

# Ideas coming into place

## An Introduction to “Basho” in the Works of Kitarō Nishida

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### Abstract

According to James Heisig, Japanese philosopher Kitarō Nishida’s (1870 – 1945) conception of place [場所 – *basho*] acted as a “magnet” that drove together all of the philosopher’s previous acceptations. In fact, there is no exaggeration in saying that, from the time of its inception in *Expressive action* [表現作用 – *Hyōgen Sayō*] from 1925, it seemed that “*basho*” was the idea that Nishida had been looking for throughout his entire career as a philosopher. The long path the “conceptions of space” and the idea of “place” took from the Platonic “*khōra*” and the Aristotelian “*tópos*” finally come to fruition in Nishida’s philosophy as “*basho*” which represents, in short, the place in which universals are expressed (or projected) as phenomena for the observing self.

This article presents itself as an analysis of the inception of Nishida’s conception of “*basho*” in many of his works dated from the 1920’s, as well as an examination of the semantics of the Chinese characters “場” and “所” that, together, constitute the Japanese word “*basho*” [場所], as a means to understand what kind of specific characteristics lie in the root of the distinction between it and the Western terms often used to describe “space” and “place.”

**Keywords:** Kitarō Nishida, *basho*, *khōra*, *tópos*, Space

### 1. Introduction

Current epistemology distinguishes between three things: the object [対象 – *taishō*], the content [内容 – *naiyō*] and the act [作用 – *sayō*] and discusses the relations between them. However, I believe that in the root of this distinction, what is being thought is simply the opposition between the cognitive act [認識作用 – *ninshiki sayō*] that constantly changes in time and the object that transcends it. But in order for objects to maintain themselves and correlate with

each other and to form a single system, we must think what maintains this system itself, what establishes this system within itself and in which [thing] is this system is located [於いてある – *oitearu*]. That which is must be placed in some thing, for, otherwise, the distinction between is and is not, would be impossible. (NKZ 4, 208)

These are the words used by Japanese philosopher Kitarō Nishida (1870 – 1945) to open his essay *Basho* in which he presents what his biographer Michiko Yusa called “the signature idea” (Yusa 2002, 202) of his philosophy. And there is no exaggeration in saying that. Since the first publication of *An Inquiry into the Good* [善の研究 – *Zen no Kenkyū*], in 1911, Nishida had been proposing that the observed world exists as a single unity and that the distinctions that we are inclined to observe between the inner phenomena of our consciousness (such as sensations and emotions) and the apparently external phenomena of nature actually represent nothing more than the way through which our thinking is able to organize things logically inside of consciousness in order to establish some kind of understanding concerning the universe and the particular objects that exist in it. Nishida characterizes “place” [場所 – *basho*] as a receptacle for the universals that appear, to the observing self, as individual objects and presents it as an alternative to the dualism between subject and object, experience and reality, conscious and natural phenomena etc. that had been dealt with by epistemologists so far.

Nishida’s main focus when developing his theory of “*basho*” was, at first, to overcome the dualism of current Western epistemology (overall that practiced by the Neo-Kantians) that he had been criticizing since the publication of the *Zen no Kenkyū*. For him, the duality between subject and object, experience and reality and the like were far from being necessary for the understanding of the work of consciousness. It is important to emphasize, however, that Nishida is not the first to propose a brake-up with such dualism. As John Krummel states:

Ever since Nietzsche in the nineteenth century, there have been Western intellectuals proclaiming the end of metaphysics and with it its dualistic assumptions. A noteworthy and recent example was Jacques Derrida. (1930 –

2004) Derrida critiqued Western thought for assuming hierarchical dichotomies, such as male-female, mind-body, nature-culture, object-subject, etc., to be simply *given* rather than constructed. (Krummel 2012, 44)

Nishida is the first to propose that *place* (in his case, the conception of “*basho*”) could hold the key to free the world of consciousness from the dualist logics that had been reigning so far. Since everything exists in the universe as a single unity that encompasses the self and all the phenomena internal and external to it, “*basho*” must work as the logical foundation for a system of reality in which those aforementioned dichotomies have neither proper ontological nor metaphysical value. Also, “*basho*” would help in solving the problem of the universals, as it is the “receptacle of the ideas” that are reflected in consciousness and experienced by the self. The present text is proposed as an analysis of Nishida’s conception of “*basho*” based on his works published between the releases of *An Inquiry into the Good* and *Basho*, as well as excerpts from his collected correspondence.

## 2. *The genesis of basho*

In a letter dated from June 8<sup>th</sup> 1926<sup>1</sup>, Nishida wrote to his then student Risaku Mutai concerning his newest essay entitled *Basho*:

I sent it to the June edition of the *Tetsugaku Kenkyū*. This essay is still not *klar* [clear], but contrarily to that which Aristotle defined as “that thing which becomes a ‘grammatical subject’ [主語 – *shugo*], but not a ‘grammatical predicate’ [述語 – *jutsugo*] and *Substanz* [substance],” what I tried to define logically is consciousness as the “thing that becomes a ‘grammatical predicate’, but not a ‘subject’.” (NKZ 18, 303-304)

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<sup>1</sup> The same month in which the essay *Basho* was published in the journal *Tetsugaku Kenkyū* [哲学研究].

