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The following text is a republication of the Preface to Nishida Kitarō: Zettai mujunteki jikodōitsu, the first volume of the new NIRC book series Nanzan Library of Japanese Philosophy. Digital versions of the book are available for download on the NIRC website (<https://nirc.nanzan-u.ac.jp/books/13>).

WESTERN ONTOLOGY finds its starting point in the words of Parmenides: thinking, being, speaking (Χρή τὸ λέγειν τε νοεῖν τ' ἔδον ἔμμεναι).¹ For Parmenides, and for the ancient Greeks, there was only one “word” (*logos λόγος*), and it only existed in the Greek language. According to this ancient worldview, other peoples stuttered; they were “barbarians” (literally, *barbaroi* βάρβαροι in Greek). At approximately the same point in history on the other side of the Euroasian continent, philosophers in China had a similar conception of the “word” (*yan* 言) as a marker of cultural exclusivity. For instance, Confucius (Kongzi) is recorded having stated, “Exemplary persons would feel shame if their words were better than their deeds” (君子恥其言而過其行).² In ancient China, language was an expression of ethical conduct, and proper conduct was defined by the social norms of Chinese society; concepts such as “benevolence” (*ren* 仁) were understood exclusively through the conventions of Chinese literary language.³ In both these hegemonic cultures of the ancient world,

1. *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, Chapter 28, Fragment B6, Line 1; John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy* (Adam and Charles Black, 1908), https://www.gutenberg.org/files/67097/67097-h/67097-h.htm#Page_197-198.

2. Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont Jr., trans., *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation* (The Random House Publishing Group, 1998), 178.

3. As Ames and Rosemont Jr. (*The Analects of Confucius*, 48) explain in the introduction to their translation, the character 仁 was formed by combining the graph “person” (*ren* 人) with “two” (*er* 二), suggesting that the moral act of benevolence presumes interaction between people. Therefore, unlike in ancient Greek, “the word” is not ontological but rather had a social function.

each with their own philosophical traditions, the “word” was bound to their own cultural-linguistic sphere.

We know about these traditions today because philosophy long ago escaped the boundaries of the classical Greek and Chinese languages. Yet, in many philosophy departments at universities around the world, curriculum is limited to words originating in Greek or modern European languages, specifically German, French, or English. Such a myopic focus on the study of philosophy obscures the diversity of ideas that drives philosophical discourse. Today, philosophy is a multicultural and multilinguistic discipline. And the tool that makes philosophy possible in the modern world is translation.

In ancient Greece, there was no term for “translate”; the closest term was “interpret” (hermeneuo ἑρμηνεύω). Likewise, in classical Chinese, the graph that comes closest to “translate” is 譯. One component of this compound graph is the term for “speech” or “word” (yan 言). In his etymological dictionary, Shirakawa Shizuka suggests that the other component of this term originally referred to the breaking down and scattering of a corpse and, therefore, came to mean “taking apart and dispersing.”⁴ Therefore, in order to “translate,” “words” are something to be first dissected and analyzed.

While in Greek “the word” is ontological in nature, translation of that “word” is a process. What, then, does the act of translating entail? In many Western languages, it clearly involves “transporting beyond,” as in the Latin verbs *trans-ducere*, *trans-ferre*, and *trans-latare* (from which the English “translate” is derived) as well as the modern European languages included in this volume: *traducir* (Spanish), *traduzir* (Portuguese), *tradurre* (Italian), *traduire* (French), and *übersetzen* (German). In Latin, there were other possibilities for translating this concept such as *vertere* or *imitari*, but in these modern languages the act of interpreting a concept in a different language maintains the Latin prefix denoting the “transfer,” in this case a transfer of “the word” from one language to another.

