

# *Esprit*

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a cura di  
Andrea Muni

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# PLATO'S AND NISHIDA'S BRIDGES OVER DUALISTIC GAPS CHIARA ROBBIANO

## INTRODUCTION

In this paper I will give some pointers, meant to pave the way for a comparison between Nishida's and Plato's attempts to bridge the dualistic gaps that they respectively had to face. The gap Nishida attempted to bridge was the one between knowing subject and known objects; Plato had to close the gap between everyday objects and the ideas he had postulated himself.

Kitarō Nishida (1870-1975) was the most important Japanese philosopher of the twentieth century. He was professor of philosophy at the Imperial University of Kyoto. He tried to articulate a vision of reality, informed both by his studies in Western Philosophy and his Buddhist (especially Zen) background<sup>1</sup>. Debates about Nishida's philosophy gave rise to the Kyoto School of philosophy. Nishida had a deep respect for Greek philosophy, especially for Plotinus,<sup>2</sup> but was also keen on pointing at profound differences between his outlook on reality and the one of the Greeks<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> "It goes without saying that there are many things to be esteemed and learned in the brilliant development of Western culture, which regards form [*eidōs*] and being as the good. However, at the basis of Asian culture, which has fostered our ancestors for over several thousand years, lies something that can be called seeing the form of the formless and hearing the sound of the soundless. Our minds are compelled to seek for this. I would like to give the philosophical foundation to this demand" (from the preface of Nishida's *From the Actor to the Seer* quoted in Abe 1990, X).

<sup>2</sup> See Okano 2015, 3: "For Nishida, 'the form of true reality is the form of the formless and its sound is the sound of the soundless' (2.327). And 'it should be through the so-called 'understanding in silence' [...III8(30)4.3...] of Plotinus that we know it (ibid. cf. 1.233, 3.28, 153), he continues. Though Nishida distinguishes his philosophy from mysticism, when we compare him with Plotinus, we can find a great affinity in their fundamental structure. 'Absolute nothingness (*zettai mu*)', the basis of all reality in Nishida's philosophy, is prior to both subjectivity

In this paper I will look at the alternative Nishida offers to Aristotle's substance logic, i.e. Nishida's logic of predicates and of concrete universals, which, I will suggest, has some affinities to Plato's conception of ideas —seen as *aitiai*: causes of reality, manifested and intertwined in everyday objects, which are not ontologically separated from them (distinct but not separated).

I will focus on the structural similarity between the two systems as it is manifested in what Nishida calls 'field of consciousness' in his essay *Basho* ('place'). Both Nishida's field of consciousness and Plato's intellectual realm (*noëtos topos*, *Rep.* 508C) are the —non-geographical<sup>4</sup>— 'place' where the network of ideas lies.

I will also sketch a few similarities and differences between what is more fundamental than ideas in Plato's philosophy —in the first place, Plato's idea of the Good, but other candidates will be looked at— and Nishida's concept of the *Basho* of absolute nothingness.

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and objectivity, and corresponds to the Plotinian One, which transcends both thinking and being (i.e. subjectivity and objectivity in the intelligible world). The correspondence between their logical structures consists in regarding subjectivity and objectivity as developments of an indefinite principle that transcends and precedes the discrimination of the two, and determination as determination of what has no determination”.

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. Nishida 1927, 94: “The Greeks with their intellectualism, even with Plotinus’ ‘the One’ [to hen], were unable to thoroughly exhaust this significance of true nothing”.

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. Moline 1981, 100-105, who argues how Plato's image of a noetic realm at *Rep.* 508C should not be taken literally. Cf. e.g. 102-104: “Many of us have accepted without sufficient examination Aristotle's dogma that to exist in the universe is to exist in a place—that is, to be confined within the limits of some specifiable environing body... Since the intelligible, on Plato's view, is not confined, to speak literally of an ‘intelligible world’ would be a contradiction in terms... In speaking of an intelligible realm he was contrasting the epistemic reliability of dialectical thought with that of sense perception.”

## PLATO'S BRAIDING OF FORMS AS A SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM OF DUALISM BETWEEN IDEAS AND EVERYDAY OBJECTS

Plato's reflection on ideas, carried out in the *Parmenides* and later dialogues, is an attempt to respond to the problems yielded by the wrong interpretation of ideas as super-exemplifiers<sup>5</sup> literally inhabiting a different world from the one we live in. Socrates, in the first part of the *Parmenides*, represents the middle-dialogue presentation of forms —or in Natorp's (1921, 224) words: "Plato's theory of ideas, more or less as it is understood by Aristotle and the whole world".

The naïve interpretation of ideas as super-exemplifiers leads both to the 3<sup>rd</sup> man problem (*Parmenides*, 132D-133A), and to what is called 'the greatest difficulty' (*Parmenides*, 133B-134E), which is the problem of separation between ideas and world of experience, which would involve the impossibility for us to know the ideas.

