaya 2019, 15).

Setting aside the question of the validity of Kanaya’s understanding

of Japanese as an anti-subject language, it is obvious that the relationship between the subject and the predicate in Japanese does not always explicitly take the form of logical structures like S-P (subject–predicate) or syntactic patterns like SVO (subject-verb-object), as seen in Western languages.

Now, we will explore this topic from two key dimensions: (1) the contrasting functions of the particles *wa* は and *ga* が, and (2) nested structures of expression. While the centrality of the “predicate” (*jutsugo* 述語) deserves thorough attention as a foundational pillar in analyzing the Japanese language, we will examine it in the next section through the philosophy of Nishida Kitarō.

First, regarding the particles *wa* and *ga*, when interpreted grammatically, the particle *wa* is often considered to take the function of indicating the nominative case. However, from the perspective of Japanese pragmatics, this is not accurate. To be sure, Japanese allows for two distinct expressions, as in “*Watashi WA Matsui desu*” and “*Watashi GA Matsui desu*” (both indicating “I am Matsui”).

According to school grammar textbooks, words marked by *wa* or *ga* are considered the subject. However, many examples show that this is not always the case. To take a famous example in Japanese linguistics, if someone in a restaurant were to ask, “*Nani ga tabetai?*” (何が食べたい?; What do you want to eat?), one might answer, “*Watashi wa sakana*” (私は魚 / “As for me, fish”).

Needless to say, “*Watashi wa sakana*” does not mean “I am a fish.” Notably, the subject-predicate relationship in this sentence is not explicitly expressed, making it impossible to determine a subject. This ambiguity has sparked long-standing debates regarding what constitutes the subject here. Scholars have argued that such an apparently unspecified structure corresponds to an implicit subject-predicate relationship that can be rendered more explicitly as “*Watashi wa sakana*

wo tabetai” (私は魚を食べたい; “I want to eat fish”) or “*Watashi ga tabetai mono wa sakana da*” (私が食べたいものは魚だ; “What I want to eat is fish”).

Kobayashi (2015) examined the nature of unique philosophical thought in Japan from the perspective of the Japanese language. According to his analysis, while sentences described using *wa* and those using *ga* differ, *ga* alone functions as a marker for the subject in Western grammar, even if the two are not entirely equivalent. As Richings (2025) discusses with reference to Kobayashi’s work, *wa* is used “adverbially.” That is, “the subject is usually marked by the particle *ga*, while *wa* is used adverbially, akin to European grammar, and therefore not related to the nominative case” (Richings 2025, 5). Grammatically speaking, *wa* is classified as a binding particle (*kakari joshi* 係助詞) rather than a case particle. This indicates that while *ga* marks the subject in expression, *wa* spotlights the predicate that follows.

Next, regarding the second dimension, the nested structure of expression of Japanese, this was already discussed during the war by the linguist Tokieda Motoki (1900–1967) in his *Kokugo-gaku genron* (Principles of Japanese Linguistics, 1941). Tokieda authored it while serving as a professor at Keijo Imperial University in Japanese-colonized Korea. In this regard, as Yasuda (1997) argues, it is necessary to take into consideration the issue that his view of the national language (*kokugo*) envisaged its dissemination to Korea based on structural similarities with Japanese grammar.

Tokieda advocated the superiority of Japanese (*kokugo*) over “dialectal languages,” such as Korean, and provided a theoretical backbone for imperialistic linguistic unification within the *Kōminka* (皇民化 imperialization) policies, namely, the prohibition of Korean language education and its usage (Kitamura 1987). According to Yasuda, Tokieda’s linguistic theory conceptually distinguishes between

kokugo (national language) and *Nihongo* (Japanese language): *kokugo* is backed by the ideal of establishing a single mother tongue anchored in an integrated state, whereas *Nihongo* refers to the language as actually used in diverse forms in mundane spheres in Japan. However, Tokieda never fully or strictly maintained this distinction; in that sense, *kokugo* and *Nihongo* overlapped, thereby providing a rationale for the discourse asserting the supremacy of the national language in the colonies (Yasuda 1997, 124–126).

