



Independence and Self-Realization

The Historical Background of the Early Nishida's Individualism

It is obvious that Nishida Kitarō's considerations on the topics of individuals and individuality in *An Inquiry into the Good* were a watershed moment in Japanese thought. However, no matter how original Nishida's thought was, his ideas did not merely appear out of nowhere. Nishida, who was born in the turbulent Meiji era (1868–1912), lived in a time captivated by the need to reconcile the flood of new ideas concerning the value of individual autonomy and moral cultivation with both traditional ethics and the need to create a modern and centralized state. In this paper, I wish to sketch Nishida's intellectual environment, as well as show how it helped create the framework in which his early ethical thought operated.

This will be accomplished by first giving a sketch of the circumstances in which individualism was imported into Japan by enlightenment thinkers like Fukuzawa Yukichi. I shall then use this discussion of Fukuzawa in order to contextualize the importation of the position which likely had the most influence on Nishida's early ethics, the theory of self-realization (自己実現説). I shall then wrap this article up with a largely biographical sketch of how Nishida relates to these developments in Japanese individualism.

KEYWORDS: Nishida Kitarō—Individuality—Individualism—Self-Realization—Moral Cultivation—Meiji era—Fukuzawa Yukichi—T. H. Green—Ōnishi Hajime—Tsunashima Ryōsen

The question of what it means to be an individual in the context of the history of Japanese thought undoubtedly developed in a new direction in Nishida Kitarō's (1870–1945) *An Inquiry into the Good*. As has been reported not only by researchers of Nishida, but also by other notable Japanese philosophers influenced by Nishida, various themes in this work were critical to the development of Japanese individualism. This book's concept of an individuality deeper than mere individuated consciousness—as well as the positive ethical connotations of this form of individuality—became cornerstones of the Kyoto school's treatments of the topic, and continue to influence philosophers all over the world to this day.

Yet, we must not forget that for all its uniqueness, Nishida's early view of individuality did not merely appear out of nowhere. Obviously, the connections to Zen have been well established, and for decades authors have been chasing down the connections between Nishida and the verifiable mountain of Western philosophy he had been reading. Yet, insofar as the problem of individuality is concerned, we must furthermore remember the importance of the Meiji era (1868–1912) to Nishida's work. Put bluntly, my belief (that I will justify in greater detail below) is that Nishida's early philosophical project of dealing with the ethical aspects of individuality was formed largely by debates internal to Japan in the Meiji era, and that Nishida's early ethics can be understood better when put in this context.

Hence, my concern in this paper is not how Nishida interpreted the individual or how his early work developed into his later position. Insofar as this investigation is concerned, I am more interested in what kinds of problems Nishida was trying to solve and what kind of framework he inherited. My proposal, then, is to sketch the debates in the background of *An Inquiry into the Good* in order to better inform ourselves of both the goals of Nishida's ethical agenda, as well as the “parameters” within which he tackled problems

concerning the individual (insofar as there was a certain atmosphere that conditioned the way that any author of the time would address these problems). Although it is certainly not possible to exhaustively discuss all aspects of Meiji individualism here, I believe that giving a sketch of the genealogical line most pertinent to Nishida's philosophy will be sufficient for us to see the framework of the debates which shaped his early work. While doing so, I shall specifically keep in mind two questions. First, what problems concerning individuals and individuality captivated Meiji thinkers from Nishi Amane to Nishida Kitarō? Second, on what grounds were debates concerning these problems set upon? In this way, we will be able to sketch the framework of the debate which Nishida operated in.

My method for accomplishing this goal will be to work in the following order. First, I will discuss the importation of individualism by enlightenment thinkers like Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835–1901). By doing so, I will show that early debates on the topic largely centered around how to reconcile the need for independent and educated individuals with the need to create an independent and modern Japanese state. I will use this background as a springboard to discuss the position that had the greatest influence on the early Nishida's ethics: the theory of self-realization (自己実現説). Specifically, I shall discuss how competing interpretations of the British philosopher T. H. Green (1836–1882) attempted to solve the problems put forth in the previous section, while also discussing new problems concerning what individual cultivation meant. I shall then move on to a largely biographical account of Nishida's connection to these debates, placed alongside some textual evidence of their impact. While I cannot flesh out the implications of these findings here, I will end this paper with some comments about the possible impact that recognizing Nishida's unique historical background can have on both our interpretations of his philosophy, and his relationship to Japanese intellectual history as a whole.

