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著者	SUZUKI Sadami
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NISHIDA KITARŌ AS VITALIST, PART 1

—THE IDEOLOGY OF THE IMPERIAL WAY IN NISHIDA'S *THE PROBLEM OF JAPANESE CULTURE* AND THE SYMPOSIA ON "THE WORLD-HISTORICAL STANDPOINT AND JAPAN"

SUZUKI, Sadami

International Research Center for Japanese Studies, Kyoto, Japan

This essay is the first in a three-part series entitled "NISHIDA Kitarō as Vitalist". This series will demonstrate that vitalism or life-centerism constitutes the sustaining structure and conceptual horizon of NISHIDA's thought, which is usually portrayed as a representative modern Japanese philosophy. I will show that the concept of vitalism enables us to put into clearer perspective the complexity, limitations and historical value of NISHIDA's work. Conversely, the articles also undertake to prove the efficacy of this concept for the rewriting of Japanese intellectual history and the history of Japanese arts in the twentieth century, analyzing the trend of "overcoming modernity" thought. The overcoming modernity stream and vitalist thought developed as a result of the social, cultural and mental traumas and devastation caused by modern civilization from the beginning of the twentieth century.

In this article, my discussion will focus on NISHIDA's late work *The Problem of Japanese Culture* (1940), which I believe to be the best for examining the problem of his political thought of the Japanese Imperial Way based on his vitalist notion of "historical life". Through examining the Kyoto School's well-known symposia on "The World-Historical Standpoint and Japan" (1941-42), which were considerably influenced by NISHIDA's philosophy, I also hope to relativize the position of NISHIDA's political thought in the Shōwa prewar and wartime period. NISHIDA's statement on the Japanese Imperial Way in the *The Problem of Japanese Culture* showed bravery and an antiwar attitude during the wartime. However, NISHIDA idealized the Imperial Way by forging its history, and gave it a theoretical base with his idealist vitalist philosophy. NISHIDA's peaceful and universal image of the Imperial Way was, indeed, produced by modern and contemporary Japanese history.

Using NISHIDA's philosophy, the scholars of the Kyoto School, in the symposia on "The World-Historical Standpoint and Japan", insisted that the Japanese mission was to overcome modern European civilization and system of thought. Moreover, they justified and glorified the Japanese "Imperial War", in spite of NISHIDA's antiwar attitude. NISHIDA's theory has many elements in its system of thought which were easily changed to justify the war against Western imperialism and death for the eternal life of the nation. In this essay I will explore the question of what kind of effect the overcoming modernity debate and vitalist thought had in Japan, and how this defective nature came about by an examination of NISHIDA's late philosophy.

Key words: NISHIDA KITARŌ, VITALISM, THEORIES OF OVERCOMING MODERNITY, HISTORICAL LIFE, JAPANESE IMPERIAL WAY, PEACEFUL IMPERIAL WAY, OBJECTIVIST IDEALISM, *THE PROBLEM OF JAPANESE CULTURE*, *THE WORLD-HISTORICAL STANDPOINT AND JAPAN*, KYOTO SCHOOL, GREATER EAST ASIAN CO-PROSPERITY SPHERE, GREATER EAST ASIA WAR.

INTRODUCTION

All discussion on NISHIDA Kitarō (西田幾多郎) in the post-World War II period has been overshadowed by the issue of his alleged support of the wartime dominant ideology of ultra-nationalism, militarism and the spirit of the Imperial Way (皇道). NISHIDA's writings in the late 1930's and early 1940's, in particular *The Problem of Japanese Culture* (日本文化の問題, 1940),¹ clearly show that he believed in the Japanese Imperial Way. And the Kyoto School scholars glorified the so-called "Greater East Asia War (大東亜戦争)" effort in the notorious series of discussions on "The World-Historical Standpoint and Japan (世界史的立場と日本)", published in the journal *Chūōkōron* in 1941 and 1942.² The four participants in the symposia were disciples of NISHIDA, which may explain in part the fact that very similar accusations were directed against both teacher and his followers.

The discussions of the Kyoto School were responded to at another notorious symposium on "Overcoming Modernity (近代の超克)" sponsored in July 1942 by the literary magazine *Bungakukai* (文學界).³ The title "Overcoming Modernity" came from one of the key concepts in the discussions of the Kyoto School. After TAKEUCHI Yoshimi (竹内好) pointed out the linkage of the two symposia, and released the issue "overcoming modernity" from the framework of "wartime propaganda" in his essay on "Modernization and Tradition" (近代化と伝統, 1959), the debates have centered on the so-called problem of overcoming modernity.⁴

The idea of overcoming modernity was central in the two symposia that have been frequently associated with ultra-nationalism and militarism and attacked by modernizationists after the war, but in reality the idea often appeared in the work of many Japanese thinkers, writers, artists and critics in the first half of the twentieth century. If anything, the intellectual struggle against modernity was a central matter of concern in the culture of that period.⁵ It was thought that the modernistic system should make an effort to solve the social, cultural and mental traumas and devastation caused by modernization by improving living and working conditions and promoting welfare. At that time, radical thinkers considered how to change the reckless current of modernization, accepting many influences from contemporary thought in Western Europe and the U.S.A. The discourse on overcoming modernity protested against the increasing evils as a result of the rapid Westernization, industrialization, and urbanization taking place in Japan since the late Meiji period.⁶ The trend of overcoming modernity was sustained by a complex combination of a critique of capitalism, imperialism, social Darwinism and finally the principle of struggle for existence by free competition, a sort of religious or artistic solution to the psychological troubles reflected in modern social conflict. The idea was to create a new national culture through a revival of the urban popular culture of the Tokugawa period, or a reconstruction of traditional farm life. An idealistic universalism, embracing pan-Asianist sentiments and thought was promoted in opposition to modern Western civilization, along with a nativist identification with the indigenous Japanese religion, and so on.

The type of thinking known as vitalism, which arose around the time of the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05, by accepting new vitalistic thought from Europe and the U.S.A and by reviving traditional religious ideas in Asia, was arguably a prominent trend. Vitalism generally can be defined as a trend of thought having an idea of "life" as the central principle — in other words, life-centerism, which grows out of a sense of an impending crisis of human life. In the early twentieth century, vitalism was based on the crisis of human life brought about mechanized

civilization and wars with modern weapons. Its central idea of “life” was influenced by new religious thought, new philosophical thought and new biology. TOLSTOY, BERGSON and German “philosophers of life” such as W. Dilthey are the European thinkers who had the most profound impact on Japanese vitalism.⁷

Like many of his contemporaries, NISHIDA embraced the thought of “life” that seemed capable of transcending the dualistic vision inherent in and of solving the many conflicts and contradictions caused by Western-style rationality and the modern social system. He started his philosophical thinking by writing the following in his diary at the beginning of the twentieth century: “Study, after all, is for the sake of life. Life is of first importance” (*NISHIDA Kitarō Zenshū*, hereafter cited as NKZ, Iwanami Shoten, Tokyo 1966, vol. 17, p. 74.). At this time the problematic issue of self identity had begun to capture the interest of young intellectuals in Japan. The notion of “life” as a dynamic universal process underlying all phenomena and all types of thought gradually develops and occupies a prominent position in NISHIDA’s writings, from the religious philosophy of his early years through the philosophy of art of the 1920’s under the influence of BERGSON’s idea “*élan vital*”, and finally to the essay entitled “life” (生命, 1945, NKZ, vol. 11) which he was working on in the months before his death.⁸ I will contend that the move toward reexamining NISHIDA’s philosophy as vitalistic in the context of the discourse on overcoming modernity described above, will shed new light both on his thought and on twentieth-century Japanese intellectual history.

In this essay I would like to examine the relationship between NISHIDA’s political thought, especially his view of the Imperial Way, and his vitalistic philosophy. My discussion will focus on *The Problem of Japanese Culture*, which best illustrates the interweaving of the mature philosophy of history, vitalism and political thought in NISHIDA’s later work. The second objective of this essay is to trace the influence of NISHIDA’s vitalist political and historical philosophy on the Chūōkōron discussions on the “The World-Historical Standpoint and Japan.” I hope that my examination of NISHIDA’s political thought and the “Chūōkōron” discussions, from the perspective of overcoming modernity thinking, will help to further disentangle arguments about the relationship between NISHIDA’s philosophy and the Japanese Imperial Way, wartime ultra-nationalist militarism, and imperialism.⁹

1 The Ideology of the Japanese Imperial Way

Readers of *The Problem of Japanese Culture* by NISHIDA Kitarō will feel, in contrast to the title, that the so-called cultural problems were hardly discussed. The words in Chapter V, “With the imperial family as the center, our national culture has been living and developing (生々発展) for thousands of years” (NKZ, vol. 12, p. 335.) which are considered as the central theme of the entire book, indicate NISHIDA’s position. Because the center of Japanese culture is concerned with the imperial family, for NISHIDA theorizing about the meaning of the imperial family for Japanese was a way of establishing a philosophical base for Japanese culture. The following passage from Chapter V is a representative example of NISHIDA’s thought at the time of the Sino-Japanese War from 1937, the East Asian stage of World War II.

Today’s Japan is neither a solitary island in the East, nor a closed society. Today’s Japan is a member of the world facing the world. The principle of Japan’s formation must

become the principle of the world's formation as well. Herein lies our country's major task at present(//).