The solution offered by Plato himself in the *Parmenides* to this problem, goes, according to Meinwald 1991 and 1992, through the distinction between two kinds of predication<sup>6</sup>. On the one hand,

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<sup>5</sup> Meinwald 1992, 384: "The views of Socrates of the first part of the dialogue have always reminded readers of certain passages of the great middle-period masterpieces, perhaps especially the *Republic* and the *Phaedo*. For convenience, I will call the position produced by concretizing the suggestions of those passages in the most simpleminded way 'Platonism'. The purpose of the scare quotes is of course to mark the fact that I question whether Plato himself had any enduring commitment to that position. There is, however, no doubt that many people have thought that he did. Intuitively, the most bizarre feature of 'Platonism' was that it thought of Beauty as the single most beautiful thing, of Largeness as doing its job by outclassing all other objects in size, and so on...'Platonism' makes the ridiculous mistake of thinking that properties to their job by having the very properties they are". See also Van Ophuijsen 1999, 312: "If Plato ever held a conception of the Forms as Super-exemplifiers, then it seems clear that he moved away from it."

<sup>6</sup>This distinction between the two kinds of predications — predications "in relation to others" and "in relation to itself"— is announced in the description of the exercise (*Parmenides*, 136a-e) that Socrates must carry out in order to understand the theory of ideas and which Parmenides himself will carry out in the second part of the dialogue (see Meinwald 1991, pp28 ff.)

common or 'garden' predications about everyday objects and individuals are predications about features that individuals display; each of these features is related to a form. On the other hand, it is both possible to do common or 'garden' predication and 'tree' predication about the forms, which reveals something about the position of a certain form in the whole network of forms, i.e. the structure of reality<sup>7</sup>.

The relations within the network of ideas can be described, in terms coming from the *Sophist* 259e as 'a plaiting together', 'twining together', or 'interweaving' of forms (*sumplokê eidôn*). In order to understand how ideas are plaited together Plato employs the method of hypothesis, which is the mature version of Plato's dialectic, i.e. "a new device to fill in and detail the map of the world of forms, conceived as a structure of relations, defining these Forms" (Van Ophuijsen 1999, 303). The method of hypothesis continues the project already started with the elenchus, which "can lead to the formation of conglomerates of consistent beliefs, the truth of some of which has been established by showing that their contradictory leads to absurdity" (Van Ophuijsen 1999, 301)

An interpretation compatible with such a non-"Two World" reading of Plato is a Neo-Kantian one that sees ideas as laws of which everyday objects are exemplifiers. Ideas are "not so much objective, as objectivising (positing objects)", (Natorp 1921 239), i.e. not special objects, like super-exemplifiers, so much as what accounts for the possibility of objects. Natorp 1921 attributes an objective transcendental idealism to Plato, i.e. the doctrine that the nature of reality itself (not only reality as it appears to us, as Kant

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<sup>7</sup> Meinwald 1992, 378-389 explains that when we say that "we know the Numbers" we talk about a feature we display, and which, most importantly, is always related to a form; e.g. "we know the numbers" is shorthand for saying: "we know the numbers by/thanks to Arithmetic". On the other hand, "Arithmetic knows the numbers" is an example of tree predication. It is predication of Arithmetic "in relation to itself": it expresses a relation between ideas: Arithmetic comes under the "tree" of knowledge and in the branch (i.e. specific difference) of Numbers; whereas in another branch we will have e.g. Music (with harmony as a specific difference). Cf. also Meinwald 2014, 467 "predications of this kind articulate the underlying structure of fundamental reality".



thought)<sup>8</sup> is derivable from the nature of thought and knowledge. Natorp argues that Plato's ideas are *aitiai*: causes, reasons, explanations: laws of nature, and as such elements of reality. The ideas are not geographically, only metaphorically located in another world, but they are independent from the changing things that they explain, whereas "changing things depend, for their existence and nature, on the ideas that explain them" (Politis 2004, 11). Plato explicitly rejects the possibility that the ideas might be in individual consciousnesses<sup>9</sup>. Ideas are rather in consciousness in general. This neo-Kantian concept of consciousness in general seems to match the concept of 'field of consciousness' in Nishida, as we will see.

Politis 2004, 36 comments: "[Natorp] argues that Plato thinks we must understand existential being in terms of predicative being whereas Aristotle thinks that the converse is true". I take this to mean that Aristotle's view on reality, which might well be closer to our everyday worldview, sees a judgment as something that depends on first there being a thing about which we predicate something: what we predicate is what we have abstracted from the existing thing by means of our thought. Quite differently, for Plato 'to be' means to be expressible in a judgment: only what can be expressed in a well-formulated thought and proposition exists; it exists because (i.e. by the very fact that) it is thinkable, i.e. its existence "is provisionally safeguarded by a proposition that has been formulated about it and has not been ruled out after this and other propositions have been 'rubbed' against each other"<sup>10</sup>.

The common denominator between Natorp's, Meinwald's and van Ophuijsen's interpretations seems to be that the reason why the ideas found by the intellect by means of dialectic are more real than any sense-perceptible objects is that it is only because of ideas

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<sup>8</sup> Natorp maintains that, according to Plato, differently from Kant, the nature of thought and knowledge is "something more fundamental than the distinction between subject and object: something that explains how subjects can think and know and how objects can be thought of and known" (2004, 9).