EARLY MEIJI INDIVIDUALISM: FUKUZAWA YUKICHI AND INDEPENDENCE

To begin, we should recognize that public discourse regarding the limits of individual autonomy and equality amongst individuals had little foothold in Japanese ethics before the Meiji period. Indeed, as authors like

Nakamura Hajime claim, the Japanese emphasis on the individual's embedding in various vertical relationships acted as a barrier to recognizing inherent equality amongst individuals.¹ By that same token, George Sansom notes that pre-Meiji Japanese ethics lacked what he calls a "liberal tradition," insofar as there were seemingly no systematic efforts to fight for equal tolerance amongst individuals with different preferences.² Obviously, exceptions to these blanket statements exist, even if we do not have time to give them the time they deserve.³ Moreover, we should not dismiss the possibility that "individuality" may have existed in a way different than it did in the West.⁴ With that said, however, it is a fact that the debates that sprang forth in the Meiji period were new to the Japanese intellectual canon.

The earliest motive to tackle the problems of individual autonomy and equality was exceedingly practical. After Matthew Perry opened the ports of Japan to the Americans in 1853 (which was soon followed by an onslaught of other unfair treaties with the dominant Western powers of the day), plans to re-construct Japan as a modern and centralized nation-state capable of surviving in the 19th century hit the ground running.⁵ After the establishment of the Meiji government and the "restoration" of the emperor in 1868, these efforts took on an even greater importance. This is evidenced by the creation of mass railways and postal service, changes in tax policies and many other large-scale reforms.⁶ It was in this context that theorists began to debate what was to be expected of each individual in a modern nation-state, with

1. NAKAMURA 1964, 333–5.

2. SANSOM 1984, 59–76

3. Exceptions in the history of Japanese political thought can be found in HANE 1969. Literary examples are given in WALKER 1979.

4. Take, for example, IKEGAMI 1995, who makes a detailed analysis of samurai culture to argue that individuality existed in the form of honor amongst individuality in a social setting. It is possible in this way that different social structures created a different kind of individualism than in the West.

5. Due to a lack of space for sufficient detail, I am simplifying this gradual movement towards modernization. KEENE 1969 has already shown that some Japanese scholars knew more of the West than we typically think. JANSEN 1992 has also shown that other options (such as the foreign expulsion movements and proposals for a unified Asian bloc) were also presented as alternatives to Western learning—in spite of a lack of success.

6. GORDON 2003, 70–3.

great help from the newly imported Western literature. In addition to the legal and economic queries concerning the limits of individual autonomy in a country shifting to a capitalist economy, closely related questions of what it meant to have a population of educated, self-sufficient and morally sound individuals took center stage for early Meiji intellectuals.

Hence, the so-called enlightenment thinkers, represented by groups like the Meiji Six (明六社) made ground-breaking new strides in the field of Japanese ethical thought. By drawing largely on British and French liberal or positivist thought (J. S. Mill and Herbert Spencer were particularly popular in the early-to-mid Meiji period),⁷ these enlightenment authors attempted to tackle the moral and ethical quandaries facing a newly centralizing nation-state. This included a large scale of issues, ranging from those as broad as equality between men and women to questions as specific as which form of writing (be it alphabetic Japanese or English) could best encourage public literacy.⁸

Out of all these early Meiji enlightenment authors, the most radical, influential, and hence important for our interests, is none other than Fukuzawa Yukichi. Fukuzawa was a leading scholar of Western literature, having first achieved notoriety with his work *Conditions in the West*, published in 1867. Fukuzawa adopted a radically individualist view of how the Japanese nation should proceed in the new era. The preamble to *An Encouragement of Learning* effectively demonstrates Fukuzawa's thought at its highest level:

Heaven, it is said, does not create one person above or below another. This signifies that when we are born from heaven we are all equal and there is no innate distinction between high and low.... Nevertheless, as we broadly survey the human scene, there are the wise and the stupid, the rich and the poor, the noble and lowly, whose conditions seem to differ as greatly as the clouds and the mud. Why is this? The reason is clear. In the *Jitsugo-kyō* we read that if a man does not learn he will be ignorant, and such an ignorant man is stupid. Therefore the difference between the wise and the stupid is traceable to the degree of learning.⁹

What followed from this conclusion was an illustration of the pragmatic

7. NAGAI 1954, 55.

8. SHIKANO 1991, 40–7.

9. FUKUZAWA 2013, 3.

consequences of this truth, articulated both in *An Encouragement of Learning* and the later *An Outline of a Theory of Civilization*. For Fukuzawa, the individualism present in Western liberalism offered far more utility to the preservation of the Japanese state than did any efforts to cling to outdated and impractical customs. If anything, Fukuzawa attempted to show that Japanese politics up to this point had given far too much authority to a small group of persons at the top, who in turn deprived individuals of the autonomy which they needed to become self-sufficient. At the very least, individuals needed to be *independent*. This entailed, if nothing else, becoming responsible for oneself and being ready to defend one's nation.¹⁰ Yet, this was not possible in an environment in which individuals remained uneducated and restrained due to class-based inequality. For Fukuzawa, it was thus time to put an end to Japan's history of stifling individual thought and interests. Instead, it was time to allow individuals the right to pursue their various interests as equals while encouraging their education and cultivation.