The equivalent of “translate” in modern Japanese is *hon'yaku* 翻訳, which suggests “analysis” or “making sense of” (*wake* 訳, the simplified variation of the classical Chinese character noted above) and flight (*hon* 翻). In this case, “flight” does not signify a direct and intentional motion like that of a bird or airplane such as with the verb *tobu* 飛ぶ. Rather it is an uncertain “twirling” (*hirugaeru* 翻る) of a leaf falling from a tree in autumn, or of a butterfly exposed to a sudden breeze that carries it away. Or, in its transitive form (*hirugaesu* 翻す), it expresses a sense of “turning something over in one’s mind” or even “changing one’s opinion.” Thus, as the Japanese term suggests, translation requires not only analysis but a musing

4. Shirakawa Shizuka 白川静, *Jitō* 字統, revised edition (Hebonsha, 2007), 859.

by the translator, who, after much consideration, determines where the meaning of words might land in a different language.

Without translation, Greek and Chinese philosophy would have died out in antiquity. Even in the modern variation of these languages, it is necessary to translate philosophy for a contemporary audience; native speakers of Greek do not read Plato like they would a newspaper, nor do native Mandarin speakers read Confucius as though it were a modern novel. Mediation is required. “A translator is necessarily producing new work in and for a new context... different from the original’s.”⁵ Through the metamorphosis of translation, philosophy is no longer confined to philologists and readers of ancient texts, but is made accessible to enquiring minds throughout the cultures and languages of the world. Moreover, as ideas and arguments continue to be translated, each new language adds new interpretation and meaning according to its structural and writing conventions. As Parmenides noted millennia ago: ξυνὸν δὲ μοί ἐστιν, ὅππόθεν ἄρξωμαι· τόθι γὰρ πάλιν ἵξομαι αὖθις.⁶ Through the act of translation, the arising of a thought multiplies, disseminates, abides in its linguistic traces, and changes form according to the languages, writing systems, and personal experiences of the translator through which it travels.

This new book series, the Nanzan Library of Japanese Philosophy, is an experiment in allowing these linguistic traces of thought to proliferate, transform through the act of translation, and return the reader to the moment when the idea first arose in the mind of a philosopher many years ago. Specters of philosophy roam our interconnected, albeit multilingual, world. As Walter Benjamin writes in *The Arcades Project* (*Passagenwerk*), a collection of thoughts he never managed to compile into a single text, “In the fields with which we are concerned, knowledge comes only in lightning flashes. The text is the long roll of thunder that follows.”⁷ In other words, “the text” is at the same time “texts.” This volume is a multilingual collection of texts that are a text Nishida Kitarō composed almost one century ago.

Zettai mujunteki jikodōitsu 絶対矛盾的自己同一 is published on pages 147–222 in volume 9 of the first edition of the *Nishida Kitarō zenshū* 西田幾多郎全集 (Iwanami Shoten, 1949) and on pages 367–425 in volume 8 of the new edition (Iwanami Shoten, 2003). The two editions are identical except for the pagination, which we have noted in the translations in bracketed bold numbers. This volume also includes a transcription of the Japanese text from the first edition. We thank Iwanami Shoten

5. Damion Searls, *The Philosophy of Translation* (Yale University Press, 2024), 3.

6. *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, Chapter 28, Fragment B5; Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/67097/67097-h/67097-h.htm#Page_197-198.

7. Walter Benjamin, *Das Passagenwerk* (Suhrkamp 1982), 570; *The Arcades Project* (Harvard University Press, 2002), 456.

for granting us permission to reproduce the text and Nakatsugawa Isao for patiently and faithfully transcribing the text.

According to the afterword to his collected works, Nishida's diary notes that he began composing the text on 31 October 1938 and completed it on 14 January 1939.⁸ However, he did not send it to the publisher Iwanami Shoten until 2 February, probably after making further elaborations. The text was first published in issue 202 of the journal *Shisō* 思想 on 1 March 1939 and later collected as part of the volume *Tetsugaku ronbunshū dai san* 哲学論文集第三.

