

Creativity of the Historical World—Nishida and the Philosophy of Technology

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Introduction

The concept of “Asia” has been used and understood not only in a neutral and geographical sense, it has long been determined in a conceptual scheme in which it was given a meaning in contrast to its pair concept, such as the West or the Occident, just like the concept of the “East” or the “Orient.”

Around the middle of the 19th century people belonging to Asia began to be conscious that they were characterized as belonging to an area identified as “Asia” in contrast to the West. It was a time when the Western powers came to Asian countries, and forcefully demanded that they open their countries and be involved in the global system the Western powers were creating.

In 1840, the Opium War began in China. In 1853 and 1854, the American Commodore Mathew Perry visited Japan with warships, causing the isolated Japan to open up to commerce with the Western World. In 1858, India came under the direct control of the British Empire.

Through these processes Asian countries became involved in “world history,” in which Western countries played the central and leading role in economic, political, and above all military fields. One of the reasons Western countries could play such a leading role was that they had developed various industrial technologies, and accomplished industrial revolutions, which made economic and social development possible. On the basis of this development, they characterized their states as modernized and civilized in contrast to non-Western countries, especially Asian countries, which were characterized as pre-modern and uncivilized.

The reactions of Asian countries to this characterization and the demands of Western powers varied. The most extreme reaction was that of the Japanese

people. After a short period of hesitation, the Japanese people decided to accept this conceptual scheme of “world history,” and began to industrialize and modernize the country, and participate in the global system determined by Western powers as rapidly as possible. At the initial phase of the modernization of Japan, Yukichi Fukuzawa, one of the preeminent Enlightenment thinkers, emphasized the importance of and the urgent need for modernizing and civilizing the country because he thought that there was nothing in Japanese traditions of which the Japanese might be proud vis-à-vis the West. He proposed to side with the civilized Western nations against other Asian countries such as China and Korea, and even claimed that Japan should “dissociate from Asia.”

While the reactions in other countries varied and were mostly more moderate, the conceptual scheme, in which the concept of “Asia” is always contrasted to the modernized and civilized West, has restricted the way of thinking of people who live in the Asian area. In particular, Japan could not and, I think, even today cannot take an appropriate stance to other Asian countries because of this conceptual scheme. The concept of “Asia” still remains traumatic for Japanese people, especially for Japanese intellectuals.

On the other hand, since the end of the 20th century the situation has dramatically changed. In the last few decades, the economic, political, and social development of Asian countries has been sufficiently surprising to notice that the above-mentioned conceptual scheme and the traditional concept of Asia are no longer valid. On the basis of the rapid development of economics in East Asia and India, we now often hear that the 21st century will be the century of China and India.

After about 150 years since the initial phase of modernization in the Asian area, we are now entering a new era of “world history,” in which the relationship between Asia and the West must be re-conceptualized.

However, do we now have an appropriate conceptual scheme corresponding to the recently developed situation? What meaning will the concept of Asia be given in this new context? To clarify and answer these questions, how can and should we re-interpret and reevaluate past and contemporary philosophies in Asia?

I assume these are the questions that lie behind the theme of this conference*: “Rethinking philosophy in Asia.”

In my talk, I would like to take up the philosophy of Kitaro Nishida (1870–1945), the preeminent figure of modern Japanese philosophy, focusing on and interpreting his philosophy of technology in a new context.

Nishida developed his original thought in confronting Western philosophies on the basis of his own experience, which began in the early phase of the modernization process of Japan, and ended when the disastrous results of this process became clear in 1945.

As technology played a central role in the modernization process of Japan, just as in the case of Western countries, I think it is a meaningful task to ask how Nishida responded to problems related to technology in his philosophy, and how he interpreted and characterized technological phenomena in his philosophy.

Perhaps you might have doubts about the theme of my talk; why of all things is the focus on the philosophy of technology when Nishida's philosophy is discussed?

Surely, when it comes to the philosophy of Nishida, it is usual for people to focus on the relationship between his philosophy and religion, especially Zen Buddhism. Indeed, Nishida practiced Zen meditation, and wrote many articles about the philosophy of religion, while he never wrote an article whose title contained the concept of technology. It is certain that religion plays a central role in his philosophy, and that his practical experience in Zen training influenced his philosophy.

