

Nishida Kitarō's Self-Aware System of Universals The Body as Incarnation of the Absolute

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〈Abstract〉

Nishida's self-aware system of universals is often disregarded and seen as a temporary diversion in the progression of his philosophy. However, this system represents an innovative advancement of the concept of place and deserves comprehensive analysis on its own merits. Furthermore, it contains numerous elements that anticipate subsequent developments in Nishida's philosophy. By examining the system's primary characteristics, particularly the rationale behind the introduction of the intelligible universal and broader universals, we can gain valuable insight into its significance. Additionally, this essay highlights the overlooked concept of the body as the noematic content of the universal of self-awareness. Not only does this concept present Nishida's initial original solution to the mind-body problem, but it also serves as a foundation for his subsequent exploration of the historical body. Lastly, I consider the two main theoretical challenges that contributed to the neglect of the system in Nishida's later years.

〈要旨〉

西田幾多郎の一般者の自覚的体系は、西田哲学の発展の中でそれほど重要ではないとされ、あまり研究されていません。しかし、その体系には後期西田哲学につながる様々な概念が導入されているだけでなく、独自の場所論理の展開として重要な意味を持っています。本論では、体系の構造、特に、叡智の一般者の導入の理由を分析した後、ほとんど無視されてきた「自覚的一般者のノエマ面」としての「身体」の概念を解釈します。最後に、体系に潜んでいる二つの難点について考察します。

Introduction

Nishida Kitarō's *The Self-Aware System of Universals* (一般者の自覚的体系; henceforth SASU) is a collection of essays written shortly after he formulated the concept of place (場所),¹⁾ which serves as the cornerstone of his later philosophical system and is arguably his most important contribution to world philosophy. In SASU, Nishida initially developed the concept by conceiving it as a linear system of progressively self-folding universals. However, he soon took a different

direction that led him to interpret the logic of place as a system of absolute dialectics, whose elements are in a dialectical relationship of ontologically simultaneous codetermination. This formulation represents the final stage of Nishida's philosophy, widely recognized as its culmination. As a result, the features of the concept of place that are relevant to Nishida's later philosophy are primarily found in the earlier essays collected in *From the Doer to the Seer* (働くものから見るものへ) rather than in *SASU*. Accordingly, *SASU* is often overlooked in secondary literature and translations, with the notable exception of the essay *The Intelligible World* (叡智の世界; henceforth *IW*),²⁾ as if it were an incidental detour on the path to Nishida's final philosophy.³⁾

The development that led Nishida in a different direction was partly influenced by the criticism leveled by Tanabe Hajime, but it can also be viewed as an organic and internal evolution of Nishida's thought. Tanabe argued that Nishida's system, which posited an ultimate metaphysical principle of reality beyond the grasp of reason, could potentially lead to the dismissal of philosophy itself.⁴⁾ Nishida took this criticism seriously, even referring to it in later years when his philosophy had already moved beyond the position criticized by Tanabe.⁵⁾ As we shall see, in *SASU*, the ultimate metaphysical principle of reality to which Tanabe was referring serves as the starting point for the progressive self-enfoldment of universals. It defies conceptual understanding because, in this context, to be conceptually understood implies being enfolded by universals.

Tanabe's criticism, however, resonated with Nishida's enduring desire to find a rational explanation of the nature of reality, as expressed in the introduction to *An Inquiry into the Good* (善の研究; henceforth *IG*). This need for rationality led Nishida to critique the 'surrender to mysticism' (神秘の軍門に請うたII, 3)⁶⁾ that characterized the final essays of *Intuition and Reflection in Self-Consciousness* (自覚に於ける直観と反省; henceforth *IRSC*), and it was reiterated in *IW*, even as he emphasized the ultimate ineffability of reality as experienced by mystics (IV, 145 ff.). Hence, Tanabe's criticism may have acted as a catalyst for a change that Nishida's philosophy would have naturally undergone, given the presence of problems and contradictions in the positions expressed in *SASU*.

However, the meaning and value of the concept of place extend beyond its development in Nishida's later philosophy. Unless proven otherwise, there is no logical reason to assume that the concept of place, as outlined in essays like *Basho* (場所) and others found in *From the Doer to the Seer*, must inevitably evolve into concepts such as absolute contradictory self-identity (絶対矛盾的自己同一) and dialectical world (弁証法的世界), resulting in a worldview similar to Nishida's later philosophy as its only possible evolution. The system presented in *SASU* offers an alternative development that warrants exploration based on its own merits, irrespective of its direct relevance to the evolution of Nishida's thought. Furthermore, some of the ideas introduced in the system, like his new concept of the living body, do represent progress in the direction Nishida would ultimately

pursue, making them valuable for a deeper understanding of the development of his philosophy.

In this essay, I examine the overall structure of the concept of self-aware determination of universals as an extension of the concept of place. Specifically, I analyze the reasons behind the introduction of the concept of intelligible universal. While Nishida typically follows a deepening approach in most of his essays, particularly the earlier ones, starting from the derivative level of the universal of judgment (判断的一般者) and progressing to deeper layers of reality, I initially take the reverse approach, as outlined by Nishida in the final essays of *SASU*. I begin from the foundational level of the self-aware determination of absolute nothingness as the origin of all reality. Subsequently, I focus on the development of the universal of self-awareness (自覚的一般者) to demonstrate its significant role in the evolution of Nishida's concept of the body. To illustrate this, I delve into the often overlooked essay titled *The Thing Placed in the Self-Aware Universal and its Relationship to the Thing that is Behind It* (自覚的一般者に於てあるもの及それとその背後にあるものとの関係; henceforth *TPTSUTBI*). Finally, I consider the two central theoretical challenges intrinsic to the system presented in *SASU*, which prompted Nishida to transcend its framework.