But where did “*basho*” come from? In fact, this term (that would later develop into one of the cornerstones of Nishida’s thought and his most original contribution to philosophy) appears only once in *An Inquiry into the good*<sup>2</sup>, but not in the particular meaning that he would later infer from it. The origins of Nishida’s new interpretation of the Japanese term “*basho*” can be traced back to 1924 (two years before the publication of *Basho* and 13 years after the *Inquiry*: first, when Nishida began to lecture on Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* at Kyoto Imperial University during the spring semester of that year; and second, when, a few months later, while preparing materials for his classes, Nishida under deep influence from the study of Aristotelian “*Substanz*” [ὑποκείμενον – *hypokeimenon* - substance] publishes the essay *On the inner perception* [内部知覚について – *Naibu chikaku ni tsuite*]. (NKZ 4, 76-134) In this work, Nishida starts by presenting an interpretation of Austrian philosopher Alexius Meinong’s understanding of “inner perceptions” in contrast to the “external perceptions,” i.e. those of external phenomena, and concludes by dealing with the Aristotelian “*hypokeimenon*” as a subject that is never predicate and that, in this way, can be the basis for everything that is objectified (in the grammatical sense of the word) by human understanding. Although Nishida does not yet directly deal with “*basho*” in this essay, it is not difficult to notice the embryo of the term that, two years later, would become what John W. M. Krummel calls the “real breakthrough” of his philosophy. (Krummel 2012, 5)

At the time, Nishida criticized phenomenology, as he understood that it was unable to deal with both the external and the inner phenomena as a single genus of things and to free the knower from the standpoint of the actively thinking self. By not being able to suspend the self that acts and knows things from inside the world of phenomena, knowledge is not free from our inner perceptions and, thus phenomenology, as the study of the structure of consciousness, is forever a hostage of the limitations of Descartes’ self (*ego*) as a *res cogitans* and is, thus insufficient if we are to try achieving any degree of knowledge concerning the unity of the world. Nishida suggests that we think consciousness as an opposite to the *hypokeimenon*.

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<sup>2</sup> The variant form “場処” (as opposed to “場所”) also appears once. The semantics of *basho* will be further analyzed in the next sections of the present text.

While the former is a subject that is never predicate, consciousness can be seen as that which “becomes a grammatical predicate, but not a grammatical subject,” (NKZ 18, 303-304) thus becoming the background in which objects exist and relate with the subject. (Yusa 2002, 202-205)

In the following year (1925), the bud of Nishida’s conception of *basho* seems to have begun to bloom. In the 41<sup>st</sup> edition of the philosophical periodic *Shisō* [思想]<sup>3</sup>, he published *Expressive action*<sup>4</sup> [表現作用 – *Hyōgen Sayō*] (NKZ 4, 135-172) in which he would, for the first time, present “*basho*” as that in which things are placed [於いてある場所 – *oitearu basho*]. (NKZ 4, 164) This conception of place is first presented as an immovable substratum in which ever-changing phenomena exist and relate to each other. He says:

Thus, to think of form [形 – *katachi*], matter [質料 – *shitsuryō*] and agent [作用者 – *sayōsha*], to think that things change, is to think about *basho*. To say that a thing acts, is to say that it moves from a *basho* to another *basho*. And even if we think of some thing that changes its form in a *basho*, such a thing must change the position [位置 – *ichi*] of its parts in space [空間 – *kūkan*]. (NKZ 4, 164)

Thus, what Nishida means is that it is impossible to think of anything without simultaneously thinking about “*basho*.” We need to place things somewhere in order to be able to think about them. And it is even more important when thinking about the relationships between different things. Each one of them is placed in “*basho*” and, as they change, move and act, the relationship between things must also be located in “*basho*”. Even in the case of changes like the change of colour, which occurs only in the thing itself, without any motion of it or of its parts and without any alteration in the “*basho*” or in the physical space occupied by the thing, since the thing is in “*basho*”, that change also happens (or takes place) in it. Also, Nishida identifies “*basho*” with *nothingness* (無 – *mu*) as, while it is able to give the foundation for things to exist in consciousness and for us to experience and to know such things, *basho* itself is not an experienced object in itself. In this case, Nishida moves in the opposite

<sup>3</sup> Dated from March 1925.

<sup>4</sup> Yusa (2002) translates *Hyōgen Sayō* as “*Expressive Operation*.”

direction to that followed by Aristotle when he defined “*tópos*” in the fourth book of the *Physics* and approximates “*basho*” to Plato’s conception of “*khôra*,” which was presented in the *Timaeus* as a third genus of things that is neither sensible, nor intelligible, while being, nevertheless, existent and necessary for the existence of the sensible things in space<sup>5</sup>.