However, I think it is too narrow to interpret his philosophy only in the context of religious philosophy. At least in the later period he repeatedly emphasized the important role of the productive activities of human beings in the concrete historical world, which he characterizes as “technological.” Without taking into consideration this technological structure of the historical world, we cannot understand his important concepts, such as “contradictory self-identity,” “active intuition,” or “creativity of the historical world,” which play central roles in his later philosophy. In this sense, the philosophy of technology plays an important role in his philosophy, at least in his later period.

Now, I would like to address the following questions:

What are the characteristic features of his philosophy of technology that distinguish it from Western philosophies of technology? Can we find in his philosophy of technology helpful indications to rethink the relationship between Asia and the West in a new context?

1. Technology as the logic of the creative historical world

The developmental process of Nishida's philosophy can be characterized as the process of searching for the ultimate reality. The process can be divided into at least three stages.

At the first stage, in his maiden work *An Inquiry into the Good*, he proposed the concept of “pure experience” as the concept that expresses the ultimate reality. According to him, pure experience is experience in which “there is not yet a subject or an object, and knowing and its object are completely unified” (Nishida 1987, 4). While Nishida characterizes this pure experience as that which we normally can have, it is sometimes interpreted that it expresses a specific kind of experience that we can only acquire on an exceptional occasion, as in the case of Zen meditation. In fact, in this view, it is not clear how to conceive the relationship between a pure experience and other types of experience, especially reflexive experience in which subject and object seem to be separated.

In the next stage of his thinking, Nishida coined the term “*basho* (place)” to characterize the ultimate reality. The ultimate reality is the “place,” in which and from which subject and object emerge and are related. While in this “place” everything including subjective beings and objective beings exist and are related to each other, concepts of being or nothing in the usual sense are not applicable to it. It is characterized rather as a “place of nothing,” which encompasses everything.

At this stage Nishida became conscious that his philosophy had the character of Eastern thought, and began to emphasize it.

Nishida thought that Western logic is the logic of substance and entity, so that, as for grammatical structure, subjects that are used to express substances have a prior status to predicates. According to him, as “place” cannot be characterized by the concepts of substance or entity, Western logic cannot grasp and describe “place” appropriately. The logic appropriate to “place” is rather the logic of predicates and “nothing,” which can be found in the traditions of Eastern thought. Only with predicates that never become subjects can we characterize the “place of nothing” appropriately.

At this stage, Nishida reached a systematic view of philosophy, but he was not satisfied with it. He thought that the view of “pure experience” or the view of

“place of nothing” still remains too theoretical and abstract, and must become more concrete from a practical point of view.

At the third and last stage, Nishida characterized ultimate reality as the “historical world” in which we live through our lived bodies, using and making various things through interactions with other people. That means the ultimate reality is the world, to which we belong, living and working in our everyday lives, and in which *poiesis* or creative activities play a central role. Poiesis is a species of technê, and the world of poiesis is the world of homo farber (Nishida 1948b, 312, 325).

“The historical world is a world of production and a world of creation. Production means that we make things. However, while things are made by us, they become entirely independent and move us in a reverse way. In addition, the acts of our making things themselves originate from the world of things. While things and we remain opposite and contradictory, things move us and we move things, and through this process the world creates itself as a contradictory self-identity. *From that which is made to that which makes*, the world moves through *active intuitions*. We are able to make things because we are productive elements in the productive world and creative elements in the creative world.” (Nishida 1949b, 9, italics mine)

According to Nishida, our real world has features that must be described with contradictory concepts, such as subject and object, one and many, or motion and rest. Because our world always has contradictory characteristics, it cannot be stable; it moves incessantly and is always in a transformational process. This transformational process cannot be characterized as mechanical or teleological because it is not determined causally or planned or produced with purpose, but arises spontaneously through the interactions of subjects and objects, of one and many. The process is creative because a new situation is always incommensurable with the old one from which it was formed. Because of this transformational character, Nishida calls our world “historical” and also “technological.” Our world is technological because it is a world of *poiesis*, a self-formative act that moves from the created to the creating.

This transformation is an interaction in which subject and object are inseparably

connected, but at the same time are strictly differentiated. For animals, the interaction is teleologically determined, and is not as contradictory as for human beings. In the case of human beings, the interaction is creative because the process has contradictory elements. The self and the environment are so contradictory that the self is newly determined and produced complementarily by the object that the self makes, and through it the self is brought to a new dimension. Cognition in this process is called “active intuition” because the subject is not a passive observer or a detached theoretician, but commits himself or herself to and is co-constructed with an object. This cognition can be found in our daily experiences, or in the cognitive skills of artisans, artists, or experimental scientists.