Keep in mind that, insofar as the very problem that early Meiji thinkers sought to solve was that of dealing with newly encroaching Western powers, individualism was not discussed as merely a moral problem. Individualism was almost always discussed insofar as it was a necessity for Japan to become a modern state. Fukuzawa himself proclaimed that "the only duty of the Japanese people at present is to preserve Japan's national polity."¹¹ Put differently, in order to maintain and protect an independent and free Japanese state, it was necessary to encourage and educate independent and self-sufficient individuals. Thus, Fukuzawa's very goal was to demonstrate that the independence of the nation hinged upon the independence of individuals, in both the sense of protecting the country from external threats as well as in the sense of maintaining public morals domestically. Fukuzawa's individualism was, seen this way, motivated largely by its relationship to the realization of a stronger Japanese state.¹²

In opposition to this pragmatic argument, opponents of Fukuzawa

10. FUKUZAWA 2013, 19–27, 59–67.

11. FUKUZAWA 2008, 36.

12. As Inoue Katsuhito notes, Fukuzawa was not alone on this point. It seems as though almost all *early* enlightenment writers motivated individualism by appealing to the needs of the state (INOUE 2011, 61, 73).

largely focused on two related points when assessing his position. The first point was whether or not such an inherently “Western” outlook could possibly be applied to Japan at all. Indeed, even the earliest comparative sociological research in Japan made it a strong point to emphasize the underlying notion that there was a key difference between the West—which took individuals to be the most basic unit of society—and Japan—which was centered on hierarchical family structures.¹³ Moreover, many disenfranchised writers and artists expressed their frustration at those like Fukuzawa for their unseemly and un-Japanese preference for everything Western.¹⁴ As we have seen, Fukuzawa himself seemed to be unimpressed with those clinging to the ways of the past, and did not hide the fact that he found such efforts counter-productive. The second point was whether or not individualism could coincide with the new government’s project of centralization. While Fukuzawa was, above all else, interested in the independence of the nation, he was openly critical of government invasion into the lives of individuals and claimed that it was counter-productive to their independence. However, this call for smaller government led to questions of whether or not individualism did not entail a break in national unity in favor of selfish interests. Indeed, conservative writers for the entirety of the Meiji period often emphasized terms like “loyalty” in order to stress that the needs of the state came first.¹⁵ Needless to say, the Meiji government itself also seemed to be wary of giving up too much control over to individuals, and thus viewed liberal or individualist enlightenment writings with suspicion.¹⁶

Thus, we see the basic questions and positions. Fukuzawa efficaciously outlined the way in which the new Japanese state could benefit from the emphasis of individual empowerment while using Western liberal sources as

13. NAGAI 1954, 62.

14. BRECHER 2012, 808–10.

15. PARAMORE 2009, 141–2.

16. The most blatant evidence of this would be increasingly strict censorship laws which even led to a shutdown of the *Meiji Six* magazine in 1875. However, one more interesting anecdote from Blocker and Sterling points out the fact that in order to combat early enlightenment tendencies towards liberalism, the Meiji government commissioned the translation of more government-friendly texts, such as Edward Burke’s *Reflections on the French Revolution* and *Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs*, as well as part of Hobbes’s *Leviathan* (BLOCKER and STERLING 2011, 122).

a guide. The opposition questioned whether such sources were detrimental to Japan's situation. This back and forth created the general framework for how to debate the topic of individualism. Was individualism beneficial to the state of Japan as a means of self-strengthening? Or was it destructive to national unity and Japanese culture? Was an emphasis on the individual key to survival in the 19th century or a betrayal of the government? The shape of this debate itself influenced Meiji debates throughout the era, well beyond just Fukuzawa and the other early enlightenment thinkers. While we do not have time to discuss the various different movements which spawned from Fukuzawa's work, we ought to note that the general framework of emphasizing individual cultivation for national independence remained highly influential throughout the era.

MORAL IDEALISM AND SELF-REALIZATION IN THE LATE MEIJI PERIOD

Of course, major changes did occur between the importation of individualism in the late 1860's and early 1870's and the shift towards the mid-to-late Meiji era. As the Meiji government began to stabilize from the 1880s onward, the intellectual demands of the Japanese began to change as well. As Japanese domestic policy began to settle and it became clear that Japan would finally have a constitution of her own, there was a growing sense that Japan had finally become one of the "civilized countries."¹⁷ As a result, a wave of national pride swept over the country. At the same time, this awareness that Japan was getting ready to sit at the same table as the imperial powers of the day also brought about a growing conviction that the Japanese needed to organize their collective psyche. Liberalism was replaced with notions of "national morality." In this way, calls for increased tolerance towards individual preferences were often substituted with reminders that morality would crumble unless all Japanese had a common rubric for evaluating each other. The infamous imperial rescript on education, which announced that the two pillars of the Japanese empire were people's loyalty to the emperor and filial piety, was implemented in 1890, and numerous discussions on education in the late Meiji period affirmed that these two vir-

17. GLUCK 1985, 21.

tues were the ground of all morality.¹⁸ However, in spite of all this emphasis on conformity, Fukuzawa's words still buzzed in the background of the era, reminding authors that if Japan were to be truly modern, she needed modernized individuals in her ranks. How were these two seemingly conflicting sides to be reconciled?

