



On the Human Condition

Miki Kiyoshi 三木 清

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Translator's Introduction

In 1933, Miki Kiyoshi (1897–1945) began to write what is widely considered his *magnum opus*, *The Logic of the Imagination*. The first part of the work was completed and published in segments in the journal *Shisō* (思想) between 1937 and 1938. In 1939, the first three sections on myth, institution, and technology were published together under the title, *The Logic of the Imagination: Part One* (『構想力の論理第一』). From 1939 to 1943, Miki worked on the next chapter, “Experience,” which was also published in segments in *Shisō*. The final planned chapter, “Language,” was never completed as Miki died in prison in 1945.

“On the Human Condition” (『人間の条件について』) was originally published as “The Human Condition” (『人間の条件』) in August 1939, the same year as *The Logic of the Imagination: Part One*. And although the text is short, it provides important insights into Miki’s central concept, the logic of the imagination as a dialectical creative logic that mediates the human and nature, the interiority of subjectivity and the external world of objective things, *pathos* (affect, emotion, or disposition) and *logos* (language and reason). We find here the central logic of Miki’s philosophy and the problem it sought to address, stripped of the wealth of content found in the chapters in *The Logic of the Imagination*, which, by Miki’s own account, only formed a collection of “research notes” toward a “phenomenology of the imagination” and not a rigorous working out of the “logic of the imagination” itself. In setting out the problematic of his philosophy of the imagination, Miki articulates his project in terms of a critical engagement with Ernst Cassirer, Martin Heidegger, Nakai Masakazu, and Nishida Kitarō.

As with all translations, decisions had to be made between alternative readings of the text. The very first problem is the title itself: 『人間の条件に

ついて」。The Japanese term 条件 (or 条件) signifies “a condition, a requirement, a qualification, or a prerequisite.” The title of Miki’s essay is the same as the title of a classic Japanese war epic『人間の条件』, based on a 1958 six-part Japanese novel by Gomikawa Junpei (五味川純平), which has been translated into English as *The Human Condition*¹; and it is the same as the Japanese translation of Hannah Arendt’s *The Human Condition* (『人間の条件』, 1958). The term “condition,” however, can mean either “a mode or state of being” or a “prerequisite” for some state of being. Miki plays on this to speak of nihility as “the pre-condition of the human condition” (人間の条件の条件). 条件 has been translated as “pre-condition,” where the hyphen is meant to preserve this double meaning. The sea is thus the “pre-condition” of a wave and the bubble, “for one cell, all other cells are pre-conditions,” and “nihility (虚無) is the *a priori* condition for the world... to be a pre-condition of the human being.”

Following the translations of Nishitani Keiji (西谷啓治), the Japanese term 虚無 has been translated as “nihility.” This is necessary to preserve the connection with Heidegger and Nietzsche. Literally, the term 虚無 means “false/worthless (虚) nothingness (無).” For Madhyamaka (the middle-way) school of Buddhism, emptiness is the “middle path” (中道) between existence (有) and nothingness (無). True nothingness (無) must be distinguished from a simplistic sense of nothingness as simple negation (虚無). In his uncompleted work『哲學的人間學』(*Philosophical Anthropology*), Miki distinguishes between “nihility” (虚無) and “nothingness” (無) while at the same time connecting them. “Nihility (虚無) is nothingness (無) as the extreme limit of the objective and subjective existence of the human being.”² “Nothingness transcends the subject-object relationship of the human being as a whole. It is not something that is merely internal, rather, it transcends the dichotomy between internal and external. The consciousness of nihility (虚無) is the pathos dimension of nothingness (無). Nihility (虚無) is thus the necessary way to reach the true state of nothingness (無).”³ Miki

1. In 1932, Tosaka Jun (戸坂潤) founded and led the Society for the Study of Materialism (唯物論研究会) of which both Miki and Gomikawa were members. It is, therefore, safe to assume that they knew each other. In 1938, the Society for the Study of Materialism was dissolved and many of its members were arrested including Miki and Gomikawa.