Keeping the above issue in mind, let us consider the nested expressive structure that Tokieda identified as a defining feature of Japanese as a national language. As Tokieda argues, “the structure of the national language can by no means be understood in the same way as Indo-European languages, which unify the opposition between subject and predicate in the form of S–P” (Tokieda 2007 [II], 15). Written with three script systems, kanji, hiragana, and katakana, Japanese is categorized as an agglutinative language. Within this system, kanji and hiragana play the primary roles in linguistic expression. Briefly put, while kanji present concepts, hiragana primarily function to link these concepts together. In the schema of Tokieda’s linguistics, these correspond to *shi* 詞 (kanji—representing concepts) and *ji* 辞 (hiragana—joining multiple *shi*).

When Tokieda speaks of the nested structure, he refers to the structural characteristic of Japanese linguistic expression formed by the multi-layered overlapping of these elements and functions. Consider one example he provides: “*Nioi no takai hana ga saita*” (匂の高い花が咲いた), which translates into English as “a fragrant flower has bloomed.” In these English and Japanese sentences, there appears to be no significant difference in word order between Japanese and English. However, it goes without saying that the Japanese expression fundamentally differs from the English in that *shi* and *ji* are arranged alternately. According to

Chapter 6
From Grammatical Subject to Philosophical Subjectivity

Tokieda, the key feature lies in the way *ji* envelop *shi*, forming a unified expression. That is, in the sentence “*Nioi no takai hana ga saita*,” the hiragana “*no*,” “*ga*,” and “*ta*” that follow the kanji bestow semantic unity upon the preceding *shi* while bridging them to the subsequent text.

Note that the last “*i*” in “*nioi no takai*” is not counted as such a *ji*; rather, “*takai*” 高い is regarded as a single *shi* (Tokieda 2007 [II], 14), because “*nioi no takai*” functions as a coherent unit equivalent to “*nioi ga takai*” 匂いが高い (fragrant). On top of this, Tokieda puts an invisible “zero-sign *ji*” (*zero-kigō no ji* 零記号の辞) between “*nioi no takai*” and “*hana*” 花. This posits an intermediating function as a *ji* that connects “*nioi no takai*” with “*hana ga saita*.” It is termed a “zero-sign,” precisely because it does not appear as a written character within the sentence.

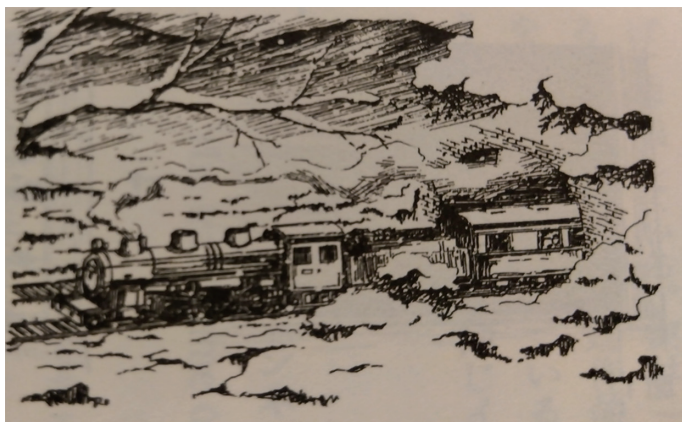


Figure 1. English speaker’s drawing of the opening line of *Snow Country* (Kanaya 2019, 34).

These two aspects make the position of the subject in Japanese highly ambiguous. Furthermore, the inclusive nature of the second aspect, the nested structure, causes the “subject” to be subordinate to

what is expressed on the side of the predicate, making it difficult to identify a clear position for the subject as found in Western grammatical structures. Affected by these two aspects in this way, the position of the Japanese subject has been a topic of debate for a long time, and this ambiguity is widely believed to stem from the cultural worldview embedded within the language.

