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Absolute alterity and the ethics of mutable boundaries: Nishida Kitarō's ontology of creative negation.

Introduction

Across contemporary debates, borders have become sites of conceptual and political tension. They mark the limits of territories, identities, and bodies, yet they increasingly reveal themselves as unstable, porous, and contested. The classical image of the border as a fixed line separating pre-existing entities no longer captures the dynamics of a world where relations continually reshape the contours of belonging. What is needed is not a new political slogan but a re-examination of the metaphysical assumptions that make borders appear natural, self-evident, or necessary. This article argues that Nishida Kitarō's non-dualistic dialectic offers a rigorous conceptual framework for such a re-examination.

This must be stated carefully. Nishida is not a political thinker, and his work cannot be uncritically mobilised as if it were detached from its historical conditions. His late writings – particularly those composed during the Asia-Pacific War – have been the subject of extensive critical scrutiny. Scholars such as James Heisig, John Maraldo, Yoko Arisaka, and contributors to *Rude Awakenings* have documented the ways in which Nishida's metaphysical vocabulary was entangled with, and at times susceptible to, discourses of Japanese cultural identity and state ideology.¹ While there remains debate about the extent and nature of Nishida's involvement, this ambivalent legacy cannot be ignored. Far from avoiding this difficulty, the present article acknowledges it explicitly: the aim is neither to rehabilitate Nishida as a political philosopher nor to deny the problematic uses to which his thought has been put.

Instead, the approach adopted here is strictly conceptual and critical. What this paper seeks to examine is how certain structural features of Nishida's non-dualistic dialectic – especially his analyses of spatial-

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¹ Arisaka, Yoko, and James W. Heisig, eds. *Rude Awakenings: Zen, the Kyoto School, and the Question of Nationalism*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1995.

ity, relational determination, and the mutual constitution of self and world – can clarify the ontological presuppositions that underlie dominant conceptions of borders. The goal is not to derive political content from Nishida's writings, but to use his logic as a tool for interrogating the metaphysics that supports rigid border-thinking. In this sense, the paper operates at a level prior to political application: it engages Nishida not as a source of normative prescriptions, but as a thinker whose conceptual apparatus can illuminate why certain ways of imagining borders become available, and why others remain foreclosed.

From his early analyses of sensation to his late logic of place (*basho*)² and absolute contradictory self-identity (*zettai mujun-teki jiko dōitsu*)³, Nishida consistently challenges the metaphysics of substance that treats individuals, nations, or cultures as self-contained units with stable essences. In his account, existence is inseparable from the field of relations that expresses it. Identity is not a sealed interiority, but a dynamic process of self-determination through alterity. A self, an organism, or a collective exists only by negating and exceeding itself, by becoming what it is through its encounter with what is other. Crucially, this dialectic has a spatial form: distinctions such as “inside” and “outside” are not primordial givens but emergent inflections within a shared field of mutual expression. A boundary is therefore not a line separating substance but the trace of a relational process through which identities co-form one another.

Approaching borders through this logic does not imply erasing them. It means understanding them as historical, situated, and creative inflections of relational life rather than as natural partitions between isolated entities. The ambition of this article is thus twofold: to show how Nishida's dialectical ontology exposes the metaphysical fragility of rigid borders, and to suggest that borders, when understood as dynamic co-determinations, can become sites of transformative encounter rather than exclusion. By clarifying these structural insights, without idealising or sanitising Nishida's political context, the article aims to contribute to a broader rethinking of boundaries in contemporary philosophical, social, and ecological debates.

In order to avoid terminological ambiguity, a distinction will be maintained throughout the article: “boundary” refers to ontological articulation within a relational field, whereas “border” designates its socio-historical and political crystallization. While the two remain structurally continuous, their levels of determination differ.

² Early analyses refer primarily to “Zen no Kenkyū” (善の研究 NKZ1), while the logic of place is elaborated in essays such as “Basho” (場所, NKZ4).

³ Developed most explicitly in “The World as Dialectical Universal” (辯證法的一般者としての世界; NKZ7).

I. The Metaphysics of Borders: From Substance to Self-Forming Field

Western metaphysics has frequently presupposed that reality is composed of discrete substances, each endowed with its own essence and defined by clear boundaries. This assumption lies behind many of the dualisms that structure philosophical discourse: subject and object, mind and body, self and world, interior and exterior. Substance ontology treats each pole of such dualisms as self-sufficient, and relations as secondary or accidental. Boundaries, in this view, express the natural limits of self-identical units. Yet the persistence of these dualisms, and the conceptual difficulties they generate, show that substance ontology cannot account for the dynamic processes by which experience, embodiment, and social life actually unfold.