2. MKZ 18: 292.

3. Ibid.

distances himself here from Nishida without breaking from him; and, like Nishitani, argues that we must pass through nihility to the end to arrive at original nothingness. For Miki, Nishida's concept of absolute nothingness (絶対無) was too abstract, too removed from the concrete condition of the human being confronted not so much with nothingness itself as with the experience of nihility.

The world and things of the world are the second “pre-condition” for the human being. The world, which includes nature and useful things, is a relational field. Everything that *exists* can be “broken down” (分解する) into a series of relational elements that can be further broken down, *ad infinitum*. This “breaking down” (分解する) also signifies a mathematical process of factoring. A factor is a number that divides another number leaving no remainder. The understanding of the human being in terms of the relational field of the world seems to suggest that it is “impossible to find anything left of the human itself apart from the pre-conditions.” We are thus conditioned by the things (物) of the relational field of the world and end by being ourselves a thing (物) of the world of logos. “The original logos reveals *Dasein* in *Sein*. The reason why existence is revealed as a thing (物) is because it is fundamentally based on logos itself. Actual existence is rendered determinate (限定) by being something, and this being determinate (限定) itself is governed by logos, which makes being determinate an intrinsic function (機能) of the thing (物).”⁴ “Nevertheless, it is certain that I exist as something (もの) different from the world. The human being and the pre-condition of the human being are altogether different. How is this possible?” That is, how is it that we are immanent in the world and yet transcend the world? It is because we transcend, “float above,” not the world but nihility that the “self” can “be something (もの) fundamentally differentiated (区別) from the elements of the world.” As a thing (物) of the world, we are connected to everything else; as something (もの) fundamentally differentiated (区別) from the elements of the world, we are isolated. “The problem of isolation is not so much a problem of the individual as it is a problem of the world, based on man's transcendence of the world within the world. The feeling of isolation is the awareness that one is not standing above the world but rather above nihility (虚無). In isolation, we have consciousness of nihility

4. MKZ 3: 201.

(虚無) rather than consciousness of one person or self. In isolation, the self becomes a place of pure sensitivity rather than selfhood.”⁵

From the fact that nihility is the pre-condition of the world and the human being, Miki concludes that “one’s life is formation (形成)” and “the self is a formative force (形成力).” The term 形成 (formation) means literally “to become (成) form (形),” and thus life is both self-forming and world-forming; in fact, self-forming in and through world-forming: “Life (生命) produces its own form (形) externally as form (形), it gives form (形) to itself (自己) by giving form (形) to things (物).” Cassirer articulates a similar point: “A self-awareness (*Selbsterfassung*) of life is possible only if it does not simply remain absolutely within itself. It must give itself form: precisely by this ‘alterity’ of form, it gains, if not its reality, then its ‘visibility’ (*Sichtigkeit*).”⁶ For Cassirer, there is no form without life, no life without form: life and form constitute a single individual unity. As Miki states: “life is form (形)” and “formation (形成: the becoming form) is always the formation (形成: the becoming form) from nihility.”

In defining “形” (form), Miki takes up and transforms the technical language of Cassirer in a way that suggests the influence of his friend Nakai Masakazu. In his 1910 seminal work, *Substance-Concepts and Function-Concepts*, Cassirer argues that in Aristotle’s ontology “the category of relation... is forced into a dependent and subordinate position to being.... Relation only adds supplementary and external modifications to the being, such as do not affect its real ‘nature.’”⁷ The subordination of relation to being results in a series of antinomic, unrelated, self-identical, closed spheres of being: life/form, subject/object, interiority/exteriority, and so on. Cassirer’s respective philosophical outlook emerges from his study of the function-concept found in Dedekind’s “mathematical structuralism” and the move from set theory to group theory. Whereas a set is just a collection of self-identical things, a group is a set *and* a transformative relation (a function) that is *productive* of the relational existence that defines the members of a group. A function is the law of the transformative relation that mediates between different elements belonging to a group. Mathematics is thus the study of