In the past Japan was an is-world without perspectives on the outside and with the Imperial Way as its formative principle. Even with the Ashikaga clan or the Hōjō clan as its rulers Japan could not be called the Japan of the Hōjōs or the Ashikagas. Japan has never been a historical subject.

Now, however, we must contribute to the world by discovering our own principle of self-formation, that is a self-identity of contradictories (矛盾的自己合一) in the depths of our historical development. This is the true manner of realizing the Imperial Way, and the real significance of "All the world under one roof" (八紘一宇). (ibid., p. 341)¹⁰

This passage affirms NISHIDA's identification with the Imperial Way as the only formative principle in Japanese history. Moreover, NISHIDA clearly asserts here that the Imperial Way must be realized in the contemporary world. Because of such passages in his later writings and lectures, NISHIDA was attacked as a rightist and an advocate of Japanese imperialism after the war. If the Japanese right wing is defined as a heterogeneous group of supporters of the Imperial Way ideology, NISHIDA must, by the same token, also be characterized as a rightist.

The matter, however, is not as clear-cut as it may seem. Let me insert the two sentences missing in the quotation above (omitting mark (//)).

I think we must by all means avoid subjectivizing. That merely turns the Imperial Way into a principle of domination over other countries (霸道) and imperialism (帝國主義).

NISHIDA clearly expresses here a resistance to imperialist expansion in and domination of other countries by Japan. He believed that the Japanese Imperial Way never constituted imperialism and did not necessarily have to lead to imperialism. Later, in "Nation Polity" (Kokutai, 国体) (1944), NISHIDA states;

The true ideal of a state must contribute to the creation of a universal world. Simplistic statist nationalism cannot transcend the struggle between nations. The term "Holy War" has no place in such a position. (ibid., p. 409)

NISHIDA consistently warned against war, arguing that the Japanese Imperial Way had a peaceful nature transcending all struggles with powers. NISHIDA clearly positioned himself as an antiwar intellectual during World War II.

Recent research has done much to clear NISHIDA of such accusations. OKETANI Hideaki (桶谷秀昭) has shown that NISHIDA's warning against the idea of becoming a subject contains an opposition to imperialism.¹¹ YUSA Michiko has proven that NISHIDA's letters and diaries express a clear antiwar and anti-imperialist stance. UEDA Shizuteru (上田閑照) even affirms that NISHIDA was no more a theoretician of the Imperial Way than he was of the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere (大東亜共栄圏).¹² Was the charge of cooperation with wartime ultra-nationalism that was brought against NISHIDA after the war, then, merely a delusion, only a fabrication put forward by left wing critics for ideological purposes?

In the 1930's and in the first half of the 1940's, the right wing identified of course with ultranationalism and militarism even though as a group it retained a sense of pure-mindedness above and beyond political and economical interests, and detested the degradation of the army and the moneymaking of the military clique.¹³ The left wing, communist or socialist, was oppressed and all but destroyed. There was also a liberalist-humanist faction some critics have described as "middle-of-the-road" way of thinking.¹⁴ From 1938, all sorts of discourses expressing antiwar sentiments and pacific views of avoiding the war with China were suppressed.¹⁵ The outbreak of the war against the U.S.A and the U.K in 1941 pleased a considerable number of liberalist intellectuals, such as KOBAYASHI Hideo (小林秀雄) and KAWAKAMI Tetsutarō (河上徹太郎) and other individuals associated with the review *Bungakukai*.¹⁶ The peaceful thought of NISHIDA of 1940 belonged to the antiwar side more so than that of humanistic liberalists who could not express their antiwar attitude. It is said that NISHIDA was attacked persistently by ultranationalists at that time because the ultrarightists despised his scholarly attitude when arguing about their holy existence.¹⁷ In addition, he may have been attacked because of his antiwar attitude.

While NISHIDA expressed an antiwar attitude and became the target of attacks by finical rightists, the fact that he was a theoretician and advocate of the Imperial Way cannot be denied. Was his anti-imperialist, nationalist-emperorist position a contradiction in terms? I think there is no conflict here. We must carefully contextualize and historicize NISHIDA's view of the Imperial Way. At that time the term "imperialism" was used only with regard to Western power in Japan. Except for a portion of the left wing, no one viewed the Japanese militarist acts in China or the war initiated by Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor as imperialism. Of course, NISHIDA's antiwar attitude was different from this type of anti-imperialism, for the simple reason that he embraced an entirely peaceful Japanese Imperial Way thought. Furthermore, this idea was not only NISHIDA's. As an orientalist who visited Japan, Bruno TAUT also espoused a peaceful image of the Imperial Way.

In *The Problem of Japanese Culture*, Chapter V, NISHIDA refers to the following passage from Bruno TAUT's *Nippon*: "Since the beginning of the twentieth century Japan has offered the most substantial impact to Europe's sincere attempt to leave behind the ridiculous outdated farce of its past" (*ibid.*, p. 349).¹⁸ It is well known that TAUT emphasized the beautiful simplicity of traditional Japanese art and architecture in his books. Stating that the simplicity of Japanese Imperial culture guaranteed its long tradition, TAUT often stressed that the Japanese Emperor's position had been distanced from political power for a long time, in contrast to the Japanese Shōgun and European emperors.¹⁹ I suspect that in Japan TAUT might have had contact with intellectuals who talked about the peaceful character of the Japanese Imperial Way in connection with an antiwar stance. It is when Taut visited Japan, escaping from Nazism, that the Japanese army expanded their action in China. My guess may be correct if we observe the stream of thought after World War II, when influential historians and thinkers such as TSUDA Sōkichi and WATSUJI Tetsurō often refer to the peaceful cultural tradition of the Japanese Imperial Way to justify the new constitutional symbolic Emperor system.²⁰ Such ideas originated of course in the prewar period and belong to the antiwar side. NISHIDA's political thought of a peaceful Imperial Way represented this type of ideology.

NISHIDA was undoubtedly an ideologue of the Imperial Way, resisting imperialism and hoping for peace at the time of World War II. What was his perception of the Japanese

Imperial Way? What is the significance of his words “our own principle of self-formation, that is a self-identity of contradictories, in the depths of our historical development”? Is the passage from NISHIDA’s *The Problem of Japanese Culture* quoted above the true way of realizing the Imperial Way? And what effect did NISHIDA’s political thought have on the historical reality of Japan’s aggressive acts in the first half of the twentieth century? All of these questions are closely related. I will start from examining NISHIDA’s conception of the Imperial Way.

2 A Peaceful Conception of the Imperial Way

According to NISHIDA, the Japanese Imperial way does not have to include being a dominant power in Asia as well as the world, because the Imperial Way by nature lacks subjectivity, or is beyond subjectivity. Some subjective powers have struggled and changed in Japanese history, but the imperial family has endured beyond such struggles. The Japanese Imperial Way as an authority to unify one world, NISHIDA asserts, is quite different from Christianity in the West and the Imperial way in China. Christian Europe constituted itself as one coherent world which produced many subjective powers that struggled with each other in the modern period. China’s authority was based on the ideal logic of “heaven” (天), and that ideal did not prevent many dynasties from succeeding one another and many wars from being fought. However, in Japan the authority of only one imperial family subsisted for centuries in spite of various power struggles and internal conflict (*ibid.*, pp. 334-351.).

It is said that the idea of “heaven” in China is the superior concept which controls the destiny of the world, combined with the concept of “public (公)”. On the contrary, in Japan, the word “public (ōyake 公)”, which was borrowed from China, meant the Emperor or state in the Ancient period.²¹ In that period, the Emperor or nation might have been regarded as a unit embracing the superior concept of “heaven”. While NISHIDA regards the Japanese Imperial Way as this kind of superior religious concept, he states that the Imperial Way is different from Western Christianity and the Chinese ideal of “heaven”.

In *The Problem of Japanese Culture* NISHIDA declared that the Japanese Imperial Way is not an ideal but a historical fact. What does “a historical fact” mean? Of course, many emperors existed throughout Japanese history. If the imperial family maintained their way of being and the mode of legitimacy of the Japanese imperial family can be called the Imperial Way, that is clearly not an ideal but a historical fact. And if being a supreme authority above and beyond all political subjects could be regarded as the way of being of the imperial family, the Imperial Way is a historical fact. Indeed, a supreme authority remote from all political subjects can be regarded as peaceful. NISHIDA declared that the Japanese Imperial Way was the supreme authority, a non ideal, historical fact. And in NISHIDA’s thought, this non-political character of Japanese emperors could be described as overcoming the modern style of European emperors who had political power to dominate other countries.²²

Now if we consider the history of the Japanese Imperial Way and the way of being of the imperial family, we will notice immediately that it does not correspond at all to NISHIDA’s vision. In the nation (a league of tribes) named Yamato (Japanese), the position of authority of the chief, whose name “Tennō” (Emperor) arose around the beginning of the eighth century, never changed, in spite of the domination of ethnic minorities and struggles among themselves for political power in the Ancient period and the Middle Ages. As is well known, the struggles in

the Ancient period are described in the *Nihon-Shoki* (日本書紀), and those during the Nanbokuchō period (1336-92) divided the regime into “Southern” and “Northern” dynasties. The authority of the imperial family was seriously weakened in the Middle Ages and was very frail in the Tokugawa era. It barely had a formal mandate. The Japanese Imperial Way had not maintained supreme religious authority from the Middle Ages through the Tokugawa period.