Reality as the self-aware determination of universals

Since *IG*, Nishida conceived of the fundamental nature of reality as an act of consciousness through which reality determines and becomes aware of itself. While the concept of self-awareness is not explicitly addressed in *IG*, Nishida unequivocally described reality as an act of self-reflection in the section on religion, where he depicted the absolute (God 神) as becoming self-aware by making itself a mirror (己自身を省みること即ち己自身を鏡となすこと I, 152; 神の自覚 I, 153) and projecting its own image as the world. Subsequently, the analysis of self-awareness became the central focus of Nishida's earliest essay in *IRSC*, where he employed Fichtean concepts and dialectic to examine the act of self-projection as the dynamic development of the self-identity of the absolute. As the merely logical general features of the self-positing act of consciousness could not account for the contingent features of the factual individual content of consciousness, Nishida resorted in the final essays of *IRSC* to a secularized version of the Christian notion of God's absolute free will (絶対自由の意志) to explain the arbitrary nature of factual experience.

However, Nishida could not be satisfied with an idea whose adoption, even in a secularized form, ran against his need to provide a rational explanation of reality. After some further theoretical vicissitudes, Nishida finally achieved a breakthrough with the formulation of the concept of place.⁷⁾ He introduced place to address the epistemological and ontological problem of the relationship between the knower and the known. Consciousness cannot be separated from its objects, as knowing occurs within consciousness and the known is ultimately a modification of consciousness.

However, they are not simply the same, as the knower must stand back from the known to be able to see it. Consciousness is a place that enfolds (包む) and contains its objects, allowing them to exist as known within it. It is like an empty space that holds the fullness of things, allowing for their existence. Nishida realized that consciousness projects itself *within* itself, and God does not see itself by making itself a mirror, rather God *is* a mirror that reflects itself within itself (自己の内に自己を映す鏡). Place is not an empty space filled by external objects but an ontological space that fills itself to know itself. Thus, consciousness, even as the source of reality, is true nothingness, and its self-projection is an act without an acting thing (働くものなくして働き, 映すものなくして映す III, 451).

The ultimate nothingness of consciousness as place is thus the feature that allows both the creation and the knowledge of things. However, the fact that place is ultimately nothingness does not mean that it has no positive features whatsoever and can be defined only in negative terms. When consciousness reflects upon itself, backing away from its content in the direction of its act – from the noematic direction in the noetic direction, in the language of *SASU* – it ultimately reaches the point where there is no known object but only pure knowing, no more content of consciousness but only pure consciousness enfolding, and therefore transcending, its objective determinations. Therefore, consciousness in itself cannot be grasped in conceptual terms, as this would imply its projection as objective content, but can only be directly experienced in a mystical intuition beyond language and thought (言語を絶し思慮を絶した神秘的直観 IV, 145) that constitutes religious experience (宗教的体験), and verbally expressed in negative terms as absolute nothingness (絶対無). The nothingness of consciousness does not negate the world: As place, it negates itself, hence allowing the world to be as it is within itself. As consciousness, its nature is to be aware, to know something, and for Nishida, to know something is to know itself and any awareness is ultimately self-awareness. Absolute nothingness is self-aware (絶対無の自覚), and the essential structure of self-awareness must therefore be inherent in it.

Projecting an image of itself within itself to see itself is the intrinsic nature of ultimate reality.⁸⁾ For Nishida, it is this positive attribute of absolute nothingness that gives meaning to the philosophical endeavor, as he defines the task of philosophy as a reflection on the projection from the ultimate point of view of absolute nothingness. (IV, 147 f.) Reality is the self-aware determination of absolute nothingness, and whereas mystics strive to intuitively experience nothingness as such, philosophers strive to rationally understand the structure and dynamics of its self-aware determination.

According to Nishida, self-awareness has a ternary (one may be tempted to say trinitary) formal structure: The self sees itself within itself (「自己が自己に於て自己を見る」といふ自覚の形式; IV, 307). Its three elements are the seeing self as subject (自己が), the seen self as object (自己を), and the self as that within which (自己に於て) the seen self is seen. At the relative level, the

self as subject is apprehended as separate from the world: Since the projection of the world is an act of self-awareness, the act itself is projected in acts of self-reflection (反省) and becomes an object of awareness distinct from its own original object. The self is thus apprehended as an I seeing a world, and this can give rise to substantialistic concepts of the I or to idealistic concepts of the world as a byproduct of absolute consciousness. However, from the ultimate standpoint of absolute nothingness, the self as pure subject cannot be objectified, and it merges with the self as within-which: Ultimately there is no seeing thing, no consciousness-thing; there is just place as seeing without a seer that allows the seen to be as it is. From this standpoint, the self as object – the world as what is seen – can be thought of as an independent reality to be understood according to its own structure, rather than as a derivative modification of an absolute substantial reality, an epiphenomenon to be understood as a mere phantom of the ultimate subject projecting it. "Because it is absolute nothingness, mountains are mountains, waters are waters, and what is is as it is" (それは絶対無なるが故に、山は是山、水は是水、有るものは有るが仮に有るのであるIV, 146).

Hence, from the ultimate standpoint, the world is not seen as the product of an act of determination by the projecting self as subject, but rather as the result of its own self-determination, and its self-determination is the self-determination of the universals that constitute it and make it knowable. From his early days, Nishida conceived of the world as the product of the determination of universals, since for him the world exists only insofar as it is actualized and known by absolute consciousness.⁹⁾ In the theoretical framework of *IG*, concrete universals were conceived as the dynamic forms of the activity of consciousness that generates and knows individual realities (I, 22). With the formulation of the self-aware system of universals as a development of the concept of place, Nishida refined and expanded his early ideas. The self-determination of universals mirrors, in different ways at different levels of reality, the fundamental dynamic of the self-reflection of place: universals reflect themselves within themselves in enfolded narrower universals and, ultimately, in individuals.