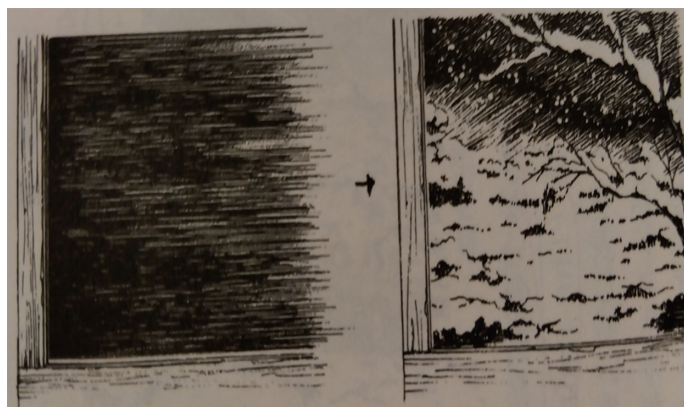


Figure 2. Japanese speaker's drawing of the same scene
(Kanaya 2019, 33)

The above figures highlight the contrasting perspectives between English (Figure 1) and Japanese (Figure 2) speakers, a distinction originally introduced by Japanese linguist Ikegami Yoshihiko. Ikegami asked English and Japanese speakers to visualize and describe the image evoked by the opening line of Kawabata Yasunari's novel *Snow Country* (*Yukiguni* 雪国). “*Kokkyō no nagai tonneru o nukeru to yukiguni de atta. Yoru no soko ga shiroku natta. Shingōjo ni kisha ga tomatta*” (Kawabata 1947, 5). In contrast, the English translation reads as follows: “The train came out of the long tunnel into the snow country; the earth lay white under the night sky; the train pulled up at a signal stop” (Kanaya 2019, 32).

Chapter 6
From Grammatical Subject to Philosophical Subjectivity

At first glance, a clear difference emerges: Kawabata's original text contains no explicit grammatical subject, whereas the English translation places "the train" as the subject. In the original Japanese expression, the first sentence, "*Kokkyō no nagai tonneru o nukeru to yukiguni de atta. Yoru no soko ga shiroku natta,*" does not explicitly mention any term corresponding to "the train." Nevertheless, it is evident from the scene that a character in the novel (Shimamura 島村) is riding on the train. Furthermore, this scene portrays the scenery as seen through a window by someone moving inside the train. At the same time, readers naturally grasp that this objectified landscape is being perceived by an observing subject. Thus, this is not merely a purely objective landscape detached from a subjective vantage point.

Seeing Figure 2, one can immediately see that the Japanese speaker depicts the view from inside the train, describing the temporal progression as the scene transitions from the dark tunnel to the snowscape. In contrast, the English speaker adopts a bird's-eye perspective, creating a snapshot of the exact moment the train emerges from the tunnel.

Taking up this contrast, linguist Kanaya points out that what has changed in this translation is none other than the perspective. According to him, while in the case of Japanese speakers, they can imagine the passage of time from an earthly point of view from Kawabata's writing, in the case of English speakers, the point of view is shifted to the sky, further resulting in the depiction of a spatial scene. Kanaya calls this the "god's point of view," while the Japanese speaker's perspective is called the "insect's point of view."

The reason is that the Japanese speaker's point of view experiences the shifting of events on the earth. This ties in with the contrast between an event and a thing or an object. Based on these points of view, Kanaya advocated the theory of "subject abolition." He insists that the Japanese

language does not need a subject grammatically. He says that the subject which is not necessary for East Asian languages such as Japanese, was introduced after the Meiji Restoration under the slogan, “Leave Asia, enter Europe,” mimicking English grammar.

Kanaya put undue emphasis on the nominative function and make a clear distinction from the western logic based on the subject (subjectivity). From this reason, his insistence has to do not only with the grammatical topic, but also with the difference of understanding subjectivity between western and Japanese culture. If that is the case, the view of “subject abolition” could lead to the abolition of thinking of subjectivity from the Japanese context.

Kanaya criticized the unnaturalness of this SVO type or SOV type of grammar for the Japanese. In doing so he advocates the philosophy of Nishida Kitarō whom I will discuss in this context. In a nutshell, Kanaya adopted this view because Nishida based his philosophy on the “insect’s point of view” (Kanaya 2019, 44–45). The Japanese language in Kanaya’s theory of “subject abolition” should be a more natural way of expressing Japanese feelings and thoughts.