Nishida's entire philosophical trajectory can be read as an attempt to confront this problem at its roots. His work calls for a re-examination of the historical and logical conditions that allowed substance ontology to appear self-evident in the first place. As he writes in one of his later reflections:

Today, we must return to the origins and analyze the socio-historical world logically and ontologically. I believe we must reconsider Greek philosophy from its beginnings from this standpoint. The epistemological standpoint of the subject-object opposition must also be examined once again. Knowing is also an event in the socio-historical world. I am not trying to return to an old metaphysics.

(NKZ9, 155, trans. Steve G. Lofs and Sova P. K. Cerda)

Rather than beginning with substances or with already-constituted dualities, Nishida seeks the ontological ground from which such distinctions arise. His critique is not a simple rejection of substance; it is a systematic effort to expose the logical presuppositions that make substance-thinking possible, and to articulate an alternative framework capable of explaining why dualisms appear and how they can be overcome without collapsing difference. In this sense, Nishida's work does not merely dissolve the boundaries that sustain classical metaphysics; it reinterprets their meaning by relocating them within a more fundamental field of determination.

The point of departure for this project is the analysis of experience⁴. For Nishida, experience does not begin with a subject confronting an external world; it begins as a non-dual field in which distinctions between

⁴ Nishida's analysis of pure experience is first articulated in "Zen no kenkyū" (善の研究 NKZ1).

inner and outer, perceiver and perceived, have not yet taken form. Sensation is not the passive reception of impressions but the activity through which the world begins to differentiate itself. The supposed boundary between self and world emerges only as a result of this activity. The logic of substance, which treats such a boundary as given, therefore mistakes a product of experiential differentiation for a metaphysical starting point. By returning to the pre-differentiated field of experience, Nishida uncovers an ontological layer beneath the dualisms of subject and object.

This move underlies Nishida's turn to the concept of *basho*, or "place."⁵ Place is not a spatial container but the ground of self-determination; it is the field in which beings arise by mutually negating and limiting one another. To speak of place is to speak of a relational context that precedes any individuated entity. In this context, determination is always relational: for something to be what it is, it must differentiate itself from what it is not, yet this differentiation takes place within a unified field that sustains both. A boundary, therefore, does not mark the edge of an isolated substance but the locus of a self-determining relation. The logic of place reverses the order of conceptual priority assumed by substance ontology: relation is primary, and identity is posterior and derivative.

Nishida's development of the notion of absolute contradictory self-identity⁶ renders this reversal explicit. Contradiction, in his logic, is not a failure of coherence but the structural condition of any determination. A being is identical with itself only by negating itself – only by standing in relation to what it is not. This negation does not occur outside the being but within the field that constitutes it. Thus, dualisms such as self/other or mind/body are not two independent substances but expressions of a deeper logic in which unity and difference are inseparable. The contradiction is not between two substances but within the dynamic process of determination itself. This structure cannot be captured by a metaphysics of fixed essences; it requires a logic in which identity is constituted through relation and relation is constitutive of identity.

From this perspective, dualisms are not fundamental features of reality but crystallised outcomes of an ongoing dialectical activity. The boundary between subject and world, for example, is neither a metaphysical wall nor a simple illusion; it is the articulation of a self-determining process within experience. The same applies to other classical oppositions. The

⁵ The concept of *basho* is introduced in the mid-1920s, particularly in the essay "Basho" (場所, NKZ4), and further developed in "Kōiteki chokkan to hanseishiteki jikaku" (行為の直観と反省的自覚, NKZ4), translated as "From the Acting to the Seeing Self."

⁶ Elaborated in the 1930s, particularly in "The World as Dialectical Universal" (辯證法的一般者としての世界; NKZ7) the notion of absolute contradictory self-identity reaches its most explicit systematic formulation in the later essay "Zettai mujun-teki jiko dōitsu" (絶対矛盾的自己同一, NKZ9)

boundary between body and mind, between individual and community, even between form and matter, is not an absolute partition but a tension internal to the process of self-expression. By grounding dualisms in a deeper field of relations, Nishida shows that they are neither absolute nor arbitrary; they are intelligible as the ways in which the world differentiates itself through reciprocal limitation.

This shift has far-reaching consequences for how boundaries themselves must be conceptualised. If boundaries arise from relational determination rather than delimiting pre-existing substances, then they cannot be treated as fixed. Their apparent stability reflects only the relative persistence of the relations that sustain them. Boundaries are dynamic articulations of a field in which identities are continually negotiated. They are not mere lines drawn between self-enclosed units but the traces of processes whereby beings form and transform themselves. In this sense, the logic of place provides a conceptual account of why boundaries are simultaneously necessary and mutable: they are required for determinate existence, yet they change as the relations that constitute them shift.