In Expressive action, first presents his conception of “*basho*” and defines it as being a necessity for consciousness to perceive things. The bud of “*basho*” quickly flourished into an original conception in that which contemporary scholar Kiichirō Sōda (Yusa, 2002, 205) would call, for the first time, “Nishidan Philosophy” (西田哲学 – *Nishida Tetsugaku*) in the following year. Nishida’s correspondence shows us that, by the end of 1925, he was aware of the importance that “*basho*,” as a term, would have in his further writings and was fully dedicated into properly characterizing it, as he writes to Hajime Tanabe in December:

Also, concerning my thoughts on that “*basho*,” my general idea is that it is going to be fruitful (*fruchtbar*), but the more I keep thinking about its many details, the more I find myself in trouble. (NKZ 19, 583)

The essay *Basho*, dedicated exclusively into fully explaining his newly developed concept and its nuances was published in *Tetsugaku Kenkyū* six months later, in June 1926.

### 3. *Nishida’s topologic lexicon*

At first glance, the answer to question “what does Nishida precisely mean by ‘*basho*?’” seems to be given in the first chapter of the eponymous essay in which he states:

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<sup>5</sup> As it is going to be demonstrated in the next session, Nishida himself would hold that, although not being the same thing, it is possible to establish a comparison between “*basho*” and “*khôra*.”

Thus, following the words of Plato's *Timaeus*, I name *basho* the thing that receives [受け取る – *uketoru*] the ideas. (NKZ 4, 209)

Here, Nishida is referring to Plato's *Timaeus* in which the Greek philosopher identified “*khôra*” as being the “receptacle [υποδοχή – *hypodokhê*] of all becoming” (*Tim* 49a 5-6) and the “receptacle” [δεχόμενον – *dekhômenon*] that, as a mother, receives the ideas” (*Tim* 51a 1-5) and gives them existence in the physical realm. So, it seems that what Nishida calls “*basho*” should be regarded in the same ways as “space”<sup>6</sup>, which is the most usual translation to the Platonian term both in modern European languages and in Japanese [空間 – *kūkan*]. However, if Nishida's conception of “*basho*” is to be dealt with as an absolute synonym to Plato's “*khôra*,” why would he choose that word in Japanese over “*kūkan*” [space]? Moreover, Nishida continues by saying that:

Naturally, what Plato calls “space” [空間 – *kūkan*] or a “receiving place” [受け取る場所 – *uketoru basho*] and what I call *basho* are not to be thought of as being the same thing (NKZ 4, 209)

That makes the understanding of Nishida's conception of “*basho*” using Platonian terminology even more complicated. He holds that he names “*basho*” in the same way that Plato call the “receptacle of the ideas” which would mean that his intention is to deal with “space” at the same time as he is making use of the term “*basho*,” that is usually much more related to the Aristotelian conception of “*tópos*” instead. And, in fact, many translators of Nishida's work tend to translate “*basho*” as “*tópos*,” as Yusa holds in the *Notes for Zen & Philosophy – An intellectual biography of Nishida Kitarō*:

Nishida's *basho* is actually closer to the Greek word “*khôra*” (the place in which a thing is) than to “*tópos*,” which many translators of Nishida, including myself [Michiko Yusa], have adopted. The advantage of adopting *tópos* is its

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<sup>6</sup> Such as “*Spatio*” in Latin, “*Space*” in French, “*Spazio*” in Italian, “*Espacio*” in Spanish, “*Espaço*” in Portuguese, “*Raum*” in German etc.

orthographic simplicity. Nishida himself never used the word “*tópos*” in his writings except when making references to “topology.” He customarily used a German word, *Platz* [place], in his personal notes. (Yusa 2002, 376)

Yusa opts by using “*tópos*” when referring to “*basho*” even though Nishida himself appears to have never used the Greek terminology in this sense. Another option to untie this knot could be the making use of the Latin term “*locus*”, widely used, for instance, by James W. Heisig when dealing with Nishida’s “logic of *locus*” [場所の論理 – *bashoteki ronri*]. (Heisig 2001, 72) Scholar David A. Dilworth also follows a similar path by calling Nishida’s thought a “logic of place.” (Nishida 1993, 47) Nishida, however, while using the German term “*Platz*” never made use of the aforementioned Latin or English terminologies. The Japanese philosopher makes use of “*khôra*” [space] in Greek, instead of “*tópos*” [place]; in German, he writes “*Platz*” [place] instead of “*Raum*” [space]; and in Japanese he deals with “*basho*” instead of all the other words that can also mean “*Platz*” such as “*tokoro*” [所] or simply “*ba*” [場] (both ideograms that, when combined, compose the word “*basho*” [場所]); or *kūkan* [空間] that not only can be translated as “*Raum*”, or “*khôra*”, but that also utilizes the ideogram 空 [*kū* – void] in its composition, that could give to it, the secondary meaning of “void space” and thus, could move Nishida’s conception closer to the Platonic “*khôra*” in detriment of the Aristotelian “*tópos*” (that completely rejects the existence of void).