<sup>9</sup> "*en psuchais*", *Parmenides* 132b-c: thoughts cannot be of nothing, i.e. only i.e. subjective states, they must be thoughts of something which is, i.e. thoughts of ideas.

<sup>10</sup> Jan van Ophuijsen, oral communication.

in the sense of laws or structures of reality that there are objects in the 1<sup>st</sup> place, and that we can see them and understand them<sup>11</sup>. What seems to be common to their views on Plato is that progress in knowing the Ideas is obtained by knowing how they are interwoven, what place in the network they take; and, at the same time, progress in knowing everyday objects and individuals will be equally obtained by understanding individuals in terms of the form-like features they display. In other words, once the interpretation of ideas as super-exemplifiers and as literal inhabitants of another world has been ditched, our everyday objects turn out to consist in a braiding of ideas—this apple on my desk might be understood as a braiding of edible, sweet, round, red, with some weight etc. This Plato is not a committed to a “Two-World” metaphysics; the interweaving of ideas is the only reality,<sup>12</sup> and dialectic is a kind of ‘analytic chemistry’ that looks for the combinations of forms capable of explaining any given situation.

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<sup>11</sup> In other words, the possibility of there being a universe is bound up in the first place with the common concepts: “being and not-being, identity and difference, qualitative similarity and dissimilarity, unity and number, even and odd” (*Theaetetus* 185-6), also called the most general kinds (*ta megista genê*: being, rest, motion, same and other) and their interweaving (*Sophist* 248-260). These concepts can explain how judgment and speech (*logos*) are possible and they can be seen as Kantian-like categories: quantity, quality, time, etc. reflected in the dialectical exercise of the 2<sup>nd</sup> part of the *Parmenides*: “concepts whose function it is to account for the possibility of judgment and predication.” (Politis 2004, 35); however they go beyond Kantian categories, in that Plato wants to “provide an account of the ultimate nature of reality, but to derive this nature from the nature of thought and knowledge” (*idid.*, 36). Natorp’s section (232ff.) about 2<sup>nd</sup> part of the *Parmenides* is entitled: “Plato’s doctrine of experience”; in fact the categories discovered in the exercise, i.e. the ideas that express the structure of reality, must be applied to ‘the other’: the manifold, the x of experience, what appears to us: “...the true subject to be determined is actually “the other” or the “not-one”, which now in this positive completion openly and explicitly emerges as identical with the x of experience, with what “partakes” or appears” (Natorp 1921, 235).

<sup>12</sup> This outlook on reality can either be expressed by downplaying the reality of the individuals (and say that they cannot be said to *be*, but only to come to be and pass away, since their manifestation of ideas is not steady) or by exalting them, by saying that they are nothing other than the interweaving ideas that they manifest, since there is nothing other they could be.

How does knowledge arise and proceed, if we rely on propositions that are tested against one another? Knowledge arguably becomes some sort of self-knowledge, possibly similar to what Nishida visualizes as ‘self-mirroring’, provided that the ‘self’ hinted at by ‘self-knowledge’ is not any individual self: it is rather ‘consciousness in general’<sup>13</sup>. Self-knowledge is the thought that shapes its objects, rather than receiving them from ‘outside’.

### NISHIDA’S FIELD OF CONSCIOUSNESS AND SELF MIRRORING

Self-mirroring is at the heart of Nishida’s philosophy: it is his solution for the unbridgeable gap between the thoughts that are in a consciousness and the objects that transcend it. Nishida claims that there is something illogical in the assumption of contemporary epistemology<sup>14</sup> that the starting point of cognition is the knowing subjects with their thoughts —immanent, i.e. in our consciousness— *in front of* the world, i.e. the objects — which are transcendent, i.e. outside our consciousness. If this were the fundamental starting point, subject and object would never meet —which is the problem of all subject/object dualisms: once two ‘worlds’ are postulated, it becomes a difficulty to explain how they communicate. What does Nishida mean with ‘self-mirroring? In what way is self-mirroring a better model than the subject-object opposition, if regarded as the fundamental starting point?

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<sup>13</sup> This is also referred to by Natorp 1921, 238, in Politis 2004, 13, as “the method of uniting the manifold.” “Knowledge is a process, in principle infinite, “of thought’s examination of itself —as self-knowledge in this sense.” (*ibid.* 36) “The same basic thesis, i.e. the view that ‘thought itself shapes its object in, as it were, looking at it, rather than merely accepting it as given’ [1], underlies, Natorp argues, the theory of recollection in the *Meno*”. (*ibid.* 36) Plato often explains that knowledge is not something that gets poured into the soul from the outside, but it is generated from within the soul. The soul hinted at is not an individual soul “but the very nature of rational thought, which is constitutive of the essence of any soul capable of such thought.” (*ibid.* 37)

<sup>14</sup> The contemporary epistemology he is referring to are especially Neo-Kantian authors who postulate epistemological dualism.