Nishida's attempt to move beyond substance ontology thus opens a way to think boundaries as both ontologically grounded and historically contingent. They are grounded because they arise from the dialectical structure of determination; they are contingent because this structure is itself dynamic and responsive to context. By tracing dualisms back to the relational field that precedes them, Nishida offers a framework that neither absolutises boundaries nor erases them. Instead, it reveals the logic through which boundaries come to be, change, and acquire meaning. This framework allows for a critical rethinking of the metaphysical underpinnings of boundary-thinking and prepares the ground for examining how such boundaries operate in interpersonal, biological, and social domains.

II. I-Thou and Interpersonal Curvatures

The metaphysical reconfiguration of boundaries outlined above finds one of its most precise and consequential formulations in Nishida's analysis of the relation between I and Thou⁷. Here, the inadequacy of substance ontology becomes unmistakable. If self and other were self-contained entities, their relation would necessarily require mediation by a higher-order universal concept capable of encompassing both. Such

⁷ The expression "I – Thou" designates Nishida's analysis of interpersonal relationality and does not carry theological implications; capitalization indicates structural singularity rather than religious personhood.

mediation would position the relation between I and Thou as external, derivable from a common genus under which both are subsumed. Nishida explicitly rejects this model. In the interpersonal domain, no universal concept can mediate without neutralising the singularity of each person.

Nishida insists that the I does not know the interior life of the Thou, nor does the Thou have transparent access to the I. Their mutual irreducibility is not accidental but constitutive. Yet this absolute difference does not render their relation impossible; on the contrary, it is the very condition of its reality. If mediation depended on a universal that objectively encompassed both, the relation would become one between objects rather than between persons. Recognition would be replaced by classification, and alterity would be reduced to a conceptual determination. As he indicates here in an essay entitled *I and Thou*:

But in the dialectic of absolute negation – which is the concomitance of absolute death and life – there must be no medium between the self and the other. (...) It is not through the mediation of a third element that the self becomes other and the other becomes the self.

(NKZ5, 297, translation mine)

The rejection of universal mediation thus exposes a decisive ontological shift. The relation between I and Thou does not unfold across a neutral conceptual space but arises within a field where no external standpoint is available. There is nothing outside the relation that could determine it from above. This absence of an external mediator does not result in isolation but requires that determination take place internally, through reciprocal engagement. The border between I and Thou is therefore not drawn by conceptual abstraction but emerges from the dynamics of recognition itself.

This point is crucial for rethinking boundaries more generally. When borders are conceived as externally imposed divisions – whether juridical, cultural, or epistemic – they reproduce the logic of universal mediation that Nishida critiques. Such borders assume that distinct entities can be defined prior to their relation and subsequently aligned or separated through overarching norms. Nishida's analysis suggests instead that relational determination precedes any such abstraction, and that boundaries are formed immanently within the encounter itself.

Nishida's account of interpersonal relation introduces a spatial logic that departs radically from linear models of separation. The I and the Thou are absolutely distinct, yet they are not related by distance in the geometric sense. They do not stand opposite one another across a neutral gap. Rather, they "touch" one another directly and reciprocally, not by collapsing into identity but by being internally related through what

Nishida describes as a unity of contradictory elements. This touching does not eliminate difference; it intensifies it.

The boundary that separates I and Thou must therefore be understood neither as a line nor as a wall. It is a curvature – a bending of relational space generated by the encounter itself. Unlike a straight line, which presupposes two pre-existing sides, a curve arises from tension within a field. It marks neither pure separation nor fusion, but the inflection through which relation becomes possible without subsumption. Recognition does not cross a boundary; it occurs at the boundary as a dynamic site of articulation. Nishida begins to spatialize the logic of I – Thou in a very concrete way in an essay entitled “Self-love, Love of the Other, and Dialectic”. As we can read here:

It thus becomes apparent that the essence of the I and the Thou is not limited to their face-to-face relation or to their mutual understanding. (...) The Thou must become the condition of the I's existence, while the I must become the condition of the Thou's existence.

(NKZ6, 212, translation mine)

This notion of curvature allows us to clarify how absolute alterity and immediate relation coexist. The I becomes fully an I only by recognising the Thou as a Thou, and this recognition simultaneously differentiates the self from objects. In this sense, the boundary between persons is the condition of personal existence itself. Yet because this boundary is produced through reciprocal recognition, it cannot be fixed once and for all. It is continually reshaped by the living relation that sustains it.

Seen from this perspective, interpersonal boundaries are neither arbitrary nor merely conventional. They are ontologically necessary, but their necessity lies in their mutability rather than in their rigidity. The border curves because it is sustained by a relation that cannot be stabilised into a static form. Any attempt to straighten this curvature – to reduce the relation to predefined roles, identities, or categories – amounts to a denial of the interpersonal field in which recognition actually occurs.

This insight extends beyond face-to-face relations. Whenever identities are reified and borders are treated as impermeable, the curved logic of recognition is replaced by a linear logic of exclusion. Nishida's analysis shows that such linearisation is not simply ethically questionable but ontologically incoherent: it misconstrues the nature of relational determination by mistaking the temporary stabilisation of a boundary for its essential form.