To conceive the world as an independent reality shaping itself as the self-determination of universals makes possible both the philosophical understanding of reality as a whole – the world in the broadest sense of the word – and the understanding of partial domains of reality that can be seen as independent and thematized in autonomous disciplines – the "various worlds" (種々の世界) whose ontological constitution Nishida had been reflecting upon since the final essays of *IRSC* (II, 241 ff.). Different concrete universals determine different domains of reality, as the intrinsic dynamic of self-determination peculiar to each universal is the unifying principle that constitutes a segment of reality as a relatively independent world giving it its specific intelligibility.

Reality as a whole is the noematic counterpart (ノエマ的相対者, ノエマ的対立者) of the self-awareness of absolute nothingness, that is, the totality of the objective content of the self-projection of the absolute. If consciousness can be compared to a mirror that reflects itself within itself,

then reality in its entirety can be compared to the totality of the image reflected on the empty surface of the mirror.¹⁰⁾ Since in its self-projection the absolute expresses itself by actualizing and knowing itself, the self-determination of reality as a whole is qualified in the final parts of *SASU* as the self-determination of the universal of expression (表現的一般者). Although reality as the universal of expression can be thought of as the totality of what is seen in consciousness, the act of seeing itself is also projected and seen within it. Concrete reality includes the subjective activity of consciousness as objectively apprehended in the acts of self-reflection that make self-awareness possible – it includes the noetic content as projected on the noematic plan.

It is possible, however, to set aside the noetic content, abstractly conceiving reality as mere noema consisting only of objective determinations. As the determination of objective content within consciousness has the form of judgment, it ultimately consists of the self-determination of the universal of judgment (判断的一般者). Judgment is a form of self-determination of universals (IV, 281), actualized as the specification of the content of universals in narrower universals or in individuals. Such self-determination mirrors the self-reflection of place at the level of objective knowledge (知識): Universals as predicates reflect themselves in narrower predicates placed within them that become subjects of judgment, and ultimately in individuals that, albeit not placed within abstract universals due to their irreducible individuality as subjects that cannot become predicates, are placed within the concrete universal of judgment. Individuals are the “things placed within” (「於てあるもの」) the place of the universal of judgment (判断的一般者の場所), and the self-determination of reality at this level can be thought of as the self-determination of individuals on the predicative plane, giving rise to the notion that the world consists of things (substances) with properties. In its narrower meaning, the self-determination of the universal of judgment is the natural world, although it also includes the human world insofar as the latter can be an object of knowledge, as Nishida stresses in the second half of *SASU*.

On the contrary, when the noematic content is bracketed – to borrow a term from phenomenology – reality is abstractly conceived as mere noesis consisting of subjective determinations as acts of consciousness. The noetic content thus apprehended is reflectively known as subjective reality, and at this level of reality awareness explicitly becomes self-awareness. The determination of the acts of consciousness consists of the self-determination of the universal of self-awareness, in which the self-determination of place takes the form of intentionality (志向): As the subject is enfolded in the predicate in acts of judgments, in acts of consciousness in general the known object is enfolded by the knowing act – noema is intended by noesis. Self-awareness gives rise to the explicit awareness of the seer as conscious self (意識的自己 IV, 99), the “thing placed within” the place of the universal of self-awareness. The “thing placed within” a place is, as it were, the bearer of the concrete reality of the content of that place. As reality ultimately consists of activity of conscious-

ness, its immediate, concrete form is the acts of empirical intuition (直覚) as the matter (質料) of which conscious reality is made; in metaphorical terms, the matter of which the surface of the self-projecting mirror is made. Within the place of the universal of judgment, such immediate content is thought of as the objective matter that bestows reality to individuals, but within the place of the universal of self-awareness it is apprehended as the subjective noetic acts in themselves, and its reality is seen as the reality of an acting self. As noesis enfolds noema – as objects of consciousness are given only within consciousness – the place of the universal of self-awareness enfolds the place of the universal of judgment and its content is therefore more concrete.

Up to this point, the structure of the self-aware system of universals closely resembles the structure of nested loci sketched in the original essays on place: The universal of judgment corresponds to the place of being (有の場所) as the objective natural world, whereas the universal of self-awareness corresponds to the place of oppositive nothingness (対立的無の場所) as the subjective field of consciousness (意識の野), and the two universals can be thought of as more detailed elaborations of the inner structure of the two original loci. The most obvious difference is that the two universals are not defined in terms of being and nothingness anymore, as in *SASU* Nishida used the term “being” to refer to all the content of absolute consciousness, both noematic and noetic – qualifying the latter as “conscious being,” “being as consciousness” (意識の有 IV, 90) – and the term “nothingness” to refer to absolute nothingness as the ultimate standpoint beyond any objectivation.

However, the most significant novelty lies in the fact that Nishida posited a progression of further universals beyond the universal of self-awareness – a progression of broader loci beyond the field of consciousness. Originally, Nishida had only posited one place beyond the field of consciousness, directly leaping from subjective consciousness as oppositive nothingness to the ultimate place of true or absolute nothingness (真の無の場所, 絶対的無). Within the framework of *Basho*, the introduction of a place that enfolds both the place of being and the place of oppositive nothingness was justified by the need to situate the relationship between the field of consciousness and its objective correlates in a place encompassing both (see III, 415; 424 ff.). It was also justified by the need to characterize the absolute as the ultimate self-reflecting place within which reality as a whole, both material and mental, objective and subjective, is generated and perceived. However, in the earlier essays of *SASU*, Nishida introduced a new place/universal in an intermediate position between subjective consciousness and absolute nothingness to function as the place within which subjective consciousness relates to the objective world: the intelligible universal (叡智的一般者) or universal of intellectual intuition (知的直観の一般者).

