

Japanese and Lacanian Ways of Thinking: An Invitation to Dialogue

Xavier BLONDELOT and Marie-Jean SAURET

It seems, on first reading, that Lacan did not mention Japan very often. However, when his teaching is examined more closely, it becomes clear that he often referred to Japan. Among his many references to Japanese culture, his encounter with Zen was particularly striking. This encounter forms the basis for a possible dialogue between Lacan's work and Japanese philosophy, especially that of Nishida Kitarō. Both started by returning to Descartes. Where Lacan was seeking to conceptualize the subject of the unconscious, Nishida was formulating his theory of the true self. Both were looking for a different kind of subject than that usually found in Western philosophy. Their returns to Descartes were intended to go beyond his thought, to open up a different approach, with Zen serving as a point of reference. The resonances between Lacan's and Nishida's ways of thinking as explored in this article serve as the basis for a reflection on the relevance of psychoanalysis and the possibility of analytic experience in Japan.

Keywords: Lacan, Nishida Kitarō, Descartes, meditations, topology, subject, *basho*, Real, psychoanalysis, Japan

Introduction

At first glance, Lacan seems to have had little to say about Japan. The little that he did say hardly seems to provide much of a basis for an encounter, whether between the experience of Japanese philosophy and that of psychoanalysis, between psychoanalysis and the Japanese language, or even between East and West or psychoanalysis and Zen Buddhism. Lacan's most direct references to Japan are found in the preface to the Japanese translation of his *Écrits* and in his article "Lituraterre."¹ However, other references are strewn throughout his seminars.² These are rarely in-depth discussions or analyses, but Lacan's frequent evocation of Japan suggests that he had a certain attraction to, and knowledge of, its culture. His references are varied, sometimes serving to paint a picture of a concept or idea, but often

1 Lacan 2001; Lacan 2013.

2 *Translator's note:* Although he did publish written works during his lifetime, Lacan did much of his theoretical exploration in the context of seminars he gave from 1953 to 1980. These seminars, which were recorded and transcribed, are still being published in edited French versions and translated into other languages.

also providing a contribution to psychoanalysis. In the course of his seminars, Lacan speaks of Japanese art, architecture, prints, *ikebana*, theatrical forms, Zen, *kakemono*, calligraphy and especially writing. He also accords a particular place to stories, filled with fascination, of his own exploration of the Japanese archipelago.³

There are also traces of Japan within several areas of Lacan's own theory and practice, in particular in his work on the question of the subject.⁴ This question, although it played less of a role for Freud, was a constant object of Lacan's theoretical elaborations.⁵ Over time, it took on central importance and became one of the major features of psychoanalytic treatment, understood as a process in which the subject of the unconscious is brought to the fore: "*Wo Es war, soll Ich werden*," "Where it was, there must I come to be as a subject."⁶ This subject evades conscious knowledge, and in practice, is found only in the various formations of the unconscious, from the slip of the tongue to the symptom. As we shall see, certain aspects of this Lacanian practice are not unrelated to Lacan's way of taking up Zen. Indeed, it does not seem possible to dissociate Lacan's reading of Zen from his return to Descartes and his depiction of the subject as sustaining or supporting itself by a void.

This is where there can be an encounter—albeit one that did not occur during Lacan's lifetime—with Japanese philosophy, and in particular with the Kyoto school, whose founder, Nishida Kitarō 西田幾多郎, also took a return to Descartes as his point of departure.⁷ Nishida's critical examination of the Cartesian *cogito* guided his own elaboration of a new subject, which he tried to extricate from the rut of classical Western philosophy's reflexivity and subjectivism. Inspired by his work with Zen Buddhism, Nishida was led to set occidental ontology against another way of reaching the subject. This is the precise point where the Lacanian and Japanese ways of thinking meet: a theory of the subject that relies on topology.

Having explored this terrain, we will then examine the relative relevance and perhaps even irrelevance of psychoanalysis in Japan. That is, we will try to see whether Lacan's rather glib statement that Japanese people do not need to be, or even cannot be, analyzed holds up.⁸ More specifically, we will examine the singularities of the Japanese language, as written and spoken, to see where psychoanalytic practice encounters a stumbling block in this culture, which is marked by the elision of the subject.

3 Lacan 2013, p. 330.

4 Other themes, such as temporality, the treatment of the object and even negation, could be included here, but space here does not allow a full treatment of the rich parallels between Lacan and Japanese philosophy. Instead, we propose to open up, in a more introductory manner, the points of convergence between the psychoanalytic and Japanese ways of thinking, to serve as an invitation to additional research.

5 It is important to note that there is virtually no conceptualization of the subject in Freud's work. It was Lacan who introduced this term to express a first-order concept in psychoanalysis.

6 *Translator's note*: The standard English translation of Freud's statement is "Where id was, there ego shall be" (Freud 1964, p. 80). It should be noted that Lacan found the standard English and French translations of this statement particularly unsatisfying, so much so that he returned to the matter several times, proposing different French glosses. See, for example, Lacan 2006a, pp. 347–48 and Lacan 2006d, p. 678. The version here is Fink's translation of Lacan's rendering in "Science and Truth," 2006b, p. 734.

7 In connection with this, we note that if Nishida had any knowledge of psychoanalysis, he would have thought that it concerned the pathological and was, for that reason, outside his purview.