5. MKZ 18: 275.

6. PSF 3: 44/45.

7. CASSIRER 1953, 8.

relationally and functionally determinate structures or topological fields that are productive. Cassirer generalizes Dedekind's function relation $\phi(x)$ into the relational logic of the symbolic function as the different modes of world-forming. The form of a function is nothing more than a mapping relation in which one thing reflects another thing. The symbolic function is a "peculiar kind of 'identity' that is attributed to altogether heterogeneous figures in virtue of their being transformable into one another by means of certain operations defining a group."⁸ Cassirer calls this an "originary relationship (*Urverhältnis*) that can be expressed in different formulations as the relationship of 'form' to 'content,' as the relationship of 'universal' to 'individual,' as the relationship of 'validity' to 'being.'"⁹ It is a "strictly unitary relation" of "opposing elements."

In contrast to the substance-thinking of Ancient philosophy and the relational and function-thinking of Modern philosophy, Miki argues that the "new thinking must be a form-thinking (形の思考)" and that "form (形) is not a simple substance (實體), nor is it a simple relation or function (機能). Form (形) is a synthesis (総合) of substance and relation. Form (形) is to be thought where relation-concept (關係念) and substance-concept (實體念) are one, where substance-concept (實體念) and functional-concept (機能念) are one." Miki substitutes, as did Nakai, the abstract epistemological categories of mathematical function-concepts (函數念) with the existential categories of functional-concepts (機能念) which determines an ability or practical function: the "function" of a window or ship, to take up Nakai's example.

In his account of the contemporary condition of the human, Miki makes use of Plato's distinction between the boundary and the unbounded, *πέρας* (limit) and *ἄπειρον* (unlimited), between the "determinate" (限定) and the "indeterminate" (無限定), between "form" and the "formless."¹⁰ Although Miki does not use the Greek in this text, he does in other places.¹¹ It was important, however, to translate 無限定 as "indeterminate" to preserve the allusion to Heidegger for whom *Dasein* exists by itself as fundamentally inde-

8. CASSIRER 1944, 25.

9. ERNST CASSIRER, "Erkenntnistheorie nebst den Grenzfragen der Logik," *ECW*, 9: 152ff.

10. It is possible that Miki has taken this up from Cassirer. Cf. *PSF* 2: 125/119.

11. Cf. *MKZ* 9: 89, 117; *MKZ* 3: 199.

terminate and in the anticipatory resoluteness of its authentic being-toward-death (nihility), Dasein realizes itself as fundamentally indeterminate.

Having lost its substantial ground, the human finds itself afloat in a sea of nihility confronted with one problem: how “to create form out of such formlessness.” “Therein lies the significance of all contemporary transcendental thinking. Formation must be a formation from nihility, an artistic formation that transcends science. It may be said that there is no salvation for the present age until an artistic worldview, a worldview that is not contemplative but formative, becomes dominant.”

For Miki as for Cassirer, life is a dynamic, open-ended, and dialectical process of formation *and* its product; the world is a constant dialectical process moving from the *forma formata* (form formed) to the *forma formans* (form forming), moving “from the created to the creating,”¹² to speak with Nishida.

The *forma formans*, which becomes *forma formata*, which must become it for the sake of its own self-affirmation, but which nevertheless never completely dissolves in it, but nevertheless retains the strength to win itself back from it, to become *forma formans*, to be born again—this is what signifies the becoming of *Geist* and the becoming of culture.¹³

For Miki, “the logic of the imagination is the logic of symbols (象徴). [However,] what Cassirer refers to as ‘the philosophy of symbolic forms’ needs to be rewritten in accordance with the logic of the imagination.”¹⁴ Cassirer’s account of the symbolic remains for Miki too abstract, too connected to the function-concepts of mathematics. As a transcendental critique, it is limited to the *factum* of the forms of the historical but cannot account for the facticity of the concrete historicity of historical form (歴史的な形).

For Miki, the logic of the imagination is the logic of invention: “A true symbol is not a symbol of something (be it being or thought). The essence of a symbol is to symbolize without something symbolized.”¹⁵ Cassirer would

12. NKZ II: 422.

13. ERNST CASSIRER, *Zur Metaphysik der symbolischen Formen*, vol. 1 *Nachgelassene Manuskripte und Texte*, ed. by John Michael Krois (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1995), 17f.

