

The Art of Persuasion: On Nishida Kitarō's Philosophy of Conflict¹

Lam Wing Keung

Abstract

This paper explores how Nishida Kitarō (西田幾多郎, 1870-1945), a prominent philosopher in modern Japan, navigated his relationship with the wartime government, particularly the pro-army factions, before and during World War II (WWII). While existing research on Nishida's wartime philosophy often scrutinizes his involvement in WWII, his skill in persuading both political and non-political members of Japanese society deserves attention. This paper aims to address the following questions: first, how did Nishida manage the delicate balance between moral and political principles? Second, how did he steer between satisfying and potentially alienating political figures? And third, what potential and challenges arise from Nishida's persuasive techniques? While philosophers typically seek universal truths, how ideas are communicated should not be underestimated. This paper delves into Nishida's art of persuasion and its implications for imperialism.

¹ This paper was originally presented at the Korean Philosophical Society Joint Spring International Conference, "In this Era of Conflict and Complex Crisis, How should Philosophy Respond", held on 24 March 2025 at Kyungpook National University, Korea. Special thanks to the conference organizers and their generous invitation, particularly Professor Lee Sung Ryule of Kyungpook National University and Dr. Peter Daekyung Jun of Pusan National University. Extensive revision has been conducted afterwards.

Philosophy ever detached from politics. But
politics also ever detached from philosophy.
(NKZ 9:93) ²

The art of persuasion in conflicts: Resistance in non-resistance

This paper aims to uncover both the potential and problems of Nishida Kitarō's philosophy of conflict. For the former, I would argue that Nishida developed an art of persuasion that can be described as “resistance in non-resistance,” addressing the domestic and internal conflicts faced before and during WWII. Nishida employed a form of rhetorical logic, meaning to “use a figurative word to please or perhaps seduce our audience,” as Paul Ricoeur postulates.³ Nishida sought to resist imperialism, nationalism, and the expansionist policies promoted by the pro-war camp, especially the army.⁴ Examples of the “figurative words” Nishida used include the Imperial Way (皇道)⁵, Japanized or Japanese (日本的), and Eight Crowns Cord, One Roof (八紘一宇). I will try to elaborate and unfold the potentials of Nishida's art of persuasion — “resistance in non-resistance” from the following perspectives. First, it provides space for persuading political and military powers from a philosophical standpoint. Second, it helps establish a philosophical persuasive logic. Third, it constitutes a philosophy of conflict.

For the latter, Nishida's strategy of “resistance in non-resistance” has its issues. The army and those in power could not grasp the rhetorical meanings of his words, yet they simply took them literally. Even with only a partial understanding, Nishida's rhetorical logic was being used politically to support the war. Like Martin Heidegger, Nishida was accused of supporting WWII by using the expressions mentioned earlier. Furthermore, being seen as apologetic about WWII, Nishida's philosophical reputation was disgraced.

As is well known, Nishida's 75-year life span encompassed some of the most turbulent periods in

² 『西田幾多郎全集』 (*Complete Works of Nishida Kitarō*). Vol. 9. Tokyo: Iwanami Publisher, 2004, p. 93. The original passage in Japanese is: 「哲学は政治を離れたものではない。併しまた政治は哲学を離れたものではない。」 The *Complete Works of Nishida Kitarō* will be abbreviated as NKZ followed by volume and page number hereinafter. All translations are done by the author.

³ Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*. Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976, p. 48.

⁴ Ōhashi Ryōsuke (大橋良介) points out that there are two different camps (pro and con) for the WWII. The army belongs to the former, whereas the navy belongs to the latter. See 『京都学派と日本海軍：新史料大島メモをめぐって』 (*The Kyoto School and Japanese Navy: On the New Historical Material Oshima's Memo*). Tokyo: PHP, 2001.

⁵ Chen Wei-fen (陳瑋芬) gives a very detailed examination of the terms, see 「「天道」「天命」「王道」與「皇道」——由近代日本天皇政治論德治與血緣的扞格」, 『近代日本漢學的「關鍵詞」研究：儒學及相關概念的嬗變』 Taipei: National Taiwan University Press, 2005, pp. 149-189, and “The Invention and Creation of the “Way”: The Shibunka's Discourse on the Kingly Way and Imperial Way after the Establishment of Manchukuo”, translated by Jan Vrhovski, in Shaun O'Dwyer, ed., *Confucianism at War 1931-1945*. New York: Routledge, 2025, pp. 42-59.