By restoring the imperial authority and reinstalling it at the head of the nation, the Meiji Restoration laid the foundation for the creation of a modern nation-state. An Emperor system in some ways similar to the constitutional monarchy in modern Europe was established by the Imperial Constitution of 1890. And the Imperial Constitution declared the Emperor to be head of chief of the nation-state. Though free from all responsibilities, he even has the right to command all the armed forces. And in fact, the Emperor used this right twice in the Meiji period. These historical facts contradict NISHIDA’s conception of the Imperial Way that was a religious superiority, peaceful, and beyond political power, and that its authority was stable. It is clear that NISHIDA forged a history of the Imperial Way and created a peaceful image of the Imperial Way. NISHIDA’s peaceful Imperial Way image, made by combining an idealization with forged history, might have developed from NISHIDA’s two “historical lives”. One of NISHIDA’s two “historical lives” is “historical life” which is a key concept of NISHIDA’s philosophy. In other words, the forged history was unified with his original idealist vitalist philosophy. The other is his actual historical life. The “historical life” — “life” with historical character — may have developed from NISHIDA’s life in modern Japanese history. In other words, the peaceful, and above all historical Imperial Way image of NISHIDA was limited by the history of the age in which he lived. I will examine these two “historical lives”, one after the other.

3 The Vitalist Philosophical Theorization of the Imperial Way

In *The Problem of Japanese Culture*, NISHIDA not only created a peaceful image of the Imperial Way, but he also blended the peaceful image with his original idealist, vitalist philosophy. If anything, the book *The Problem of Japanese Culture* seems to be written to establish a peaceful image of the Imperial Way using all of NISHIDA’s previous works. Chapter IV of the book begins as follows: “So far I have explained at length the meaning of the concept of life” (*ibid.*, p. 319.). The first half of this book, from Chapter I to Chapter IV, looks like a summary of all his philosophical works until then, with “life” as the central concept. Readers of *The Problem of Japanese Culture* will notice that the word “life (生命)” appears in this text quite frequently. Apart from the term “historical life (歴史的生命)”, which occurs repeatedly, the following expressions may be found; “animal life (動物の生命)” (*ibid.*, p. 300), “organic life (有機的生命)” (*ibid.*, p. 306.), “life of species (種的生命)” (*ibid.*, p. 310), “biological life (生物的生命)” (*ibid.*, p. 314, 318), “life of human being (人間の生命)” (*ibid.*, p. 321), and “life of society (社会の生命)” (*ibid.*, p. 323). The expression “life of state (国家の生命)”, which appears in other works of NISHIDA as well, also belongs to this series (*ibid.*, p. 424).

According to NISHIDA’s thought, the word “life” is the essence of existence and the dynamics of the world. The movement of “life” constitutes the core and the principle of formation of all things. Things and matters are the outcome of the development of “life”. This “life” forms the world’s history. Endowed with the capacity of the supreme principle “life” to

form, produce and transform all being and fact, this ceaseless movement or energy is called "historical life". Individual existence is unified in this whole movement. This is the reason why NISHIDA attached greater importance to historical fact than to idea.

The vision of a vital force sustaining and propelling the world and history, is, of course, a type of evolutionary thinking. NISHIDA described the evolution from living thing to human being in *The Problem of Japanese Culture*. NISHIDA was not influenced merely by biological evolution, but also by social evolutionism and a theory of an organic social system. This is illustrated by his use of terms such as "life of society" or "life of state". These terms are no more metaphors than metaphysical rhetoric. In NISHIDA's thought, "society" and "state" are produced by "historical life" too. The centrality and consistency of the concept of "life" as a universal movement or universal formative principle in NISHIDA's writings compels me to define his philosophy as life-centerism or vitalism.

In his view, the pure material world can neither move nor develop, can no longer produce anything — it is non-living (*ibid.*, p. 319). NISHIDA criticized materialism, mechanism, and teleology, because they are concerned only with one side of the world. NISHIDA seems to want to overcome these modern theories. How can this sort of overcoming modernity be accomplished? NISHIDA states that we have to recognize objectively the world that holds us human beings, who work on the world and create the world, and who recognize the world (*ibid.*, pp. 297-298). This world is the world that human beings live in — a living and developing world. This recognition system seems well suited to this world in which human beings live. Even after the complete destruction of human life, of course, a world should be living and developing. However, for human beings, the world has no meaning but in trying to imagine it. In this world in which human beings live, human beings are one of the subjects working on this world.

As a subject of observation, standing outside such a world, NISHIDA describes this world as "the world forming and developing itself" (*ibid.*, p. 314) or "the world living and developing itself" (*ibid.*, p. 335). "The world forming and developing itself"? Do these words of NISHIDA express an idealism? Does NISHIDA state that human beings work on the world, and create the world? Except for the work of human beings, what does form the world? NISHIDA's notion of "the world forming itself" seems to omit the subject, human beings, who work on and create the world, and it clearly falls into objectivism.

In *The Problem of Japanese Culture*, the concept of "free will" (*ibid.*, p. 322) seems superior to the notion of "life". The "free will" can express and form itself through some self-identity of contradictories: of one and many, time and space, form and quality, subject and environment, one and its species and so on (*ibid.*, pp. 306-307). For NISHIDA, "free will" is the source of the subjectivity of human beings and the source of subjectivity in the world. However, in his early works, both of these subjectivities are manifestations of "god". In *An Introduction of Philosophy* (a transcript of a lecture presented around 1924 at Kyoto Teikoku Daigaku) he interprets the idea of "god (神)" as "true life" (NKZ, vol. 15, p. 36). NISHIDA even stated that the force of "life" is detectable when our will is projected onto an object,²³ too. Or, an act by us is a self-expression of "life".²⁴ While NISHIDA avoids using the terms "god" and "true life" in *The Problem of Japanese Culture*, he seems to state that our "free will" necessarily has to realise "historical life" as the "life" commands.

Such a conception belongs of course to the realm of philosophical idealism. With an objective recognition system, NISHIDA's philosophy should be called objectivist idealism or idealist

objectivism. And this objective idealist system embraces the concept of “life” as its central, supreme principle. Without the notion of “life”, the concept of self-identity of contradictories (矛盾の自己同一), which occupies a central position in NISHIDA’s philosophy, cannot be maintained. For NISHIDA, the world of existence (“Dasein”) is just that, namely a “totality” or “whole one” (全体的一) of “historical reality (歴史的現実)”, which was formed by “self-identity”, and which embodied a contradictorial relationship between a subject and an object, or a subject and its environment (*ibid.*, pp. 314-316).

So far as the subject in this world is concerned, he transcends his struggles and becomes a higher identity through self-denial. This self-denial is what NISHIDA calls “nothingness” or “no-being (無)”. At the stage of “nothingness” or “no-being” one is in a condition to lose oneself. But this “nothingness” is not simply nothingness, since no-being is a stage on the way to the next phase where the subject attains self-renewal. “Nothingness” is not a condition wherein the subject negates himself completely, so NISHIDA called this condition “being in/of nothing” (無の有). This dialectic system including self-negation seems close to the one by Hegel and to the concept of *Satori* (悟り) in Zen.²⁵

In general, when a subject acts toward an object in the world, indeed he is limited by his environment. And the world that accepts his act is limited by his act. The relation between a subject and his environment is co-limited. Though NISHIDA states this relation, he thought that an active subject, through this self-negation system, could realize the essence of himself. Moreover an observing subject, through this self-negation system, could recognize the essence of himself. And both are unified with the whole world, because their essence is the essence of the world. The essence of the world is “life”. NISHIDA believed that the closer we come to the stage of the self-identity of opposites, the more we become the “true life” (*ibid.*, pp. 294-296, pp. 313-317). This means that the purest style of self-identity of contradictories is the most essential.

This is the reason why NISHIDA felt that the Japanese Imperial Way is peaceful, a unique and unsurpassed spirit. The Imperial Way, which is far from any political power and not subjective, realizes a self-identity of contradictories, “being in non-being” (*ibid.*, p. 325). The Japanese Imperial Way has never been threatened by a struggle for power. It is an authority based on historical reality, the outcome of “historical life” itself. It is by preserving its capacity for self-negation that the Japanese Imperial Way can contribute to world peace. That is why NISHIDA said, at the time of World War II, “I think we must by all means avoid subjectivizing. That merely turns the Imperial Way into a principle of domination over other countries and imperialism”, and “our own principle of self-formation, that is a self-identity of contradictories, in the depths of our historical development. This is the true way of realizing the Imperial Way”.

In his vitalistic system of thought NISHIDA saw the essence of the world embodied in the ideal of the Japanese Imperial Way. The Imperial Way is both an essential and a historical reality with no subjectivity. Its unique character lies in its achieving a self-identity of contradictories, which is the closest one can come to the essence of existence. For us, this idea of the Japanese Imperial Way formulated by NISHIDA is only a delusion produced by a subjectivist idealism.