The most obvious reason for the introduction of the new universal lies in the fact that Nishida came to realize that neither the universal of judgment nor the universal of self-awareness, nor

absolute nothingness in itself could account for the objective ideal content of consciousness, that is, for the axiological world of ideas of the Platonic tradition (IV, 129). Since Nishida conceived of the self-determination of the universals of judgment and of self-awareness as producing the factual worlds of empirical sciences like physics and psychology, they could not be the direct source of the self-determination of the ideal world. Neither could the self-determination of absolute nothingness in itself, given that absolute nothingness lies beyond any determined content, and therefore its noematic correlate must be the totality of being rather than one single ontological domain with specific content. The existence of the intelligible world thus called for the introduction of a correlate universal.

Another reason is likely the fact that in *Basho* Nishida had introduced the Kantian concept of consciousness in general (*Bewußtsein überhaupt* 意識一般) as a portal (入口III, 432) leading from the field of consciousness to the place of true nothingness, without properly clarifying its status in terms of place (場所的). Consciousness in general cannot be considered as placed within the field of consciousness, as the content of the latter consists of mere psychological facts and not of ideal transcendental forms; but it cannot be considered as directly placed within the place of true nothingness either, since true nothingness as such cannot be thought of as having the ontic structure of consciousness in general. The same holds for the will, which Nishida considered a deeper level of reality than consciousness in general. Hence the half-baked idea of a portal, a sort of limbo between the loci of opposite and true nothingness. The intelligible universal provides a place within which consciousness in general and the volitional self, along with the emotional self, can be placed and their ontological status made clear.

However, there is another possible, less apparent reason behind the introduction of the intelligible universal, which can be inferred from a few scattered remarks made by Nishida regarding the union of subject and object (主客合一). The concept played a major role in *IG*, where the unification of subject and object was seen as the ultimate standpoint of consciousness, and therefore as the ultimate reality, experienced eminently in intellectual intuition. In *SASU*, intellectual intuition is the form taken by the self-reflection of place at the level of the intelligible universal, the act by which consciousness directly knows its objective content as its own self-determination rather than as given from the outside. The intelligible universal as universal of intellectual intuition is thus the place within which subject and object are unified. However, the unification of subject and object is not regarded as the ultimate standpoint anymore, since the self seen from its standpoint is still an objectified self, not the ultimate self as the true seer.¹¹⁾ Consequently, behind the universal of intellectual intuition there must be a deeper, broader universal whose noetic content is truly intuited as the true self without being objectified as noema (真にノエシス自身の直覚 IV, 245).

The intelligible universal knows itself by determining its own objects as expressions of its own

ideal content through acts of intellectual intuition. Although such acts always have a knowing nature, they are not always cognitive acts in the sense of being acts of objective knowledge as determinations of ideas with mere alethic value, like the idea of truth itself. They have an emotional or volitional nature as well, as determinations of ideas with emotional or moral value, like the ideas of beauty and moral good. Indeed, mere cognitive acts of self-determination of the intelligible universal – like acts of objective scientific knowledge – are more ontologically superficial and less concrete than emotional and volitional acts, as they only constitute the formal structure of their noematic content and don't express any actual noetic content of the intelligible self (叡智的自己) per se. At this level of self-determination, the self as cognitive intelligible self (知的叡智的自己) corresponds to Kant's consciousness in general, as the mere a priori formal structure of the objects of knowledge.

In emotional and volitional acts, on the other hand, deeper, more concrete levels of the self are known, called by Nishida emotional intelligible self (情的叡智的自己) and volitional intelligible self (意志的叡智的自己). The subjective content of acts like artistic intuition (芸術的直観) and moral actions (道德的行為), which materialistic worldviews dismiss as illusory phantoms, is for Nishida the noetic reality that makes them more concrete than disinterested acts of knowledge, since they better express reality in its fullness, instead of reductively cutting out only one aspect of it.

In the second half of *SASU*, Nishida introduced broader universals beyond the intelligible universal to account for non-cognitive acts. Intellectual intuition, as the specific form of self-determination at the level of the intellectual universal, has a deterministic character as it actualizes ideas that are logically and ontologically prior. To the extent that actions (行為) express ideal content, they can be seen as acts of self-determination of the intelligible universal. However, in *IRSC* Nishida abandoned his earlier belief in determinism¹²⁾ and came to believe that volitional acts are ultimately the manifestation of free will. Therefore, the self-reflection of place as free, creative action and the reality thus determined must transcend the deterministic self-reflection of the intelligible universal, enfolding it as the free actualization of its ideal content. According to Nishida, this is exemplified in moral actions, which have the capacity to actualize moral ideals but can also deviate from them, resulting in evil (悪 IV, 326).

Furthermore, the place of free action must be at a lower level than the ultimate place of absolute nothingness, as it still has a determined content that can be cognitively apprehended, and its freedom is not yet ultimate, being conditioned by ideals and concrete historical circumstances. Therefore, Nishida introduced the universal of action (行為的一般者) as the place within which the acting historical self (行為的自己, 歴史的自己) determines itself in free historical actions (歴史的行為) that shape the historical world (歴史の世界) in its irrational contingency (非合理的 IV, 266). He then redefined the universal of expression – previously introduced as the immediate self-determina-

tion of absolute nothingness – as the universal of action in a broad sense (広義の行為的一般者). Within it, the ultimate free will that is beyond any determination expresses itself in the totality of reality. This emphasis on the acting self and historicity paved the way for Nishida's later notions of active intuition (行為的直観) and history.¹³⁾

The universal of self-awareness and the lived body

Although the introduction of further loci as multiple universals and the renewed focus on action and the historical world it allowed are the most evident novelties of *SASU*, in *TPSUTBI*, Nishida outlined a concept of the body (身体) that went far beyond his earlier views on the topic and foreshadowed the later development of his thought.¹⁴⁾

In his early days, Nishida did not pay much attention to the concept of the body. In *IG* there is no thematic analysis of the lived body, which is considered to be on the same epistemic and ontological level as the physical things regarded as external objects (外物, 物体). Interoceptive bodily sensations are equated to exteroceptive sensations, as all sensations belong to the objectified realm of content of consciousness (意識内容) and are thus opposed as inert objects to the living activity of consciousness (意識作用).¹⁵⁾