The ethical significance of Nishida's analysis does not lie in moral prescriptions but in the transformation of how responsibility itself is un-

derstood. If the I and the Thou are internally related through a curved boundary of recognition, then ethical life cannot be grounded in the application of universal norms from an external standpoint. Responsibility arises from the fact that the self is always already implicated in the relational field that constitutes it.

This implication undermines the idea that ethical judgment can be exercised from a position of neutrality or mastery. There is no external vantage point from which the relation between self and other can be fully grasped or controlled. Ethical responsiveness begins not with rules but with exposure: the self finds itself addressed by the other within the very structure of its existence. The boundary that separates I and Thou is thus also the site where obligation emerges, not as coercion but as responsiveness to alterity.

This obligation does not take the form of an externally applied rule, but arises from the fact that the self is constituted at the point of its exposure to the other. To relate to the Thou is not to confront a limit from the outside, but to be internally determined by a relation one does not master. Responsiveness thus names the mode of existence of a self that cannot withdraw from the relational field through which it is formed.

Understanding boundaries as curvatures helps clarify why rigid borders so often generate ethical pathologies. When interpersonal or collective boundaries are treated as fixed lines, responsibility is displaced onto abstract principles or institutional frameworks. The living relation is obscured, and ethical engagement is replaced by compliance or exclusion. Nishida's logic suggests that such rigidification is not merely politically problematic but ethically evasive, insofar as it denies the self's implication in the relational field that sustains it.

By contrast, curved boundaries preserve both difference and responsiveness. They do not demand the erasure of identity, but they resist its absolutisation. In this sense, Nishida's analysis offers a way to think ethics beyond both relativism and universalism. Responsibility is neither imposed from outside nor dissolved into subjective preference; it arises from the internal tension of a relation that cannot be finalised. The I is responsible not because it subsumes the other under a shared norm, but because it cannot exist as an I without the other.

This non-mediational structure of relation has been emphasised in recent interpretations of Nishida's thought that seek to clarify the experiential dimension of radical relationality without reintroducing a reflective subject standing apart from the field of relation. As Francesca Greco has argued, drawing on Nishida's later writings, relationality is not constituted through acts of attention directed toward an object, but through a mode of involvement in which distinction emerges from within participation rather than being imposed from without (Greco 2024). What

is at stake is not a moral or psychological attitude, but an ontological structure in which self and other co-arise within a shared field that precedes their differentiation. Read in this way, the I-Thou relation does not require mediation by a universal concept or a reflexive stance in order to be intelligible. It is grounded instead in what Nishida describes as a relational field in which recognition occurs through exposure rather than representation.

This conception of interpersonal boundaries prepares the ground for a broader ethical rethinking of borders in social and ecological contexts. If boundaries are understood as curved inflections within a shared field rather than as fixed partitions between independent units, then ethical life demands attentiveness to the relations that sustain them. The task is not to abolish borders, but to remain responsive to their ongoing formation – and deformation – within the living world.

III. Biological and Ecological Curvatures: Symbiogenesis and World-Formation

At this point, the argument requires a shift in scale rather than a change of topic. What was articulated at the level of interpersonal relation must now be examined at the level of life itself. The question is whether the dialectical structure disclosed in the I – Thou encounter is confined to human relational experience, or whether it can be traced in the broader field within which living beings emerge and sustain themselves. While the analysis of the I – Thou relation belongs to Nishida's dialectical writings of the early 1930s, its extension beyond the interpersonal sphere becomes more explicit in his later essays of the late 1930s and early 1940s. In the essays entitled "Experimental science" (經驗科學, NKZ9), and "Life" (生命, NKZ11), where Nishida engages contemporary biological and quantum physics thought, the logic of contradictory self-determination is no longer confined to intersubjectivity but is articulated at the level of life itself. While Nishida distinguishes between the material, biological, and historical worlds – reserving the latter for specifically human modes of self-determination – the following analysis proposes to foreground life as a broader field in which relational structures can be examined. What was articulated at the level of interpersonal relation will thus be reconsidered at the level of living processes, not in order to attribute this extension directly to Nishida, but to explore how the ontological structure he describes may also illuminate the way living beings emerge and sustain themselves within relational fields. The logic of interpersonal curvature developed in the analysis of the I-Thou relation does not constitute a local or exclusively human phenomenon. Rather, it signals a more general

ontological structure that extends beyond intersubjectivity and into the biological and ecological constitution of life itself. Just as the relation between I and Thou cannot be mediated by an external universal without neutralising alterity, the relation between organism and milieu cannot be adequately understood through the conceptual framework of self-contained individuality confronting an external environment.