8 Lacan 2001, p. 498.

Lacan, Zen Master?⁹

If there were any figure in the long course of human history with which Lacan, both as teacher and as psychoanalyst, would have wanted to be identified, it would be the Zen master.¹⁰

On one occasion Lacan went so far as to say that he was a Lacanian because he had taken a few Chinese lessons.¹¹ He could have added that it was also because he thought so highly of Zen.¹²

The figure of the Zen master appears at the beginning of Lacan's first seminar:

The master breaks the silence with anything—with a sarcastic remark, with a kick-start. That is how a buddhist master conducts his search for meaning, according to the technique of *zen*. It behoves the students to find out for themselves the answer to their own questions. The master does not teach *ex cathedra* a ready-made science; he supplies an answer when the students are on the verge of finding it.¹³

This statement, along with others found throughout Lacan's teaching, evinces a certain knowledge, a certain keen awareness of ways in which psychoanalysis and Zen overlap. The figure of the Zen master can be found everywhere in Lacan's style, as much in his practice as in his teaching. This master is to be understood not in the traditional sense—as someone who bestows knowledge or causes it to circulate—but instead as someone who feigns knowledge so that a possible response or enlightenment can happen to, or for, his student.

Analytic practice as elaborated by Lacan is reminiscent of Zen *mondō* 問答:¹⁴ sessions involving *kōan*—paradoxical, enigmatic, or even odd questions—uttered by the Zen master, to whom the student responds in terms of his or her own degree of enlightenment. The aim is not to close knowledge off but rather to let go of meaning, thereby freeing oneself from one's certainties and subjective illusions. These sessions are held with specific students; their purpose is not to impart universal knowledge, but rather to lead a particular

9 This is a reference to Maurice Pinguet's article which was first published in 1981 in the Japanese journal *Gendai shisō* under the title "*Lacan homme de lettres*" [Lacan, A Man of Letters]. It was later published in France under a different title, *Stèle pour Jacques Lacan* [Stele for Jacques Lacan] in the collection *Le texte Japon* [The Text of Japan]. This text is an excellent exploration of Lacan's interest in Zen and its influence on his work. "Lacan, Zen Master?" could also evoke the French title of Stuart Schneiderman's book of the same name (originally published in English as *Jacques Lacan: The Death of an Intellectual Hero*), which is not about Lacan and Zen, but rather about the place of death in psychoanalysis.

10 Pinguet 2009, p. 69.

11 Lacan 2006c, p. 36.

12 It is interesting to note that Lacan was speaking specifically of Zen and not, for example, of its Chinese or Korean correlates.

13 Lacan 1988, p. 1.

14 Literally, these are sessions of questions (*mon* 問) and responses (*tō* 答) between a master and a disciple. *Kōan* are what is said (*énoncés*). If some of these statements seem easy to understand, at least initially, their deeper resonance is not directly accessible. They should not be taken literally; they can be considered *kōan* because they need to be worked out with the help of a deep knowledge of psychoanalysis and, most especially, with the experience that psychoanalytic practice provides. In this way, the statement "The unconscious is structured like a language" is not merely a matter of linguistics, but refers instead to the place of speech in the analytic experience. The fact that it is a question of "a" language highlights how this speech cannot be reduced to a system of communication.

individual towards enlightenment. Similarly, impromptu interruptions of a meditation (*zazen*) are also a form of *kōan*, a relinquishing of the totalizing search for meaning. Lacan's technique of the variable-length psychoanalytic session likewise makes use of cutting and unpredictable interruptions that function as interpretations intended to encourage a similar type of subjective letting go.¹⁵ The position of the analyst is akin to that of the Zen master. Neither is concerned with providing appropriate, suitable answers; on the contrary, they seek to allow a singular and non-universal knowledge, one that is specific to the subject, to appear. The student and the analyst must each find their own ways, without stopping at a response that closes down or "sutures" the process.

Lacan's teaching is replete with enigmatic statements. They function as do *kōan*: they are not meant to be explained, do not "make sense" and are impossible to grasp.¹⁶ No pat answers are given, but instead there is an invitation to ask oneself questions, to mull over statements that evade comprehension. In Zen and in Lacanian analysis, there is no *Weltanschauung* or dogmatic system, such as those found in most religions and philosophical models.¹⁷ This may be a consequence of the fact that both Zen and Lacanian analysis are practices rather than belief systems or doctrines. Their goal is not to induce an individual to adapt to an environment or a group, or to adopt a school of thought. What is important, instead, is the liberation, the awakening, the enlightenment and the effort towards subjective destitution, through which the subject is freed of the mirage of speech and of narcissistic illusion.¹⁸

Lacan's interest in Zen was not accidental. It is one place that leads us to investigate the connection between Lacanian and Japanese approaches, in particular as concerns the question of the subject. To this end, it will be useful here to discuss the Kyoto school in greater detail.

The Kyoto School

Contemporary Japanese philosophy has worked to open up an intercultural exchange with Western philosophy, which even now suffers from an "inability to conceive of the cultural reality of the other."¹⁹ It invites European philosophy to cast off its mantle of ethnocentrism to achieve "a conceptual melting pot" where East and West will meet.²⁰ This ethnocentrism has been so pervasive that Hegel, for example, thought that non-Western philosophies—philosophies that do not descend from the Ancient Greeks, the only possible point of departure—are, at best, forms of animism.

15 Regarding the technique of interpretation, there is a direct echo between the techniques used by the Zen master and Lacan's concepts of citation, of enigma and of equivocation. See Lacan 2007, pp. 29–38.

16 Examples of such statements include: "The Real is the impossible"; "The unconscious is structured like a language"; and "There is no such thing as a sexual relationship."

17 The process and transmission of both Zen and psychoanalysis cannot occur independently of experience. As we shall see, the question of experience plays a crucial role in Lacan's teaching and Nishida's thought.

18 This is quite reminiscent of the development in Lacan's understanding of how a psychoanalysis ends. Early on, he held that it was a matter of symbolizing, but later he described it as a subjective destitution.

19 Stevens 2005, p. 8.

20 Stevens 2005, p. 10.

Japanese philosophy is not concerned simply with prolonging Western philosophy or with opposing it on ideological grounds, but instead with an effort to draw out those aspects that can enable us to move beyond modernity.