In the years after the publication of *IG*, Nishida looked to Bergson for hints on how to approach the mind-body problem. In *Thought and Experience* (思索と体験), he stated that Bergson was the first philosopher to provide a remarkably profound clue (I, 336) toward solving the problem from the perspective of the theory of pure experience (純粹経験論). In the essays of *IRSC*, Nishida followed Bergson's lead and emphasized that the body cannot be simply regarded as a material object like any other, as we have a special relationship (特殊な関係) with it. The body is the interface between mind and matter, and its unity is teleological (合目的論的統一) rather than merely causal as in the case of physical things. What gives the body its teleological unity and its special relationship to the self is the will, as the will is "the body of the spiritual world" (精神界の身体) and the body is "the will of the material world" (物質界の意志) insofar as it is the expression of the will (意志の表現). However, Nishida was unable to provide any original and satisfactory analysis of the concrete relationship between will, body, and inert things. He resorted instead to an unspecified notion of unification (結合) that, without further analysis, could be tantamount to little more than the a posteriori synthesis of neutral sensory data, originally homogenous to the exteroceptive sensations synthesized as external objects (see II 181, ff.). In the final essays of *IRSC*, Nishida gave a brief reinterpretation of the relation between will and body on the basis of his theory of absolute will: Internally experienced activity of consciousness (spiritual activity精神作用) belongs to the positive, creative aspect (肯定面) of absolute will, and the body is the projection of such activity on

the objective world as its negative aspect (否定面, a concept similar to the later notion of noematic plane II, 248 ff.).¹⁶⁾ However, in this interpretation, it is still unclear what originally distinguishes bodily sensations from exteroceptive sensations and the lived body from inert physical things, given that exteroceptive sensations are also ultimately the result of the projection of the positive activity of absolute will on its negative plane.

It is only within the self-aware system of universals that Nishida was finally able to outline a viable and original theory of the lived body¹⁷⁾ as the interface between consciousness and nature, by interpreting it as the noematic content of the conscious self. In *TPSUTBI*, for the first time, Nishida established a clear distinction not only between externally perceived inert matter and the body but also between the lived body and the body as a teleological organism. The latter is different from inert matter, but it is still perceived as an external object to which an organizing principle of unification is ascribed from the outside by a separate knowing subject – it is known as noematic content of consciousness in general, to which a noetic content is ascribed. That is to say, it is known from the standpoint of the cognitive intelligible self as the transcendental subject that apprehends the content of perception as an objective natural world, whereas the lived body is known from the standpoint of the conscious self that apprehends the content of perception as internal phenomena of consciousness. The conscious self – the “thing placed within” the place of the universal of self-awareness – is the self-projecting act that becomes aware of itself by reflecting itself within itself and abstracting such reflection from the originally intended noema. The content of the conscious self has, therefore, a noetic character, but, being the reflected self, it consists of noesis projected on the noematic plane (ノエマ面) and apprehended thus as object.

The development that allowed Nishida to formulate an original theory of the lived body was his new understanding of the relationship between act, content, and object in consciousness. Since his early days, Nishida conceived of phenomena of consciousness as consisting of an active element, corresponding to the epistemic subject (主観), and a passive element, corresponding to the epistemic object (客観). In *IG*, the two elements were defined as activity of consciousness and content of consciousness. Activity of consciousness is objectified by acts of self-reflection (反省) that can, in turn, be recursively objectified by acts of self-reflection of a superior order in a potentially infinite progression of levels of objectivation, anchored in the immediate, non-reflective content of consciousness as zero-order objects.¹⁸⁾ However, strictly speaking, activity as such is unobjectifiable, as it always corresponds to the active knower and never to the passive known, and when reflected, loses its true character of active element becoming a passive object. In *IG*, Nishida apparently was not aware of the problem of the intrinsic difference between, on the one hand, activity in itself and objectified activity, and, on the other hand, between objectified activity and immediate, non-reflective objective content. Such awareness would have required a conceptual distinction

between the content of acts of consciousness as their objects and the content of acts of consciousness as their intrinsic quality prior to their objectivation. The quality of an objectified act that makes it a particular kind of act – for instance, an act of perception rather than an act of thinking – must somehow be already contained in the non-objectified act, as it already was an act of perception and not an act of thinking before its objectivation.

In *SASU*, Nishida used a more complex terminological and conceptual apparatus, albeit in an unsystematic manner. He introduced the distinction between noesis and noema, which parallels but is not always identical to the distinction between subject and object, and began to use the word "content" (内容) to also refer to the inner content of an act as distinguished from its intentional object, even mentioning noetic content that cannot be known as an object projected onto the noematic plane. Moreover, the introduction of the idea of nested loci implies what may be called an "axis noesis-noema," along which awareness can move in either direction. A place has a noetic character in relation to a narrower place it projects within itself, but a noematic character in relation to a broader place by which and within which it is projected. Awareness can move in the noematic direction (ノエマ的方向), reducing its noetic content until it reaches a minimum (極小) in the universal of judgment, the natural world conceived as inert matter. On the contrary, awareness can move in the opposite noetic direction (ノエシス的方向), reducing its noematic content and reaching thus mere abstract noesis in the universal of self-awareness as the world of psychological phenomena (see IV, 178). Alternatively, awareness can embrace both sides of the axis, overcoming the dichotomy in the intelligible universal and broader universals that enfold it, until it reaches the universal of expression as the totality of known reality, beyond which lies only, in the noetic direction, absolute nothingness as the ultimate place that projects the entirety of reality and has no objectifiable content.