3. What Does Searching for Subjectivity Mean in Japanese?

Nishida’s idiosyncratic writing style is well known. As a literature critique, Kobayashi Hideo, expressed it a “bizarre system” (*kikaina sistemu* 奇怪なシステム) far from that natural way of expressing Japanese and it is written in the most esoteric, “unreadable style” in the history of Japanese philosophy. For describing the spatial scene, there was a struggle to express the interactive movements in the process of the actors engaging with the environment, changing it, and so changing themselves.

Chapter 6
From Grammatical Subject to Philosophical Subjectivity

What follows is not an inquiry into the validity of the “abolition of the subject” discussed by Kanaya. Instead, the main concern is how philosophy conducted in the Japanese language identified the foundation of the “subject” [subjectivity].

Now, let us look at how Nishida reexamines the relationship between the Western tradition of subject and predicate, and how it has been inherited within the history of Japanese philosophy. In doing so, I will argue that we can avoid the understanding of the “Japaneseness” of Japanese philosophy as a non-subjective philosophy embedded in the environmental world, which is easily opposed to the Western, subject-based way of thinking.

Certainly, Nishida sought to create a philosophy unique to Japan. However, this does not mean that he expounded his philosophy in the natural Japanese language. Instead, the subjectification of individuals became an issue in Japan’s modernization. In this context, he needed to find and develop a logic for forming the subject by thinking differently from the Western philosophical tradition.

In the following discussion, we will see that Nishida considered that while Western philosophy is subject-based, Japanese philosophy must understand the experience of consciousness on a predicate basis. I will focus on one more Japanese philosopher, Nakamura Yūjirō. He critically inherited Nishida’s ideas of “nothingness,” “place,” and “predicate” and reformulated them into a perspective on subjectivity that could change relationships per se.

Nishida was born in 1870 and passed away in 1945, the final year of the Asia-Pacific War. During that time, he wrote many influential books and articles such as *An Inquiry into the Good* (善の研究 1911) and “Place” (場所 1926) while based at Kyoto University. The philosophy of the Kyoto school was later formed in the 1930s by his protégés, and their philosophy continued to have a strong influence after the war.

There is also the problem of their philosophy's so called "cooperative relationship" with the Japanese war, but this is outside the scope of this chapter.

Nishida became a well-known philosopher through his *An Inquiry into the Good* written in 1911. What he attempted in this work was to reverse Western philosophy by confronting the basis of the conscious experience beyond the subject/object dichotomy. To this end, he deployed his argument centering on the concept of pure experience. Pure experience is the pre-reflective stage. I quote, "When one directly experiences one's own state of consciousness, there is not yet a subject or an object, and knowing and its object are completely unified" (Nishida 1990, 3–4).

In other words, a unified state of the subject and the object is found as the stage before the epistemological distinction is established. With the concept of pure experience, he argues that the dichotomy of subject and object, and the form of knowledge based on it, derive from this fundamental unity. In my opinion, what Nishida did was to embark on a philosophy that could place subjectivity in the fundamental unity, rather than something derived from it. Let me explain this with a short history of "subject" in Japan. The concept of subject is imported from Western philosophy, and Nishi Amane, an intellectual in the early Meiji period translated it as *Shukan* 主観. At that moment, *Shukan* was closely related to introspection, which refers to the ability to reflect on one's inner state of mind. Nishi translated the book *Mental Philosophy* written by Joseph Haven in 1857. Nishi says it is quite a difficult concept to translate. In contrast, the word *kyakkan* 客観 that corresponds to an object originally existed in Japan.

However, this did not mean the ability to recognize an external object; it meant the appearance of a guest, or behavior as a guest in Chinese classics. Accordingly, the Chinese character *shu* 主 means to

be a host. However, Nishi diverts *shukan* into a term for the cognitive subject.