But how can this move be achieved? This question is the point of departure for the Kyoto school, which located the origin of the impasse of Western philosophy in the theory of the subject inherited from Descartes' *cogito*. Under the impetus of Nishida Kitarō's work, a critique of positivism—of the objectivism inherent in Cartesian science—developed. The notion of moving beyond modernity goes hand in hand with a search for a new, more open subjectivity. This subjectivity is no longer trapped in the parochial limits of the subject/object dichotomy, the tendency to objectify being, the failure of the mind/body split and the Cartesian ego, which always misses the essential point: the subject exists by not being.

Japanese philosophy regards Buddhism, and Zen in particular, as a necessary reference point in this traversal. Nishida's work, however, is not a sort of religious philosophy, any more than it is an elucidation of Zen Buddhism or a renewed appeal to traditional Buddhist beliefs. Instead, it is more like an attempt to create a dialectic between religion and philosophy. For Nishida, the essence of Buddhism provides a basis from which a new articulation of the subject, with its specific historical and cultural reality, can be brought into play.

Nishida's perspective thus "advocates a balance between the individual and the group."²¹ Given that this dialectical relation takes its cues from Zen, the void plays an almost obligatory role. It is constantly present in Nishida's work and in that of his students and colleagues, although they sometimes use different terms: "nothingness" (Nishida), "emptiness" (Nishitani Keiji 西谷啓治) or the "in-between" (Watsuji Tetsurō 和辻哲郎). Each of them, with their individual styles and concerns, would take up Zen and its unique way of interweaving with philosophy.²²

The philosophical approach of the Kyoto school is topological and pragmatic rather than rationalist or essentialist. In keeping with the precepts of Shinto and Japanese Confucianism, this school regards each action, individual and thing as being defined by the place it occupies. Likewise, the subject itself can never be an essence or a substance; it cannot be objectified. It can only be defined or even approached topographically or topologically, in terms of its location or position (as is also expressed by the terms "nothingness," "emptiness" and the "in-between"). This Japanese philosophy responds to Western philosophy's rationalist and logocentric ego with a topocentric approach that seeks a new form of subjectivity. As Jacynthe Tremblay states, Nishida, Nishitani and Watsuji share a common cause: "the search for a new type of subjectivity, one that is no longer self-centered, but instead is already situated within the World with which it is engaged."²³ Much of this is evocative of Lacan's work; to draw this point out, it will be useful to look more closely at the thought of the Kyoto school's founder.

21 Tremblay 2007, p. 36. More precisely, as Tremblay notes, "...Nishida's model of relationality (...) borrows simultaneously from Western individualism and Japanese collectivism."

22 They were influenced not only by Zen, but also, and perhaps somewhat less fruitfully, by Shinto and especially by Japanese Confucianism. On this, see Stevens 2005, pp. 43–71.

23 Tremblay 2010, p. 36.

Nishida, Precursor of a Relational Approach

Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945) was born in Unoke, Ishikawa prefecture during the Meiji period (1868–1912), a time when Japanese society was opening itself to the outside world and becoming more modern. This Westernization was consensual and touched all areas of social life, including economic structures, politics and cultural forms and institutions. “Consensual” here means that Occidental ideas came to pervade Japanese society as a result of the effort to reconcile modernism with traditions. It was at this time that philosophy really took hold in Japan.²⁴ This is not to say that there had not been any kind of philosophical reflection prior to this, but rather that philosophy had not been formalized as it had been in the West. It had not become an academic discipline in its own right.

During the Meiji period, intellectuals from many disciplines were sent abroad to study new developments in Western research, which were to be brought back and introduced into Japan.²⁵ This was the context in which Nishida began his philosophical work.

Nishida was determined to set up a dialogue, with a special focus on Zen, in which Western philosophy and Eastern traditions could encounter each other. This was a quite remarkable endeavor, because his contemporaries had only been interested in presenting philosophical ideas imported from Europe, without trying to add to them and make them their own. Nishida did not reject Western logic and concepts; he was more concerned with placing them in a larger context by means of a comparison with traditional Japanese ways of thinking.

Such a project would also have the effect of bringing a breath of fresh air into the vacuum in which European and American philosophy tended to operate. The aim of this dialogue was not to “Japanize” Western philosophy, but instead to throw a lifeline to an approach lost in the meandering labyrinth of positivism and objectivism.

This project made Nishida a pioneer and a precursor of the coming intercultural dialogue in philosophy.²⁶ He constantly returned to Japanese tradition for inspiration as he strove to articulate the relations between Zen Buddhism and Western philosophy, enhancing the latter in the process.²⁷ This is how he worked to realize his original aim of using Japanese thought to enrich a philosophy that had fallen into a subjective impasse.

Zen plays a key role in this. It is already discernible in the terminology employed, such as “awakening,” “negation,” and “nothingness.” These terms refer directly back to Zen, of which Nishida was a longtime adept. He first began to practice the discipline when he was seventeen, and according to his own accounts, he continued with it until he was thirty-five.²⁸ The influence of Zen can be felt in the primacy of experience in his work, in contrast with Western philosophy, where knowledge or *logos* plays this role.

Although Nishida distanced himself from Zen practice at a certain point, his writings continued to be colored with references to Buddhism, from his initial explorations in *A Study of the Good* through his return to Descartes until the culmination of his work: the logic of *basho* 場所.

24 Nishi Amane 西周 (1829–97) gave philosophy its Japanese name: *tetsugaku* 哲学. Literally, this means the “science of wisdom.”

25 This was not, however, the case for Nishida, who never traveled outside Japan.

26 Stevens 2005, p. 11.

27 In many places, the other two significant Japanese conceptual approaches—Confucianism and Shinto—would also make their mark on his philosophical development.