Japanese history, including, but not limited to, the Seinan War (西南戦争, January–September 1877), the Sino-Japanese War (日清戦争, July 1894–April 1895), the Russo-Japanese War (日露戦争, February 1904–September 1905), World War I (July 1914–November 1918), and World War II (September 1939–August 1945). Although he was deeply concerned and worried about Japan’s situation before and during WWII, as reflected in his diary,⁶ he remained inactive in political involvement. The exceptions include, for examples, his public talks titled “The Problem of Japanese Culture” (日本文化の問題) given at Kyoto Imperial University in 1938, and subsequent essays such as “Uncovering the Distinctive Features of Eastern philosophy from Western philosophy: Is Nation-state philosophy possible?” (西洋哲学から東洋哲学の特徴—国家哲学は考えられるか), a talk delivered at the symposium of World policy organized by the Shōwa Study Group in 1938, “The Vertical World of the Unity between the Monarchy and Subjects” (君民一体縦の世界), a talk given at Rakuyūkan of Kyoto Imperial University in May 1939, “The Theory of New World Order” (世界新秩序の原理), a talk presented at the Study Group of National Policy on May 19th, 1943, and “The National Polity” (国体), written in September 1944. In the following lines, our discussion will focus on “The Problem of Japanese Culture” and “The Theory of New World Order,” which are widely studied and rarely contested by many scholars. While most scholarship centers on the question of responsibility regarding WWII—specifically, whether Nishida supported the war⁷—this paper will concentrate on the art of persuasion.

Principled resistance in non-resistance

The first strategy Nishida used is principled resistance through non-resistance. The word “principled” means that Nishida stuck firmly to a set of principles without making concessions, especially the ethical universality embedded in the Imperial Way and the worldly Japan (世界的日本). This is evident in his talks at Kyoto Imperial University in 1938 and in the revised edition of his monograph published in 1940 by Iwanami Publisher, titled *The Problem of Japanese Culture*. Without compromising on these principles, Nishida did not openly condemn the imperialists but instead persuaded them indirectly. That is why I called this approach “principled resistance in non-resistance.”

Why did Kyoto Imperial University organize the Monday Lecture Series on Japanese culture, especially at the time of imperialist movements? Why did Nishida give three talks titled “The Problem of Japanese Culture”? Even before WWII, the word ‘Japan’ had been perceived as a very sensitive word, which was extensively used by the pro-war camp. According to Fujita Masakatsu (藤田正勝), this public lecture series was conducted under the political pressure put on Amano Teiyū (天野貞祐) and the exaltation of Japanese spirit (日本精神) during that time.⁸

⁶ See NKZ 17 and NKZ 18.

⁷ See for examples, James W. Heisig and John C. Maraldo, eds. *Rude Awakenings: Zen, the Kyoto School, & the Question of Nationalism*. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1995. Christopher S. Goto-Jones, *Political Philosophy in Japan: Nishida, The Kyoto School and Co-prosperity*. London: Routledge, 2003.

⁸ 藤田正勝 (Fujita Masakatsu) 「西田幾多郎の思索—「日本文化の問題」をめぐって—」 (The

Amano was appointed Dean of Students in 1937. In 1938, he published a monograph, *The Feeling of Reason* (道理の感覚), which included an essay: “On Moral Education” (德育について). In this essay, Amano criticized the secondary education system for prioritizing military training (銃剣) over the cultivation of common sense (常識) as demanded by the army. Coupled with increasing media pressure, Amano's resignation from Kyoto Imperial University seemed inevitable. However, the University President, Hamada Kōsaku (浜田耕作), refused to accept it, reaffirming the University's tradition of academic freedom.⁹

As a resolution, or perhaps a tacit agreement following this incident, Kyoto Imperial University organized a public lecture series on Japanese culture at the request of the Ministry of Education. In July 1936, a decree promoting the exaltation of the Japanese spirit was distributed to all national schools and universities. After the Marco Polo Bridge Incident in July 1937, the Japanese government intensified its nationwide control over freedom of thought.¹⁰ Against this backdrop, Nishida delivered a lecture titled “The Problem of Japanese Culture.” While the title may appear simple, it was, in fact, both problematic and challenging.

In the preface to *The Problem of Japanese Culture*, a revised and expanded edition of his Kyoto Imperial University lecture, Nishida clarified that he would not specifically examine “Japanese culture.” Instead, he aimed to connect it to his philosophical framework. Nishida directed readers to sections 5 through 8 of the book for further elaboration, particularly the discussion on the absolute contradiction of self-identity (絶対矛盾自己同一). Subtly, Nishida revisited the concept of the Imperial Way, emphasizing that it embodies universal principles of moral goodness that contribute to world history. Because it implies universal moral principles, imperialists, without exception, should adhere to them. Nishida's intention was not to overemphasize the Imperial Way as a guiding principle for world history or a new world order in the political sense, but rather to highlight the universal ethical principles that all humankind should uphold. Imperialists, therefore, should not pursue expansionist policies and invade other nations, as violating the Imperial Way is universally immoral.