In western philosophy, the subject as *shukan* can be found in Kantian critique in the sense of the cognitive subject who grasps external objects. In contrast to it, the subject as *shutai* 主体 indicates an actor engaged to work on objects and transform environments. According to Nakai Masakazu, a distinction between *shutai* and *shukan* began to be made around 1932 to 1933 in Japan (Nakai 1950).

4. From “*Hypokeimenon* (ὕποκείμενον)” to the “Subject”

The English term “subject” originally comes from the ancient Greek term, *ὕποκείμενον* (*hypokeimenon*) argued by Aristotle, which means a given existence before it was linguistically categorized. In Latin, *hypokeimenon* was translated into *subiectum* by thinkers such as Apuleius and Boethius, and the term comprises “sub” (under) and “iectum” (placed or thrown). *Hypokeimenon* is not transcendental, but a fundamental substance of a concrete particle without any exhaustive categorization and final determination. In this sense, *hypokeimenon* is closely bound up with a proper name. *Hypokeimenon* is ultimately that which can only be indicated as the essential “being-ness” or “this-ness” of a particular thing. In this case, it is the one which incorporates numerous predicates that stipulate it.

It serves as the very foundation that determines various individual entities. To be sure, *hypokeimenon* did not originally carry such a burdened connotation. According to Nakai, whom I referenced earlier, Plato used the term only in the literal sense of “lying underneath.” Likewise, in the Roman world, Cicero employed it merely to convey something akin to an “evident matter lying clearly before one’s eyes.” It came to signify the fundamental foundation of all things only because,

throughout the Middle Ages up until the sixteenth century, Latin translations and commentaries on Aristotle established the meaning of a “‘primordial substrate’ (or ‘fundamental subject’) that evokes a sense of solemn majesty rather than mere utility, much like the pinnacle of a spire rising above a domed edifice” (Nakai 1950).

Aristotle, stipulated in metaphysics and categorized *hypokeimenon* as that which is the subject and cannot be a predicate. For example, *hypokeimenon* is Aristotle himself. We can say that “Aristotle is a philosopher who existed in Athens, Greece in the fourth century, B.C.”; we can offer numerous predicative propositions, such as “Aristotle is a man” and “Aristotle is a father.” However, we cannot logically say “A is *the* Aristotle.” Admitted we can say, “the author of this book is Aristotle.” However, the term Aristotle here is used as a famous figure or as a philosopher. Thus, the term “Aristotle” is a general term here and is used in the predicative sense. For example, one cannot say, “Humans are Aristotle.” Aristotle is a primary individual as a proper name. The subject is the presupposed individual.

In contrast to *hypokeimenon*, Nishida developed a logic opposite to Aristotle’s in his article “Place.” In this article, Nishida explored a logical explanation of the place in conscious phenomena or a conscious field that lies at the root of human conscious experiences and underpins our specific conscious phenomenon. He relies on two dimensions of consciousness: a mirror that reflects conscious contents, and what is mirrored. While this mirror-like image of consciousness was already underpinned by William James’s perspective of the “field of consciousness,” Nishida pursued the nature of the reflecting side of consciousness as absolute nothingness by designating it as “*basho*” (place). Through this, he sought to demonstrate the mode of “absolute free will” realized upon reaching this dimension. He says that:

That which infinitely reflects itself within itself, and which, while being nothingness in itself, encompasses infinite being, is the true self in which the so-called opposition between subject and object is established. (NKZ 3, 419)

“Self-understanding” and the things that a subject perceives and comprehends are always accompanied by the reflecting side of consciousness. In other words, there is no world that is pre-divided into subject and object. Only when both dimensions, the consciousness that apprehends things and the things that are apprehended, are simultaneously encompassed and grasped within the plane of consciousness as “*basho*” does the distinction between subject and object become established.

Therefore, the image in our consciousness of a phenomenon does not exist by itself, but the mirror of our consciousness that mirrors the image underlies consciousness. Let us take the example of a movie theater. While a specific image of a movie is projected on the screen, an image cannot be projected without the screen itself. In the case of consciousness, a projector plays the role of eyes and perceptive bodies, through which numerous perceptions and impressions come from the external world. They are the sources of the thing being-mirrored.