Does NISHIDA state that we have to objectively observe the world in which we live? It must be accepted that we have to objectively observe the world in which we live. And a subject who observes the world is the same subject who works on the same world. NISHIDA’s recognition system, in fact, neglected this point. Indeed, objective recognition can only be guaranteed by an observer standing outside of the world established by the observer as object. That is why the

observer has to divide his subject in two — a real one who lives in the world which is observed by the observer, and another ideal one who observes the world in which he lives. Only this system of observation guarantees the objective recognition of the world in which he lives. In other words, for an observer, this relationship of his observations and work guarantees an objective-subjective observation and prevents him from falling into objectivism or subjectivism. If one has the recognition that a subject who lives in the world is always limited and influenced by the world he lives in, in other words, a subject who lives in the world is made by the world in which he lives, he has to endeavor to observe how he was made by the world he lives in. This observation system produces in the observer a self-examination or self-relativization.

However, NISHIDA, omitting this self-relativization system, stood outside of the world and set forth the idea of “life” as the center of the world. While NISHIDA’s intention was objective thought, he fell into a hole of idealist objectivism. A hole of idealist objectivism has no outside world, being very similar to simple subjectivism. A man who lives in this hole, because he holds an objective stance and views the entire world, has difficulty escaping. In addition, Vitalism makes the hole very deep, with the water of “life” springing from its bottom. In this hole all things and all matter are the phenomena of the ideal “life”. He established “life” as the principle of the world, even though his thought is nevertheless a phenomenon of this “life”. For him, this ideal “life” seems non-ideal, because he always views his life and feels the living force of his own body as reality. Even if he died, he could not escape this vitalistic world, because even death is a phenomenon of the ideal, eternal “life”. In NISHIDA’s vitalist philosophy, with its dialectic idea of self-negation, the death of a subject is only one stage of climbing the stairs of “the world living and developing itself”. NISHIDA states this in a plain expression, “life includes death” (*ibid.*, pp. 315-316). In NISHIDA’s thought, the human realizations which are a phenomenon of “Life”, have to approach through a dialectic self-negation system, more and more closely to the essence of an object which is a phenomenon of “Life”, too. Such realization means an awareness of existence itself or a phenomenon of “Life”. In this completely self-enclosed vitalist system, many facts of history were idealized by the will of the subject to think almost freely, avoiding exact realization.

It is the conclusion of this chapter that NISHIDA’s world is completely enclosed, having no system of self-examination or self-relativization. If NISHIDA adopted the self-relativization system, he could no longer recognize that his idealist vitalist thought — his idea of the Japanese Imperial Way being close to the essence of universal “historical life” — was only a product of the thought and social circumstances of the age in which he lived.²⁶

4 The Historical Character of NISHIDA’s Imperial Way

The image of NISHIDA’s peaceful Imperial Way, which was philosophically grounded in idealist vitalism, was created not only by forging the facts of Japanese history, but also by the historical reality in which NISHIDA lived. In other words, while NISHIDA provided the peaceful image of the Imperial Way with an essential and universal ground, his image is limited by the special features of modern Japanese history. The first historical factor concerning NISHIDA’s Imperial Way image might be the character of the Japanese Imperial Way which was fabricated in the Meiji period. Indeed, the idea of the Imperial Way — the main sustaining principle of the Japanese national identity — was the leading ideology of the Meiji Restoration. It

was established by the Imperial Constitution of 1890, and was modeled after the constitutional monarchy system of Europe, in which the monarchy sits on the supreme political power, free from all responsibility. In addition, the national moral was put forth as a sort of state religion by the Imperial Rescript on Education (教育勅語). This Rescript emphasized the eternity of the Imperial Family (万世一系), and the duty of the people to respect the emperor and the nation-state (忠君愛国), based on an orthodox Confucianism that differed from the orthodox Neo-Confucianism rationale of the Tokugawa bakufu.²⁷ At that time, the Japanese Imperial Way seems to have occupied the central position of a kind of national religion. The new notion of the imperial family's secular existence was established by the constitution, while also its preeminent role as religious authority and the guarantor of eternal traditions, was reestablished and began to spread among the Japanese people. This imperial nature that was established by the Imperial Constitution and the Imperial Rescript on Education, must have influenced NISHIDA's image of the Imperial Way, which is characterized by a supreme religious authority, an eternal tradition and no political subjectivity.

The second historical factor which may have influenced the image of NISHIDA's Imperial Way was the Japanese Imperial Way spirit at the time *The Problem of Japanese Culture* was written. After World War II, Japanese liberal intellectuals, because of their strong desire for peace, often hid this national tendency and emphasized that Japanese people followed the state will in opposition to their own.²⁸ In fact, a lot of soldiers fought in the long war, and many men and women, young and old, worked to support the war. The words "for the state" or "for the nation", which had almost the same meaning as "for the Emperor", were like a magic spell, enabling them to overcome their psychological agonies and conflicts, and making them stand or fall watching each other. Even after the war, which ended with Japan's surrender, a large number of people received the Emperor's visit by prostrating themselves. We should insist on looking squarely at reality, and not allow history to be forged. We have to grasp the inherent structure of any discourse to relativize its position in a historical situation. In this essay, indeed, I would like to clarify the inherent structure of NISHIDA's thought on the peaceful Imperial Way and to relativize its historical meaning.

Before World War II, by both hard and soft political means, heterogeneous sentiments towards worship of the imperial family spread among the Japanese. State-nationalism was strengthened during the Sino-Japanese War (1894-95) and in the national crisis of the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05). After these wars against mighty states, the authority of the Emperor appeared to be confirmed by Japan's victories, and the Japanese people were proud of themselves as being one among the mighty states in the world, in spite of great sacrifices and a very low margin. The opposition to the emperor system that still persisted was all but wiped out in the wake of the "Great Treason Incident (大逆事件)" of 1910. For example, discussions of the problem of the division of the dynasty into "Southern" and "Northern" during the Middle Ages were allowed in the Taishō period when the Emperor's authority was considerably weakened.²⁹ On the contrary, in the Shōwa prewar period, that historical problem of the imperial family became taboo, and all discussion, including scholarly studies of the imperial system recorded in the Imperial Constitution, were oppressed. The official ideology established the sacred character of the Imperial Way around 1930 and onward. The Japanese Communist Party was crushed as soon as it declared the overthrow of the emperor system in 1932. However, revolutionary ideologies that appealed to the authority of the Imperial Way did have some resonance. A

significant example is Ōmoto-kyō, one of the new Shintō religions, which leaned to the Imperial Way after the first oppression in 1920. There were of course the two aborted military coups of 1932 and 1936, both of which were sustained by the belief that the state's economic and political welfare depend on agriculture and Japan's rural communities more than anything. Indeed, those movements were suppressed with force.

Before the war, the nature of the Japanese Imperial Way was asserted as a unique living principle in the world. Uneasiness increased, for under this principle, Japan should stand up against the Western powers that had established their hegemony in Asia. A variety of opinions were proposed by intellectuals at the same time as the rise of militarism. Even the non-militarist, non-imperialist poet HAGIWARA Sakutarō gave a speech to servicemen in which he stressed that in order to preserve the peaceful Asian spirit, soldiers had to fight against Western powers with weapons produced by Western technology that Japan had obtained in Asia.³⁰ This seems like twisted logic, and is a typical example of the "overcoming modernity" ideology used to justify the war against Western powers. To fight against Western powers meant to overcome Western modern civilization and to preserve the peaceful Asian spirit and philosophy. Although all wars are justified with peace as their end, this statement by HAGIWARA Sakutarō did not refer to a general peaceful end, but to an end of realizing the special peace of the Asian spirit, to overcome Western modernity. This prowar logic to realize a peaceful Asian spirit in the world against Western modern civilization resembles NISHIDA's antiwar thought in *The Problem of Japanese Culture*: "The principle of Japan's formation must become the principle of the world's formation as well. That is the great problem of today's Japan. ...I think we must by all means avoid subjectivizing... we must contribute to the world by discovering our formation..., in the depths of our historical development."

It seems that the two discourses of HAGIWARA's and NISHIDA's, conceive only one problem — to stand up as a subject to the world, or not. NISHIDA clearly cut off "a principle of domination over other countries", insisting on a peaceful Imperial Way and an antiwar attitude in *The Problem of Japanese Culture*. Above in Chapter 1, I have clarified NISHIDA's antiwar attitude by his words in 1944: "Simplistic statist nationalism cannot transcend the struggle between nations".

That is not to say he was far from the ideology of "overcoming modernity" at that time. On the contrary, NISHIDA's peaceful Imperial Way provided a reason for that ideology. "The principle of Japan's formation refers to the principle of the world's formation as well." NISHIDA's words "the principle of Japan's formation" mean the Japanese Imperial Way which realizes the principle of "historical life", making a peaceful way to overcome imperialism. NISHIDA states in *The Problem of Japanese Culture* that this peaceful Imperial Way realizes "All the world under one roof". What image do we have from these words? This means simply that in this world, each nation-state maintains a relationship of co-existence. As a matter of fact, NISHIDA had never denied nation-state. The organic image of the state appears in the earliest work of NISHIDA, "Zen no Kenkyū" (善の研究) in 1910 (NKZ vol. 1, p. 163). Moreover, NISHIDA put forth a theory on the law of state and on the reason why each state stands on each nation by principle of race in his essay on "The Problem on the Reason of State" (1941). How is this peaceful image of the world realized? NISHIDA does not answer. But it is only his ideal image of the "overcoming modernity" world transcending the modern world filled with struggles between nations.