What is most objectionable is the subjectification of Japan, which leads to hegemony and imperialism in the Imperial Way, positioning Japan as the world. The Imperial Way is a theory of world formation... Based on historical development, we can observe the theory of self-formation, that is, how the contradictory self-identified world can contribute to the world, where we can witness the exertion of the Imperial Way and the truth of Eight Crowns Cord, One Roof.¹¹

Thought of Nishida Kitarō: On “The Problem of Japanese Culture”), see https://ocw.kyoto-u.ac.jp/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/prof_nishida_kitaro_prof_fujita.pdf (accessed on 10 April 2025).

⁹ Ibid..

¹⁰ Ibid..

¹¹ The original text in Japanese is: 「最も戒むべきは、日本を主体化することではなければならないと考へる。それは皇道の覇道化に過ぎない、それは皇道を帝国主義化することに外ならない。こ

Moral principles form the foundation for the self-formation of the world, meaning that our world should be created on a basis of ethical practice.¹²

The nation-state should be a true moral entity, aware of its mission for historical and worldly creation.¹³

Nishida seemed to argue three main points regarding the Imperial Way. Firstly, the Imperial Way should not be considered superior or imperialized. While it should flourish and serve as a principle for the formation of a new world, it should not be transformed into the world itself. What should flourish are the embedded ethical principles. Secondly, Nishida believed that the world should be historical and ethically practical. Although he emphasized that moral practice should be historical, it is not confined to a particular era. Rather, moral practice should be universally applicable, grounded in universal principles. Thirdly, a nation-state should be a true moral subject, self-aware of its mission for historical and worldly creation. Without genuine ethical grounding, it cannot be considered a true nation-state.

Fujita Masakatsu provides detailed analyses of the portrayal of history and the nation-state in Nishida's wartime writings.¹⁴ Fujita reminds us that the ethical connotation of the nation-state should not be overlooked. For example, in the article "The Problem of Nation-State Reason" (国家理由の問題), published in September 1941, three months before the outbreak of WWII, Nishida, drawing on Friedrich Meinecke's concept of *Staatsräson*, argued that the existence of the nation-state should be based on law and ethics (倫理).¹⁵ And in the article "The Theory of New World Order," Fujita argues that, unlike Anglo-American imperialism, which is based on egoism, the "world mission" (世界的使命) of the nation-state should transcend it. This is what Nishida called "the true nation-state" (真の国家), which he considered the root of morality (道德).¹⁶

れまでは日本即世界であつた。皇道とは我々がそこからそこへといふ世界形成の原理であつた。(中略)我々は我々の歴史的発展の底に、矛盾的自己同一的世界そのものの自己形成の原理を見出すことによって、世界に貢献せなければならない。それが皇道の発揮と云ふことであり、八紘一字の真の意義でなければならない。」(NKZ 9: 52-53)

¹² The original text in Japanese is: 「道徳的法則とはかかる世界の自己形成の法則でなければならない。我々の世界は、かかる意味に於て道徳的実践の世界でなければならない。」(NKZ 9: 83)

¹³ The original text in Japanese is: 「国家と云ふものが、真に道徳的主体として歴史的世界的創造の使命を自覚すべき時に至つたと云ふのである。」(NKZ 9: 84)

¹⁴ 藤田正勝 (Fujita Masakatsu), 「西田哲学と歴史・国家の問題」(Nishida Philosophy, History and the Problem of Nation-state), 『日本哲学史研究』(*Studies in Japanese Philosophy*), No. 2, pp. 73-111, and 「西田哲学の国家論」(The Theory of Nation-state in Nishida Philosophy), 『日本哲学史研究』(*Studies in Japanese Philosophy*), No. 4, pp. 27-55.

¹⁵ Fujita Masakatsu, "Nishida Philosophy, History and the Problem of Nation-state", p. 96.

¹⁶ Fujita Masakatsu, "The Theory of Nation-state in Nishida Philosophy", p. 51.

Questions remain, however, about the meaning of universal moral principles and their relationship to the new world order. For Nishida, these principles can be found in the Imperial Way, as expressed in the concept of Eight Crowns Cord, One Roof. Nevertheless, this has led to the criticism that Nishida was supporting imperialism by presenting Japan as a role model for the new world order. However, I argue that this is a misunderstanding. Even if Japan can serve as a role model, it is in the ethical, rather than the political realm.