This new approach allowed a better understanding not only of the relationship between the various elements of consciousness, like the objectified subject and its original object, but also of the peculiar nature of the lived body as the interface between the natural and the psychological world. Noesis is the fundamental nature of reality, as everything that exists ultimately consists of acts of self-projection, but such acts always entail a projected content as noema. The universal of self-awareness is the place of abstract noesis detached from noema in an act of self-reflection by which the conscious self is apprehended, but the act of self-reflection actualizes itself as the projection of the original act's noetic content as its own noematic content – as the internally experienced factual form of the self-determination of the conscious self as noesis.

Noema thus apprehended as projected noesis is the lived body, which can thereby function as the interface between noema as material world and noesis as psychological world. When thought of as abstract noesis, a sensation of red is seen as a subjective act of visual consciousness, but the act

can be experienced only as projected internal noematic content, apprehended as a bodily act of sensation by the eyes as part of the lived body. As the bodily sensation lies on the noematic side of the noetic abstraction, a further movement of awareness in the noematic direction leads to the apprehension of the sensation as a property of an external object.¹⁹⁾ Hence, being the noematic side of the conscious self the lived body functions as the interface that conjoins noesis and noema – the internal natural world that allows consciousness to know and act upon the external natural world. The lived body is nature (自然), but not as a part of the natural world thematized by the natural sciences either as inert matter or as teleological organisms. It is nature because the self-aware universal is grounded in the noetic determination of the intelligible universal (叡智的ノエシスの限定に基づくIV, 220), which is the place within which reality is constituted, therefore its noematic content, albeit subjective, is an expression of the content of the intelligible universal, and as such is endowed with natural, factual reality (事実).

As internal noematic content, the lived body is the expression of the peculiar content of the conscious self as subjective, individual reality, whereas the physical world as intersubjective external noema is the expression of the intelligible self as consciousness in general.²⁰⁾ "Expression" does not simply mean the manifestation of an internal state seen from the outside, but denotes rather the plane of determination (限定面) of a universal, the surface of the mirror in which the universal reflects itself determining and knowing its own inner content. The universal of self-awareness expresses itself in the field of conscious phenomena, which in its totality constitutes the lived body. Every conscious phenomenon has a bodily character, starting with the emotional and volitional phenomena that constitute the distinctive content of the conscious self, therefore there is no conscious self without a body.²¹⁾

The body is not just the expression of the universal of self-awareness in a static cognitive sense. The expression of the universal of self-awareness is more than the cognitive projection of an image, being also the emotional and volitional actualization of the conscious self. Noesis is not only seeing but also acting, and the body is first of all incarnate action, movement that expresses the acting self by objectifying the will.²²⁾ The body thus functions as interface by embodying the actions that interiorize the external world assimilating it to the will, the concrete form of the conscious self's being in the world as shaping the world in its own image.²³⁾

Our existence as conscious, active individuals is a fully embodied existence. Furthermore, everything that is has an embodied aspect, as only what appears as a phenomenon of consciousness is. As God is conceived as the transcendent(al)²⁴⁾ subject that creates the manifested world, from the standpoint of the religious worldview, the embodiment of reality in the self-determination of the universal of self-awareness may be described as the incarnation of God.²⁵⁾

Two theoretical challenges in the self-aware system of universals

The concept of the body outlined in *TPSUTBI* is not only an original development in Nishida's thought that is coherent with the self-aware system of universals and a unique solution to an age-old philosophical problem. It is also an important step forward in the direction of his later philosophy of the body, and as such it deserves more attention than it has been given in the secondary literature. Although at this stage Nishida did not bring together the concept of body and the concept of history, he described the body as the concrete expression of action and the embodiment of the will, and recognized the historical dimension of action (歴史の行為) as the expression of free will. Hence, it is not farfetched to imagine that Nishida may have unified the two concepts in a notion akin to that of the historical body (歴史の身体) within the system of universals had he not chosen a different path forward.

However, the system of universal as Formulated in *SASU* implied some problems and contradictions that needed to be solved, either by refining the system or by moving beyond it, as Nishida eventually did. Two of the most consequential problems for the future development of Nishida's thought stem from the subjectivistic, noetic-oriented tendency of the system. The first one is the lack of an adequate account of the interaction of separate individual consciousnesses. Individuals are the result of the self-determination of the universal of self-awareness, which transcends individuality and is therefore described by Nishida as the place within which different individuals can connect at the emotional level through altruistic love (他愛 IV 248 f.). However, the concrete interactions in which individuals determine each other through the medium of the intersubjective physical world are difficult to account for within the system, insofar as the determination of an individual is coherently described as a one-way, up-down act that proceeds from the universal to the individual – from enfolding noesis to enfolded noema.

Objects given in experience are described as passive images (映像) projected by the active subject within itself, and as such it is hard to see how they can be thought of as acting on the subject to determine its content. Within the framework of the self-aware system of universals as developed in *SASU*, when two individuals interact through the physical world they are not actually determining each other, but are rather both simultaneously determined by layers of noetic activity: By the universal of self-awareness that determines their internal content, and by consciousness in general as the cognitive intelligible self that determines the noematic plane as the common external world through which they appear to relate to each other. Their apparent interaction is closer to a form of pre-established harmony than to an actual mutual exchange. From the point of view of later Nishida's philosophy, the system of universals lacks the concept of dialectic interaction between individual and environment, and among individuals through the environment that Nishida will begin

to develop only in the later essay *I and Thou* (私と汝). At this stage, Nishida still conceived place only as the enfolding subject, rather than as both the enfolding subject and its enfolding environment-world, thereby conceiving the world only as the passive plane of determination projected by the transcendent cognitive subject. This problem might have hampered a possible development of a notion of the historical body within the self-aware system of universals, given that it makes it difficult to account for the multidirectional interactions that concretely shape the historical body.