Classical biology has largely inherited the metaphysics of substance by conceiving organisms as bounded units whose identity is secured through internal organisation and defensive separation from what lies outside. Life appears as an interior process, while the environment remains an external domain of influence or constraint. Even when interaction is acknowledged, it is typically framed as secondary to the organism's primary self-maintenance. Boundaries thus function as stabilising limits that guarantee identity by exclusion.

The concept of autopoiesis, introduced by Maturana and Varela⁸, marked an important departure from mechanistic models by defining life in terms of self-production rather than external causation. Living systems were no longer described as machines responding to inputs, but as networks that continuously produce and maintain their own components. Yet despite this shift, autopoiesis retains a residual logic of closure. The organism remains operationally self-referential, while the environment appears mainly as a source of perturbation. The boundary, though permeable in practice, remains conceptually straight: it continues to separate an inside defined as essential from an outside defined as contingent.

Recent developments in biology and ecology have profoundly challenged this framework. The concepts of sympoiesis, introduced in systems theory by Beth Dempster (Dempster 1998) and later extended by Donna Haraway⁹, and of symbiogenesis¹⁰, developed in evolutionary biology by Lynn Margulis, reject the idea that living beings are fundamentally self-producing individuals. Instead, they describe life as a historically layered process of collective formation. Evolutionary novelty emerges not primarily from competition between autonomous units, but from long-term processes of cohabitation, incorporation, and mutual transformation. The organism is no longer the starting

⁸ The concept of autopoiesis was introduced by Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela in *Autopoiesis and Cognition* (1980), where living systems are described as self-producing networks.

⁹ The term sympoiesis was first articulated by Beth Dempster (1998) and later developed by Donna Haraway in works such as *When Species Meet* (2008) and *Staying with the Trouble* (2016).

¹⁰ Lynn Margulis's theory of symbiogenesis, presented in *Symbiotic Planet* (1998), argues that evolutionary novelty emerges through long-term symbiotic incorporation rather than competitive isolation.

point of analysis; it is the provisional outcome of relational processes that exceed it.

From this perspective, biological boundaries can no longer be conceived as lines securing identity against alterity. Cellular membranes, immune systems, and ecological niches function not as defensive walls but as dynamic interfaces that regulate exchange. Distinction is maintained only through constant permeability and negotiation. The border does not precede relation; it emerges from it. This is precisely why the biological boundary curves: it bends in response to the forces that traverse it, expressing a tension between differentiation and exposure rather than a clean separation between inside and outside.

This convergence is not merely retrospective. In his later writings, Nishida himself increasingly turns toward biological thought in order to clarify the concrete structure of life. In the essay "Life" (生命; NKZ 11), where Nishida engages contemporary biological thought, particularly that of J.B. S. Haldane, life is described as a dynamic field of internal differentiation rather than as a collection of self-enclosed individuals. What draws Nishida's attention is not biology as a specialised science, but its capacity to reveal that living beings exist only through relational determination and internal differentiation. Although Nishida neither formulates nor anticipates later notions such as symbiogenesis or sympoiesis, his insistence that life unfolds as a self-differentiating field rather than as a set of isolated units finds a striking resonance in these contemporary frameworks. The affinity lies not at the level of empirical prediction, but at the level of ontological insight: both reject the idea that biological identity precedes relation, and both understand living boundaries as historically and dynamically constituted rather than fixed in advance.

The continuity with the I-Thou relation should now be clear. In both cases, individuality is constituted through relation without being dissolved by it. The organism, like the self, exists only by being internally related to what is other. Biological curvature thus extends the interpersonal logic of non-mediated relation into the material processes of life itself.

Nishida's dialectical ontology provides the conceptual means to articulate this biological shift without reducing it to empirical description. As in the interpersonal domain, his point of departure is the rejection of external mediation. Just as the relation between I and Thou cannot be grounded in a higher-order universal, the relation between organism and milieu cannot be explained through abstract frameworks that would encompass both from an external standpoint. Determination occurs only from within the relational field itself.

In Nishida's logic of absolute contradictory self-identity, to be is to negate oneself. Existence is not grounded in the preservation of an internal essence, but in exposure to what exceeds and transforms it. Identity is

not prior to relation; it arises through it. This structure maps with remarkable precision onto the biological logic articulated by symbiogenesis. The incorporation of alterity is not a secondary modification imposed upon an already constituted being; it is the very condition under which individuation occurs.

Nishida's concept of *basho* is decisive here. *Basho* does not designate a container in which beings are placed, but the dynamic place in which beings emerge by mutually limiting and determining one another. The organism does not occupy the world as an external environment; it is a local articulation of the world's own self-expression. Interior and exterior are not ontologically distinct regions but moments generated within a single process of differentiation. What biology describes as organism – environment interaction, Nishida articulates as world-formation (*sekai keisei*).

This allows Nishida's thought to be read as a metaphysics of symbiosis. Existence is always already co-existence. Yet this symbiosis does not imply harmony or fusion. Nishida insists on contradiction as the structure of life itself. To exist is to sustain tension with what negates and conditions one's existence. Biological identity, like personal identity, persists only insofar as it remains exposed to this tension.