At first glance, the act of conscious awareness might be thought of as an internal processing of perceptions acquired through contact with the external world, akin to the projector in the previous example. However, Nishida argues that there must exist a reflecting field (*basho*) that serves as a screen: a realm that projects the results of such internal processing yet is itself distinct from any concrete content and therefore capable of projecting all possible contents.

Nishida thus says, “When we think of things-events, there must be a *basho* (place), wherein they are mirrored. Initially, we may think of this

as the field of consciousness. To be conscious of something, one must mirror it upon the field of consciousness. However, we must distinguish the mirrored phenomena of consciousness and the field of consciousness that mirrors them.

However, one can ordinarily sense the image of the screen. I have mentioned that Nishida reconsidered the individual differently from Aristotle, because Nishida defined the “place” as that which is a predicate and cannot be a subject, Aristotle’s definition of *hypokeimenon* is that which is a subject and cannot be a predicate, which is quite the opposite.

So, what does the place as “that which is a predicate and cannot be a subject” mean? In Aristotelian logic based on the substantial particles, they are discontinuous with each other and the science or *ἐπιστήμη* (*episteme*) which is an ancient Greek term for science, is required to categorize them into an order. However, in the logic of place, a person’s consciousness is ultimately a place that can only be the predicate, so they are thrown into the world of various possibilities of transformation that can be predicated in new ways.

For example, I and Thou are distinct individuals (subjects), categorized with a predicate such as “human beings” in the Aristotelian view. However, we see a variety of other potential ties when we look at them in terms of predicates. For example, on the predicate side, beyond the logical categorization, I can ultimately say that I am Thou because Thou and I exist only on the plane of the predicate that contains a finite universal characterization.

Nishida developed this logic in his article, “The I and the Thou” (我と汝, 1932). “Thou” is personally independent of me. At the root of it, the “place” as the “absolute other” creates the possibility of free connectivity between “I” and “Thou.” This logic becomes thinkable in the work of the “place of nothingness” as Nishida argued in his

article “Place.” However, it is not an entity that presides over the world, like God, it is absolutely nothing. He argues. “The ‘I’ and ‘Thou’ are absolutely other existence (*Watashi to nanji towa zettai no hokanarumono de aru*, 私と汝とは絶対の他なるものである)” (NKZ 5, 297). There exists no transcendental or universal entity that encompasses both “I” and “you.” “Thou” as the ultimate other can only be encountered when “I” transcends the framework of individual consciousness and reach the “place of nothingness,” wherein “I” encounters true otherness—namely, “Thou.” In other words, “Thou” fundamentally underlies the existence of “I” at the level of the place of nothingness, just as “I” underlies the existence of “Thou.” Both converge in their innermost (non-)selves, even as they remain entirely distinct from each other (NKZ 5, 297).

5. Connectivity and History

The connection to “place of nothingness” is explored here. It is highly elusive, and at least unlike the self-evident view of the independence of individuals, and in my view, this argument suggests that one can transcend the mere categorization of being connected or disconnected and instead become an individual within the place that breaks down strict categories. Within this place, individuals can exist as distinct entities while still being interconnected. In other words, the possibility of connectivity is the premise of Nishida’s understanding, and he further says it is the absolute that works throughout history.

Nishida says in his article “The Standpoint of the Individual in the Historical World” (歴史的世界に於ての個物の立場, 1938),

The absolute must be what we are located in, or what the world is made of. It must be absolute nothingness, and everything is

composed of it and it is absolutely contradictory self-identity. (NKZ 8, 365)

What is referred to here as “the absolute” or “absolute nothingness” is infinite connectivity. First, in the predicate field, it is assumed that individuals connect with each other without substantial grounds. Second, this is called our historical world, because the entire connectivity is not only the total amount of existing relationships from the past to the present, but the totality of infinite relationships, including those in the future. In a word, history is not history unless it includes the future.