Of course, one might argue that it is ideal to have morally good political leaders. However, there is no necessary connection between political power and moral goodness. For instance, even if Japanese political leaders are morally good, it does not mean that non-Japanese people should be under Japan's control. By emphasizing that the Imperial Way entails universal moral principles, Nishida stresses that imperialists should not misuse them for political purposes. Rather, they should abide by the universal moral principles that dictate the cessation of political and military invasions. It is universally immoral to suppress and kill others through political and military power.

By satirizing the immorality of the imperialists through a reinterpretation of the Imperial Way that emphasizes universal moral principles, Nishida employed rhetorical logic. While the Imperial Way was a convenient justification for military expansion, Nishida reminded, or even warned, the imperialists that they should not disregard the universal moral principles embedded within it. Nishida demonstrated an art of persuasion by not directly criticizing the imperialists as immoral, but by using the Imperial Way as a figurative discourse to resist them. I would describe this resistance as principled non-resistance: that is, all humankind, including imperialists, should abide by the universal moral principles embedded in the Imperial Way and cease invading other nation-states.

Another example of Nishida's understanding of Japanized identity, or "Japanese" (日本的), is found in *The Problem of Japanese Culture*. Nishida repeatedly argued that the particularity inherent in the term "Japanized" or "Japanese" should not be overemphasized but should be understood from a worldly perspective (世界の, 世界的). Without this worldly perspective, the particularity of Japan or "Japanese" cannot be truly understood.

Today, the word "Japanese" is extremely widely used. However, academic study should encompass theory, which should not be limited to the ethnicity of a race, but should be applicable worldwide. Similar to mathematics and physics, which may have originated in Germany, Britain, and France, they are not inherently tied to any particular ethnicity.¹⁷

¹⁷ The original text in Japanese is: 「而も今日は極めて容易に学問に日本的といふ語が冠せられるのでからうか。学問は理論を有たねばならない。而してそれは単に或民族の民族性といふだけのものでなくして、世界的に働き得るものでなければならない。数学や物理学の如きものにも、ドイツ的とかイギリス的とかフランス的とか云ふものがあるであらう。併しそれは数学や物理学が民族性に従つて色々あると云うことではない。」 (NKZ 9: 13)

Nishida was critical of the exaggeration of Japan's particularity based on ethnicity. He argued that the adjective "Japanese" has no place in academic study. As Fujita Masakatsu points out, the term "Japanese science" sounds strange and elicited laughter from Nishida and the audience at the lecture series on Japanese culture.

Today, the most popular word and superficial notion is "Japanese science." There is no such adjective, "Japanese," in academic study. The abstract of the public lecture ("The Problem of Japanese Culture") was printed in the Kyoto Imperial University Newspaper and later expanded and published as a monograph in the Kyoto University Student Affairs book series in 1938. The news clipping noted "laughter" after Nishida mentioned the term "Japanese science."¹⁸

For Nishida, this "laugh" was directed not only at those who advocated "Japanese science" but also at those who overemphasized the particularity of "Japanese" culture, particularly the imperialists. However, in saying so, Nishida did not deny cultural particularities, but emphasized that they should be perceived from a "worldly" (世界的) perspective. In a talk given at Hibiya Hall in 1937, titled "The Academic Methodology" (学問的方法), which is included in the monograph *The Problem of Japanese Culture*, Nishida argued that there is a profound basis for both Eastern and Western cultures. Universal logic is built upon this foundation, which academic study should strive to uncover.

While delving deeply into the foundations of Western culture, we should also closely examine the foundations of Eastern culture. By doing so, we can grasp the differences between Eastern and Western cultures and uncover the broad and deep essence of human culture itself... And one should not negate Eastern culture by Western culture, or vice versa... On the contrary, a deeper foundation can be seen in both Western and Eastern cultures, which can shed new light on them... We must develop a new logic for it. By emphasizing the "deeper foundation" and a "new logic" for Western and Eastern cultures.¹⁹

¹⁸ The original text in Japanese is: 「今日最も流行る言葉で浅薄軽率なものは「日本科学」と言う言葉である。日本と云う形容詞をつけた所で其の学問がどうなる事もない」というように述べています。この講演の概要はすぐに『京都帝国大学新聞』に発表されましたし、その後西田自身が加筆したものが、京都大学学生課叢書の一冊として 1938 年に刊行されました。それを見ますと、今の言葉のあとに「(笑声)」と記されています。」 See https://ocw.kyoto-u.ac.jp/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/prof_nishida_kitaro_prof_fujita.pdf (accessed on 10 April 2025).