Now, what important insights concerning the philosophy of technology can we find in these characterizations of the technological creative world presented by Nishida?

To find the scope and the meaning of Nishida’s philosophy of technology, I would like to take a look at a typical philosophy of technology developed at about the same time, namely Heidegger’s philosophy of technology.

2. Heidegger’s philosophy of technology and technological determinism

No one would oppose the claim that one of the most well-known and influential philosophers of technology in the 20th century is Heidegger.

In his short essay “The question concerning technology,” Heidegger clearly criticized the traditional view of technology, and gave technology central status in his ontology (Heidegger 1977).

He criticized anthropological and instrumentalist views of technology, in which technology is considered to belong entirely to the dimension of human activities, and to be related not to ends but only to means. Against this traditional view, he emphasized that technology constitutes an essential element of the meaning and the way of appearing of the Being, and technology belongs to the deepest level of ontology.

On this ontological level, he strictly differentiated modern technology from traditional technology.

While in the traditional world, technology works in harmony with various other

factors, such as social and cultural factors, in the modern world technology alone has acquired dominant status, and other factors are dominated and controlled entirely by efficiency and technological rationality. Heidegger impressively described this situation with the well-known concept “Gestell (Enframing),” in which technology appears to be autonomous, and its developmental process appears to be irresistible.

Certainly, the development of technology influences not only means but also influences ends themselves, and brings about new forms of actions and new forms of life, and in this sense it deeply influences and changes our social and cultural lives. For example, we have experienced that with the introduction of new technologies, such as telephones, e-mail, and mobile phones, forms of communication in our everyday lives have been radically transformed. While it still seems to be up to us to decide whether we accept and use new technologies or not, the criteria for deciding seem no more to be a matter of choosing. That means, when we choose new technologies, it seems so natural to choose more useful and more efficient ones that it seems irrational if we do not follow these criteria.

In this sense, we must admit that Heidegger impressively pointed out an important characteristic of modern technology. However, if this autonomous character is the unique essence of modern technology and no other features can be found in it, we only have a one-sided and very pessimistic view of the relation between technology and society or culture.

Indeed, Heidegger’s conclusive statement concerning this point is the following:

“No individual, no group of human being, no committee whose members are influential politicians, researchers, and engineers, or no conference constituted by leading people of economy and industry can put the brake on and orient the historical process of the atomic age. No merely human organization is in a position to establish rule over the movement of this age.” (Heidegger 1959, 20f.)

This statement is a typical and extreme expression of *technological determinism*, according to which any efforts to criticize and change the technological process are doomed to fail. If this is the final philosophical statement, it would be meaningless to philosophically analyze concrete phenomena related to technology. In fact, in the

case of Heidegger, we can find no place in which the philosophy of technology has a positive sense.

In this sense, it is an urgent and necessary task to find a way of criticizing the deterministic view of technology, if there should be a positive aspect of the philosophy of technology.

While philosophers could not find an appropriate approach to this task for a long time, sociologists recently proposed a new, fruitful approach, which is called the *social constructivist approach*. The following is the main thesis of this approach.

When we see the end products of technology, which are widely used in society, e.g., a bicycle, it seems to be neutral against various social, cultural, and political factors. However, if we investigate the process of development, introduction, and use of artifacts closely, it becomes clear that they are the results of conflicts, negotiations, and translations of various interests of social groups. The process and products of technology are not a black box that is pre-determined by the rigid logic of technological rationality and efficiency, but are socially constructed and “interpretatively flexible” (cf. Bijker, Hughes and Pinch 1987).

What is characteristic in the social constructivist approach is that it does not commit itself to any determinism. According to this approach, although technology is socially constructed, it does not mean that society determines technology in the reverse way to technological determinism. Rather, as the developmental process of technology is influenced by various factors, including technological, social, and cultural factors, it is contingently determined, dependent on each context, and we cannot identify which factor is essential, without considering the context. Thus the *in-essentialism* is the most significant implication of this approach.

On the other hand, we seem to encounter a fundamental difficulty if we try to clarify the philosophical implications of this new approach.

Usually, it is considered that one of the most important tasks of philosophy is to be found in searching for the “essence” of the object of the philosophical investigation. The important task of the philosophy of technology is considered to be a search for the “essence” of technology. However, if there should be no “essence” of technology, as the social constructivists claim, it seems to be impossible to conceive of a philosophy of technology corresponding to the social constructivist approach.