28 Heisig 2001, p. 39.

His writings can be grouped into three periods.²⁹ In the first, from 1911 to 1926 which included *A Study of the Good*, Nishida distinguished himself not only by his grasp of Western philosophy but also by his ability to incorporate contributions from Japanese philosophy. The concept of self-awakening was central in this period. His idea is that the subject is an agent submitted to the logic of predication. This is a departure from the Aristotelian logic on which Western philosophy is based, with its autonomous, reflexive subject who creates its own world. Nishida's subject has no substance because it is defined as a self-negation, by the fact that it is a non-subject. Further, the subject, or self-awakened self, could be attained only through action rather than by intellectualized thought: "Self-awakening begins at the place where self-consciousness arrives at its limits."³⁰ In other words, it involves desubjectification, a search for a more fundamental self that underlies the ego.³¹

Nishida's second, shorter period (1926–30) featured the introduction of the focal concept of *basho* in his essay of the same name published in 1926. The "logic of *basho*" (*bashoteki ronri* 場所の論理) served as the source of what would establish his reputation.

The literal meaning of "*basho*" is "place," but it would not be correct to constrain the concept within a single term or univocal meaning. "*Basho*" is a highly polysemous term, so much so that it is preferable not to translate and thereby risk losing its varied nuances and subtle implications, in particular as regards to topology.

The concept of *basho* is akin to Plato's *χώρα* or *Khora*, but is not coextensive with it.³² *Basho* is a topographical or topological concept, which takes the place of subjectivism and of the search for the essence of being. In response to the subject defined as substance, to the dogma of being and of the self-sufficient individual, the logic of *basho* counters that the subject is positional, defined by its place, which is a non-substantial space based on a "nihilation" or a negation of being. This subject is defined by its predicate: in an action, in a positional manner, in terms of a *basho*. Ontology and its discourse on being are superseded by a form of meontology, a discourse on nothingness, which, for that reason, does not admit of being objectified, for nothingness cannot be circumscribed by any designation or definition.

During his last period, from 1930 to 1945, Nishida developed his theory of the world as historical, along with that of "absolute self-contradictory self-identity" (*zettai mujunteki jiko dōitsu* 絶対矛盾の自己同一). The latter is closely related to another aspect of his work: the introduction of relationality. This involves establishing a new perspective that advocates finding the balance between the individual and the group and thus reconciling Western individualism with the collectivism of Japan.³³

29 Tremblay 2007, pp. 9–11.

30 Tremblay 2007, p. 24.

31 Stevens 2005, pp. 103–104.

32 Tremblay 2007, p. 59.

33 Tremblay 2007, p. 35.

Lacan with Nishida: The Return to Descartes

I believe that we find ourselves in an epoch in which the subjectivist philosophy of modern times has been driven to an impasse and must be rethought from its fundamental principles.³⁴

For Nishida, it was not enough merely to reiterate the positions of Western philosophy and to make do with its limitations. In the face of an overall trend towards neo-Kantian approaches, he called instead for a return to Descartes, in order to address the dead end of subjectivism and the crisis of the modern subject.

A few decades later, Lacan also went back to Descartes. If he had different reasons for doing so, his aim was quite similar: he was looking for a way to understand the subject of the unconscious.

Both Lacan and Nishida sought, first and foremost, a critical response to subjectivism and rationalism. Where Nishida was looking for a true self, which meditation would cleanse of the artifacts of consciousness, Lacan was trying to find the subject of the unconscious, which analytic practice would enable to emerge from the tribulations of the ego.³⁵

Modern philosophy is haunted by the question of the subject, but this question has strayed far away from its Cartesian origins. Therein lies the interest, for both Lacan and Nishida, of returning to the initial stumbling block, to the impasse encountered by Descartes: the “*cogito, ergo sum*,” which posits that the subject is a substance. Nishida states:

I find that Descartes had already shifted from a negational self-awakening, that he had broken with a method of analysis based on self-awakening, when, with the *cogito, ergo sum*, he supposed that an external substratum exists. This *sum* is clearly what causes the problem.³⁶

To return to Descartes is, first, to return to a method that leads to an unprecedented scrutiny of the self. To get to the point of the *cogito, ergo sum*, Descartes made use of meditation, a method of radical doubt that is, for Lacan, indispensable to the first formulation of the modern subject.

Likewise, both Nishida and Lacan approach the subject through an experiential practice: Zen meditation for Nishida and the exercise of psychoanalysis for Lacan. Nishida held that the subject could be apprehended only by acting and not by purely intellectual means or by some aspect of consciousness. Lacan, for his part, held that the subject of the unconscious could be approached only through the twists and turns of language in the practice of analytic free association. In no case is it the fruit of some kind of ratiocination; nor does it involve any sort of certitude.

The important element here is “experience.” This term is frequently evoked by Nishida in the form of “pure experience” and by Lacan as “analytic experience.”

34 Nishida 2004, p. 274.

35 “Self-awakening by means of radical doubt, the analysis that is absolutely negational, should be philosophy’s most proper method, the method of the very science of philosophy. I take philosophy to be a self-awakening through negation, an analysis by means of self-awakening” (Nishida 2004, p. 255).

36 Nishida 1965, p. 259.

The Cartesian experience is based on a series of negations. Everything is negated, up to and including existence as such. Yet, for both Nishida and Lacan, Descartes did not go quite far enough with this. Instead of pushing forward into the deepest possibilities of doubt, he stopped with the *cogito*, the “I” who “is” because “I am thinking.” He looked to the external world for the validation of this being, in a substratum of extension, and then left the problem to God. This was not, indeed, just any God: Descartes’ God was not a deceitful, “evil genius,” and was therefore able to provide a certain certitude about being. That is where the Cartesian approach stumbled, where its quest for the subject came to an end. The consequence of this was the advent of a subject brimming with subjectivism and even solipsism. This subject is made of substance, is reflexive; it is a subject of knowledge that becomes an object like any other and gives rise, among other repercussions, to a rejection of the body.³⁷

We must now strive to rethink regular philosophy from the point of view of the self’s awakening to this true self of practice, to a self of mind/body unity. That is why I hold that we must return once again to Descartes.³⁸

Nishida makes a radical break with a philosophical heritage that progressively oriented itself ever more fully towards the field of consciousness, reason and ego. Spinoza, Kant and even Heidegger: none of these philosophers was able to avoid subjectivism.