The curvature of biological boundaries thus mirrors the curvature of interpersonal recognition. In both cases, distinction is preserved not by exclusion but by relation. The boundary does not disappear; it becomes the site of ongoing articulation. Vulnerability, rather than autonomy, appears as the fundamental condition of life.

Extending this logic beyond the human domain requires a fundamental reconfiguration of ethical boundaries. Anthropocentrism presupposes straight borders between humans and non-humans, culture and nature, agency and matter. Nature appears as an external field subjected to human intervention, management, or control. These borders function precisely as straight lines: they secure human identity by projecting alterity outward.

Dean Anthony Brink¹¹ has shown that Nishida's late philosophy undermines this framework by articulating a post-anthropocentric ontology in which human consciousness no longer occupies a privileged external position with respect to the world. In Nishida's essay "Life", Brink argues, the human appears not as the sovereign center of meaning but as a modality through which the world expresses itself. The living world is not given to humans from the outside; it determines them from within (Brink 2022).

From this standpoint, ecological borders cannot be conceived as limits separating human activity from a passive environment. The environment

¹¹ See Dean Anthony Brink (2022) for an interpretation of Nishida's essay "Life" as articulating a post-anthropocentric ontology.

is not what surrounds life; it is an internal condition of life. To act upon it is always already to act upon oneself. Ecological destruction thus appears not as damage inflicted upon an external Other, but as a form of self-negation that undermines the conditions of action itself.

A post-anthropocentric ethics of borders does not call for the abolition of distinctions between human and non-human life. Such distinctions remain necessary for articulation and responsibility. What changes is their ontological status. Boundaries must be understood as curved: historically formed, biologically enacted, and continually reshaped by relational processes. They are neither arbitrary nor absolute.

Within this framework, responsibility arises not from mastery but from participation. Ethical action consists in remaining responsive to the relational fields one inhabits, rather than attempting to secure identity through rigid separation. Straight ecological borders – those that isolate humanity from the living world – constitute both metaphysical abstraction and ethical violence. They deny symbiosis while depending upon it.

Seen through Nishida's dialectic, the ecological crisis appears¹² as the consequence of straightening boundaries that are inherently curved. Life persists through co-determination, not through isolation. An ethics adequate to this condition must therefore abandon the fantasy of external control and acknowledge shared vulnerability as the ground of coexistence.

IV. Historical, Social, and Political Borders

The shift to historical and political borders does not introduce a new domain but articulates the same ontological structure at the level of collective world-formation. What appears biologically as co-determination becomes historically enacted through embodied and institutional practices. The logic of curved boundaries developed in the preceding chapters reaches a decisive level of complexity in Nishida's conception of the historical world (*rekishibiteki sekai*). History, for Nishida, is not an external framework within which already constituted subjects, cultures, or political entities evolve. Nor is it a linear sequence of events unfolding according to a homogeneous temporal order. The historical world is itself an active process of self-formation: a field in which time and space are produced through concrete acts of determination.

This implies a radical departure from linear models of historical space. The present does not function as a point dividing a completed past from

¹² By "ecological crisis," I refer specifically to anthropogenic climate change and large-scale biodiversity collapse characteristic of what Earth system science has termed the Anthropocene.

an open future. Rather, it is the locus where multiple temporal dimensions intersect and are reconfigured. The past remains operative within the present, not as a static heritage but as a force that continues to shape action, while the future exerts pressure as a field of possibility that calls for determination. Historical space is therefore elliptical rather than linear: it is constituted by overlapping trajectories without a single center or unified direction.

Within such a space, borders cannot be conceived as stable demarcations separating self-identical historical units. Cultural, social, and political boundaries emerge at points of tension where heterogeneous historical trajectories encounter one another. A border does not mark the end of one history and the beginning of another; it marks a zone of interference where histories are mutually implicated. What appears as a fixed boundary is thus a provisional crystallisation of relations whose deeper structure remains dynamic.

This understanding challenges the metaphysical assumptions that underpin many political conceptions of borders. When borders are treated as natural or timeless, history is implicitly reduced to the unfolding of pre-defined identities. Nishida's historical ontology exposes this reduction as untenable. Historical reality is constituted through acts of self-negation and reinterpretation that continually reshape the field in which identities emerge. Borders belong to this movement; they have no meaning outside it.

To insist on rigid historical borders, then, is to impose linear separations onto a field whose logic is internally folded and relational. Such imposition obscures the elliptic structure of historical becoming and transforms contingent articulations into absolute limits. The historical world resists this flattening precisely because it is never given as a totality. It must constantly be formed anew through action.

