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Japanese-English Translation: Nishida Kitarō—Self-determination of the Expressive Self (May 1930)

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From the Selected Works of Christopher Southward

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Nishida Kitarō—Self-determination of the Expressive Self

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To say that we think something must be to say that we determine it conceptually; to determine things through universal concepts is what we call "knowing." But what is it to say that something is conceptually determined? That which is thinkable as conceptual content is precisely expressive content borne by language; conceptual content is the specific semantic content of linguistic expression. In order to judge things, we must first talk about them, but before judgement can obtain, there must obtain consent of both meaning itself and the proposition itself. We can think judgement as truthful verbal expression about things.

I must first try thinking that which we call "expression." Broadly speaking, we can think expression as that which bears subjective semantic content as objective existence. Taking something like speech as an example, we can think it as physical sound, but it is more than this; speech must be the expression of thought.¹ We can think the unity of meaning and existence within expression in terms of any of the various points between such things as the simple *sign* and the *work of art*. If we can think signs and works of art together as expression, then we can also broadly think such things as a society's customs, practices, and institutions as forms of expression. But how is it that these forms of expressive content avail themselves to consciousness? Of course, everything that directly presents itself to consciousness is that which expresses itself, so we can probably even say that that which we call the "I" is thinkable as expression. Moreover, if we are at all justified in thinking the "I" as objective existence, and if it also has subjective meaning as content, then we must first ask how something like this is possible. I think that in order to understand that which we call the expressive being said to be possessed of existence, which is to say semantic being, we must try to think by taking as our point of departure something like the self-determination of the active self. It is not to be thought that, simply by virtue of its possession of semantic content, that which we call objective existence expresses itself. While presuming the external world as the ground of self-realization, that which sees the external as the internal must be the standpoint of the active self. Just as the body is an instrument of self-realization in which the expressive significance of that self-realization obtains, things that are externally situated with respect to the body deploy it as a conduit through which they appear as instruments of self-realization and make the tendency towards the objectivization of these subjects all the more complete, and this in such a way that it is thinkable that, at the moment when the subject is absorbed by the interior of the object, objective being as such expresses its own content. I think it is possible to think even something like Hegel's notion of "objective spirit" in this sense. When we lose ourselves at the ground of the self-awareness of the active self and take up the standpoint of the self that is seen as nothingness, everything that *is* is that which becomes aware of itself and expresses itself. Thus, from this standpoint, we can all the more aptly say that that which is thought as the so-called "conscious self" is nothing more than the self that is seen as expression.

If we take that which we call "expression" in terms of our preceding arguments, then what we call "judgement" must be a speaking *by* things *about* things themselves; it must be for objective being to speak its own² objective content. When the self becomes that which sees as nothingness, it is on the

¹ Cp. Ferdinand Saussure: "Physiological Phonetics," in *Course in General Linguistics*. While Nishida's work here predates Saussure's, their concepts pertaining to the conditions of possibility for the generation of linguistic meaning resonate. Even so, I want here to resist reading Nishida *through* Saussure and retain the rigorous if often cumbersome sense of his argument and taxonomy.

² 「判断とは物が物自身について語ることでなければならぬ、客観的存在が自己の客観的内容について語ることでなければならぬ。」

basis of such a self that all that is seen is that which *speaks self*. It is thinkable that, at the limit of the *noētic* awareness of this self which sees as nothingness, objective being speaks of objective being itself and that the language³ of such a thing is the true *logos*. What we call objective thought is simply the meaning of the *noēmatic* determination that results from our active-awareness; it is for that which we call objective thought to speak without that which speaks. Seen from the standpoint of the active self, things are tools, and perhaps the external world can be seen as a place of intention-realization.⁴ But, within the standpoint of the self-awareness of nothingness, the seen becomes that which expresses itself; that is, there obtains the meaning of the self seen in all its specificity. Everything that lies in the field of expression possesses the meaning of the seen self, so we can think that it has both *noētic* and *noēmatic* tendencies. Those things that lie at the limit of such *noētic* determination are things which can be thought *as things*, and we can think that the *noētic* awareness that determines such things is “thought.” When the seen self loses the meaning of self, it becomes a thing; that which, in losing the meaning of such *noēmatic* determination while retaining the meaning of *noētic* determination is that which we can think *as thing*.

³ Nishida introduces here an apparent neologism, 「物その物の物語」, lit., “thing-speak.” While this makes perfect sense in the Japanese, I’ve parsed it here in order to avoid awkward redundancy in the English.

⁴ Perhaps against “the realization of intention” [「意志の実現」], this is better read in the compound sense in which Nishida presents this idea, “intention-realization” [「意志実現」], which seems to point to an unfolding of parallel processes. As with similar constructions, the author omits the use of a copula here, thus rendering his meaning ambiguous.