### 3.1 “*Basho*” and “*tokoro*”

Both “*basho*” and “*tokoro*” can be translated as “place,” “*Platz*” and “*locus*,” and their uses are often the same. One could think that the fact that both words seem to have identical meanings is characteristic to modern Japanese, however even dictionaries available during the days of Nishida present “*tokoro*” and “*basho*” as almost synonymous terms. For instance, the 1897 edition of the *Nihon Shinjirin* [日本新辭林] defines “*basho*” as “place” [ところ – *tokoro*] and “whereabouts, or the place occupied by someone” [みどころ、又、ばせき – *idokoro, mata, baseki*]; (Tanahashi 1897, 1897) and defines “*tokoro*” as “*place*” or “*whereabouts*” [居所 – *idokoro*] and as



“part” [部分 – *bubun*]. (Tanahashi 1897, 1393) Whereas the 1913 edition of the *Nihon Daijiten* [日本大辭典] defines “*basho*” as “that place” [そのところ – *sono tokoro*] and “a place of that thing” [そのことのあるところ – *sono koto no aru tokoro*] (Mozume 1913, 1611); and “*tokoro*” as “a word that expresses a limit” [かぎりをいふことば – *kagiri wo iu kotoba*]. (Mozume, Aoki, Kawakami 1913, 3001)

If, on the one hand, “*basho*” and “*tokoro*” seem to mean almost exactly the same thing, on the other, it is not appropriate to make use of them indiscriminately. The two ideograms (“場” and “所”) that constitute the three expressions (“場所,” “場” and “所”) present nuances in their uses that may pass unnoticed by the Western reader of Nishida, but that most of the Japanese are familiar with. In many occasions, both words can mean “place” and are interchangeable without compromising the understanding of a sentence. For instance, when saying “The place where I live in is close by” in Japanese, one could say “私の住んでいる場所は近いです” [*watashi no sundeiru basho wa chikai desu*] or “私の住んでいる所は近いです” [*watashi no sundeiru tokoro wa chikai desu*], without any further harm in the communication. However, although a Japanese person can easily express something happening in the immediate past by making use of “*tokoro*” such as in “彼は駅に着いたところ” [*kare wa eki ni tsuita tokoro*], in which “*tokoro*” can be translated as “just” in the sentence “He just arrived at the station”, no one would say “彼は駅に着いた場所” [*kare wa eki ni tsuita basho*]. In the first example, both “*basho*” and “*tokoro*” express places in space and the choice between one or the other is a simple matter of situation or of personal style, whilst in the second, “*tokoro*” signifies a “place” in time, a meaning that “*basho*” is unable to express.

So, let us examine each of the Chinese ideograms [漢字 – *kanji*]<sup>7</sup> that constitute “*basho*” in order to try to understand what Nishida had in mind when he proposed to deal with the term as a place or “thing that receives the ideas.”

### 3.2 “Ba” [土 + 易 = 場]

<sup>7</sup> Hereafter referred to as “*kanji*.”

The first ideogram, “場” [*ba* or *jō*] is constituted by the conjunction of the radical “土” [つち偏 – *tsuchihen*]<sup>8</sup> and “昃” [ヨウ – *yō* or ジョウ – *jō*]. According to the kanji sourcebook *Shinkangorin* [新漢語林], “土” means “land” or “earth” and indicates an area of some physical extension and some fixed portion of space, while “昃” means “sunrise” or “dawn” and expresses “warmth.” The same lexical dictionary also states that “場” in itself usually expresses the concept of “*basho*” [場所]. (Kamada 2001, 285) Another source, the *kanji* encyclopedia *Shinkanwa daijiten* [新漢和大事典] also defines 場 as some portion of space enclosed. It means, “some space with borders defined by walls” such as a “Japanese style pub” [居酒屋 – *izakaya*], a “shop” or a “residence.” (Tōdō 2005, 367)

The impression of warmth represented by the kanji in the component “昃” – as it is also present in other ideograms that represent warmth such as “湯” [*yu* – “hot water”] and “陽” [*yō* – “positive”], which is present in “太陽” [*taiyō* – “sun”] – indicates “enclosure” or “something closed” and represent a portion of space that possesses some energy (warmth). A meaning that would perfectly fit the usage of “場” as “field” in physics.

As a single word (not a *kanji* constituent of some other word), the *Kōjien* dictionary defines *ba* primarily as a wide “place” [広いところ – *hiroi tokoro*], “moment” [時機 – *jiki*] or “surface” [局面 – *kyokumen*] in which something is done. By the same lexicon, it is defined in physics as follows:

A “field” and as an individual point in space [空間 – *kūkan*] in which, when dealing with a physical quantity A, it’s field [*ba*] comes into being and A is said to be a quantity of such a field [*ba*]. It is also some sort of “force field”, “velocity field”, “magnetic field” or “gravitational field.” (Niimura 1998, 2102)

Other definitions for “*ba*” include “some situation that repeats itself” [その時その時の状況 – *sono toki sono toki no jōkyō*], the “space that exerts the action of some force” [ある力の作用を及ぶ空間 – *aru chikara wo oyobu kūkan*] (Tokieda 1983, 1649) and “in *Gestalt* psychology, a condition or an environment in which actions and

<sup>8</sup> In which “*hen*” indicates a radical located in the left portion of the *kanji*.

reactions influence directly and relate in the form” [ゲシュタルト心理学で、行動や反応のしかたに直接影響し関係する環境や条件 – *geshutaruto shinrigaku de, kōdō ya hannō no shikata ni chokusetsu eikyō shi kankei suru kankyō ya jōken*]. (Matsumura 1995, 2087)

As a concept of physics, “*ba*” has been used in the Japanese language to describe the English term “field”, the German “*Feld*” and the French “*champ*” since the late XIX century. According to the physics lexicon *Butsurigaku Daijiten* [物理学辞典]:

Apart from physics, the conception of “*ba*” has been used in biogenetics and in psychology and the complementation between matter and “*ba*” has also deeply influenced philosophy. (*Butsurigaku jiten henshū iinkai* 2005, 2087)

Ba has a wide use in the natural sciences, especially when meaning “field” such as in “magnetic field” [磁場 – *jiba*], “electric field” [電場 – *denba*] and “gravitational field” [重力場 – *jūryokuba*]. It is also widely used interchangeably with “界” [*kai* – “world”, “realm”] to represent “field” in terms such as “electric field” [電場 – *denba* or 電界 – *denkai*] and “magnetic field” [磁場 – *jiba* or 磁界 – *jikai*].

### 3.3 “Sho” [戸 + 斤 = 所]

The second ideogram, 所 [*sho* or *tokoro*] is constituted by the conjunction of the radical 戸 [とだれ – *todare*]<sup>9</sup> and 斤 [キン – *kin* or オノ – *ono*]. The radical means “door” or “house” and indicates “something enclosed” or “something that belongs” to some other thing, while one of the many significances of “斤” expresses “volume” or some “quantity.” The *kanji* as whole can also signify “origin” [もと – *moto*] and “measure” or “necessary action” [処置 – *shochi*]. (Kamada, Yoneyama 2001, 511-512) It is important to notice not only the spatial meaning of 所, but also how it expresses “the now,” or something that has just happened and a single portion or

<sup>9</sup> In which *dare* indicates a radical allocated in the left and upper portions of the *kanji*.

moment in time in the same way as it expresses the individual space, (Tōdō 2005, 675-676) as it was previously demonstrated.

The *kanji* can also be read with its *kun'yomi*<sup>10</sup> [訓読み] pronunciation “*tokoro*” which, when taken as a single word represents a “location that possesses an extension” [広がりをもった位置 – *hirogari wo motta chi*] and where “something exists or comes into being”. It also has the characteristics of expressing a “standpoint” [立場 – *tachiba*]<sup>11</sup> or a “determinate definite portion of time or space.” (Niimura 1998, 1916) It can additionally be understood as a “degree” or “level” [程度 – *teido*] of something and as the “conclusion” or “results” [結果 – *kekka*] of some action. (Tokieda 1983, 1497)

### 3.4 “*Basho*” [場所]

And finally, the *Kōjien* defines *basho* both as a “place” [*tokoro*] and as a “field” [*ba*]. It also expresses a “location” or “positioning” [位置 – *ichi*] in space and “the place where something secures [確保 – *kakuho*] itself.” (Tokieda 1983, 2138) Additionally, the *Daijisen* also defines it as “place where something exists or happens” [何かが存在したり行われたり所 – *nanika ga sonzaisuru tokoro*] or the place where “something becomes a subject” [物が主体となった – *mono ga shutai to natta*]. (Matsumura 1995, 2124)

Thus, “*tokoro*” expresses a “limit” or a “portion of something,” but does not necessarily represent something spatial whereas “*basho*” expresses the same kind of “limit” [*sho*], but with some “warmth” or energy” that surrounds it [*ba*]. Thus, if “*tokoro*” roughly means “place”, “*basho*” is a “place” delimited by some “force,” or “a place that possesses a field” [ある場をもつ所 – *aru ba wo motsu tokoro*]. This “force” implied in “*basho*” seems to be the key to the reason behind Nishida’s choice of the term in detriment of others with similar meanings.

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<sup>10</sup> *Kun'yomi* literally means “meaning(-based) reading” and is usually referred to as the “Japanese reading” of an ideogram when compared to the *on'yomi* [音読み] that means “sound(-based) reading” and that is usually closer to the Chinese reading of the ideogram.

<sup>11</sup> “*Tachiba*” is another term widely used by Nishida to express “standpoint” or “point of view.”

#### 4. Nishida's use of "basho"

As it has been previously explained in the *Introduction* of the present work, Nishida first presented "basho" as a new conception in his philosophy in *Expressive action* and only publicly characterizes it in the essay *Basho*. Prior to that, the term had only been used in its aforementioned colloquial meanings and, even in his major work, *Zen no Kenkyū*, "basho" [場所], apart from two instances in which term was used in the preface for the 1936's re-edition of the book (NKZ 1, 6-7), it was used only once by Nishida when, while explaining how do beings [有 – *u* or *yū*] come to be out of nothingness [無 – *mu*], he says:

Consciousness is not something subordinated to the quantitative limitations of time [時 – *toki*], place [場所 – *basho*] and force [力 – *chikara*], so it is not something controlled by the mechanical laws of causality. Indeed, those forms are established on the unity of consciousness. (NKZ 1, 57)

In this passage, Nishida talks of "place" in the same meaning that one would use for "space" or when dealing with "movement in space" as it is dictated by the laws of causality, which, he argues, do not apply to consciousness. Also, putting "basho" in the same category as "time" and "force" corroborates with the interpretation that, here, it is used in the same meaning that it possesses in natural sciences. Here, "basho" is closer to "spatio" than to "locus" and this understanding of the term is also supported by the fact that in the text of the *Zen no Kenkyū*, Nishida would further use a variant form of "basho" [場処] when dealing with proper "place" as a "portion" of space:

In the normal sense, to say that that a thing exists is to say that it exists in a certain place [場処 - *basho*] and time [時 – *toki*] in a certain form [形 – *katachi*]. (NKZ 1, 75)

Here, although making use of a different set of ideograms, Nishida seems to talk about a "basho" much closer to the one that he would present fifteen years later

as he holds that, to say that something exists, is to say that it does so somewhere. The reason for the two different writings for the same word seems to be precisely in the different nuances that he implies to them as, in *Zen no Kenkyū*, “場所” appears as a substitute to “space” and “場処”, as meaning a portion of space, or simply “place.” The use of two different sets of *kanji* (“場所” and “場処”) means that Nishida wanted to establish a distinction inside the text of *Zen no Kenkyū* so that the reader could understand that the author is, in one occasion, dealing with “place in general” [場所] in the same category as “time” and “force” in a context of causal relations, while, in another occasion, he deals with a “specific place” [場処] that is occupied by something with a “specific form” in a “specific period of time.” In a way, it is like saying that the first is the same thing as Plato’s “*khôra*” while the latter shares its meaning with Aristotle’s “*tópos*” and the “*basho*” that appears as a new conception in his works from 1926 onwards<sup>12</sup> represents a mixture of both, as it is a “receptacle of ideas” that is also a part of consciousness that, as it is going to be demonstrated further, is a “*basho*” in its broader form.

##### 5. “Basho” and “*khôra*”

Nishida holds that, if some thing exists, it must be *placed* or *located*<sup>13</sup> [於いてある – *oitearu*] somewhere or in some thing. (NKZ 4, 208-209) It means that, in order to say that anything *is* – be it an object [対象 – *taishō*], its content [内容 – *naiyō*] or the act [作用 – *sayō*] of it – it *must* exist in something, or else, in some *basho*. As it is clear, Nishida does not talk, here, about the places that those things occupy in physical space, but rather the place where the very idea that represents such things in consciousness is placed in. His project for “*basho*” becomes clear when he identifies it as having the same metaphysical role as the Platonic conception of “*khôra*” and

<sup>12</sup> During Nishida’s later years, the usage of the term “*basho*” declined significantly in his works. However, as even the title of this last essay – *The logic of ‘basho’ and the religious world view* [場所的論理と宗教的世界観 – *Bashoteki ronri to shūkyōteki sekaikan*] – shows us, Nishida never completely abandoned the conception and never seems to deny it or to propose some other term that could be a substitute to it.

<sup>13</sup> John W. M. Krummel translates “*oitearu*” into English as “to be implaced in.” James W. Heisig and John Maraldo translate it as “to be located in.”

holds that both work as “receptacles for the ideas” (Krummel2012, 50) or as the “thing that receives the ideas.” (NKZ 4, 209) In the same way as “*khôra*” receives the ideas and gives them existence in the physical world, “*basho*” gives them existence in the world of consciousness. Therefore, although Nishida deals with physical space and place when taking into consideration the place of beings and of the relative nothingness (i.e. nothingness relative to beings), there is no doubt that what Nishida proposes concerning his newly developed conception of “place” is not to deal with the spatial positioning or “location” of physical objects, as did Neoplatonists such as Theophrastus and Simplicius of Cilicia; neither with the surface of the extensive bodies, as did Aristotle. It is also impossible to interchange Nishida’s “*basho*” [場所] with the very similar Japanese term “*tokoro*” [所] that represents a portion or a limit of a determinate dimension, like space or time. Nishida’s “*basho*” indeed represents a limit, but it is one occupied by the very existence of a universal idea in consciousness. In this context, Yusa explains it as follows:

“*Basho*” is in fact a spatial metaphor for the workings of consciousness. Just as the universal embraces the particular in the subsumptive judgment, so the *topos* [*basho*] embraces the self-conscious self. (Yusa 2002, 204)

This does not mean that Nishida did not take the physical place of objects or space as a whole into consideration, but rather that even physical space itself, since it exists and since the relationships between it and the physical things that are in it exist, physical space, also must have a *basho* in which its existence in consciousness is placed.

Thus, there is a *basho* for the existence of everything, even for that of the physical “*basho*” (place) itself. *Basho* and existence are indissociable from one another in a way very similar to the one expressed by Aristotle in the *Physics* (when the Greek philosopher considered “*tópos*” to be necessary for the very existence of that which is in it) and the former is a logical necessity for the latter. It means that, without *basho*, it would be impossible for consciousness to think of anything. Again, Nishida agrees with Aristotle, who held that *tópos* is not only existent, but necessary for the very existence of motion and of the bodies themselves. (Aristotle, *Physica*, IV 208a25-b30)

However useful in terms of comparison, it is important to note that, although a necessity for things in order for them to come to be and to relate with others in the same way as Aristotle's "*tópos*," Nishida's "*basho*" is conceptually, as the Japanese philosopher himself admits, much closer to Plato's idea of *khôra* presented in *Timaeus* (*Tim.* 51a3-b6) In this dialogue, Plato deals with *khôra* as being that which gives extension (and in a way, existence) to the ideas in the material realm while, for Nishida, *basho* is a necessity for the thing in the realm of consciousness, or else, in the "field of consciousness." Contrarily to Plato, however for Nishida, *basho* represents more than the receptacle in which things find their existence in the sensible world, as even physical places find their respective *basho* in consciousness which is, in turn, projected on the background of absolute nothingness.