“When we think of thing-events there must be a basho wherein they are mirrored. Initially we may think of this as the field of consciousness. To be conscious of something one must mirror it upon the field of consciousness.... The content of thought is primarily what is mirrored in the field of consciousness. It designates the object in virtue of its content. Epistemologists today distinguish content and object and regard the content as immanent and the object as transcendent. The object is thought of as something that utterly transcends acts [i.e. of consciousness] to stand on its own. Thereupon we go beyond the field of consciousness. It is thought that there is no field of consciousness for the object [in-itself]. However in order to relate consciousness and object there must be that which envelops them both. There must be a basho wherein they are related. What could it be that enables their relationship? If the object transcends the act of consciousness, if the object is completely outside of consciousness, we would be unable to think—from within consciousness where we find ourselves—even the fact that the content of consciousness signifies an object or to say that the object transcends that act of consciousness. (Nishida 1927, 50-51)

Self-mirroring is not a solipsistic gazing of an individual in the depth of oneself. When we think, we subsume individual things under the universals placed in the field of consciousness. While acting we are conscious of some objects and some aspects of reality (and we are not conscious of many other aspects) what we are conscious of are our phenomena of consciousness. Knowledge is objectification, i.e. as soon as we want to know some aspect of reality we objectify it. For instance, when the self tries to know itself, it will never be able to know the knowing subject: it will rather get to know an object, an objectified version of itself. Full objectification of the self can never be attained; there is always something that we leave out. Nishida suggests that we need to postulate something beyond the boundaries of the cognitive subject. This is what Nishida calls ‘field of consciousness’.

To be conscious of something one must mirror it upon the field of consciousness. However, we must distinguish the mirrored phenomena of consciousness and the field of consciousness that mirrors them. We can even say that there is no such thing as a field of consciousness apart from the very continuity of the phenomena of consciousness. There must how-

ever be a field of consciousness that does not move in contrast to the phenomena of consciousness that go on changing in time from moment to moment. By means of it, phenomena of consciousness are mutually related and connected to each other. (Nishida 1927, 51-52)

Nishida 1927, 50 visualizes this objectification, which happens in cognition, as self-mirroring: the mirroring of the object in the subject must emerge from a background: the *basho* called ‘field of consciousness’; it is a background that is persistent through time and that we have no reason to regard as an object; the field of consciousness is in its turn implaced in the *basho* of absolute nothingness, as we will see.

### DOES THE ‘FIELD OF CONSCIOUSNESS’ RESEMBLE PLATO’S INTELLIGIBLE REALM?

This ‘field of consciousness’ is neither the epistemological subject, nor any objectified version of the self. It is “something universal” that makes it possible for our individual consciousness to be conscious of anything, it is the *basho* in which the ‘consciousness qua knowing subject’ and the ‘consciousness qua known object’ are implaced, it is the “unifying point that posits knower and known” (Nishida 1927, 55)

Does the field of consciousness that connects the individual consciousness and objects resemble Plato’s intelligible realm?

The true form of forms must be a *basho* of forms. Even in Aristotle’s *De Anima*, following the *Academics*, the soul is conceived as “the place of forms. (Nishida 1927, 52-53).

Nishida refers to Aristotle’s *De Anima*, in which the soul is conceived as ‘the place of forms’, which reminds us of Plato’s *noêtos topos*. It seems that according to Plato, when the individual soul or consciousness understands forms, it goes beyond its own individual opinions and is raised toward a divine, non-subjective level of

understanding<sup>15</sup>. In order to express the non-individuality of the field of consciousness, which is more fundamental than any individual seeing, Nishida sometimes uses such paradoxical and powerful expressions as the seeing without a seer.<sup>16</sup>

## SUBSUMPTIVE JUDGMENT CONNECTS THE GAP: HOW PLATONIC IS IT?

What form does the connection operated by the field of consciousness between consciousness (individual soul) and object take?

Natorp maintains that, according to Plato, all determination we see in reality is an achievement of thought expressible in sentences<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. Moline 1981, 104 who shows how Plato presents his example of the best city as lying both in the heaven (*Republic* 592B) and in accounts (*en logois*): the form of the best constitution is in fact not an individual phantasy but an account irrefutable and divine, as the type of accounts presented in the *Phaedo* 85D and *Phaedrus* 259D, i.e. something belonging to the intellectual space (which is not a geographical place but an indication of the epistemic reliability of dialectical thought).

<sup>16</sup> “Essays in *From That Which Acts to That Which Sees* (1927) and subsequent works invert Aristotle's notion of the hypokeimenon [i.e. a subject, ‘something underlying’ CR] and propose that consciousness is the “transcendental predicate” that can never be a subject; in other words consciousness in act can never be made an object of consciousness. Nishida is aware of the paradox of such formulations that would make consciousness the subject of sentences that describe it, and he sometimes resorts to explicitly paradoxical descriptions such as “seeing without a seer” and “seeing the form of the formless, hearing the voice of the voiceless.” But he again also uses the straightforward metaphor, the “field of consciousness,” to indicate its non-subjective and non-objectifiable character. Consciousness cannot be grasped as the property of an individual substance nor as anything like a substance or underlying substrate itself. It functions as the field that is the opening of world and self... His logic of place offered an alternative to the logic of substances presupposed in much traditional metaphysics.” Maraldo 2012.