Grounded as it was in an original philosophy of existence, NISHIDA's conception of the Imperial Way was anything but simplistic. In other words, his move consisted in lending a philosophical foundation to the tradition of the Japanese Imperial Way, as enshrined in the Imperial Rescript on Education, and to the sacred character of the Emperor set forth in the official ideology in the Shōwa period. This move may be seen in *The Problem of Japanese Culture*, which was clearly composed as an expression of NISHIDA's desire to face squarely Japan's situation at that time and to warn against the militarist propaganda being disseminated since the late 1930's. NISHIDA seems to be walking on a historical tightrope between the consecration of the Emperor and the militarism within the Emperor's army (皇軍). In the next chapter, I would like to examine a prowar ideology that more closely resembles NISHIDA's antiwar Imperial Way thought than HAGIWARA's statement.

5 NISHIDA's Influence on the Symposia on "The World-Historical Standpoint and Japan"

NISHIDA's philosophy had a deep impact on the series of three discussions on "The World-Historical Standpoint and Japan" in which four young scholars of the Kyoto School took part. The title of the first discussion was chosen as the title for the entire symposia, and suggested that the participants were proposing an interpretation of the contemporary situation as a period of transition toward a new world order, and a new principle to create a new historical stage by the Japanese. The central issue in the first discussion was how to overcome modern European civilization involved with Euro-centerism — universalism of European culture — and capitalism, mechanism, positivism, utilitarianism, theory of development by stages, the principle of struggle for existence of individuals which produces a division of the inner life and outer life, relativism, nationalism, and imperialism. Of course the participants wanted to overcome these aspects of modern European civilization and culture which modern Japan had accepted from the Meiji period, and to formulate a new principle for Japan. This first discussion seems to have been an occasion for NISHIDA's disciples to make concrete the abstract thesis that NISHIDA proposed in Chapter V of his *The Problem of Japanese Culture*, cited previously in this essay: "The principle of Japan's formation must become the principle of the world's formation as well. That is the great problem of today's Japan, ..."

At the outset of the first discussion, the participants talked about a sort of Western European consciousness crisis, a division of European totality learned from books written by historians and thinkers in Western Europe.³¹ The participants in the symposium determined that the Western European consciousness crisis was brought about by Asian resistance to Western imperialism, although these trends of thought in Europe, in fact, had been concerned with the rise of Nazism, Fascism and Stalinism, too. (from the book of *The World-Historical Standpoint and Japan*,³² hereafter cited, WHS, pp. 3-43.). The discussion went on to try to search for a Japanese principle by historically comparing European culture with East Asian and Japanese culture, and by focusing on the difficulties between them, the logical style, the character of modernity, and a consciousness of history and individuality. Finally they proposed a sort of new historicism to create a new national unity, a subjective force of the nation-state, based on an international standpoint and a vital force of morality to improve upon the existing conditions and to create a new world order.

For the participants, who were NISHIDA's disciples, European subjectivity was analogous to

an “I”, which strives to expand itself all over the world. NISHIDA’s book also insists that we have to relate to others as equals, and to establish with them a relationship between “I” and “Thou”. Thus, during the discussion NISHIDA’s disciples referred to NISHIDA’s theory on “I and Thou” (p. 12), NISHIDA’s notion of “Japanese history which has a living and developing ability” (p. 72), “absolute nothingness” (p. 94), as well as to NISHIDA’s essay “The Problem on the Reason of State” (p. 57) and *The Problem of Japanese Culture*.³³

The path taken by NISHIDA’s disciples seems not only to make tangible NISHIDA’s abstract thesis in *The Problem of Japanese Culture*, but also to formulate their own theory on the problem of Japanese culture. Although in *The Problem of Japanese Culture* NISHIDA said, “In the past Japan was an is-world without perspective on the outside”, KŌYAMA Iwao (高山岩男) pointed out that in the text of *Nihon-Shoki*, Shōtoku Taishi (聖徳太子) had an international standpoint in East Asia and a firm intention to foster national unity through Buddhism (pp. 77-82).³⁴ Following NISHIDA’s words, “we must contribute to the world by discovering our own principle of self-formation”, they made every effort to discover the Japanese principle of self-formation, and declared that the subjectivity of Japan could contribute to the world, in spite of NISHIDA’s words, “I think we must by all means avoid subjectivizing”.

In the second discussion, “Morality and Historical Character of the East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere (東亜共栄圏)³⁵”, which took place after the outbreak of the war between Japan, the U.S.A, and the U.K, the vision of the participants became more concrete than in the first discussion. They insisted on a pluralistic system (p. 142, p. 178) and a cultural and economical block to transcend imperialism (pp. 180-196). Their pluralism clearly depended on NISHIDA’s image of the world or the “I and Thou” philosophy. Following NISHIDA’s words, “That merely turns the Imperial Way into a principle of domination over other countries and imperialism”, the scholars of the Kyoto School clearly rejected imperialism, fascism, and totalitarianism (p. 196). The reason why they could create a vision of a new world order that appeared peaceful was because they fully comprehended NISHIDA’s notion of “historical life”. The participants in the first part of the second discussion characterized the war as a moral fight between East and West. Above all KŌYAMA Iwao insisted on “moral energy” as a principle that became manifest in the war and which would support the new world order. This concept, which the Kyoto School thinkers adopted from Leopold RANKE and revised according to their own dynamic vision of history, was translated as the “vital force of the nation” by KŌSAKA Masaaki (高坂正顕) (pp. 135-145).

Also, in the second discussion, NISHIDA’s disciples created a theory of their own, ignoring NISHIDA’s words, “I think we must by all means avoid subjectivizing”. The participants in the Chūōkōron discussions declared that Japan had to maintain a subjectivity for opening a new world order by encouraging the “East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere” to stand up against Western powers. The ideal of “all the world under one roof (八紘一宇)” must be viewed as a pluralistic system in which “all nations stand on their own position (万邦所を得る)”. This order of block has to be supported not only by an economical system, but also by a moral system which transcends modern Western rationality. A perfect analogy for the new block order is that of a family of nations coexisting in harmony like the individuals in one family (pp. 225-255).

This is roughly what the second discussion proposed as a strategy for “overcoming modernity” in a rapidly changing global context. This strategy seems a sort of conclusion which sums up the current of overcoming modernity thought in Japan from around the Russo-Japanese War. If we

could take the content of *The World-Historical Standpoint and Japan* outside of the world-historical context at that time, it would look similar to the so-called “postmodern” problems, or worth reexamining in the context of the present global economic and political situation. Some aspects of the critique of European modernity, such as that it is a mechanical civilization lacking harmony with the souls and bodies of humans and nature, as well as the deconstruction of Euro-centerism proposed by the Chūōkōron symposia, seem just as valid today. Otherwise, while reading this part of the discussion, someone might feel that we would soon be in a world war again. The viewpoint referring to the historical inevitability of the rising Asian resistance to Western imperialism can be applied to the so-called post-colonial situations in developing nations. Finally, in this age of environmental crises, the following problems discussed by the Kyoto School in 1941-42 acquire contemporary significance. The Japanese thinkers identified overcoming modernity with Western civilization, which included sustaining values such as utilitarianism, nationalism, capitalism and imperialism; the principle of competition and struggle for existence between individuals and nations; as well as the modern theories of positivism, development by stages, and relativism. However, while it may seem useful to examine the overcoming modernity thought of NISHIDA’s disciples in light of the contemporary situation, we do not want to repeat the same mistakes. We should not forget the aim of the discussions and carefully examine the way they framed the debates.

6 The Fault of Idealistic Historical Perceptive and Idealist Vitalism

Though the view of *The World-Historical Standpoint and Japan* embodied a kind of pluralism, Japan’s right to take the leading role in the “East Asian Area Co-Prosperity Sphere” was never contested. Nor was Japan’s racial and cultural superiority questioned. The participants in the discussion resolved the contradiction between their pluralism adapted from NISHIDA’s “I and Thou” philosophy and their insistence upon Japanese subjectivity to create a new world through an ideal vision in which the relationship among nations was analogous to a family. All of them envisioned Japan’s position as a father in the new familial block of East Asian nations, and thought that Japan’s leading position in Asia meant Japanese subjectivity. Thus Japanese authority existed only in their vision.

If they had really had the courage to pursue their view of an equal “I and Thou” relationship between Japan and other Asian nations to its logical conclusion, they would not have made the mistake of justifying Japan’s history of imperialistic aggression in East Asia — at least the domination of Korea from the Japanese-Korean Protocol in 1904. It is clear that Japan completely took political power away from Korea by force in 1910. The unification carried out under the guise of providing political and economical relief to Korea, and establishing the eternal peace of the East was justified on the grounds that Japan and Korea have the same ethnicity. The Kyoto School scholars participating in the discussions were probably blinded by these reasons given to justify Japan’s aggressions in East Asia, which were required by the competition of colonial repatriation in the early twentieth century.

While they were concerned that Japanese aggression in China appeared imperialistic, they justified that the Japanese were acting to defend China from partition by Western Imperialism, and that the outbreak of the war against Western Imperialism was proof of the justice of Japanese acts in China. It was their ideal vision to justify the war between Japan and China from 1937.