Absolute Contradictory Self-Identity, as the text has been translated in English, constitutes one of the key junctures in the development of Nishida's thought, as it marks the beginning of the last and most mature phase of his philosophy. If we consider *An Inquiry into the Good* (1911) to be the beginning of Nishida's theoretical adventure, then we might say that *Intuition and Reflection in Self-Awareness* (1917)—with its creation of the concepts of self-awareness and absolute will—constitutes an early phase in the development of what would eventually become *Absolute Contradictory Self-Identity*. The next phase of Nishida's thought can be seen in *Place* (1926), or perhaps even more clearly in *The Intelligible World* (1928), both of which convey his thinking on the concept of place and its own logic. The first half of the 1930s witnessed an evolution of Nishida's thought in which “action-intuition” and the “historical world” gradually come to constitute the central themes of his philosophy. As a result of these reflections, in 1938 Nishida developed the concept of “absolute contradictory self-identity,” which occupied the core of his thinking until his death in 1945. This concept allowed him to explore various themes and problems, ranging from politics to science to aesthetics and so on. Therefore, “absolute contradictory self-identity” is the theoretical foundation of the final phase of Nishida's philosophy.

A seminal work in the Nishida canon, we feel that it is essential that *Zettai mujunteki jikodōitsu* be the first work translated in the Nanzan Library of Japanese Philosophy. This volume is not the first attempt to translate this notoriously challenging text. Robert Schinzinger translated it into German (Verlag Walter de Gruyter, 1943) and English (Maruzen, 1958). The text has also been translated into French by Jacynthe Tremblay (CNRS Éditions, 2003), which has been updated and revised for this volume. This volume also includes new English and German translations, as well as translations in Italian, Spanish, Mandarin Chinese, and Brazilian Portuguese for the first time. The editors sincerely hope that readers will find these translations engaging as “texts” of Nishida's “text,” inspiring new thoughts to proliferate and spread throughout the multilingual and transcultural world of philosophy.

8. See pages 349–351 in vol. 9 of the first edition and pages 581–589 in vol. 8 of the new edition.

Many of these translations were the result of the Japanese Philosophy Workshops and Nishida Seminars hosted at the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture. We thank all of the participants for their input and discussion during these events. We would also like to acknowledge that the Italian translation (Fongaro) was made possible by the 2025 Nanzan University Pache Research Grant I-A-1 and Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (C) 24K03368 and the Spanish translation (Wirtz) was done in the context of *kaken* research project 24K15884. Part of the Portuguese translation (Ferrari Gonçalves) was presented on 17 June 2025 at “Jornada Kitarō Nishida: 80 anos de sua morte.” Thanks to Kaitlyn Ugoretz for designing the cover and helping proofread the volume.

Enrico Fongaro and Matthew D. McMullen
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1 August 2025



**NISHIDA
KITARŌ**

*Zettai
mujunteki
jikodōitsu*



Edited by
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Steve G. Lofts,
Matthew D. McMullen,
and Jacynthe Tremblay

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Summary of the Volume

With this volume, the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture launches a new book series, the Nanzan Library of Japanese Philosophy, as a venue for translations of Japanese philosophical works and essays on related topics. For decades, the Nanzan Institute has been the global leader for research and publications on Japanese philosophy. This inaugural publication of the series includes translations of Nishida Kitarō's seminal work *Zettai mujunteki jikodōitsu*. Completed in 1939 at the peak of Nishida's career as a philosopher, this work lays the foundation for his concept of "absolute contradictory self-identity," which came to define the final period of his philosophical writings. By translating this notoriously complicated work into seven languages (French, English, Italian, Spanish, Mandarin Chinese, Brazilian Portuguese, and German), this volume not only makes Nishida's thoughts on self-identity accessible to an international readership but is also an experiment in the art of translation. We invite those interested in the philosophy of Nishida as well as the process of translation to explore how the translations in this volume, all produced by Nishida scholars, interpret the text.

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