

**Nishida's Mahāyāna Buddhist Rethinking of *Sittlichkeit* in 「絶対矛盾的自己同一」**

「私の今日の考が多くのをヘーゲルから教へられ、又何人よりもヘーゲルに最も近いと考へると共に、私はヘーゲルに対して多くの云ふべきものを有つて居るのである」 (西田幾多郎)

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**Abstract:**

Along with "The Position of the Individual in the Historical World" 「歴史的世界に於ける個物の立場」 (1938), "Absolute Contradictory Self-Identity" 「絶対矛盾的自己同一」 (1939) is arguably one of Nishida's most important texts in which we find beginnings of his mature philosophy. Throughout this text, Nishida repeatedly references Hegel in defining his position, focusing primarily on Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* [*Recht*]. "Right" [*Recht*], for Hegel, refers to the existence of freedom *realized* in the historical world of *actuality*. A philosophy of "right" [*Recht*] is thus a philosophy of freedom and history whose central aim is to provide an account of the ground of freedom and how the Idea of freedom is actualized *in* our ethical relations with others *as* these relations are embodied *in* social and political institutions. Ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*) is the logic and content of the normative framework of duties and values that guide our common everyday practical reasoning in the *self-actualization* (*Selbstverwirklichung*) of our socio-political world as the objective manifestations of the Idea of freedom. It is not so much a question of establishing *the* "good life" as "*living* the good" (PR §142), living according to a shared sense of life that forms the living *ethos* of the central socio-political institutions by which the Idea of freedom is actualized: namely, the family, society, and the state. In this sense, Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* [*Recht*] might have been called *An Inquiry into the Good*. While there is no shortage of legitimate objections to Hegel's socio-political views — they are manifestly patriarchal, Euro-centric, anti-democratic, and the list goes on — our current socio-political reality demands that we return to rethink and revitalize the notion of "ethical life." Freedom has largely become synonymous with "being able to do as one wants" (PR § 15), which is precisely the notion of freedom Hegel (and Nishida) rejects. A second issue concerns what Rawls calls "the fact of pluralism." Do we today have a common social experience that can form the framework for communal living? Is it possible to speak of a common ethical life that could function as the ground for a *worldly world*? Furthermore, our current world is dominated by a political discourse of "personal rights" and lacks a discourse of "personal duties" towards the other or the world. However, for Hegel (and Nishida), the self-actualization of individual freedom and the *commitment* to the duties and virtues of *Sittlichkeit* are co-originating and reciprocal conditions. To be free, individuals must accept the duty (constraints on freedom) to recognize the other's freedom and the virtue of putting the other's interest before yours when it is rational. If we are not to sink into a 'state of nature' as a war of all against all, the individual can

no longer live as if they constitute a 'tribe of one.' We must actualize ourselves as members of ethical institutions. It is not so much a "continuous preference for the public interest over one's own," to speak with Montesquieu, as to recognize that the public interest is one's own. My "right" to wear or not wear a mask during a pandemic must be balanced by my "duty" to public safety, which is the safety of others and myself. The constraint on freedom must be an internal telos of practical action, not an external limitation. We cannot have a legal society that lacks a shared commitment to the Idea of freedom as a living ethos that animates such a legal polis. In other words, for Nishida, "an actual existing society is always comprised of both *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* dimensions. It begins as a center that is a contradictory self-identity." (NKZ 12: 425) The common critique of Hegel is that in his account of ethical life, the individual is entirely sublated into the relationality of the ethical institutions, which are entirely sublated into Absolute Spirit such that only Absolute Spirit is truly free. This traditional critique of Hegel has been challenged by many Hegel scholars today. The important point is that the self-actualization of ethical life in the socio-political world depends on our understanding of nature and the ground of freedom. Beginning from the Mahāyāna tradition of Buddhism, for Nishida, the individual is radically individual in that they face or oppose absolute nothingness and radically relational in that they face or oppose the other and their social environment, forming a contradictory self-identity; and only as this contradictory self-identity can the individual be creative and thus free. This paper undertakes a reading of "Absolute Contradictory Self-Identity" as a reworking of the project of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* from the perspective of the logic of Mahāyāna Buddhism, specifically based on its logic of the *soku* (即) and the notion of emptiness as co-dependent origination. It argues that "Absolute Contradictory Self-Identity" is the framework of Nishida's socio-political theory, and we must assess Nishida's political views based on a reading of this text and not from a series of isolated quotes often taken out of context.