Nishida held both that consciousness is not where the true subject can be found and that the subject is not a substance. On the contrary, the subject is the effect of a nihilation obtained through self-awakening. It is a non-self. Like Lacan, Nishida also opposed psychologism—the reduction of the subject to the individual—and stressed that it is impossible to separate the knowing from the knower.³⁹ Consciousness cannot be totalizing; the subject cannot be reduced to it. This does not mean that the subject of consciousness is completely abandoned. It retains a place—but not an omnipotent one—in Nishida’s approach.

In his early work, Lacan also rejected, or worked to discredit, the idea of the subject. Until 1959, he ridiculed the subject because it carried the conceptual baggage of intersubjectivity, being and consciousness. This subject was a guileful liar, and was thus assimilated fundamentally into the Imaginary register, the register in which the body is thought to be a sphere.⁴⁰ However, Lacan eventually came to advocate another subject, the subject of the unconscious. This subject has escaped from the rut of the “I” and its reflexivity. It becomes an effect of the signifiers that compose language and, “...properly speaking, does not designate a being but instead a lack-in-being that has been emptied of the blockages of the imaginary identifications of the ‘I,’ the cogitating rationalizations of philosophy and the substantialist aspirations of biology.”⁴¹ This subject is described as “nothing,” a blank, a hole, a lack and will move ever further from the notions of “person” or “ego,” while being increasingly based on an evocation of vacuity and thus of the Real.⁴²

37 “Descartes’ great foreclosure [*Verwerfung*] was his ejection of the body from thought” (Lacan 1967, session of 10 January 1968).

38 Nishida 2004, p. 267.

39 This is the principle of contradictory self-identity: the thinker is thought.

40 Lacan was concerned with the subject as liar from 1953 to 1959, until the shift in his seminar, “Desire and its Interpretation” (Le Gaufey 2009, pp. 13–16).

41 Pernot 2009.

42 Lacan 1961, session of 28 March 1962.

Thus, for both Nishida and Lacan, the subject evades the usual philosophical ideas of identity, reflexivity and consciousness. It is a nonbeing that has ceased to be rendered a substance as it was for Descartes. Descartes' error can be found at the very heart of the *cogito's* halting of doubt.⁴³ Descartes was not able "...to make of the *I think* a mere point of fading."⁴⁴ He stopped there, without following out his nihilating meditation to its end. This led him to miss the true, self-negating self. Instead, he ended up with the rejection of the body and a subject that was sutured.⁴⁵ If, however, the subject is not to be confounded with being—if this is not a matter of ontology—how could it be apprehended?

To deal with the absence of ontology and being, Nishida has recourse to topology. Acceding to the true self necessarily involves an emancipation from the Aristotelian subject, a rejection of the model of the sphere in which the subject is made a substance. Sphere-based worldviews always produce dualisms stemming from the opposition of interior and exterior and the splitting of subject and object. Now, Nishida argues that the true self can only be grasped at the place where the conscious self is nihilated, which is also the place in which body and mind are united.⁴⁶ To refuse all dualism implies that subject and object are not separate, a position that is reminiscent of the advances Lacan made on object relations theory and on transference as a total phenomenon, as well as of his theory of the inseparability of the subject and the object *a*.

Generally speaking, the ego is thought of as a subjective unity, which possesses its various traits as if these were some kind of object. However, it ought to be a predicative rather than a subjective unity. It should be a circle, not a point; it should be a place and not an object. When a predicate cannot become a subject, the ego cannot fully know itself.⁴⁷

To overcome the subject-object dichotomy, and to become aware of the true self, Nishida provides a topological approach with his logic of *basho*. The basic idea of this approach is that "everything that is, is located with respect to something."⁴⁸ This "something" implies a "lococentric" logic which is not, however, based on a spherical model.

Basho are distributed in three strata, in terms of what they encompass: the *basho* of consciousness, the *basho* of oppositional nothingness and the *basho* of absolute nothingness. Their features may be summarized as follows:

- The *basho* of consciousness is the least inclusive. It must be overcome in order to allow desubjectification to occur, but need not be utterly rejected. Its interest lies in its access to scientific and technical knowledge of the world.
- The *basho* of oppositional nothingness is that in which relations between the true self and nature, as well as those among individuals, are located.

43 This is different from Damasio's critique. He speaks of Descartes' error in terms of an inversion of the *cogito*: I am, therefore I think. Because I have a physical body—a brain and neurons—I can think. The organic thus takes precedence over thinking. For Nishida, it was rather a matter of showing that Descartes stopped too soon in his negation through doubt. To get to the true self, the ego must be nihilated: one must go below the "I."

44 Lacan 1978, p. 224.

45 Nishida 2004, p. 268.

46 Nishida 1965, p. 266.

47 Nishida, *Basho*, cited by Stevens 2005, p. 131.

48 Nishida 1965, p. 223.

- The *basho* of absolute nothingness, the most encompassing, comes close to the Real for it cannot be defined, cannot be reduced to an object of knowledge and cannot be expressed in any word or image. It is in this *basho* that things can be nihilated and thereby become suitable for relation.⁴⁹

Each *basho* is delineated in relation to the others, in terms of its dual noetic and noematic content, and is neither objectivized nor objectifiable.

The *basho* model enabled Nishida to propose a means of desubjectifying the subject through nihilation of the ego. To elucidate this, he made use of the figure of the circle or ring. The interest of this lies in the way that this figure makes emptiness exist, thus paving the way for a non-binary concept of the subject and a non-dualist concept of the true self. Here again there is a parallel in Lacan's work: his explorations of topology are themselves variations on the question of the subject of the unconscious. From the torus to the Borromean knot, Lacan's experimentations revolve around the attempt to locate the subject as a fundamental lack. The recourse to topology allows a subject that is disburdened of being and essence to appear. This subject, as in Zen, is sustained by the void. It is only emptiness, only a structuring void.