¹⁹ The original text in Japanese is: 「我々は深く西洋文化の根柢に入り十分に之を把握すると共に、更に深く東洋文化の根柢に入り、その奥底に西洋文化と異なった方向を把握することによって、人類文化そのものの広く深い本質を明らかにすることができるのでないかと思ふのである。それは西洋文化によって東洋文化を否定することでもなく、東洋文化によって西洋文化を否定す

Nishida added that both Eastern and Western thought lack the true academic spirit that seeks the truth of things (物), which should be grasped from a world perspective.

In Buddhist logic, we can see the beginnings of objective logic and the logic of mind. It is confined to something like experience, and yet developed into a logic for things.²⁰

In sum, through his talks and the monograph *The Problem of Japanese Culture*, Nishida attempted to revisit the notions of the Imperial Way and Japan/Japanese, which were favoured expressions of the imperialists at the time. To counter the imperialistic interpretation, Nishida tried to persuade the imperialists to consider the hidden and often overlooked nuances: namely, the universal moral principles and logic. For Nishida, these are principles that cannot be ignored and must be insisted upon. In doing so, however, he did not directly confront the imperialists. While concessions were impossible, this “principled resistance in non-resistance” was founded and developed within the context of academia.

Even though the talks given at Kyoto Imperial University were open to the public, the laughter recorded in the University newspaper's coverage suggests that the audience largely agreed with Nishida's view on the term “Japanized” or “Japanese”, and allows us to imagine that the audience was primarily composed of academics. If this was the case, Nishida, a highly respected retired faculty member of the University and scholar, sought to remind academics to resist imperialism with universal moral principles and logic, alongside his subtle critique of the imperialists.

Rhetorical resistance in non-resistance

Another strategy employed by Nishida is “rhetorical resistance in non-resistance.” Unlike “principled resistance in non-resistance,” Nishida appeared to use a comparatively softer approach while still confronting the imperialists. However, this does not mean that Nishida feared the imperialists and abandoned his principles of condemning imperialism. To persuade his imperialistic counterparts, Nishida attempted to follow their logic but presented it rhetorically, as seen in his essay, “The Theory of New World Order.”

“The Theory of New World Order” was written in 1943, based on a talk given at the Study Group of National Policy (国策研究会) on May 19, 1943, during a period when Japan was actively pursuing an

ることでもない。(中略) 却って従来よりは一層深い大きな根柢を見出すことによって、両者共に新しい光に照らされることである。(中略) 我々は新しい論理を有たなければならない。」(NKZ 9: 91-92)

²⁰ The original text in Japanese is: 「私は仏教論理には、我々の自己を対象とする論理、心の論理といふ如き萌芽があると思ふのであるが、それは唯体験と云ふ如きもの以上に発展せなかった。それは事物の論理と云ふまでに発展せなかった。」(NKZ 9: 13)

expansionist policy and participating in WWII. The facilitator of the event was Yatsugi Kazuo (矢次一夫), who had close ties to the pro-war army.²¹ According to Fujita Masakatsu, Nishida was asked by Tanabe Suketoshi (田辺寿利) to write an essay after the talk to help the army understand his presentation. He began writing on May 21, 1943, and submitted it to Tanabe on May 25, 1943. Meanwhile, the relevant figures in the army still struggled to grasp Nishida's message. Tanabe asked Nishida to rewrite it in a more palatable way, but Nishida refused. Having no other option, Tanabe rewrote it himself on Nishida's behalf. Although this revised edition was not written by Nishida, he hoped that the army could understand his intended message: to perceive Japanese spirit from a global perspective, or the idea of a "worldly world" (世界的世界). Unfortunately, it was not well-received.²²

Regarding the concept of the "worldly world," it can be divided into three components: the "world" (世界), the "worldly" (世界的), and the "worldly world" (世界的世界). Firstly, the "world" refers to each nation-state race (国家民族).