The *basho* where phenomena are placed in consciousness is, contrarily to their spatial location, not accessed through everyday experience, but only through pure, direct experience. This happens because, while the experience of physical places, for instance, is subject to perceptions such as being outside or inside or larger or smaller, the perception of *basho*, as Nishida deals with it, means solely to perceive *basho* as it is. This also brings Nishida's conception close to Plato's *khôra*. Krummel indicates this proximity by stating that:

Derrida, who most certainly was unaware of Nishida's appropriation, comes close to Nishida's conception when he remarks that Plato's *khôra* as *triton genos* that is *neither* of the immutable intelligibles (*ideas*) *nor* of the becoming and corruptible sensibles (*images*), is a dark "beyond" (in *excess* of sense and meaning), defying the either-or "logic of non-contradiction," "the logic of binarity." (Krummel 2012, 21)

*Basho*, as Plato's *khôra* is, then, a sort of "third genus" of things as it is not of the same kind of thing as a universal, immutable idea, neither a sensible phenomenon in nature. It is perceivable without being an object and it receives things without ever being an active subject. It is, in the words of Nishida himself, a "thing that becomes a grammatical predicate, but not a subject." (NKZ 18, 303-304)



## 6. “Basho” and consciousness

It is not difficult to accept that every thing in consciousness has a *basho*. According to what is being proposed by Nishida, when we experience an object in space, both the object and the physical space in which it lies have an individual *basho* in consciousness that allow us to perceive them. However, to say that “an object is in space” is to experience not only each one of them (object and space), but also to perceive the relation that exists between them. Indeed, “space,” having a *basho* and being perceived by the observing self is also an object in this relation and to say that “an object is in space” represents the same kind of understanding as to say that “an object relates with another object.” Thus, although through experience in the common sense people may say that in the relationship “an object is in space,” only the object has a place in which it exists, in fact, the work of consciousness when experiencing such relationship through “pure experience” is to allocate not only the “object” in a *basho*, but also “space” and the “relationship” between them. Very similar to what Bergson and Einstein thought when they considered space to be essential for the thinking of everything – especially in the case of Bergson, who considered that even non-corporeal things are thought in terms of space. Not only that, but also every characteristic attributed to the object such as its color, size and texture and, indeed, every “content” that may be related to this experience has, similarly, a *basho* of its own. Again, there is a *basho* for every object, every content and every act. All those things in *basho*, that Nishida identifies as “phenomena of consciousness” [意識現象 – *ishiki genshō*], are in constant change; not only because things relate with each other, but also, because their meanings may change in consciousness in accordance to time (history) or context (society/culture). In this sense, phenomena are in *basho* in the same way as elements are in *tópos* for Aristotle. Elements have their natural *tópos* but start to move at any moment they transform into some different element with different properties in the same way as objects change and transform in consciousness, and their relations also do so concomitantly.

It is now clear that every single phenomenon possesses a *basho* in consciousness and that all of them are objectified (in the grammatical meaning of the term) and placed in a *basho* that works like a grammatical predicate that receives and gives

contextual meaning to them. It is not difficult to notice the influence of Bergsonian “space” here as, in the same way as the French philosopher deems it as being necessary for consciousness to think about anything, Nishida’s “*basho*” is also at the basis of everything that has existence from the standpoint of the conscious self. However, Bergson does not deal with “space” as the epistemological substratum that gives existence to the phenomena, as did Nishida, but rather as a completely passive medium in which perceived things exist and relate with each other. So, how does Nishida understand the “*basho*” of consciousness as whole? If things, in their respective *basho* relate with each other in consciousness, there must be some sort of “common ground” in which all those relations take place. For, if every phenomenon existed isolated from others in their respective *basho*, relations would not be a possibility. Once again, one must not forget that *basho* is not merely a *tokoro*, but rather a limit or a portion (*tokoro* or *sho*) surrounded by a field (*ba*) and, thus, without a common medium, relations would be impossible due to the “force” exerted by the field that tends to give unity to the phenomena by isolating them. To help solving this knot, we must once again revert to the ideas of the Stagirite philosopher. The Aristotelian *tópos* acquires the same shape as the things that are inside of it and also gives unity to them, but there are also *tópoi* that surround and encompass the ones of the individual things as, for instance, the natural *tópos* of earth is inside the *tópos* of water and the *tópos* of all the moving and changing elements (as well as those of the immutable ones as well) exist inside the *tópos* of the universe that is immovable. And in the same way as there is an absolute, immovable *tópos* that encompasses all the relative *tópos* of the constantly moving bodies in Aristotle’s conception of the universe, there must also be an ultimate *basho* that encompasses the *basho* of all the ever-changing phenomena of consciousness. If the *basho* of every phenomenon experienced by the acting self is in consciousness, then consciousness itself must be the realm in which the *basho* of every thing relates with each other.