Returning to Descartes via topology allowed both Nishida and Lacan to make the subject *ex-ist*. At the place where the "*ergo*" of the *cogito* had the effect of canceling out the division between "I think" and "I am," where it hid the subject—that "effect of the void between the enunciation (I think) and the statement [*énoncé*] (I am)"⁵⁰—topology gave them a way to bring forth another subject that is not ego, is not substance, is not coextensive with the individual and thus cannot be made an object.

Lacan, Nishida and the Real as *Basho*

Now that we have explored the consonances between the work of Lacan and Nishida, we shall seek next to identify concepts that the two approaches share. Is it possible, for example, to develop a specifically Lacanian concept by using Nishida's terms?

Our argument here allows us to answer this question positively. Both Lacan and Nishida conceive of the subject through topology, make use of a logic of Place which dispenses with *logos*, allow for the subject-object split to be overcome, and thereby avoid the pitfalls of the Imaginary.⁵¹ These encourage a reification of the subject, which becomes merely the object of (its own) knowledge. In both approaches, there is a de facto rejection of intentionality as the determining factor of the subject's future; this also decenters consciousness from the logic of the I. This is the thrust of Nishida's critiques of Kant, whom he considers a pillar of pure science, and of phenomenology, which tried to overcome the logic of psychologism with another logic of psychologism based on consciousness.⁵² As

49 Tremblay 2007, pp. 50–64.

50 Julien 1996, p. 37.

51 Here, logic is to be understood in terms of mathematical topology. Mathematical logic is used in order to lessen the effects of meaning, that is, the imaginary divagations inherent in the use of *logos*.

52 It is also reminiscent of what Lacan says during his seminar on the formations of the unconscious: "Think of Kant's critique as the most profound challenge to the whole nature of the Real" (Lacan 1998, p. 57).

we follow our two authors' efforts to impede the totalization of knowledge unleashed by modern science, we will emphasize spatiality instead of temporality as grounded in *logos*; it is the latter approach that has led to the impasse of modern subjectivity.

These modern impasses of the subject, which can be found not only in the clinical approaches to acting and enacting, but also in the contemporary subject's tendency to wander, cannot be dissociated from the effects of the discourse of science. The advent of modern science in the seventeenth century has not been without repercussions for subjectivity. One of the most fundamental of these is that science has brought about the rejection of the figures of the Real. As a discourse or form of social bond, science dispenses with Truth, the Subject and death, and it tosses everything to do with love into a dustbin of enigma.⁵³ It does so with the collusion of the capitalist discourse, which leads the way. To this end, science propels us as individuals into the illusion that we can master ourselves and our bodies, although we are acted upon by a dimension that both exceeds and determines us: this is what Lacan calls the Real and Nishida calls the *basho* of absolute nothingness.

The Real can be transposed onto the *basho*—the *basho* of absolute nothingness—first because the Real cannot be reduced to a concept. It is, instead, a place.⁵⁴ Likewise, the *basho* of absolute nothingness, as Nishida formulates it, cannot be considered as just another “object of knowledge.”⁵⁵ Both of these belong to the category of impossibility, which eludes scientific reasoning. It is not something that can be put into words, nor can it be reduced to any meaning, but it is, nevertheless, the condition of all possible meaning and speech. The Real is prior to logic and thus to any hooking together of signifiers. It pre-exists the human, despite the fact that the signifier is the best means we have to apprehend and deal with it. The Lacanian Real is irremediably non-objectifiable. It is a place that cannot be represented, that eludes symbolization, but from which everything proceeds and from which the subject emerges. This is the same as the way in which Nishida described the *basho* of absolute negation:

In no case whatsoever can it be made into an object of knowledge. All that we can say is that it is a *basho*, the *basho* where everything is located (whether nature, individuals or knowledge), the *basho* in which everything is interrelated.⁵⁶

On the basis of this conceptual equivalence, the question remains whether the notion of *basho* can contribute to that of the Real, and of whether it can thereby shore up the impasses of the subject and of the contemporary social bond. In the context of the excesses of rational thought, considering the Real as *basho* is above all else an attempt to reintroduce the subject that is foreclosed by science: to reintroduce a place for existing in suffering, in the violence of a world that never slows down. This must occur, as we have emphasized, in the context of a practice or exercise of the Real.

From a clinical perspective, taking up the Real as a *basho* highlights the modern problems of those who are considered to be beyond or outside the subject, those for whom subjectivity is defective because it is not grounded in the singularity of the Real. “Beyond or outside” refers here to the wanderers—to those “dismissed cases” who exist

53 When the figures of the Real are rejected by the discourse of science, the subject ends up, without any symbolic base, without any means by which to handle the support of its structure.

54 Melman 2009, pp. 115–30.

55 Tremblay 2007, p. 48.

56 Tremblay 2007, p. 48.

only though their dismissal, to those who are lost or seem to have no place—but also to those who, because they cannot find their place, end up with no solution other than to exclude themselves from existence. They do so either through the drastic act of suicide or by shutting themselves off in different ways and shutting up, so that they end up subsisting in the shadows at the margins of the contemporary social bond.⁵⁷ Lacking a place to exist, the ability to subjectify whatever place they do have, or with the help of the “genius” of their symptom, some such people find they have no other choice than to bow out of existence, temporarily or in a more radical manner.⁵⁸ Thus, the cult of the ego—taking oneself to be an “I” rather than holding on in one’s own subjective place, which is the precondition of the Real as *basho*—fabricates subjects who have no place to exist, no place in which to find themselves because they have nowhere to stow their symbolic effects. The subject suffers because it is caught in the arcana of positivism, in which it does not manage to locate itself because it is stuck in the Imaginary. Lacking a way to find the self, lacking an inscription in the social link, without being able to make do with the real qua *basho*, we observe an “exponential increase in the waste from the social bond.”⁵⁹

Conclusion: Is Lacan Relevant in Japan?