(1) The “Absolute Contradictory Self-identity” (絶対矛盾的自己同一)

Let me explain the concept of absolute contradictory self-identity as simply as possible. On the one hand, this refers to being an already constrained being in the sense that the self exists in a particular environment, or social setting, or network. On the other hand, it also implies that the self is formed by changing the surrounding environment, by acting upon it, by being affected by it, and thereby changing oneself to form one’s identity. This process continues incessantly like a person standing between self-reflecting mirrors. This is the subjectivity in Nishida’s philosophy (NKZ 8, 314). The individual is not presupposed, but the fundamental reality is the work of the “place” where various individuals interact. Individuals form themselves and one can say “I am myself,” but it is synonymous with “I am myself in the infinite connectivity.” In other words, the subject appears in the holistic connectivity of place.

Going back to the differences of perception between Japanese and Western languages, I think that there is certainly no “god” point of view here, but there is a different form of existence, existence from the

“insect’s point of view” as we saw before, which is like an insect’s point of view inherent in the environment, or the natural world. Instead, the initial philosophical question, “what is the forming of the self” is being questioned deeply.

6. Nakamura Yūjirō’s Vision of *Topos* and the Emergence of Subject

Lastly, we look at the philosophy of Nakamura Yūjirō. Nakamura has been active since the 1960s, and his theory of subjectivity also basically developed around Nishida’s philosophy. However, he reformulated it based on embodiment in a cultural and natural world. First, his view of embodiment is phenomenologically captured in terms of the inversion or ambivalence between seeing beings and being seen or touching and being touched. For instance, when I have been looking at a cat for a while, I have the opposite sense of being looked at by the cat, in an ambivalent way. In other words, the active and the passive become unified, as Merleau-Ponty once argued, as viewing or touching a tree evokes the sensation of being viewed or touched. Nakamura calls this ambivalence “common sense” (Nakamura 2000). Importantly, this “common sense” does not simply refer to a generally shared understanding in society, but to a sense that integrates individual sensory actions across the five senses.

Nakamura argued that common sense is composed of the sense of touch, muscle movements, internal organs, and so on, called the somatosensory system, or somatesthesia, because those senses are thought to extend outside the self, through our physical movements, or spatial cognition. And since humans have a body based on this common sense, the way we operate in space becomes essential because of this embodiment. The place where the self as a being sees something and is

being seen, ambivalently becomes meaningful.

Nakamura gave the example of the *Noh* 能 play, because *Noh* theater is considered an expression that embodies the “aesthetic of the vacant.” The stage of *Noh* theater is quite simple. According to Nakamura, it expresses an “abundantly expressive *topos*,” and *topos* means “place.” *Noh* performers express everything with physical movements. Nakamura says, “Looking up at the sun, the mountains, and the birds as they go,” or “gazing at the grass and enjoying the waves of the sea” are all expressed through the body. Nakamura (2001) calls it “relational performance.” Additionally, *Noh* performers must strive to project their awareness of what is behind them while looking ahead to achieve such a performance. In other words, as a *Noh* performer one should internalize the audience’s perspective in the movements of one’s body. Zeami 世阿弥, a central figure in the history of *Noh* theatre in the 14th to 15th centuries, called it “*riken no ken* 離見の見,” a perspective rooted in a flexible mind and physical acts that allow an actor to intuitively perceive how the audience sees him/herself. In other words, the performer is open to the outside and is strongly influenced by it. However, this does not mean others are superior to the self. Instead, attracting others’ attention and transforming it is considered to be required for performers. In this sense, this redefines the relationship. The performer performs within the possibility of redefining relationships. The “vacant” space in *Noh* theatre embodies this possibility for Nakamura.

7. Conclusion

Having examined the issue of the subject within the concept of place (*basho*) from Nishida to Nakamura, we observe an underlying assumption of a subject that enables the generation of potential relationships. Both thinkers struggled to articulate a form of subjectivity

that is not entirely reducible to its surrounding contextual relations. By introducing possibilities that have not yet solidified into holistic connectivity, one might characterize this as a distinctive perspective of Japanese philosophy; However, I hesitate to claim that it is an intuitive or “natural” sentiment for the Japanese populace at large.