14. MKZ 8: 34.

15. MKZ 8: 40.

agree: “the symbol hastens ahead of reality, showing it the way and initially clearing its path. It does not merely look back on this reality as being (*sei-ende*) and become (*gewordene*), but it is itself an element and motif of its becoming itself.... It reaches forward into the to come (*Künftig*) and outward into sheer possibility while placing both before itself in a purely symbolic act.”¹⁶

Miki now defines his logic of the imagination: “The creation of forms is not so much a dialectic of synthesis as a dialectic of mixing (混合の辯證). My logic of the imagination should be characterized as a dialectic of mixing (混合). Mixing (混合) is the combining (結合) of the indefinite (不定なもの), and the basis of the indefiniteness of the indefinite is the existence of nihility (虚無の存在).... The dialectic of mixing must be a formation from nihility.” Miki clarifies what is meant by the term “mixing” (混合) by reference to Plato’s concept of “μικτόν,”¹⁷ the mixed (混合); the concept of “panmixie”¹⁸ used in biology to designate random matting or the freedom of combination, alteration, and dilution of heritable characteristics that are supposed to occur in the absence of natural selection; the “*compositum*”¹⁹; and Heinrich Rickert’s concept of “*Mischform*”²⁰ which refers to a science that is at once historical and general, e.g., a “historical” natural science.

In the *Philebus*, Plato considers the Pythagorean doctrine. He substitutes, however, the term *πέρας*, the limit, for the word *περαλινοντα*, which is Philolaus’ expression for the limiting; and the union of the two (the limit and the unlimited) he calls *μικτόν*, the mixed. Everything is constituted out of the *πέρας*, and the *ἄπειρον*, the limit and the unlimited, and the result is the *μικτόν*, that is, the union of the two. The actual world is thus the “mixture” of existence and non-existence.²¹

Speaking of the methodology of the sciences in his *Kulturwissenschaft und Naturwissenschaft* (1899), Heinrich Rickert from the Südwest-Deutsche Neo-Kantian school writes: “Reality becomes nature when we look at it with regard to the general, it becomes history when we look at it with regard

16. PSF 3: 208/203.

17. MKZ 5: 39; MKZ 8: 81.

18. MKZ 8: 42.

19. MKZ 5: 39.

20. MKZ 6: 386.

21. Cf. MKZ 6: 319.

to the particular and individual. Accordingly, I want to contrast the generalizing procedure of natural science with the individualizing procedure of history.²² The *Mischformen* (mixed forms) of science are generalizing and individualizing and treat the *Mittelgebeit* (i.e., middle area) between nature and history.

Whereas Cassirer's transcendental philosophy can explain how the creative formative energies of objective spirit (language, myth, art) form and configure the world of meaning in which the subject and object are understood, it cannot speak to the facticity of historical reality, to a historical form (歴史的な形). Whereas Heidegger's existential philosophy can explain the facticity and finitude of Dasein, it cannot speak to the form that provides Dasein with its historical form (歴史的な形). The historical form of which Miki speaks is both sense and existence: it is neither an abstract universality nor a radically concrete existence; it is both universal and individual. The "form-thinking" of which Miki speaks in this text is both general and individual, both natural and historical; it is a logic of formation out of nihility that creates the objective and subjective, externality and interiority, the transpersonal meaning of the world and the existential existence of Dasein, logos and pathos through the logic of dual transcendence of the productive imagination.