Today's world is an era of worldly awakening. By the self-awakening of worldly mission by each nation-state, a world historical world, that is, a worldly world, should be constructed... In my opinion, modern time is an era of worldly self-awakening of each nation-state race. Each nation-state race constructs a world that transcends oneself; it does not refer to an ethnic self-determination, which recognizes its independence and the equality of each race, as suggested by Wilson's international ally.²³

As seen in the monograph, *The Problem of Japanese Culture*, Nishida writes, "Race as a nation-state is a moral subject. The nation-state is not merely a moral ought, but a moral energy as Lanke posited."²⁴ For Nishida, the nation-state race entails a subject-object relationship. The nation-state is the object, while the race is the subject, and both encompass morality. Fujita Masakatsu points out that, in Nishida's view, race refers to a kind of morality. Once it becomes a moral subject, the nation-state will be established.²⁵ If so,

²¹ For the background of the essay "The New World Order" (「世界新秩序の原理」), see Uemura Kazuhide (植村和秀) 「国家と歴史の側から、西田幾多郎を問いなおす」 (Revisiting Nishida Kitarō from the Perspectives of Nation-state and History), 『西田哲学会年報』 (*The Journal of Nishida Philosophy*), Vol. 7, 2010, pp. 35-53.

²² See Fujita Masakatsu, "Synopsis". NKZ 11: 559-561.

²³ The original text in Japanese is: 「今日の世界は、私は世界的自覚の時代と考へる。各国家は各自世界的使命を自覚することによつて一つの世界史的世界即ち世界的世界を構成せなければならない。(中略) 私が現代を各国家民族の世界的自覚の時代と云ふ所以である。各国家民族が自己を越えて一つの世界を構成すると云ふことは、ウィルソン国際連盟に於ての如く、単に各民族を平等に、その独立を認めるといふ如き所謂民族自決主義ではない。」 (NKZ 11: 444-445).

²⁴ The original text in Japanese is: 「民族が国家として道徳的主体であるのである。国家は単なる道徳的的當ではなく、ランケの云ふ如く道徳的エネルギーでなければならない。」 (NKZ 9: 82)

²⁵ 藤田正勝 (Fujita Masakatsu) 「西田幾多郎の国家論」 (Nishida Kitarō's Theory of Nation-state), 『日

the “world” must also be moral.

By emphasizing the morality of the nation-state race, Nishida argues that each carries a “worldly mission” (世界的使命). As a moral “world,” the “worldly mission” of a nation-state race is to form a particular world while sustaining itself. Nishida repeatedly criticized imperialism, colonialism, and nationalism, as they cannot overcome the conflicts between ethnic groups. For Nishida, the solution is to form a particular world based on its regional tradition. Furthermore, each particular world should unite to form a worldly world. Under the threat of European imperialism, Nishida suggested that each East Asian ethnic group should accomplish its “worldly mission,” which is based on “East Asian culture.”²⁶

In the essay “The Theory of New World Order”, Nishida did not explain “East Asian culture” in detail, nor did he clarify why “East Asian culture” could serve as “the theory of world history” (世界史の原理). Nishida only mentioned the morality of nation-state ethnic groups, which is neither the philanthropism of Christianity nor the Chinese kindly way (王道). What is evident in the text is Nishida's strong discontent with European culture, as he believed it promoted expansionism. As a countermeasure, “East Asian culture,” with its emphasis on morality, may offer a solution.

Secondly, according to Nishida, the “worldly” encompasses two aspects: the regional particular world, such as the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere (東亜共栄圏), which is grounded on the transcendence of each nation-state race, and the worldly world, which is the union of all regional particular worlds. The former is regional, and the latter is global.

While each nation-state race preserves itself, it also transcends itself and constructs a worldly world. By transcending oneself and following its regional tradition, it will construct a particular world. In line with the historical basis, the particular world unites with each other and constructs a worldly world for the whole world.²⁷

Regarding the “regionality” and “worldliness” of the “worldly,” Nishida did not illustrate how they function and materialize in the real world. In face of European imperialism, Nishida believed that the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, grounded in East Asian culture, could help overcome it. The problem is that Nishida developed his idea of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere using the concept of Eight Crowns Cord, One Roof, which not only relies on the Imperial Way but also implies Japan as the centre for leading other East Asian nation-state ethnic groups.

Michiko Yusa (遊佐道子), however, argues that Nishida did not intend to make Japan the center of Asia by proposing the idea of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, but aimed to “call Japan to return to the humaneness and morality of its original national spirit, to lay down its arms and only then

本哲学史研究』 (*Studies in Japanese Philosophy*). Vol. 4, 2007, p. 34.

²⁶ NKZ 11: 446.