They regarded the struggle of Japan against Western powers as most important and glossed over a series of conflicts between Japan and other Asian nations. The Kyoto School scholars' stance may be defined as a pan-Asianism revolt against the West. Such anti-Western Asianism is frequently found after the Meiji Restoration and around the time of the Russo-Japanese War, often combined with the idea of overcoming modernity. With this kind of anti-Western Asianism, at the time of the outbreak of the war between Japan, the U.S.A, and the U.K, NISHIDA's disciples stood up for the absolute subjectivity of Japan that realized "the will of human race" and "historical life" of the world, in spite of the fact that NISHIDA denied all subjectivity in *The Problem of Japanese Culture* written at the time of the war between Japan and China.

In the symposia on *The World-Historical Standpoint and Japan*, the participants insisted on Japanese leadership in Asia. This Japanese subjectivity was justified with the argument that it was "historically inevitable". As a result, the will of the state was totally ignored. Concerning the "historical inevitability" of the Japanese leadership in Asia, the discussion went as follows: With the Meiji Restoration Japan had subjectively constituted itself into a nation-state opposed to imperialism (pp. 164-165). From the Meiji period onward, Japan developed a Western-style civilization by this subjectivity, which allowed it to advance into China and to maintain political power and land in China, in a non-imperialist fashion against Western imperialism (pp. 169-177). But Japan was fully aware of its responsibility to constantly revitalize itself with a morality based on the creative development of "historical life", and to contribute to the progress of the world dominated by Western civilization. This is not only a restoration but a new awareness of the necessity to create a new world order (p. 159). This world-historical consciousness is universal, a characteristic inherent in the human race itself. The new world order had to constitute itself by embracing the subjectivity of others, not by expanding the self outward through a rejection of the world. The war that began in 1941 between Japan, the U.S.A, and the U.K was essentially a conflict of world views (p. 272). This conflict of world views necessarily had to become an all-out war (pp. 274-275). It was said that all-out war does not mean struggle among nation-states in the modern period, but means "overcoming modernity" itself. The young scholars of the Kyoto School idealized and justified the Japanese standpoint in World War II as "historical necessity", and they called the Greater East Asia War an "Imperial War (皇戦)" insisting that the attack on Pearl Harbor was the first step toward the realization of their vision (p. 289).

In their view, the Greater East Asia War was caused by "historical inevitability" and the will of the history of the world; it was the outcome of movement of the "historical life". Thus, the young Kyoto School thinkers defended and glorified the Greater East Asia War. They stated that the Greater East Asia War, as an "Imperial War" or "Holy War (聖戦)" waged in the name of the ideals embodied in the Japanese Imperial Way, had the mission to realize the essence of the human race.

In *The World-Historical Standpoint and Japan*, KŌSAKA Masaaki quoted the following words by NISHIDA which he heard in 1940:

The history of the world is the purgatory of humanity's soul. Perhaps wars have this meaning too. Dante described the purgatory of individual sinners in his great work. If a great poet like Dante were to appear today, he would certainly write on the history of the world as the profound purgatory of the spirit of humankind. (p. 130).

Indeed, “purgatory” refers to the place where we expiate our sins and purify ourselves. While NISHIDA’s words seem, for me, to be coming out of his sentiment toward the major crisis of the world at the time of World War II, KŌSAKA Masaaki used them to support their declaration: Japan’s subjectivity was obtained with the awareness that its ideal mission was to create a new historical scene to rescue the world from deep crisis. Of course, even for young scholars of the Kyoto School, this subjectivity is not a simple subjectivity of its own, but a subjectivity to realize the will of the human race.

This idealistic prowar stance of the Kyoto School scholars is far removed from NISHIDA’s peaceful ideals. How did NISHIDA’s attitude toward the war differ from his disciples’? Differing ideas on subjectivity seems to divide them. NISHIDA’s thought essentially denies any sort of subjectivity, based on his dialectic philosophy that all subjectivity realizes itself through self-denial of the subject. On the contrary, NISHIDA’s disciples gave Japanese subjectivity a supreme or absolute idealistic value.

Next, I would like to compare the content of the idealism of the Kyoto School thinkers in the Chūōkōron discussions with NISHIDA’s. Following NISHIDA’s philosophy, the Kyoto School thinkers declared that the Japanese spirit respects the “fact” to create historical fact (WHS, p. 163).³⁶ Their idealism took them far from the historical fact of Japan in the twentieth century. This idealism was certainly not mere subjectivism. This idealism, learned from NISHIDA’s philosophy, also had a dialectic structure of capturing the essence of the object through the self-denial of the subject. This idealism, in fact, recognized the essence of the historical matter of Japan in the twentieth century through denial of the will of the state, and interpreted the essence of the Japanese act as acting to realize the “historical life” of the world, “the soul of the human race”. This idealism reduced all of Japanese historical matter to the “historical inevitability” or “historical life” of the world. This ideology declared that only Japan was able to realize “the soul of the human race”. This ultra-subjectivism produced by their objectivist idealism, which omitted the objectivist real observation on the side of subject or Japan’s state will, subjectively created the contents of “historical inevitability” or “historical life”.

This system of logic employed by NISHIDA’s disciples seems to be the same as NISHIDA’s. NISHIDA redefined the Japanese Imperial Way as historical fact without idealistic content in *The Problem of Japanese Culture*. In NISHIDA’s vision, by forging its history, the mode of being of the Imperial Way is closest to the essential style of “historical life” of the world. Though NISHIDA denied the idealistic character of the Japanese Imperial Way, his system of thought, no doubt, evinces a self-enclosed objectivist idealism. (See my discussion at the end of Chapter 3 in this article.)

7 Temporary Conclusion

Although NISHIDA warned against the war, grounding his arguments in his theory of the Japanese peaceful Imperial Way, NISHIDA’s disciples who participated in the discussions on *The World-Historical Standpoint and Japan* justified and glorified the war using almost the same self-enclosed system of thought as NISHIDA’s. KŌSAKA Masaaki quoted twice NISHIDA’s words “The war may be a purification of the world” to dignify their discussion (p. 130, p. 219). Similar words were used by Filippo T. MARINETTI in the manifesto of futurism in 1909 in which he glorified the destruction of the old order. In World War II, a few intellectuals in Japan wrote

similar lines having slightly different shades of meaning. One of them suggests that the outbreak of the war clearly solved many mental struggles, while another suggested that the war unified the minds of the Japanese people toward one aim, and weakened selfish struggles and class conflicts in Japan at the cost of poverty.³⁷ Or perhaps NISHIDA's philosophy of respecting the historical fact above all may have led him to justify the war? The quote "The war may be a purification of the world" may not be an exact translation of the meaning of "purgatory of the soul of the human race". However, whatever the true sense of his words, for us, it is the problem that NISHIDA's words were quoted by one of his close disciples who used them to glorify the war, although NISHIDA intended to oppose war.

In fact, the reason why NISHIDA cautioned against the war is his opposition to an imperialistic war. Such a war would be a contradiction of the Japanese Imperial Way, the "Holy War" that he idealized. Of course we might think that his ideal of a "Holy War" could never be realized in the actual world in which imperialistic wars were being waged. We could also assert that NISHIDA was aware that his vision of a Holy War was impossible to realize.

Yet it is true that his theory of the "Holy War" and his vision of the Japanese Imperial Way were actually used to justify and glorify the war. His opposition to an imperialistic war and his vision of the Japanese Imperial Way as a way to realize the "historical life" were easily translated into a theory to justify and glorify the "imperial war" against imperialistic power in order to realize the "historical life". That interpretation was not merely a mistake. That translation was done by his close disciples, following the thought system of NISHIDA. The discussions on *The World-Historical Standpoint and Japan* in 1940-41 which, as we saw above, drew significantly on NISHIDA's philosophy, constitute only one example of the application of NISHIDA's thought for the purpose of promoting the Great East Asia War. Many young intellectuals justified and glorified their will to engage in the war, appropriating terms from NISHIDA's philosophy and that of his followers: "being in/of nothing", "absolute nothingness", etc.. Such concepts were used to justify and glorify death through self-identification with a "national eternal life" identified with the "Japanese Imperial Way" or the "historical life" of the human race.

In the Asian and the Pacific stage of World War II, the Japanese army attacked, hurt and killed huge numbers of people in Asia, and many Japanese people were victims of the war as well. As a result, against his will, NISHIDA's idea of a peaceful Japanese Imperial Way against Western imperialism, based on his vitalistic philosophy, was easily transformed into a philosophy to glorify "life through death" in the war time. (I demonstrated how NISHIDA's vitalist philosophy, with its self-negation system, was easily transformed into an ideology that affirms death at the end of Chapter 3)

There is no question that NISHIDA would not have liked his antiwar theory being used for counter purposes. However, NISHIDA's philosophy embodied a nature and structure that was easily used by the prowar side. One of the reasons is its idealistic and enclosed system based on the universal "life", which realizes itself through self-negation. If persons influenced by NISHIDA's philosophy think that they are living in this universal "life", and have a will to realize this universal "life" in this actual world, they could identify with the universal "life" through self-negation. NISHIDA's theory can be easily changed to glorify self-sacrifice in order to realize the ideal universal "life", and to "live" an eternal life. But it is not only the nature of NISHIDA's theory. All of idealistic vitalism essentially embodies this nature that easily turns from affirmation of death in order to unify with the grand "Life" of the universe, the human race,

or the nation, if there is no system of logic to prevent this reversing.