We have seen that there are many places at which Lacan’s way of thinking touches the Japanese way of thinking elaborated by Nishida. However, these points of intersection did not prevent Lacan from claiming that psychoanalysis was of no use to Japanese people because they are fundamentally unanalyzable. This claim had to do with the fact that Japanese writing allows for a kind of doubling between *onyomi* 音読み, the Chinese reading of ideograms, and *kunyomi* 訓読み, their Japanese reading. Lacan’s statement, however, needs a bit of qualification. First of all, it should be noted that Japanese writing cannot be reduced only to *onyomi* and *kunyomi*. In fact, Japanese writing requires three, or even four, different systems: *kanji* (ideograms), *hiragana* and *katakana*.⁶⁰ To write in Japanese requires at least the first two, because there are things that cannot be written with ideograms alone. The *hiragana* system is necessary to write the enclitics which run through Japanese sentences, and thus to express words that do not have an ideogram. For this reason, it is impossible to write a sentence only with *kanji*.⁶¹ The *katakana* system is mainly used to write terms that come from other languages. Next, it is important to note that one *kanji* can have a wide variety

57 This implies not only withdrawing from the social bond but also the wanderings of depression.

58 The symptom is that which bears the best witness to the subject’s Real, to the way in which the subject works out its connection to the Real.

59 Sauret 2009, p. 87.

60 It requires four, if the *rōmaji*, or the letters of the Western alphabet, are included. We also note that *hiragana* and *katakana* are both syllabary systems.

61 For the benefit of readers not familiar with Japanese writing systems, it should be noted that Japanese requires the use of several writing systems. It has its own means, ends and uses. For one example, the sentence “Lacan is a psychoanalyst” is written as follows: ラカンは精神分析家です (*Lacan wa seishinbunsekika desu*). Because the word “Lacan” comes from a foreign language, it must be written with *katakana*: ラカン. It neither can nor should be written with *kanji*, even if they have the same pronunciation. は (wa), an enclitic that indicates the place of the subject, can only be written using *hiragana*. There is no *kanji* for that word. However, 精神分析家 (*seishinbunsekika*) or “psychoanalyst,” is written with *kanji* because the needed ideograms do exist. Finally, there is no *kanji* for です (*desu*), which is roughly equivalent to the verb “to be,” so it is written in *hiragana*.

of different pronunciations in both *onyomi* and *kunyomi*.⁶² All of this is quite far away from the ideas of the univocal and of automatic transcription. In other words, Lacan's assertion that Japanese people cannot be analyzed comes from an incomplete understanding of what Japanese writing actually involves.⁶³

However, if there is not after all a linguistic barrier on this level, as Lacan had suggested, it is true that psychoanalytic practice has yet to make a place for itself in Japan.⁶⁴ In the experience of one of the present authors, the word *seishinbunseki* 精神分析 (psychoanalysis) evokes something vague for many Japanese people. Many are not really sure to what, exactly, it refers. Experience has shown that when they are asked about this, after a moment of reflection, they give answers that often bring in things that are quite distinct from psychoanalysis. For example, some responses have more to do with psychiatry, with university research or even with mind-reading, and others connect the term to psychotherapy or "life coaching," which are considered more as a type of consumer product than anything else.⁶⁵ Thus, the task of finding a psychoanalyst is not straightforward in Japan.

Although psychoanalytic theory is quite well known in intellectual circles, the practice of psychoanalysis remains something of a little-known novelty.⁶⁶ It has difficulties in establishing both its theory and its practice. Perhaps the origin of these difficulties is another characteristic of the Japanese language: the effacing of the subject.

In Japanese, the grammatical subject or the subject of the statement [*énoncé*] is not required when one speaks; Japanese is a contextualized language which can dispense with the grammatical subject, even while knowing how to use it.⁶⁷ This may be explained by the fact that the ego and the individual tend to be subsumed within the collective nature of Japanese society. Insofar as the discovery of the unconscious presupposes the prior emergence of the Cartesian ego, it is perhaps not surprising that a language that can dispense with this ego would find it particularly problematic to sustain psychoanalysis within its culture. What interest could there be in undertaking a psychoanalysis if its search for truth does not make sense?⁶⁸

62 Again for readers who have less experience with how Japanese is written, we note that even for this seemingly simple sentence, three writing systems are needed. If the foreign-language words are replaced with Japanese words, as in, for example, the sentence "Mishima is a writer" (三島は小説家です), only two writing systems are needed, but that is the lowest number possible. Here 三島 reads "Mishima" and 小説家 (*shōsetsuka*) means "novelist." To add to the complexity, one can note that some *kanji* do not have an *onyomi* pronunciation, because they were created in Japanese.

63 Lacan's thesis that Japanese people cannot be analyzed thus suffers from the fact that he does not take *hiragana* in particular into consideration. The Japanese language cannot be reduced to *onyomi* and *kunyomi*, and furthermore it seems that psychoanalytic practice in Japan would be more oriented towards the extended deployment of *hiragana*, which are more suitable for re-transcribing the play of signifiers.

64 For example, see "La psychanalyse au Japon" [Psychoanalysis in Japan] 2006.

65 In fact, this is what often happens in Japan with therapies that borrow the name "psychoanalysis": there is an appropriation of certain parts of the psychoanalytic theory to create a psychotherapeutic model.

66 "La psychanalyse au Japon" 2006, pp. 69–83.