²⁷ The original text in Japanese is: 「各国家民族が自己に即しながら自己を越えて一つの世界的世界を構成すると云ふことは、各自自己を越えて、それぞれ地域伝統に従って、先ず一つの特異的世界を構成することではなければならない。而して欺く歴史的地盤から構成せられた特異的世界が結合して、全世界が一つの世界的世界に構成せられるのである。」 (NKZ 11: 445)

to presume to guide its Asian neighbours into a new era.”²⁸ Yusa adds that “one may read it as a plea for the restoration of humanity to politics and the restoration of a Japanese spirit that had gone astray” and concludes that “[f]rom our present position, we may wish for Nishida to have been clearer. At that time, he seems to have been testing the limits of free expression with that very same ambiguity.”²⁹ Uemura Kazuhide (植村和秀) also expresses sympathy for Nishida, arguing that by using the notion of Eight Crowns Cord, One Roof, Nishida was not attempting to make Japan the leader of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, but rather exemplifying Japan's determination to establish a new world order for the future.³⁰

Nishida was again very cautious about the usage of “Japan.” Although he admitted that “Japan” embraces a kind of particularity, it should be perceived from the perspective of the “world,” but not the opposite. That is the reason why Nishida proposed to have a “worldly Japan” (世界的日本), but not a “Japanized world” (日本の世界). The former refers to the notion of a worldly world, which, on the one hand, acknowledges the particularity of each nation-state race and, on the other, accentuates that each nation-state race should perceive itself from the perspective of the “worldly.” Japan, therefore, should not be taken as a political leader manipulating other nation-states, but rather the opposite.

Last but not least, the notion of a “worldly world” (世界の世界) signifies that each particular world should not only emphasize its particularity but also transcend it and unite with each other. In saying so, Nishida does not refer to a kind of international alliance or organization, such as the United Nations today, which merely recognizes the equal status of each ethnic group and admits national self-determination. Nishida condemns the latter, arguing that it will lead to the rise of imperialism, which overstates the sense of superiority of each ethnic group. On the contrary, each nation-state's ethnicity does have its world-historical mission, which is grounded in morality. Every single ethnic group should transcend itself, respect each other, and then form a worldly world, including Japan. In other words, Japan should not pursue imperialism by overemphasizing its particularity and disregarding other particular ethnic groups.

By promoting this “worldly world” concept, Nishida employed an art of persuasion, which I call “rhetorical resistance in non-resistance.” Nishida tried to persuade the imperialists by altering the meanings of their favourite notions, such as Japan, the world, and the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. During WWII, the imperialists, including the army, adopted an expansionist policy and began invading other nation-states. The army seemed to suggest and actualize the leading role of Japan for the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, as well as the world. Ironically, Nishida twisted the meanings of Japan and the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere from a “worldly” perspective, arguing that Japan

²⁸ Michiko Yusa, “Nishida and Totalitarianism”, James W. Heisig and John C. Maraldo, eds., *Rude Awakening: Zen, the Kyoto School, & the Question of Nationalism*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i, Press, 1995, p. 129.

²⁹ Ibid..

³⁰ Uemura Kazuhide (植村和秀) 「国家と歴史の賭ける側から、西田幾多郎を問いなおす」 (Revisiting Nishida Kitarō from the Perspectives of Nation-state and History) 『西田哲学会年報』 (*The Journal of Nishida Philosophy*), Vol. 7, 2010, p. 45.

should not overemphasize its particularity. Although the army did not fully understand Nishida's argument, he attempted to persuade them to abandon their expansionist policy in an indirect or rhetorical way, based on an imperialistic interpretation of "Japan" as the theory of the new world order. "Japan" should be rearticulated as a "worldly Japan" or "worldly world," rather than a "Japanized world."

Unlike "The Problem of Japanese Culture," which is based on a series of talks primarily given to an academic audience, "The Theory of New World Order" represents a direct encounter or conversation with the imperialists, particularly the army. Instead of imposing universal ethical principles and logic, Nishida tried to align with the mindset of his counterparts, the imperialists, by using their preferred terminology to develop his ideas. In doing so, Nishida adopted a "rhetorical resistance in non-resistance" approach, attempting to rhetorically alter the meanings of words. Although the imperialists did not fully grasp Nishida's argument, he avoided angering them and being imprisoned, as his beloved student, Miki Kiyoshi, later experienced. As a philosopher, Nishida was undoubtedly dedicated to developing universal theories. As a citizen, Nishida was also deeply concerned about his nation. By using the tactic of "resistance in non-resistance", Nishida tried to persuade the imperialists to rethink the meanings of the Imperial Way, Eight Crowns Cord, One Roof, Japanized identity or "Japanese", and the world without directly condemning them.