<sup>17</sup> Natorp comments a passage of the *Theaetetus* by saying: “‘being’ means here, as it always does in Plato’s more rigorous philosophical language, the positing in thought, the unity of determination, and therefore of predication. Now if all determination is an achievement of thought, then that which is to be determined in thought must be something absolutely indeterminate prior to this determination.

What expresses the structure of reality and gives form to the indeterminate are well-formed propositions, tested by dialectic. Is Nishida's solution similar, when he suggests that it is by the act of judgment, occurring in the *basho* of the field of consciousness, that the gap can be bridged between individual consciousness and object?

But if consciousness and object were completely unrelated, neither could we speak of any mirroring of this [object] nor would it even be possible for us to speak of its implacement in it. We might thus regard the act of judgment as that which connects the gap between them....(Nishida 1927, 53)

Nishida offers the logic of the predicate as an alternative to the object logic that he regards as lying at the basis of Aristotle's metaphysics of substance. Judgment for Nishida does not describe how a substance or subject takes on or shows its attributes —the world is not a container of objects with essential and changing attributes. Judgment according to Nishida bridges the gap between subject and object, which are both implaced in the field of consciousness, i.e. the *basho* of universals that manifest themselves in particulars<sup>18</sup>. What we call objects are rather a self-determination of universals; and judgments point to a predicate/universal that takes on the form of a particular. The most fundamental to knowledge are subsumptive judgments, which

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Plato found this character of indeterminacy already clearly present in the characteristics of the thoroughgoing relativity and variability of the sense-perceptible that had been sharply emphasized by current philosophy under the influence of Heracliteanism." Politis 2004, 42.

<sup>18</sup> "If judgments describe things and states of affairs and thus would give us access to reality by setting themselves over-against that reality, we must step back as it were and consider a wider reality that includes judgments. In other words, we must place judgments that predicate universals of things into a wider field of predication... He thinks of universals as fields of possibility that becomes specified or determined (more accurately, that determine themselves) in their particular instantiations." Maraldo 2012.

entail the subsumption of the particular in the universal. To subsume means to take the particular as [grammatical] subject and to predicate the universal of it (Nishida 1927, 91).

For example, when I say “the door [particular] is green [universal]”, I might say that I put particular and universal in a subsumptive relation, which could be expressed in the following clumsy way: ‘the door is implaced in Green’, i.e. the door (particular) is implaced in the universal. Is this logic something that Plato would have welcomed, or even recognized as a description of his own project (i.e. description of reality in terms of participation)? It seems to me that this amounts to saying that the door is participating in Greenness; i.e. that the door is an interweaving of different forms, among which the one of Green: it is a combination of greenness, rectangularity, etc. My suggestion is that ‘being implaced in’ is the same as Plato’s ‘participates in’: the door participates in Green.

This is not all —not only is the particular implaced or nested in Green, but also Green is implaced in a more fundamental *basho*, the field of consciousness in which all universals are implaced. In this way, we get a nesting of levels, until we arrive at the *basho* of absolute nothingness, which cannot be implaced in any further *basho*.

So far we have not talked about the status of the mind or consciousness that formulates the judgments and the problem of the gap. Judgments about doors being green might well be about objects ‘out there’, outside consciousness, while the characteristics these judgments assign to those objects might be the ascribing of something within consciousness, i.e. something ascribed to the object by the subject.

“What does it mean to take the particular as [grammatical] subject and the universal as its predicate? When we think in this way, we always assume the subject–object opposition and think that what becomes the [grammatical] subject pertains to the objective world and what becomes the predicate belongs to the world of the [epistemological] subject. However, prior to conceiving this opposition, there must be an immediate relationship between what becomes the [grammatical] subject and what becomes the



predicate, and there must be an independent system of concepts in themselves, whereby the objective [kyakkanteki] validity of judgments is established. How does the system of concepts maintain itself? ... we can think of the universal as enveloping the particular as its basis and the particular as implaced in the universal... Universal and particular overlap immediately without limit. And the *basho* where this overlapping takes place is consciousness (Nishida 1927, 92)

How does Nishida argue that there is something that safeguards the validity of judgments, by bridging the gap both between particular (door) and universal (green) and between knowing subject (my individual mind) and the object (door)?

Subsumptive judgments bridge the gap both between universals and particulars and between objects and the mind or consciousness involved in a cognitive act about them. In fact, in the nesting of layers or *basho*, both the Green and my individual mind formulating the judgment, need to be both implaced in a common *basho*, which is the field of consciousness. By means of my cognitive act that lifts this particular in front of me to the level of universals through subsumptive judgment I reach the level of the Platonic forms or the level of the field of consciousness that envelops both me as knowing subject (or individual soul) and my object. In the subsumptive judgment it becomes explicit that both the individual mind and the particular object belong to the level of the universals of which they are manifestations. In other words, the field of consciousness envelops both the cognitive act of the individual saying or thinking: “the door is green” and its object, i.e. the door.