The second problem stemming from the subjectivistic tendency of *SASU* is what prompted Tanabe's criticism: By considering reality as an object projected, determined, and hence enfolding by noesis, in his regression to deeper layers of noesis, as mentioned above, Nishida was bound to reach an ultimate pure noesis whose content cannot be known as it cannot be projected onto the noematic plane. If its content could be projected and objectively known, the projection would imply a further noetic layer as the projecting act and would thus result in a regression ad infinitum. Although in *SASU* Nishida regarded both noesis and noema as determinations of self-awareness – which is the feature that allows awareness to know its own intrinsic noetic content – he nevertheless viewed their relationship as fundamentally asymmetrical. Noesis is always the active, enfolding side of awareness, whereas noema is always the passive, enfolding side. Whereas moving in the noematic direction awareness reaches a final noema that does not enfold anything – a pure object that can, in principle, be exhaustively known as its content is fully displayed in the projection – in the noetic direction awareness reaches a final noesis that is not enfolding by anything – a pure subject that can be known only in mystical experience.

Despite Tanabe's criticism, the recognition that reality is ultimately ineffable would not constitute a problem in a different philosophical context. Tanabe's criticism seems to assume that philosophy can exist only as an exhaustive rational explanation of reality – as metaphysics in the Heideggerian sense – and that reality should conform to the need of philosophy, rather than the other way around. However, until proven otherwise, there is no guarantee that reality can be fully understood by reason without any residual unknown – without any residual concealment, in Heideggerian terms. Nor should philosophy be dismissed just because it cannot exhaustively comprehend reality, no more than mathematics should be dismissed just because of Gödel's theorems. Since what exists obviously can exist, the existence of theological and mystical philosophies demonstrates that philosophy can exist while recognizing its own limitations in the ultimate ungraspable nature of reality.

However, not only does the recognition of the ineffability of the content of ultimate noesis clash with Nishida's own need for a rational explanation of reality, as mentioned above, but it also results in a contradiction within the system of self-aware universals as formulated in *SASU*. On the one hand, Nishida stated that in absolute nothingness all noetic content is objectified and there is

nothing left unknown, given that to reach the self-awareness of absolute nothingness means to exhaust the process of objectivation of noetic content. The distinctive mark of the self-awareness of absolute nothingness is the absence of "fringes" (縁暈IV, 283) of awareness of an objectified self. Unlike in the intermediate universals, there is no distinct "absolute self" apprehended in absolute nothingness: The self of absolute nothingness is the self of the totality of things (万物自己 IV 327), since the ultimate place contains only the totality of projected things and nothing more. As mentioned above, in the self-awareness of absolute consciousness the self as seer merges with the self as within which, therefore there is no seer to be aware of and only the self as seen is left – the *ich* merges with the *in mir* and only the *mich* remains (IV, 307 f.).

On the other hand, Nishida explicitly stated that the fact that there is no knowable content in absolute nothingness does not mean that there is no content at all, but only that the content of absolute nothingness is unobjectifiable. Absolute nothingness, thus, is regarded both as lacking any own content and as having ineffable content. Such content might perhaps be regarded as just being emotional or volitional content that transcends cognition, rather than anything mysterious or metaphysically transcendent. Since, for Nishida, the emotional and volitional selves are at a higher level of reality than the cognitive self, their content as well must be deeper than cognitive content, and as such objectively unknowable but capable to be felt in a non-verbal experience. This demystifying interpretation, however, does not eliminate the contradiction, as emotional and volitional content is nevertheless still content, endowed with ontic features that must be, if not knowable in a mere cognitive sense, *seeable* as the self-awareness of absolute nothingness is ultimately seeing. These ontic features clash with the idea of nothingness and can be opposed to the ontic features of the world as two separate sets of entities, thereby invalidating the idea of the empty nature of the ultimate place as what allows it to let reality be as it is – to let mountains be mountains, waters be waters, and to let what is be as it is.

Furthermore, the demystifying interpretation is undermined by Nishida's explicit characterization of the experience of self-awareness of absolute nothingness as religious (宗教的). He employed the common Japanese term for 'mystical' that incorporates the character for 'God' or 'divine' (神秘), suggesting the transcendent nature of the experience. He also used metaphors from the Western mystical tradition to describe the ineffability of absolute nothingness, namely Dionysius the Areopagite's metaphor of a deep darkness that is at the same time a dazzling obscurity. The absolute is obscurity in its conceptual unknowability, but the obscurity is dazzling because it is the source of all light, the origin of all reality. Reality as what is known must be essentially visible, and its visibility must come from its source, the luminous mirror (明鏡) that reflects itself within itself as the world.

The solution to these problems required either a further development of the self-aware system

of universals or a deeper change in the conceptual framework. Prompted by Tanabe's criticism and his own theoretical inclination, Nishida chose the latter. In the context of his later system of absolute contradictory self-identity, any contradiction within the system is readily resolved by accepting it as an expression of the ultimate dialectical nature of reality. Furthermore, the non-processual nature of Nishida's dialectics eliminates the need for a starting point conceived as a metaphysical principle beyond conceptual grasp, leading to the explicit rejection of mysticism in his later philosophy of religion.²⁶⁾ However, the choice might have been different. He might have chosen the former path, by, for instance, introducing a form of dialectics that accounts for the concrete interaction between individuals and for the contradiction between emptiness and fullness of content in the ultimate place, while preserving its ineffability – unlike the dialectics of absolute contradictory self-identity that completely identify the absolute and the world without any residual unknown. A different choice might have thus led to a different philosophical system than what we identify now as the final phase of Nishida's philosophy. This possibility makes the structure of the self-aware system of universals worth exploring not only as a provisional stage in the actual development of Nishida's philosophy but also as a potential alternative outcome of the logic of place.²⁷⁾