The historical world does not exist independently of embodied life. Nishida's notion of the expressive (*hyōgen-teki*) or historical body (*rekishiteki shintai*) is therefore central to understanding how borders are enacted at the social and political level. The body is not a biological substrate subsequently shaped by culture or power; it is the site where the world becomes concrete through action and expression. History is not something that happens to bodies; it happens through them.

In this sense, the body itself functions as a curved boundary. It differentiates inside and outside, self and world, while remaining constantly traversed by forces that exceed it: sensation, affect, language, labor, and social norms. Bodily boundaries are neither purely natural nor purely symbolic. They are relational articulations sustained by practices that are themselves historical, as he indicates in an essay entitled "Human Existence" (人間の存在, NKZ9):

In the self of the human being who sustains contradiction, mutually contradictory elements are joined together. Even the universality of judgmental logic, as well as the objective universality of science, confronts us only as an objective expression of the historical world of life to which we are connected bodily and productively.

(NKZ9, p.26, translation mine)

Social and political borders acquire their force precisely through this embodied dimension. They are not only legal or conceptual demarcations; they are lived realities enacted through movement and restriction, recognition and exclusion, vulnerability and protection. Borders are inscribed in bodies through racialisation, gendering, labor regimes, ecological exposure, and differential access to space. Their apparent abstraction conceals the fact that they operate through concrete bodily effects.

At the same time, embodiment introduces an irreducible instability into border-making. Because borders exist only insofar as they are enacted, they cannot be fully closed. Every repetition of a border also exposes it to variation. The expressive body does not merely reproduce the world it inhabits; it participates in its transformation. Gestures, practices, and modes of inhabiting space can reaffirm borders, but they can also bend them, displace them, or render them porous.

This dynamic reveals why borders are never purely structural. They depend on forms of life that sustain them. Political authority may attempt to stabilise borders through institutions and norms, but their persistence relies on embodied participation. Nishida's conception of the expressive body thus provides a non-reductive account of social power: one that avoids both voluntarism and determinism by situating agency within a relational field that both enables and constrains action.

From this perspective, the violence of rigid borders can be understood at a deeper level. Such violence is not only empirical, manifesting in exclusion, domination, or displacement. It is also metaphysical. Rigid borders presuppose a logic of substance that treats identities – individual, collective, territorial – as self-contained and prior to relation. They impose straight lines onto a world whose structure is intrinsically curved. Here, the logic of substance should not be understood as an independent ontological principle coexisting with a relational one. It emerges instead as a derivative abstraction produced when relational determinations are stabilised and reified into self-contained identities. Rigid borders do not presuppose substance as their ground; rather, they retroactively generate the appearance of substantial entities by fixing what are in fact dynamic and internally differentiated relations.

This metaphysical error has ethical consequences. When borders are conceived as absolute separations, responsibility is externalised. Ethical

judgment is displaced onto abstract systems of rule – sovereignty, legality, security – that claim legitimacy from outside the relations they organise. The agents who draw or enforce borders imagine themselves as standing apart from the relational field they shape. Violence becomes administrable; exclusion becomes procedural; implication is obscured.

Nishida's ontology exposes the incoherence of this stance. There is no external standpoint from which borders can be drawn without participation. Every boundary is drawn from within the historical world and contributes to its ongoing configuration. To deny this implication is to deny the relational conditions of one's own existence. Rigid borders thus enact a double negation: they negate those whom they exclude, and they negate the world-forming relations that sustain those who impose them.

An ethics adequate to Nishida's ontology does not take the form of an external moral framework applied after the fact. It emerges immanently from the structure of historical existence itself. Because borders are necessary for articulation, responsibility does not consist in their abolition. It consists in resisting their reification. Curved borders acknowledge distinction while remaining open to transformation; rigid borders convert distinction into exclusion.

Ethical responsibility, in this sense, is inseparable from world-formation. To act historically is always already to participate in the drawing of boundaries. The ethical question is therefore not whether borders will exist, but how they will be inhabited: as fixed lines that deny co-determination, or as dynamic articulations that remain responsive to the relational fields they shape.

Rather than introducing ethics as a distinct normative domain, Nishida's dialectic destabilises the very conditions under which such a separation could be maintained. The question is not whether ethical norms should be added to the ontology of the historical world, but whether abstraction from its relational structure can coherently ground action at all. What appears as ethical failure is not a deviation from an otherwise neutral order, but the effect of a conceptual abstraction that treats historically and bodily constituted relations as fixed and self-contained. To impose straight lines upon a world whose structure is internally relational is therefore not simply a matter of political risk or moral error; it is a misunderstanding of the mode of existence through which historical reality takes form.