Instead, I argue that this philosophy, while intrinsically rooted in Japan, aims to redefine connectivity within Japanese culture. Even within a place constituted by infinite interconnectedness, subjectivity can be defined as the agency to reconfigure one’s own connectivity and, through that process, transform oneself. Following this logic, one can still assert that “I am who I am” precisely through the performative act of reshaping one’s relationships and, ultimately, oneself.

References

Abbreviation

NKZ: Nishida Kitarō. 2002–2009, 2020. *Nishida Kitarō Zenshū* (The Complete Works of Nishida Kitarō), New Edition, 24 vols. and 1 supplementary vol. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten. (in Japanese)

Other Sources

Kanaya, Takehiro. 2019. *Nihongo to seiōgo: Syugo no yurai wo saguru* (Japanese and Western Languages: Searching for the Origin of the Subject). Kōdansha. (in Japanese)

Kawabata, Yasunari. 1947. *Yukiguni* (Snow Country). Shinchōsha. (in Japanese)

Kitamura, Hideo. 1987. “Kokugo” shisō no tenken: Zasshi “*Nihongo*” no Tokieda ronbun hihan (On “The National Language (KOKUGO)” : The Magazine NIHONGO and Tokieda’s article in It), *Hyoron Shakaikagaku*, 33, 1–23. (in Japanese)

Kobayashi, Toshiaki. 2015. *Nishida no shikō to nihongo no mondai*

- (Nishida's Thinking and the Problem of Japanese), *Studies in Japanese Philosophy: Nihon Tetsugakushi Kenkyū*, 12, 1–15. (in Japanese)
- Nakai, Masakazu. 1950. *Gengo wa ikiteiru* (Language is a living thing). Aozora Bunko (online) <https://www.aozora.gr.jp/cards/001166/files/43833_34955.html> (in Japanese)
- Nakamura, Yūjirō. 2000. *Kyōtsū kankaku ron* (On Common Sense). Iwanami Shoten. (in Japanese)
- . 2001. *Nishida Kitarō*. Iwanami Shoten. (in Japanese)
- Nishida, Kitarō. 1990. *An Inquiry into the Good*, trans. Abe Masao and Christopher Ives. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Richings, Vicky A. 2025. Beyond Subject and Object: Language, Thought, and Nishida Kitarō's Philosophical Contribution. *Asia-Japan Research Academic Bulletin*, 6. (online) <https://doi.org/10.34389/asiajapanbulletin.6.0_16>
- Tokieda, Motoki. 2007. *Kokugogaku genron* (I/II) (Principles of Japanese Linguistics (I/II). Iwanami Shoten. (in Japanese)
- Yasuda, Toshiaki. 1997. *Syokuminchi no nakano "kokugogaku"* (Japanese Linguistics under Colonial Rule). Sangensha. (in Japanese)

5. Dr. Nobuyuki Matsui



Chapter 6. From Grammatical Subject to Philosophical Subjectivity: Relationality in Japanese Thought from Nishida Kitarō to Nakamura Yūjirō

MATSUI Nobuyuki is an associate professor at Doshisha Women's College of Liberal Arts, Japan. He earned a BA in Asia Pacific Studies from Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University, and an MA and a Ph.D. in International Relations from the Graduate School of International Relations at Ritsumeikan University. His expertise lies in International Relations, Global Ethics, postwar Japanese Philosophy, and Western Philosophy in English, French, and German, focusing on several themes such as embodiment, place, nothingness, technology, and capitalism. His main research concern is bridging Japanese and Western philosophies to understand global and social transformations shaped by crises in technology, economic systems, and the environment. He is the editor of *Globally Shared Common Sense from the Philosophy of Imagination: Bridging Eastern and Western Perspectives* (AJI Books, 2022) and has published articles including "'Common Sense' and Encounters after the 'Capital-Nation-State' in the Digital Age: Nakamura Yūjirō vs. Karatani Kōjin in their Philosophies of Imagination," *Journal of the Asia-Japan Research Institute of Ritsumeikan University*, Vol. 3, pp.17–32, 2021.