...We might thus regard the act of judgment as that which connects the gap between them. Not only can we think of the object as transcending the act on the one hand. We must also consider, on the other hand, the field of consciousness as transcending the act and enveloping it within (Nishida 1927, 53)

Next to the implacement of this door in Green, we also need the consciousness that makes the judgment possible. Door and consciousness are related since they are implaced in a common universal, i.e. the field of consciousness. The particular object in front of

me is not separated from my representation of it in my mind by an ontological gap: the object in front of me is the self-determination of an universal which belongs to a field of consciousness which is also the cause of my existence as a knowing subject<sup>19</sup>.

## IS IT PLATONIC TO REGARD OBJECTS AS SELF-DETERMINATION OF UNIVERSALS?

Are Plato's ideas active or concrete universals, i.e. capable of manifesting themselves in the many? Is beauty a self-determining universal that takes now the shape of a sunset, now of Helen now of a String Quartet? Could Plato have said that when we perceive Helen or a String quartet we are confronted with the braiding of many forms, one of which is the one of beauty? According to Nishida this is Greek:

To regard forms as active as the Greeks did becomes possible only on the basis of a truly immediate basho of consciousness. (Nishida 1927, 92)

I suggest that it is a possible interpretation of Plato, i.e. the one I have sketched at the beginning of the paper. According to Natorp, participation of an object in an idea is the relationship of a case to a law: the case is logically subsumed under a law. Everyday objects are constituted by their laws or causes on which they depend<sup>20</sup>. Socrates in the *Phaedo* suggests we should engage in *deuteroplous*: rather than being blinded by looking at sense-perceptibles, he suggest we should attempt to look at their causes, like the idea

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<sup>19</sup> Krummel 2012, 212, n. 215 comments: "For the particular that is the grammatical subject, as implaced within the universal, is in fact the latter's self-determination. Hence the real grammatical subject is not an independent transcendent substance or object but rather the predicate qua self-determining universal."

<sup>20</sup> In Politis' rendering of Natorp, sense-perceptible, changing things are nothing above their determinations and properties "particulars, as such, do not have an essence" (Politis 2004, 25). See also: "Changing, sense-perceptible things are by themselves indeterminate and unknowable, but determinate and knowable in virtue of their relation to a principle of determination and unity" (*ibid.* 43).

of the Beautiful, by means of the intellect. The idea of the Beautiful both explains why beautiful things are beautiful and it causes them to be beautiful. In fact, beautiful things are beautiful *by the Beautiful*. When we look at things we are actually looking at universals that manifest themselves in what we might call ‘things’.

## HOW NISHIDA TRIES TO CORRECT PLATO: HOW DIFFERENT IS PLATO’S GOOD FROM THE BASHO OF ABSOLUTE NOTHINGNESS?

According to Nishida, the intellectual take on reality is one of our functions; by no means the only one. Intellect can deliver explanations of reality —however we should be aware of there being a ground ‘below’ and more fundamental than any of these layers of explanation.

The field of consciousness is yielded by some more fundamental reality when it mirrors itself in itself.

In *Inquiry into the Good*, Nishida conceived of what is absolutely fundamental (i.e. more fundamental than the field of consciousness) as pure experience<sup>21</sup>, later revised as *zettai mu* (absolute nothingness).

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<sup>21</sup> “At the start of his career, Nishida in *Zen no kenkyū* (*An Inquiry into the Good*, 1911) conceived of the concrete ground of reality in terms of “pure experience” (*junsui keiken*), an immediate state prior to the differentiation between the experiencing subject and the experienced object. But the need to explain how the dynamic of fission unfolds from this fundamental nondistinction, led Nishida in *Jikaku ni okeru chokkan to hansei* (*Intuition and Reflection in Self-Awareness*, 1917) to his concept of “self-awareness” (*jikaku*). “Self-awareness” here involves a concrete dynamic that comprises an ongoing interaction between two moments: an initial “intuition” (*chokkan*) in immediate (“pure”) experience and its subsequent “reflection” (*hansei*) in thought that analyzes that experience, reconstructing it into the dichotomized terms of subject and object. The process of this dynamism is ongoing, with each reflection leading to another intuition inviting further reflection, and so on. Nishida conceives of this endless dynamism as an internal mirroring of its own process within itself, in the sense that the resulting content appears within the very dynamism of the process of determination.” (Krummel 2012, 7).

ingness), or the *basho* of absolute nothingness<sup>22</sup>. In the *basho* of absolute nothingness not only cognition, but also emotions and volitions are grounded. Cognition emerges when pure experience mirrors itself within itself and gives itself forms.