Conclusion

The argument has moved from ontological foundations to biological articulation and finally to historical enactment in order to demonstrate

the structural continuity of relational determination across domains. This article has approached borders not as fixed lines separating pre-existing entities, but as variable articulations emerging from relational fields of determination. Drawing on Nishida Kitarō's non-dualistic dialectic, it has argued that boundaries – whether interpersonal, biological, ecological, or historical – do not delimit substances but express the dynamic processes through which identities take form. The logic of place (*basho*) and of contradictory self-identity reveals that distinction is inseparable from relation, and that separation without co-determination is an abstraction rather than an ontological given.

Reinterpreting borders through this framework does not entail their elimination. On the contrary, it clarifies why boundaries are necessary for articulation, action, and intelligibility, while remaining intrinsically mutable. A border is not an external limit imposed upon a field of relations; it is the local curvature through which a relational field differentiates itself. When borders are treated as straight – grounded in self-contained identities or abstract universals – their apparent stability depends on a metaphysical simplification that conceals the historical, embodied, and expressive processes sustaining them.

By tracing the continuity between interpersonal recognition, biological co-formation, and historical world-making, the analysis has shown that the same ontological structure governs domains often treated as discontinuous. The I/Thou relation, the organism – milieu dynamic, and the expressive body embedded in the historical world are not analogues but variations of a single relational logic. In each case, identity emerges through exposure to alterity, and boundaries function as sites of tension rather than as protective enclosures.

The relevance of Nishida's thought in this context lies not in its capacity to provide political prescriptions, but in its ability to unsettle the metaphysical assumptions that render rigid borders intelligible in the first place. To think boundaries as curved is to recognise that they belong to processes of self-negation and formation that cannot be suspended without distorting the structure of existence itself. From this perspective, the critical task is not to replace existing borders with new norms, but to attend to the conditions under which borders are formed, sustained, and transformed within the historical world.

In this sense, Nishida's ontology offers neither a moral doctrine nor a political theory, but a conceptual reorientation. It invites a shift away from models of identity grounded in exclusion toward an understanding of existence as inherently co-constitutive. Borders appear not as the antithesis of relation, but as its most fragile and expressive inflections – sites where the world differentiates itself while remaining irreducibly shared.

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Absolute alterity and the ethics of mutable boundaries: Nishida Kitarō's ontology of creative negation

Il presente articolo propone un ripensamento dei confini attraverso la dialettica non dualistica di Nishida Kitarō. Anziché considerare i confini come linee fisse che separano entità preesistenti, il contributo li affronta come articolazioni relazionali che emergono da campi dinamici di auto-determinazione. Attingendo alla logica del luogo (*basho*) di Nishida e alla sua nozione di autoidentità contraddittoria, l'articolo sostiene che la distinzione e la separazione sorgono solo all'interno di un campo condiviso di relazioni e non possono fondarsi su un'ontologia sostanziale. Dopo aver esaminato la struttura interpersonale della relazione io/tu e l'impossibilità di una mediazione da parte di universali astratti, l'analisi si estende ai contesti biologici ed ecologici, dove le recenti teorie della simbiogenesi e della simpoiesi risuonano con la concezione di Nishida della vita come co-formazione. Le sezioni finali si concentrano sul mondo storico e sul corpo espressivo, mostrando come i confini sociali e politici siano attuati attraverso pratiche incarnate piuttosto che imposti dall'esterno del campo relazionale. L'articolo non propone una teoria politica tratta da Nishida, ma chiarisce i presupposti ontologici che rendono comprensibili i confini rigidi. In tal modo, il presente contributo suggerisce che considerare i confini come curvature mutevoli e storicamente situate consenta una comprensione più adeguata dell'identità, dell'alterità e della formazione del mondo all'interno dei dibattiti contemporanei.

PAROLE CHIAVE: Nishida Kitarō; confini; ontologia relazionale; incarnazione/embodiment; formazione del mondo.

L'alterità assoluta e l'etica dei confini mobili: l'ontologia della negazione creativa di Nishida Kitarō

This article proposes a rethinking of borders through the non-dualistic dialectic of Nishida Kitarō. Rather than treating borders as fixed lines separating pre-existing entities, it approaches them as relational articulations emerging from dynamic fields of self-determination. Drawing on Nishida's logic of place (*basho*) and his notion of contradictory self-identity, the article argues that distinction and separation arise only within a shared field of relations and cannot be grounded in substance ontology. After examining the interpersonal structure of the I/Thou relation and the impossibility of mediation by abstract universals, the analysis extends to biological and ecological contexts, where recent theories of symbiogenesis and sympoiesis resonate with Nishida's account of life as co-formation. The final sections focus on the historical world and the

expressive body, showing how social and political borders are enacted through embodied practices rather than imposed from outside the relational field. The article does not advance a political theory derived from Nishida but clarifies the ontological assumptions that render rigid borders intelligible. In doing so, it suggests that treating borders as mutable, historically situated curvatures allows for a more adequate understanding of identity, alterity, and world-formation in contemporary debates.

KEYWORDS: Nishida Kitarō; borders; relational ontology; embodiment; world-formation.