It does not mean consciousness is the ultimate *basho* in which every experienced (or rather experienceable) thing is placed, as there are multiple *basho* in consciousness that correlate and overlay one another and, consciousness itself, finds itself on a background of true nothingness beyond which nothing else is placed. Also phenomena do not *exist* inside of consciousness, but they rather have places and *reflect*

or *project* [映す – *utsusu*] inside of it in order to be thought by the *self* [我 – *ware* or *ga*]. In the words of Nishida:

[...] there must be an immovable “field of consciousness” [意識の野 – *ishiki no ya*]<sup>14</sup> in contrast to the “phenomena of consciousness” that go on changing every time and from moment to moment. (*NKZ* 4, 210)

This “field of consciousness” is that immovable *basho* that the individual *basho* of all the things that reflect in it need in order to be able to establish relationships among them. About this “reflection” or “projection” of the “phenomena of consciousness,” Nishida explains as follows.

When we think of things [物事 – *monogoto*], there must be like a *basho* in which they reflect. At first, we may think of it as a “field of consciousness.” In order to be conscious of things, they must reflect on the “field of consciousness.” However, one must distinguish between the projected “phenomena of consciousness” and the projecting “field of consciousness.” We can say that there is no such a thing as a “field of consciousness” outside of the very continuity of the “phenomena of consciousness” themselves. (*NKZ* 4, 210)

Therefore, Nishida is holding that the “field of consciousness” is not only the *field* in which the *basho* of every projected phenomenon is placed, but also that there are no conscious phenomena being projected outside of it. Everything that has a *basho* for us, i.e. everything that *exists* for us, must have its *basho* in the “field of consciousness” that is like Aristotle’s immovable *tópos*, not only in that it encompasses the *basho* of all the other things, but also in that, from the standpoint of consciousness, there is no existing thing that is not projected in it. There is no *basho* projected outside the “field of consciousness.” As Nishida further explains:

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<sup>14</sup> “Field,” here, has a different meaning from that of “*ba*.” It means “field” as a broad surface in which the phenomena are reflect and where they possess a *basho* in consciousness.

If the object transcends the act of consciousness [意識作用 – *ishiki sayō*] and if the object is totally outside of consciousness we, existing inside consciousness, would be unable to think even that the content of our consciousness indicates an object or that the object transcends the act of consciousness. (NKZ 4, 211)

The “first” consciousness referred to by Nishida (i.e. the consciousness that relates with the objects) is the consciousness of the self, while the “latter” (i.e. the consciousness within we find ourselves) is the “field of consciousness” in which all the experienced phenomena, including the self, is reflected and find its *basho*. So, it is not the consciousness of the things that can be thought that occurs inside the self, but rather the self that, being one of the experienced phenomena, also has its *basho* in the field of the broader “consciousness.” This dialogues directly with *Zen no Kenkyū* in which Nishida proposes that everything exists within the unity of the universe and that the external “natural phenomena” and the “phenomena of consciousness” that the self perceives as being internal to it are, in fact, one and the same. When Nishida talks about the “phenomena of consciousness,” one must be aware that they do not represent only the phenomena of the self’s inner consciousness, but also the external “phenomena of nature” as well. And to say that does not mean that natural world does not exist or that it exists solely as projections in the “field of consciousness.” What scientists take as the order of the “natural phenomena” – for example Newton’s three laws of motion or Kepler’s laws of planetary motion – is, in fact, the order of our “phenomena of consciousness.” In the very same way, the opposition we are induced to perceive between the spirit and the nature, mind and matter, subject and object is caused merely by conflicts in the “system of reality,” or else different points of view on the unity of the universe that Nishida proposes in the *Zen no Kenkyū*. In that work, he better explains about the “consciousness” and its relationship with the phenomena in the following passage:

All consciousness is established according to a unity. And this unity reaches from the unity in the small daily consciousness of each individual person to the large universal [宇宙的 – *uchūteki*] unity of consciousness that includes all individual consciousness. ([To say that] the unity of consciousness is limited to

individual consciousness is nothing more than an arbitrary dogma added on to “pure experience”). The natural world [自然界 – *shizenkai*] is a system of consciousness constituted by such a trans-individual unity [超個人統一 – *chōkōjin tōitsu*]. We unify the experience of the self by means of an individual subject [主観 – *shukan*] and, furthermore, unify the experience of all individuals by means of a trans-individual subject, to which natural world is born as an object. (NKZ 1, 180)

It means that the self, seeing itself as a subject, objectifies the individual self of others and sees the natural world (or the world of objects) through this subject-object relationship. However, the self and its individual consciousness are also projected in the larger consciousness that encompasses itself and all the other individual consciousness. In other words, the individual consciousness, together with the self, is also projected in the “field of consciousness” and does not transcend it. Consciousness is constantly reflected upon itself and is, thus, self-contained. It limits, at that same time all that which is known and all that which can be known and is complete and encompassing of all of the unity present in the world of nature. In this way, external “natural phenomena” and internal “emotions-and-volitions” [情意 – *jōi*] alike are projected in consciousness and have their *basho* inside of its field, the first, being projected from outside the self, while the latter are projected from inside of it but is, nevertheless, projected.

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