22. RICKERT 1899, 77.

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Translated by Steve Loftis

[254]¹ The more I try by whatever means to focus myself, the more I feel as if I am floating above something. Above what exactly am I floating? I can only say that I am floating above nihility (虚無). The self is a single (一つの) point inside nihility. This point can be infinitely reduced. But no matter how small it becomes, it is not one with the nihility in which the self floats. Life (生命) is not nihility; rather, nihility is the pre-condition of the human being (人間). We cannot, however, think of the human being apart from this pre-condition, just as a wave, even a bubble, cannot be considered apart from the sea. The idea that one's life (人生)² is like a bubble is mistaken if one does not consider the wave and the sea as the pre-conditions for the bubble. But just as bubbles and waves are one with the sea, so human beings are one with the nihility that is their pre-condition. Life (生命) is the force (力) to gather (掻き集める) nihility. It is a formative force (形成力) out of nihility. That which is formed (形作られた) by gathering (集める) nihility is not nihility. Nihility and the human being are as different as death and life. But nihility is the pre-condition of the human being.

[255] There is a myriad of other things that can be considered as part of the pre-condition of the human being. For example, this room, this desk, this book or the knowledge it imparts, the garden of the house, the whole of nature, the family, and the whole of society... the world. What is described in these few words can be further broken down (分解する: factored) into a myriad of elements. These myriad elements (要素) are interrelated. Human beings, their body (身体) and their spirit (精神), can also be broken down (分解する: factored) into an infinite number of elements (要素) of the same order. And for one (一つ) cell, all other cells are pre-conditions; and for each mental image (心象), all other mental images are pre-conditions. These pre-

1. [Numbers in square brackets refer to the original pagination of the Japanese.]

2. [人生 may also be translated as "human life." 人 can mean a "person" or "human." 人生 has been translated as "one's life" because in this text, it is clear that Miki intends here a radically individual life and not human life in general.]

conditions are related to all other pre-conditions. If we go on breaking down (分解: factoring) in this way, it would seem impossible to find anything left of the human itself apart from the pre-conditions. I see myself broken down (分解されて: factored) into the same elements as the elements of the world. Nevertheless, it is certain that I exist as something (もの) different from the world. The human being and the pre-condition of the human being are altogether different. How is this possible?

The fact that things (物) are a pre-condition of the human being depends on the fact that it is only revealed as such inside nihilism (虚無の中に). In other words, nihilism is the *a priori* condition for the world—whether we think of it as infinitely large or infinitely [256] small—to be a pre-condition of the human being. As something (もの) that can itself return to nihilism, or rather, as something (もの) that is nihilism, as something (もの) constrained by the fundamental pre-condition of the human being, which is nihilism, the things (物) of the world are the pre-condition of the human being. Only in this way can there be any distinction between the human being and the world, between the human being and its pre-condition, even though the human being can be infinitely broken down (分解され: factored) into the same elements (要素) as the world, into the relation of elements (要素の関係). If nihilism is not the pre-condition of the condition of the human (人間の条件の条件), how can my self be something (もの) fundamentally differentiated (区別) from the elements of the world?

From the fact that nihilism is the pre-condition of the human being or the pre-condition of something that is the pre-condition of the human being, it follows that one's life (人生) is formation (形成). The self is a formative force (形成力), and not only is the human something formed, but the world, too, is something formed (形成されたもの), and it is only when the world is something formed that it can really have the sense (意味: *Sinn*) of an environment for human life. Life (生命) as form (形) produces form (形) externally and gives form (形) to itself (自己) by giving form (形) to things (物). Such formation (形成) is possible because nihilism is the pre-condition of the human being.

The world can be broken down (分解され: factored) into elements (要素), the human being too can be broken down (分解され: factored) into the elements of the world, and a relation between one element and another element (要素と要素との間に) can be observed, and the elements themselves

can be broken down (分解され: factored) into relational elements. These relations can be formulated [257] in terms of a number of laws, but life (生命) cannot be established in such a world. Why is this? Because life (生命) is not an abstract law, it is not a simple relation nor the sum or product of relations; life is form (生命は形であり), and form (形) is not conceivable in such a world. Formation (形成) must be conceived from some other place, that is, from nihility. Formation (形成) is always the formation (形成) from nihility. The coming into existence of form (形の成立), the relation between form and form, and the transformation from form to form can all be understood only on the basis of nihility. This is the essential characteristic of form (形).