What we mean by the standpoint of cognition must be one manner whereby lived experience mirrors itself within itself. To cognize means nothing other than for lived experience to form itself within itself... That which ought to be called in this sense the mirror that illuminates itself, not only serves as the *basho* of the establishment of knowledge but also establishes emotion and volition... (Nishida 1927, 52-53)

Pure experience and *basho*, seen as this very situation, are whole which creates us while we create it, which might be visualized by referring to Escher's hands. Each of us is a very tiny mirror that mirrors the whole<sup>23</sup>. It is the

True lived experience entails the standpoint of complete nothingness, a free standpoint separated from knowledge. (Nishida 1927, 53)

The claim that the most fundamental *basho* is beyond intellect and that it somehow precedes the cognitive intervention of the intellect might well remind us of the *chôra* of the *Timaeus*, space, recepta-

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<sup>22</sup> This is the most fundamental *basho*, but by no means not the only one. There are in fact *basho* at different levels. Nishida claims that, from a logical point of view, in order for a system of relation to obtain, there must be a place —*basho*— in which this system is implaced (Nishida 1927, 49). For two things to be related like subject and object, or intellect and ideas, there has to be something more fundamental and less determined than themselves from which they emerge, and which envelops them. Every two related terms are implaced in a certain *basho*, which is less determined than the related terms, until one reaches the one grounding principle, the *basho* of absolute nothingness (or of true nothing), which is not a being, but is the grounding principle of every being.

<sup>23</sup> "...if self-awareness is to be an awareness of more than merely oneself, it cannot be interior to the self alone. ... Nishida's solution was to see the world as mirroring itself in all the things "in the world." Whatever is "in the world" is a mirroring of the world. In this sense it is the world that is "self-aware" or self-reflexive; and there is no outside to it. An individual's "self-awareness" is a partial mirroring of the world" Maraldo 2012.

cle, place, or space-matter, on which the demiurge imposes the forms. Nishida explicitly mentions the *Timaeus* when he introduces the concept of basho, but he also makes it clear that *basho* may well not be the same as what Plato meant with *chôra*.

Following the words of Plato's *Timaeus*, I shall call the receptacle of the ideas in this sense basho [place; *chôra*]. Needless to say, I am not suggesting that what I call basho is the same as Plato's 'space' or 'receptacle place' (Nishida 1927,50)

If the field of consciousness that envelops beings corresponds somehow to the intellectual realm that envelops Platonic ideas, does the *basho* of true nothing, which envelops both the Platonic ideas and the Intellect and so much more, correspond to Plato's Good?

What envelops 'field of consciousness' and beings is, according to Nishida, the *basho* of absolute nothingness, which, similarly to the idea of the Good, is not a being, but is "on the far side even of Being in dignity and power" (*Rep.* 509B6): the source or ground from which intellect and beings emerge. Insight into the Good is the vantage point from which everything can be seen as one: the source both of being and of knowledge, i.e. what provides a foundation both for the existing beings and for the intellects of the individual knowers attempting to understand reality: "the desired synoptic view of reality, when the intellect has traced their necessary connection to a common foundation in the ultimate source of reality and truth"<sup>24</sup>. Also in Nishida's *basho* of absolute nothingness in some sense all is one, since everything is part of the largest universal: the one that is not objectifiable, i.e. it cannot become the object of any more fundamental *basho*<sup>25</sup>.

However, Nishida tries to correct Plato and the Greeks, by claiming that what envelops the intelligible realm is not like the Good, the One or any unifying or rational principle, but is a network in which everything is related and nonsubstantial.

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<sup>24</sup> van Ophuijsen 1999, 301.

<sup>25</sup> see Krummel 2012, 212, n.254.

In Plato's philosophy, the universal was conceived to be objective reality. But this did not lead to the idea that the universal that truly envelops all things would have to be a place [*basho*] that establishes them. For this reason place [*basho*] was instead thought of as unreal and as nothing. But there would have to be such a place [*basho*] even in the depths of the intuition of the ideas themselves. Even the highest idea is nothing but that which still has been determined, a particular. Even the idea of the Good cannot escape its being relative. (Nishida, 1927, 59)

The unity encountered at the level of the most fundamental *basho* is the unity of a network in which everything is related and nothing is independent. In fact, Nishida distinguishes the vantage points of the field of consciousness and of absolute nothingness as two ways of looking at things: in the *basho* of beings, enveloped in the field of consciousness, things are separated from each other as Platonic ideas are; whereas in the *basho* of absolute no-thing-ness, there are not independent 'things'; what we call 'things' are interrelated but not substantial nodes in a network which is their unification. This last *basho* can be regarded as the most concrete, since it is from there that the Platonic ideas are abstracted: they emerge when we step back from the concreteness of a situation and we focus on this or that aspect, or in other words, we describe it as a determination of this or that universal<sup>26</sup>. According to Nishida even the Idea of the Good is determined and therefore cannot be the equivalent to the *basho* of absolute nothingness, but is Nishida right in his evaluation of Plato's Good? Is Nishida right that: "The Greeks with their intellectualism, even with Plotinus' 'the One' [to hen], were unable to thoroughly exhaust this significance of true nothing"(94)?