Even if the war could purify the world, as NISHIDA said to KŌSAKA Masaaki, NISHIDA's overcoming modernity philosophy, which could be seen as compatible with militarism and warmongering, was, in fact, disgraced by the war. After the war his philosophy and the overcoming modernity thought were attacked by the left wing and liberalists as representing a rightist system of thought supporting militarism and ultra-nationalism. However, NISHIDA died in 1945 as a vitalist, leaving his unfinished manuscript entitled "Life". It seems that in this text, he attempted to offer a fuller vision of his philosophy of life to extend outside of the ideal enclosing system. It goes without saying that his death just before the end of the war prevented him from witnessing the terrible devastation and losses it caused, and from fully assessing the impact of his philosophy during and after the war. Our task is to continue not only to reexamine how the defective nature was formed in NISHIDA's vitalist thought throughout its history, but also to observe carefully the potential and limitations of the overcoming modernity current and vitalist thought stream in twentieth century Japan.

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NOTES

- 1 This series of discussions took place three times in "Chūōkōron". The first, "The World-Historical Standpoint and Japan", was held just before the attack on Pearl Harbor on November 26, 1941; the second, "Morality and Historical Character of the East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere" on March 4, 1942; and the third, "Philosophy on All-out War" on November 24, 1942, and published as a book with the title *The World-Historical Standpoint and Japan* in the month of March, 1943 (Tokyo, Chūōkōronsha). Participants were KŌSAKA Masaaki (高坂正顯), KŌYAMA Iwao (高山岩男), SUZUKI Shigetaka (鈴木成高), and NISHITANI Keiji (西谷啓治).
- 2 『近代の超克』 ("Literary World" 「文学界」 Sept. and Oct.) published in 1943 (Tokyo: Sōgensha). Participants and their special fields were KAWAKAMI Tetsutarō (河上徹太郎, literature), TSUMURA Hideo (津村秀夫, Western culture), SHIMOMURA Toratarō (下村寅太郎, philosophy), NAKAMURA Mitsuo (中村光夫, literature), KIKUCHI Masashi (菊地正士, science), HAYASHI Fusao (林房雄, literature), SUZUKI Shigetaka (鈴木成高, Western history), KAMEI Katsuichirō (亀井勝一郎, literature), YOSHIMITSU Yoshihiko (吉満義彦, philosophy), MIYOSHI Tatsuji (三好達治, poem), MOROI Saburō (諸井三郎, music), NISHITANI Keiji (西谷啓治, philosophy), KOBAYASHI Hideo (小林秀雄, literature).
- 3 At that time the "Chūōkōron" discussions had more influence on Japanese people than the symposium on "Overcoming Modernity"; the first publication of 15,000 copies of their discussions appeared in March, 1943; the second printing (10,000) in August, 1943.... In contrast, the first printing (6,000 copies) of the book *Overcoming Modernity* was published in July, 1943.
- 3 This essay appeared in volume 7 of *Lectures on the History of Modern Thought in Japan* (近代日本思想史講座) (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1959). TAKEUCHI's viewpoint was cited in MATSUMOTO Kenichi's (松本健一) "Commentary" on TAKEUCHI Yoshimi's *Overcoming Modernity* (近代の超克) (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1983).
Recently KARATANI Kōjin (柄谷行人) emphasized literary liberalism in the symposium on the "Literary World" while critiquing the discussions by the Kyoto School in his *'Prewar' Thoughts* (『戦前』の思想) (Tokyo: Bungeishunjū, 1994). MINAMOTO Ryōen (源了園) examined "The symposium on 'Overcoming Modernity'" in *Rude Awakenings* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994).

- 4 Here, I would like to cite only one example to show a pattern of this intention. TAOKA Reiun (田岡嶺雲), a critic and Asianist active in the latter half of the Meiji period, wrote in his "Dark Current of Contemporary Thought (現代思想の暗流)", that the egoism and materialism in the nineteenth century produced social inequalities. In contrast, the thought of Rousseau and Nietzsche, which were in vogue at that time in Japan, represented a kind of anti-civilization, and he was convinced that the revolutionary resolution to conflict between modernity and anti-modernity would come, in the unrivaled general magazine "The Sun" (*Taiyō*, 太陽, vol. 11. number 4, pp. 140-150) in the month the Russo-Japanese War started. From the end of the Russo-Japanese War, young intellectuals began to catch up with the contemporary thought of the West.
- 5 Men and women who had a kind of overcoming modernity thought whom I will attempt to sort out by trend. Marked (*) are those who showed a remarkable vitalistic trend.
- A critique of capitalism, imperialism and finally the principle of struggle for existence by free competition; KINOSHITA Naoe (木下尚江)*, ŌSUGI Sakae (大杉栄)*, KAGAWA Toyohiko (賀川豊彦)*...
- A sort of religious solution to mental troubles reflected in modern social conflict; ANEZAKI Masaharu (姉崎正治)*, NISHIDA Tenkō (西田天香)*, DEGUCHI Onisaburō (出口王仁三郎)*, KURATA Hyakuzō (倉田百三)*, WATSUJI Tetsurō (和辻哲郎)*, OKAMOTO Kanoko (岡本かの子)*...
- A sort of artistic solution to mental troubles reflected in modern social conflict: UEDA Bin (上田敏)*, ARISHIMA Takeo (有島武郎)*, SHIGA Naoya (志賀直哉)*, KITAHARA Hakushū (北原白秋)*, YOSANO Akiko (与謝野晶子)*, SAITŌ Mokichi (斎藤茂吉)*, TAKAMURA Kōtarō (高村光太郎)*, MIYAZAWA Kenji (宮沢賢治)*...
- An idea to create a new national culture with a revival of the urban popular culture of the Tokugawa period or a reconstruction traditional farm life; NAGAI Kafū (永井荷風), TANIZAKI Jun'ichirō (谷崎潤一郎), YANAGITA Kunio (柳田国男)...
- Asianist sentiments and thought and a nativist identification with the indigenous Japanese religion: MIYAKE Setsurei (三宅雪嶺)*, IWANO Hōmei (岩野泡鳴)*, ORIKUCHI Shinobu (折口信夫)*, YASUDA Yōjūrō (保田與重郎)*...
- See SUZUKI, *Reading Modern Japan from the Viewpoint of Vitalism — Birth and Development of Taishō-vitalism* (鈴木貞美『「生命」で読む日本近代—大正生命主義の誕生と展開』 Tokyo: NHK Shuppan, 1996.
- 6 It seems that the religious idea, stream of "eternal life" was changed by the new biology, genetics and the theory of evolutionism, having as background positivism which had gradually spread and the influence of established religions which had declined relatively. See SUZUKI, *Reading Modern Japan from the Viewpoint of Vitalism*, pp. 71-100.
- 7 The word "life" in NISHIDA's journal may mean "life of human race" which is *Jinsei* (人生) in Japanese at that time. "Journal", 24. Feb. 1902. The spiritual circumstances for young intellectuals at that time will be described in the next article. See Note (9).
- 8 *The Problem of Japanese Culture* was published in one of Iwanami Shinsho's cultural series of paperback pocketbooks, which had a great effect on Japanese people at that time.
- 9 This article is the first of a series of "NISHIDA as Vitalist". In the next article, "NISHIDA as Vitalist 2 — A History of Vitalist Idealism", I will try to clarify the formation process of NISHIDA's vitalistic philosophy in the stream of vitalism. The final one, "NISHIDA as Vitalist 3 — NISHIDA's Philosophy, its Potential and its Historical Limitation", will be on NISHIDA's positions in the current of overcoming modernity thought.
- 10 Compare the translation of Andrew Feenberg, "The Problem of Modernity in the Philosophy of Nishida" (*Rude Awakenings*, p. 169)
- 11 OKETANI Hideaki (桶谷秀昭) *An Intellectual History of the Shōwa Period*, (『昭和精神史』) (Tokyo: Bungei Shunjū, 1992, pp. 390-393).
- 12 YUSA Michiko, "Nishida and Totalitarianism: A Philosopher's Resistance" (*Rude Awakenings*, pp. 107-131)
UEDA Shizuteru "Nishida, Nationalism and the War in Question" (*Rude Awakenings*, p. 91)
- 13 For example, SUGIMOTO Gorō (杉本吾郎), one of the dead and deified war heroes. SUGIMOTO Gorō's *Taigi* (大義, Loyalty, 1938) sang the praises of absolute loyalty to the supreme existence, Tennō, with a special idea called "Tennō Zen" and the book was greatly admired by schoolboys preparing themselves for death in the later war.
- 14 Recently MINAMOTO Ryōen proved that humanistic liberals or universalists were "middle-of-the-road". KARATANI Kōjin emphasized literary liberalism in the symposium on "Literary World". See Note 3.
- 15 For example, ISHIKAWA Jun's "Marusu no Uta" (マルスの歌, Song of Mars) and ISHIKAWA Tatsuzo's *Ikite iru Heitai* (生きている兵隊, Soldiers Who are Living). The "Bungakukai" in January 1938 published ISHIKAWA Jun's "Marusu no Uta", which satirized the situation in which the song of the god of war was placed under a ban. ISHIKAWA Jun and KAWAKAMI Tetsutarō, editor of that issue, received a summons from the police and were fined. ISHIKAWA Tatsuzo's *Ikite iru Heitai*, which wrote of the pain and sorrow of a soldier on a battlefield in China, was published in January 1938 and placed under a ban,

too.