Resistance in non-resistance: A perlocutionary act

Philosophers are human beings who exist in the life-world (*Lebenswelt*) and cannot escape conflicts with others. Having lived in one of Japan's most turbulent eras, Nishida could not remain isolated in his study. Although he generally remained silent in public, he occasionally engaged and shared his views on the circumstances facing Japan. By examining his unusual but important participations in current affairs, namely, the talks and writings titled "The Problem of Japanese Culture" and "The Theory of New World Order", Nishida developed a kind of philosophy of conflict. Nishida attempted to resist the imperialists in a non-resistant way, that is, to criticize imperialism indirectly. It is not merely a kind of criticism but an art of persuasion. The two strategies that Nishida employed are principled resistance in non-resistance and rhetorical resistance in non-resistance. While both are subtle, the former is more straightforward than the latter. Nishida allowed no concessions regarding the universal ethical principles and logic embedded in the Imperial Way but was comparatively flexible in reinterpreting the notions of Japanized identity or "Japanese," the world, and Eight Crowns Cord, One Roof. While most scholarship on Nishida's wartime work focuses on responsibility, his art of persuasion, especially the underlying rhetorical logic, should not be overlooked.

Examining the art of persuasion is particularly timely, especially in light of ongoing military conflicts around the world. While Nishida's strategies may not be perfect, they remind us of J. L. Austin's speech-act theory. By employing a kind of rhetorical logic, Nishida's art of persuasion is neither confined to a

locutionary act nor an illocutionary act; it encompasses a perlocutionary act.³¹ Overcoming and resolving political disputes is never an easy task. Eighty years have passed since the end of WWII. Philosophers and schools of philosophy may continue to study and provide insights for relieving the embedded tensions. Although the issue of responsibility should not be disregarded, and the art of persuasion should neither be overlooked.

References

- 『西田幾多郎全集』 (*Complete Works of Nishida Kitarō*). Tokyo: Iwanami Publisher, 2002-2009. A Supplementary volume was published in 2020.
- Austin, J. L. *How to Do Things with Words*. Urmson, J. O. and M. Sibsá. Eds. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962.
- Chen Wei-fen (陳瑋芬) 「天道」「天命」「王道」與「皇道」——由近代日本天皇政治論德治與血緣的扞格」, 『近代日本漢學的「關鍵詞」研究：儒學及相關概念的嬗變』 Taipei: National Taiwan University Press, 2005, pp. 149-189.
- Chen, Wei-fen. ““The Invention and Creation of the “Way”: The Shibunka’s Discourse on the Kingly Way and Imperial Way after the Establishment of Manchukuo”. Jan Vrhovski. tran. O’Dwyer, Shaun. ed.. *Confucianism at War 1931-1945*. New York: Routledge, 2025, pp. 42-59.
- Fujita, Masakatsu (藤田正勝). 「西田幾多郎の国家論」 (Nishida Kitarō’s Theory of Nation-state), 『日本哲学史研究』 (*Studies in Japanese Philosophy*). Vol. 4, 2007, pp. 27-55.
- Fujita, Masakatsu. 「西田幾多郎の思索——「日本文化の問題」をめぐって——」 (The Thought of Nishida Kitarō: On “The Problem of Japanese Culture”), https://ocw.kyoto-u.ac.jp/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/prof_nishida_kitaro_prof_fujita.pdf (accessed on 10 April 2025).
- Fujita, Masakatsu. 「西田哲学と歴史・国家の問題」 (Nishida Philosophy, History and the Problem of Nation-state), 『日本哲学史研究』 (*Studies in Japanese Philosophy*), No. 2, pp. 73-111.
- Fujita, Masakatsu. 「西田哲学の国家論」 (The Theory of Nation-state in Nishida Philosophy), 『日本哲学史研究』 (*Studies in Japanese Philosophy*), No. 4, pp. 27-55.
- Goto-Jones, S. Christopher. *Political Philosophy in Japan: Nishida, The Kyoto School and Co-prosperity*. London: Routledge, 2003.
- Heisig, W. James and John C. Maraldo., eds. *Rude Awakenings: Zen, the Kyoto School, & the Question of Nationalism*. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1995.
- Ōhashi Ryōsuke (大橋良介) 『京都学派と日本海軍：新史料大島メモをめぐって』 (*The Kyoto School and Japanese Navy: On the New Historical Material Oshima’s Memo*). Tokyo: PHP, 2001.
- Ricoeur, Paul. *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*. Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976.

³¹ J. L. Austin. *How to Do Things with Words*. Urmson, J. O. and M. Sibsá. Eds. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962.

Uemura Kazuhide (植村和秀). 「国家と歴史の側から、西田幾多郎を問いなおす」 (Revisiting Nishida Kitarō from the Perspectives of Nation-state and History) 『西田哲学会年報』 (*The Journal of Nishida Philosophy*), Vol. 7, 2010, pp. 35-53.