Nishida seems to have a point to the extent that, even if the Good transcends both being and any rational human attempt to articulate the truth about reality, still it is the *megiston mathêma* (*Rep.* 505a), the 'greatest object of intellectual instruction'" (Van Ophuijsen, 1999, 294): the limit towards which all attempts of human under-

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<sup>26</sup> "Thus the *basho* that mirrors even our species concepts is not reducible to a realm of mere ideas in the Platonic sense. Actuality here means the concreteness of *basho* in contrast to the various determinants that emerge in abstraction from it." (Krummel 2012, 194, n.53)

standing converge; and intuition of the Good is something that, at least ideally, would enable one to achieve an infallible synoptic view of reality, which “constitutes the summit of intellectual, and generally of human, attainment”.

This is very far from Nishida’s ultimate *basho*, which is pre-intellectual, since it reaches deeper than the intellectual realm of the ideas, which, implying boundaries and limits, cannot be the most fundamental *basho*.<sup>27</sup> Okano 2015, 21 quotes Nishida’s words about a fundamental difference between Plotinian One and absolute nothingness: “the Plotinian One is antipodal to Eastern Nothingness. Therefore it has not attained to the standpoint of radical ordinariness (10.353). The concept of ‘radical ordinariness’ (*byōjōtei*) derives from Zen and about it Nishida quotes Linji Yixuan: ‘Followers of the Way, as to buddhadharma, no effort is necessary. You have only to be ordinary, with nothing to do —defecating, urinating, wearing clothes, eating food, and lying down when tired. Fools laugh at me, but the wise understand.’”

Does Plato suggest any better candidate than the idea of the Good that could be a good *pendant* to absolute nothingness, seen as a place before the division between subject and objects, i.e. how reality is before it is determined by means of the ideas. Natorp refers to the *Theaetetus* in which the suggestion is made that, beyond the determination offered by ideas, only the limit-concept of the indeterminate remains. *Apeiron*, ‘indeterminate’, (*Theaetetus* 183B5) is the characterization of the sense-perceptible, before it is expressed in a judgment. If Natorp is right, Plato implies not only that all determination is an achievement of thought, but also that only what is determining is real. Truth about reality is then discovered by finding relations and is always expressed in well-formed propositions like ‘S is P’ that reveal the structure of reality, and beyond this system of determinations and of relations established by the Intellect nothing exists.

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<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, the Good, like the ultimate *basho*, is the source of reality and it is not correlative to anything. A designation like ‘Good’ should not be misinterpreted as referring to a being, it might just be a label trying to express mostly negation: a limiting concept, signalling that anything more specific involves determination. Ultimately both according to Nishida and to Plato there is no reification at this level. I owe this suggestion to Jan van Ophuijsen.

The indeterminate seems to make a better Platonic pendant of the *basho* of absolute nothingness. However, could Plato ever agree in regarding the alogical, unknowable Heraclitean flux in which we all are immersed as more fundamental than the intellectual realm of forms? Would Plato agree that, more fundamental than any way of determining the situation we are in, there is the simple fact of our being part of reality?<sup>28</sup>

## CONCLUSION

I have given some pointers towards a comparison between Nishida's field of consciousness and Plato's intelligible realm — both yielding a profound solution to a problem of dualism that arguably haunts every system in which the objectivity of knowledge is founded on the existence of objects that transcend the consciousness that knows them. Once everyday objects are seen as caused, both in their being and in their knowability, by the universals or ideas that manifest themselves in such objects, they cease to be hacked in two halves (a thought-half in our consciousness and a real half in the outside world). The field of consciousness or the intellectual realm are the 'place' that connects individual consciousness and objects. Such a connection is expressed in the presumptive judgment, which expresses how a universal becomes

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<sup>28</sup> According to Nishida reality might well look like a system from the perspective of physics or sociology or politics, but whatever description we might give of ourselves as knowers or as physical matter or as playing a role in a social or political context, we have (or, better, are) a ground 'below', which is more real and more fundamental than any of these layers of explanation, as Krummel 2012, 4-6 suggests: "Today we are witnessing the confusing proliferation of conflicting disparates (worldviews, religions, philosophies, truth-claims, ways of life, etc.) on a global scale, calling for a philosophy that can make sense out of the situation, a philosophy of *place* in this ever-shifting globalized context.... Nishida's situation was not unlike ours.... The attraction of Nishida's *basho*-theory is in providing a philosophical glimpse into that concrete situatedness that we all live and experience 'always already' (*immer schon*), and from which we thus find ourselves having 'fallen from grace' in thinking about it". I would like to thank Jori Jansen for reminding me of this point.



manifested, and which offers one and the same solution at once for any gap between sensible and intelligible and between subject and object.

We have also seen the problems relative to mapping the *basho* of absolute nothingness onto Plato's Good, even if both are limiting concepts of a kind, signalling that anything more specific involves determination. The indeterminate mentioned in Plato's *Theaetetus*, whose importance is stressed by Natorp, could offer a better parallel, which however does not seem to capture the spirit of Plato's project<sup>29</sup>.

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