- 16 KOBAYASHI Hideo said "Now, my mind is very simple. I feel the breakout of the war was good timing. The war wiped out useless thoughts in one stroke." In the roundtable talk "Mind of Literature in Wartime (即戦時下文学者の心, "Bungakukai", April, 1942), he also said that he found in the navy spirit a new mind in which it is enough to have right knowledge and right judgment, to have a clear aim in life. The war enabled KOBAYASHI, who desired a release from the complex mind produced by modern civilization, to find a simple mind to think only about how to cope effectively with a tense situation and not to be undecided. KAWAKAMI Tetsutarō demonstrated a will to carry out duties for the nation-state as an intellectual in this symposium and others.
- 17 NKZ vol.12, postscript by SHIMOMURA Toratarō (下村寅太郎) : p. 470.
- 18 Quoted von Bruno TAUT's *Nippon* (1934, translation 1941, Tokyo, Meiji-shoin.), Introduction pp. 3-4.
- 19 TAUT wrote that the Japanese Emperor had been removed from political power for a long time, and he also spoke about the crystal character of the Japanese people, their national spirit, manners, customs and culture. *Nippon*, pp. 60-61.
- 20 See SUZUKI "Thought on the Imperial Way of MISHIMA Yukio" (三島由紀夫の天皇思想) in *The Ideology of Contemporary Japanese Literary Thought* (現代日本文学の思想, Tokyo: Gogatsu shobō, 1992).
- 21 See MIZOGUCHI Yuzō *Kōshi* (Public and Private, 公私), one of the series "Dictionary about one word" (Tokyo, Sanseidō, 1996, pp. 46-57)
- 22 When NISHIDA talks about the political power of modern European emperors, he refers to "Die grossen Mächte" (1833) by Leopold von RANKE (NKZ vol. 12, p. 337, p. 373), and gives examples of Louis and Napoléon Bonaparte (*ibid.*, p. 373).
- 23 See SUZUKI, *Reading Modern Japan from the Viewpoint of Vitalism*, pp. 29-31.
- 24 NISHIDA's early works were influenced by BERGSON's "Creative Evolution". See SUZUKI, *Reading Modern Japan from the Viewpoint of Vitalism*, pp. 29-31.
- And NISHIDA's theory of art, "Essence of Beauty (美の本質)" (1923), shows clearly the influence from BERGSON. The idea of "life of society" or "life of state" may be compared with theories of organic society, organic state, or the so-called philosophy of life or Neo-Kantism in Germany from the end of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century. I would like to clarify the formation and transformations of NISHIDA's vitalistic philosophy in the next article of this series.
- 25 I will examine NISHIDA's dialectic system including self-negation and compare it with Hegel's dialectic system and *Satori* in Zen in the next article.
- 26 The relationship between NISHIDA's vitalistic philosophy and the thought and social circumstances of his age will be examined in the next article. See Notes 5, 6 and 9.
- 27 Intellectuals in the Meiji period had various reactions regarding this political choice. I would like to give only one example — FUKUZAWA Yukichi (福沢諭吉), a famous leader of modernization in the earlier Meiji period. Although FUKUZAWA fiercely attacked the adoption of an orthodox Confucian education (教育方針変化の結果, "On a Result of the Educational Policy Change", in "Jijishinpō", 1892), he accepted the monarchy system, and said that the essence of the reason why people admire their monarchy is to make the monarchy the center of their public spirit,... (*A Hundred and One Speeches by FUKUZAWA Yukichi in His Old Age*, Chap.9, 福翁百余話—第9章).
- 28 To give an example, the well-known book *Kike Wadatsumi no Koe* (Listen to the Voices from the Bottom of Sea) is the best example to prove that Japanese people followed the state will against their own will. Some letters written by students who were mobilized on the battlefield had a few lines deleted which showed their will to fight for Japan and to prepare for death. A complete and unabridged edition of *Kike Wadatsumi no Koe* was published in 1995 by Iwanami Shoten.
- 29 For example, in the review edited by MIYAKE Setsurei, "Nihon oyobi Nihonjin", March, 1911 (Number 554).
- 30 "The mission of Japan (日本の使命, 1937)", *HAGIWARA Sakutarō Zenshū* vol. 10, (Tokyo, Chikuma-shobō, 1975), pp. 542-549.
- 31 In the first discussion, the Kyoto School thinkers refer to historians in Germany; Oswald SPENGLER, BRANDENBURG (*Europe and the World*), Werner SOMBART (*Future of Capitalism*), historian in France; Agaton MASSIS (*Protection of Europe*, 1927), thinker in the U.K; Christopher H. DAWSON. (WHS pp. 7-19).
- 32 While there are some differences between the text of the discussions in the magazine and the book version, we can disregard them in this argument.
- 33 KŌSAKA Masaaki's discussion of how the historical movement in Japan was different from in Europe and in China (WHS, pp. 71-72), was clearly influenced by *The Problem of Japanese Culture*. See Chapter 2 "A Peaceful Imperial Way".
- 34 This view that ancient Japanese culture had an international character is not Kōyama's original finding, for intellectuals who had an interest in the history of ancient Japanese culture were well aware of this. Some of them even knew that Shōtoku Taishi had an international standpoint in East Asia and a firm intention to form national unity by Buddhism. NAKAZATO Kaizan portrayed the same image of Shōtoku Taishi in his novel *Yumedono* (夢殿, 1924).

35 The second discussion has the title of "East Asian Area Co-Prosperity Sphere". This term was used very often at that time, as well as "Greater East Asian Area to Co-Prosperity Sphere". It is said that the term of "Greater East Asian Area to Co-Prosperity Sphere" appeared in official statements in August 1940.

The name "Greater East Asia War" was determined by the Ministry of Tōjō on December 12, 1941 after the outbreak of the war between Japan, the U.S.A and the U.K. The aim of the "Greater East Asia War" was not clear officially. Very often the Ministry of Tōjō insisted on the independence and self-defense of Japan. Preferably, the scholars of the Kyoto School in the discussion seem to give a more positive meaning to the war than the Ministry.

36 This appeared in a statement by KŌYAMA Iwao.

37 About these statements see Note 15. For further information, see HAYAMA Yoshiki's short essay "People Who Live in a Mountain Village" (山村に生きる人々) in 1939. *HATAMA Yoshiki Zenshū* vol. 6, (Tokyo, Chikuma-shobō, 1976), pp.14-15. HAYAMA Yoshiki was one of the best writers on socialism during the early Shōwa period.

— 西田幾多郎、生命主義の軌跡（その1） —
— 西田の皇道思想と座談会「世界史的立場」 —

— 鈴木貞美 —

要旨：本稿は「西田幾多郎、生命主義の軌跡」の第1部。全体は3部から成り、日本の近代哲学を代表するとされる西田幾多郎の思想を、日露戦争以降盛んになる近代文明の弊害を克服することを意図する「近代の超克」思想の流れとその中心にあった生命主義の観点からとらえ、彼の思索の軌跡と内部構造を明らかにするもの。同時に、20世紀の日本思想の分析概念としての生命主義の有効性を示し、思想史の枠組みの組み替えを促すものである。

西田幾多郎の戦時中の立場に対する評価が今日、国際的に検討され、論議を呼んでいるが、第1部「西田の皇道思想と座談会『世界史的立場』」は、西田幾多郎『日本文化の問題』（1940）の検討を中心に据え、京都学派による雑誌「中央公論」における座談会『世界史的立場と日本』（1941-42）に与えた影響を考察し、思想史上の意味を探ることを課題にする。西田幾多郎『日本文化の問題』は、日本文化の中心としての「皇道」の哲学的意味を説くものであるが、①端的に言えば、戦争を否定する平和的皇道主義であり、その内容は、②「歴史的生命」の観念を中心にして、観念論的客観主義の構造をもつ彼の生命主義哲学をあげて理論化されたものであると同時に、③彼のうちに育まれた明治期からの天皇イメージをもとに、対中国戦争期の思想状況に直面することによって形成された歴史的格をもつことを明らかにする。④「中央公論」の座談会は、西田幾多郎『日本文化の問題』を、思想的、文化的に具体化するという課題を果たす役割を担い、西田の哲学に学んだ方法によって、「近代の超克」の立場から「日本の使命」を説くが、「大東亜戦争」の勃発後には、西田の反戦的立場とは異なり、戦争を観念論的に肯定し、積極的な意義を説くものに陥ってしまった。⑤この座談会に射している西田哲学の影を具体的に考察し、⑥西田哲学が一步転じただけで、「大東亜戦争」の理念を支え、青年たちを死に誘うものになり得る性格のものであったことを論証する。

さらに、これは西田哲学だけの問題ではなく、生命主義そのものが内包する否定的一面の発現であり、日本における近代の超克思想の流れが転落した一形態であることを明らかにし次の課題として、日本における近代の超克思想、なかんずく生命主義の展開の中において、西田の生命主義哲学がどのように形成されたかを全面的に検討することをあげる。