67 In Japanese, several personal pronouns can be used to say "I": *watashi* 私; *watakushi* 私; *ore* 俺; *ware* 我, 吾; *boku* 僕. As a general rule, however, these forms are often not employed. We certainly could notice a similar sort of effacing of the subject in other languages, such as Spanish, but in such languages the conjugation of the verb always indicates the person. This is not the case in Japanese, where verbs do not conjugate. Japanese verbs only express the level of formality or the relation to temporality and never specify a grammatical subject.

68 This does not mean that truth is unimportant for Japanese people, but instead that it does not suppose any kind of subjective investment.

Along these lines, if the unconscious is structured like a language, then any attempt to encourage the development of the practice of psychoanalysis in Japan would need to take as its point of departure the singularity of the Japanese language, with its syntactic structure that tends to elide the subject.

Translated by John Holland

REFERENCES

Freud 1964

Sigmund Freud. "The Dissection of the Psychical Personality," trans. James Strachey. In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey. Hogarth Press, 1964, pp. 57–80.

Heisig 2001

James W. Heisig. *Philosophers of Nothingness: An Essay on the Kyoto School*. University of Hawai'i Press, 2001.

Julien 1996

Philippe Julien. "Modernité et nostalgie identitaire" [Modernity and Identitarian Nostalgia]. In *Le moment cartésien de la psychanalyse: Lacan, Descartes, le sujet*, ed. Erik Porge and Antonia Soulez. Éditions Arcanes, 1996, pp. 29–42.

Lacan 1961

Jacques Lacan. *Séminaire IX: L'identification* [Identification], 1961–1962. Unpublished. Available from <http://staferla.free.fr/S9/S9%20L%27IDENTIFICATION.pdf>.

Lacan 1967

Jacques Lacan. *Séminaire XV: L'acte psychanalytique* [The Psychoanalytic Act], 1967–1968. Unpublished. Available from <http://staferla.free.fr/S15/S15%20L%27ACTE.pdf>.

Lacan 1978

Jacques Lacan. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis [Seminar XI]*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan. Norton, 1978.

Lacan 1988

Jacques Lacan. *Freud's Papers on Technique, 1953–1954 [Seminar I]*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. John Forester. Norton, 1988.

Lacan 1998

Jacques Lacan. *Le séminaire de Jacques Lacan. Livre V, Les formations de l'inconscient* [Seminar V, The Formations of the Unconscious], 1957–1958, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Éditions du Seuil, 1998.

Lacan 2001

Jacques Lacan. "Avis au lecteur japonais" [Note to Japanese Readers]. In *Autres écrits*. Éditions du Seuil, 2001, pp. 497–99.

Lacan 2006a

Jacques Lacan. "The Freudian Thing," trans. Bruce Fink. In *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*. W.W. Norton, 2006, pp. 334–63.

Lacan 2006b

Jacques Lacan. "Science and Truth," trans. Bruce Fink. In *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*. W.W. Norton, 2006, pp. 726–45.

Lacan 2006c

Jacques Lacan. *Le séminaire de Jacques Lacan. Livre XVIII, D'un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant* [Seminar XVIII, On a Discourse That Would Not Be a Semblance], 1970–1971, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Éditions du Seuil, 2006.

Lacan 2006d

Jacques Lacan. "The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious," trans. Bruce Fink. In *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*. W.W. Norton, 2006, pp. 671–702.

Lacan 2007

Jacques Lacan. *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis [Seminar XVII]*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Russell Grigg. Norton, 2007.

Lacan 2013

Jacques Lacan. "Lituraterre," trans. Dany Nobus. *Continental Philosophy Review* 46:2 (2013), pp. 327–34.

"La psychanalyse au Japon" 2006

"La psychanalyse au Japon: Entretien avec Kosuke Tsuiki" [Psychoanalysis in Japan: Interview with Kosuke Tsuiki]. *Psychanalyse* 7:3 (2006), pp. 69–86.

Le Gaufey 2009

Guy Le Gaufey. *C'est à quel sujet ?* [What Subject Is This about?] EPEL, 2009.

Melman 2009

Charles Melman. "Le Réel n'est pas un concept, c'est un lieu" [The Real Is a Place, Not a Concept]. In *Problèmes posés à la psychanalyse*. Éditions Érès, 2009, pp. 115–30.

Nishida 1965

Nishida Kitarō 西田幾多郎. "Mu no jikakuteki gentei" 無の自覚的限定. In vol. VI of *Nishida Kitarō zenshū* 西田幾多郎全集. Iwanami Shoten, 1965.

Nishida 2004

Nishida Kitarō 西田幾多郎. "À propos de la philosophie de Descartes" [Regarding the Philosophy of Descartes]. In *L'éveil à soi*, trans. Jacynthe Tremblay. CNRS Éditions, 2004, pp. 251–82.

Pernot 2009

Pascal Pernot. "Du sujet de l'inconscient au parlêtre." Posted on Internet website, <http://www.causefreudienne.net/du-sujet-de-linconscient-au-parlêtre/>. Viewed 4 December 2014.

Pinguet 2009

Maurice Pinguet. "Stèle pour Jacques Lacan" [Stele for Jacques Lacan]. In *Le texte Japon: introuvables et inédits*, ed. Michaël Ferrier. Éditions du Seuil, 2009, pp. 59–77.

Sauret 2009

Marie-Jean Sauret. *Malaise dans le capitalisme* [Capitalism and Its Discontents]. Presses Universitaires du Mirail, 2009.

Stevens 2005

Bernard Stevens. *Invitation à la philosophie japonaise: autour de Nishida* [Invitation to Japanese Philosophy: Nishida]. CNRS Éditions, 2005.

Tremblay 2007

Jacynthe Tremblay. *Introduction à la philosophie de Nishida* [Introduction to Nishida's Philosophy]. l'Harmattan, 2007.

Tremblay 2010

Jacynthe Tremblay. *Philosophes japonais contemporains* [Contemporary Japanese Philosophers]. Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 2010.