Notes

- 1) I used to translate *basho* as "locus." However, the translation as "place" has become standard, especially since the translation of the essay *Basho*. See Nishida 2012.
- 2) *IW* was translated into English, and the original essay was included by Ueda Shizuteru in his widely read anthology of Nishida's essays (Nishida 1958, 1987) and published with a detailed paraphrasis and some commentary by Kosaka Kunitsugu (Kosaka 2009). *SASU* has recently been translated into French (Nishida 2017).
- 3) Kosaka Kunitsugu argues that the difficult metaphysical character of this phase of Nishida's thought contributed to his neglect (Kosaka 2009, 3).
- 4) Tanabe, 309. See Leonardi 2014, 461 f.
- 5) See X, 320; 356. See Kosaka 1994, 281.
- 6) In the references to Nishida's work, the Latin numerals refer to the volume, and the Arabic numerals to the pages of the *Complete Works* (Nishida, 2002–2009).
- 7) See Leonardi 2021.
- 8) 「そこに絶対無の場所として尚映すと云ふ意味が残されねばならぬ、それが我々の知識の根本的立場となるのである。」(IV, 147)
- 9) See I, 21 f., where Nishida explicitly refers to Hegel's Logic.
- 10) In *IW*, Nishida once again employed the metaphor of consciousness, represented by the term *kokoro* (心), as a mirror. He referenced a quotation from Jacob Böhme, previously cited in the same context in *IG* and *IRSC*, where the metaphor explicitly connects with the notion of the absolute as nothingness. (IV, 147)
- 11) 「直覚といふのは主客合一することであると考へられる、知るものと知られるものが一となることであると考へられる。(中略) 知的自覚に於ては、自己が真に見る自己となるのではない、

- それは、尚見られた自己となるのである。」(IV, 245) See IV 128 f.
- 12) See Nishida's discussion on free will and his criticism of the concept of freedom of choice (選択の自由) in IG (I, 29 ff.; 90 ff.; 146 ff.).
 - 13) See Sugimoto 2013, 81 ff.
 - 14) The secondary literature on Nishida's concept of the body focuses mostly on the later concept of the historical body, often ignoring Nishida's earlier ideas. (See Loughnane; Cheung; Yuasa, 48 ff.; Obama; Sugimoto 2016) Itabashi Yujin provides an interesting interpretation of what could be considered an implicit concept of the body in IG, before jumping to Nishida's later philosophy. However, this interpretation lacks explicit support from statements on the body in IC and even appears to contradict them, as acknowledged by Itabashi himself, who notes that they can "cause misunderstanding" (Itabashi, 64).
 - 15) 「我々の身体も物体である。この点より見ては他の物体と変りはない。視覚にて外物の変化を知るのも、筋覚にて自己の身体の運動を感じずるのも同一である、外界といえは両者共に外界である。」(I, 28) 「我々の身体もやはり自己の意識現象の一部にすぎない。」(I, 44)
 - 16) On the positive and negative aspects of absolute will – as *Natura creans et non creata* and *Natura nec creans nec creata* – see Leonardi 2012, 48.
 - 17) Nishida does not use the expression "lived body." However, in *SASU* he introduces a terminological distinction between the internally perceived body (身体) and the externally perceived body (肉体; IV 246).
 - 18) See Sueki, 106.
 - 19) See IV, 227; Tanaka, 71 f. This descending order towards lesser noetic content reflects the logico-ontological process of the actualization of reality, not the factual process of development of any individual awareness. Factual individual awareness always starts as awareness of an objective world in which the individual exists.
 - 20) 「物を自己の身体として見る時、始めて意識的自己が自己自身の内容をノエマ的に見るのである、叡智約自己自身の限定面と異なった限定面の独立なる内容を見るのである。」(IV, 218)
 - 21) 「意識的的自己の内に包まれたノエマ的なるものは、身体的なるものでなければならない。我々の身体は常に意識的的自己の道具たるのみならず、意識的的自己の表現と云うべきものである。身体なくして意識的的自己はない、自己其者の内容たる情意的内容は、いつも身体的でなければならない。」(IV, 218)
 - 22) 「身体の運動は自己の行為を表現するものである、自己限定の意味を有ったものである。我々の意志と身体の運動とは内面的関係を有って居る、行動は意志の対象化と云ってよい。」(IV, 219).
 - 23) 「私が行為するといふことは、自己の意識を越えた外界を自己の中に取り入れることである、外界の出来事を自己の意志実現として、自己の内容を実現するものと為すのである。」(IV, 126)
 - 24) Nishida used the word 超越的 for both "transcendent" and "transcendental."
 - 25) To be precise, Nishida defined God in *IW* as the transcendent subject and creator of the intelligible world (IV, 146). However, it is clear that Nishida's intention was to define God as the transcendent subject encompassing the entirety of reality. At this stage, he had not yet introduced any universal beyond the intelligible universal, except for absolute nothingness itself. Indeed, in spite of having compared God to consciousness in general, Nishida hinted that God is beyond the intelligible self (叡智的自己といへども神の前に平伏せざるを得ない IV, 146), and at the very end of *SASU* reiterated that religious experience is the ultimate standpoint of the self-awareness of absolute nothingness (宗教的体験に至って、ノエマの限定は失はれて絶対無の自覚に入る IV, 381).
 - 26) See Leonardi, 2014.

- 27) I would like to suggest that analyzing the system of universals as an independent philosophical standpoint could also facilitate a potential comparison between Nishida's philosophy and Indian non-Buddhist thought. This relationship "remains to be explored in the growing literature on Nishida's philosophy" (Maraldo). Non-dialectical and open to the mystical experience of an ultimate transcendent principle, Indian non-dualistic philosophies such as Advaita Vedanta may be closer to Nishida's system of universals than to his later philosophy.

List of abbreviations

<i>IG</i>	<i>An Inquiry into the Good</i>
<i>IRSC</i>	<i>Intuition and Reflection in Self-Consciousness</i>
<i>IW</i>	<i>The Intelligible World</i>
<i>SASU</i>	<i>The Self-Aware System of Universals</i>
<i>TPSUTBI</i>	<i>The Thing Placed in the Self-Aware Universal and its Relationship to the Thing that is Behind It</i>

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