I think this is the point where we can find helpful suggestions in Nishida's philosophy.

3. The scope and the meaning of Nishida's philosophy of technology

1) In-essentialism:

Nishida's concept of "contradictory self-identity," with which the structure of the historical world is characterized, is exactly the concept that shows the in-essentialist character of his philosophy. In the historical world many factors are inseparably connected to bring forth a certain development of technology, but no factor is determined by, and is reducible to, some definite factor, and in this sense every factor remains independent and contradictory to each other.

It is especially interesting that this perspective makes it possible for us to criticize technological determinism in a fundamental way.

2) The significant role of users:

Nishida's phrase "from that which is made to that which makes" can be interpreted emphasizing the roles of users in the process of technological production. According to this phrase, the technological process does not end when the technological artifacts are produced and handed to users. When the products have left the hands of producers and become independent from them, they have a chance to acquire a new meaning and a new developmental direction through their interaction with users. We have various examples of this. The Internet is a good one. Although originally designed for military use, the Internet has now become a new form of communication in our everyday lives. It is said that the typewriter was originally designed as a prosthetic device to help people with sight deficiencies, but it played a central role in offices, and its original purpose became marginalized (Ihde 2002, 106).

In this sense, Nishida's view of technology is one in which creativity and interpretative flexibility can be found not only in the process of design and production, but also in the process of diffusion and use. Nishida describes this process as "reverse determination." Perhaps this concept suggests that users instead of producers determine the creative process. But, what Nishida emphasizes is that

neither producers nor users alone have a decisive role in determining technological development. Indeed, a creative process is possible only through an interaction between producers and users, both of whom stand in a contradictory relation. Only in recent studies of technology has this insightful view of the role of users been sufficiently emphasized, and it is pointed out that the distinction between design and use is artificial (Oudshoorn and Pinch 2003). In this way, any determinism, including technological determinism, is de-constructed.

3) Uncertainty:

In his philosophy of technology, Nishida does not emphasize the instrumental role of technology, by which our lives are made convenient and stable; instead, he underscores the role of technology in radically transforming our historical world. According to him, because of this characteristic of technology, our lives are always in a process of self-negating or self-creating, and are therefore unstable. “Even in the simple process of building a house, things are not given only as material but as something that has a fateful significance for our actions. In every action we stand on the brink of crisis in some way or other. Our world of everyday life is a world of true crisis” (Nishida 1949a, 70).

Everyone knows that safety is one of the most important points we must consider when we develop new technologies. However, according to Nishida, if we produce new artifacts to improve safety, we necessarily bring about new dangers. Safety and lack of safety are inseparable in our historical world.

The lack of safety or “risk” is not a feature we can control absolutely and must eliminate totally, but rather is a feature with which we must get along, as long as we continue to retain creativity in our lives in a historical world.

Conclusion: Localism and globalism

In the later phase of his life, motivated by the political situation at that time, Nishida wrote articles such as “Problems of Japanese culture” and “Fundamental principle of a new world order,” which had various political implications, and aroused many controversies.

In the latter article, Nishida used the concept of “contradictory identity” to

characterize the modern and global structure of the twentieth-century world in contrast to the eighteenth-century world. According to him, while nations and people in the eighteenth century were relatively independent, and the concept of the world remained abstract, in the twentieth century the connections and the antagonisms among nations and peoples are so strengthened in a unified world that every nation is forced to transcend itself to fulfill its “historical world mission.”

“Today, as a result of scientific, technological, and economic development, all nations and peoples have entered one complex global space. Solving this problem requires each nation to be awake to its world-historical mission, and for each to transcend itself while remaining thoroughly true to itself, and to construct one ‘multi-world’ (sekaiteki sekai)” (Nishida 1950, 428).

These texts are problematical because they are embedded in the context in which they were written and it is misleading to interpret them without considering the context. However, if we take seriously his philosophical perspective concerning the creative and technological structure of the historical world, I think it is still meaningful to discuss the concept of “multi-world” in our contemporary world. According to Nishida, in the “multi-world,” all nations and every cultures are inseparably connected, but are irreducible and contradictory. In this sense, globalism and localism are inseparable. If this is the case, the relationship between Asia and the West is also not exceptional. In spite of the global development of technology, or rather because of the global development of technology, Asian culture and Western culture must be able to coexist in a contradictory way in the new world order. This is, I think, the world-view Nishida reached at the end of his life, in confronting the modernization process of Japan on the basis of his cultural background.

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