In ancient times, people thought in terms of substance-concepts (實體念), and in modern times, people thought in terms of relation-concepts (關係念) or functional-concepts (機能念) ([mathematical] function-concepts (函數念)). The new thinking must be a form-thinking (形の思考). Form (形) is not a simple substance (實體), nor is it a simple relation or function (機能). Form (形) is a synthesis (総合) of substance and relation. Form (形) is to be thought where the relation-concept (關係念) and the substance-concept (實體念) are one, where the substance-concept (實體念) and the functional-concept (機能念) are one.

In the past, human beings lived in a determinate (限定された) world. The territory (地域) in which they lived was visible from one end to the other. They knew the tools they used, where and by whom they were made [258], and how good they were. They also knew the source and reliability of the news they obtained. Thus, because their living conditions and environment were determinate and tangible (形の見えるもの: lit. something seen of the form), human beings themselves had a definite form in their spirit (精神: *ethos*), their facial expressions (表情), and their general appearance (風貌). In other words, in the past human beings had a character (性格: personality, disposition).

Today, however, the condition (條件) of the human being is different. People today (現代人) live in an indeterminate (無限定) world. I do not know where or by whom my tools are made, nor do I know where the news and knowledge I rely on come from. Not only is everything anonym (アノニム) (anonymous (無名: nameless)), everything is amorph (アモルフ) (amorphous (無定形: without determinate form)). As a result of living in such

conditions (條件), people today (現代人) have become anonymous (無名: nameless), amorphous (無定形: without determinate form), and characterless (無性格: non-nature).

What is more, the fact that the world of the individual today (現代人) is so indeterminate (無限定) is the result of its most determinate nature. Through the development of transportation, every corner of the world has become interconnected. I am connected to a myriad of unseen things. Isolated things (もの) have become extremely determinate (限定) by entering into a myriad of relations (關係). The substantial thing (實體的なもの) is thoroughly determinate [259] by being broken down into relations. In contrast to this determinate world, we must say that the previous world was indeterminate. Nevertheless, today's world is indeterminate (無限定) even if it is determinate (限定) in terms of relations and functions (函數); or better, as a result of being so determinate (限定) it has become indeterminate (無限定) in form. In fact, this indeterminateness is the result of the development of a particular means of being determinate, which is the specific complexity of what is called the characterlessness (無性格: non-nature) of people today (現代人).

The greatest problem of the human being today is how to create form out of such formlessness (形のないもの: something formless). This problem cannot be solved from an immanent standpoint. It cannot because this amorphous state results from the exhaustive development of limitation. Therein lies the significance of all contemporary transcendental thinking. Formation must be a formation from nihilism, an artistic formation that transcends science. It may be said that there is no salvation for the present age until an artistic worldview, a worldview that is not contemplative but formative, becomes dominant.

In what is called the chaos of the present age, everything is being mixed (混合). It is not so much that opposites are being synthesized (総合: integrated, combined), but rather that they are being mixed. From this mixing, [260] new forms will emerge. The creation of forms is not so much a dialectic (辯證法) of synthesis as a dialectic of mixing. What I call the logic of the imagination should be characterized as a dialectic of mixing. Mixing is the combining (結合) of the indefinite (不定なもの), and the ground of the indefiniteness of the indefinite is the existence of nihilism (虚無の存在). Everything is inside nihilism, and we can think of mixing from the fact

that each has its own particular nihility. Nihility has not only a universal existence but also a particular existence in each case. The dialectic of mixing must be a formation from nihility. The philosophy of the ancients, which was concerned with the generation (生成) of the cosmos from chaos, contains a profound truth. The important thing is to grasp the meaning (意味) of this truth in a thoroughly subjective way.

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 NKZ 旧版『西田幾多郎全集』 [*Complete Works of Nishida Kitaro, Old Edition*] (Tokyo: Iwanami). Pagination in this work refers to the old edition unless otherwise noted.
 PSF Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*: vol. 1, *Language*; vol. 2, *Mythical Thinking*; vol. 3, *Phenomenology of Cognition*, trans. Steve G. Lofts (London: Routledge, 2021).

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