It is on this note that the position which had a more direct influence on Nishida's ethics entered the stage: the theory of self-realization (henceforth referred to as the "TSR").¹⁹ Starting with Nakajima Rikizō's (1858–1918) introduction of Thomas Hill Green's philosophy²⁰ into Japan (beginning in 1892), proponents of the TSR would utilize Green's claim that self-realization necessarily benefits the "common good" as a means to champion individual moral cultivation without sacrificing the needs of society or the state. In this sense, we can agree with Hirai's claim that proponents of the TSR were something of spiritual successors to Fukuzawa Yukichi, trying to find space for the individual self in a society dominated by conformity.²¹ Looking at how this notion of self-realization developed, as well as how it was interpreted, will give us a better look at Nishida's intellectual environment. In turn, this will also show us the shape of the argument used by some authors to justify increasing attention to individual cultivation.

So what are the basic tenets of the TSR? As the name may suggest, Meiji ethicists formed various ideas about the value of self-development based on Green's claim that the goal of humanity is the *realization* of each individual self's character and moral capacities in such a way that they furthermore contribute to the realization of other persons, i.e., contribute to the *common good*. While a full-fledged explanation of Green's theory (or a detailed treatment of how Meiji authors may have misunderstood, betrayed or ignored certain aspects of his work) is not possible within the confines of this paper, we should try to highlight the main ideas of his concept of self-realization before we discuss its reception in Japan.

18. GLUCK 1985, 120–7.

19. The common parlance during the Meiji era was either 自己実現説 or 自我実現説, which both mean roughly "Theory of Self-Realization."

20. Thomas Hill Green was a British philosopher and politician. A detailed account of Green's ideas on self-realization can be found in TYLER 2010. The political and practical implications of Green's theories are well documented in NICHOLSON 1990.

21. HIRAI 1979, 116.

Now, the first point that we ought to account for is what Green means by self-realization. Green attempted to justify his theory of self-realization by claiming that there is an *a priori* determined ideal form of being, to which all individuals aspire.²² The act of realizing one's own capacities and aiming to achieve a better state is, for Green, equivalent to moving closer to a more accurate reproduction of this ideal human form.

Through certain *media*, and under certain consequent limitations, but with the constant characteristic of self-consciousness and self-objectification, the one divine mind gradually reproduces itself in the human soul. In virtue of this principle in him man has definite capabilities, the realisation of which, since in it alone he can satisfy himself, forms his true good. They are not realised, however, in any life that can be observed, in any life that has been, or is, or (as it would seem) that can be lived by man as we know him; and for this reason we cannot say with any adequacy what the capabilities are. Yet, because the essence of man's spiritual endowment is the consciousness of having it, the idea of his having such capabilities, and of a possible better state of himself consisting in their further realisation, is a moving influence in him.²³

In order to paraphrase Green's rather thick-writing, we should start by noting that the divine mind referenced above (otherwise referred to as the eternal consciousness or, otherwise, "God")²⁴ is itself precisely the *a priori* determined ideal human form alluded to above. Although, as Green points out, no one has ever truly achieved such an ideal form or fully realized all of their capacities as a human being, we can (at the least) imagine ourselves to be in a preferable state to the one we are in at the moment. This consciousness drives us to continue to pursue this ideal, and thus aim to fully realize all our capacities. This drive to achieve the ultimate form of humanity became the cornerstone of Green's ethics.

Now, what is especially important to remember for us is that, although

22. GREEN 1997, 179–81.

23. GREEN 1997, 189.

24. Although this eternal consciousness is often referred to as "God", scholars like Colin Tyler have shown that it is not difficult to take his notion of an eternal consciousness as meaning something akin to a "universal human spirit" without any serious misreading. What this means is that Green's interpreters had some leeway in terms of how they ought to deal with the religious aspects of generating moral ideals. Cf. TYLER 2010, 80–3.

the pursuit of one's ideal form is driven by one's own personal desire for self-improvement, it is not a merely individual task. As the individual reaches higher levels of self-realization, his or her desire to give back to society will strengthen thus that consciousness of one's ideal form "must at least keep the man to the path in which human progress has so far been made. It must keep him loyal in the spirit to established morality, industrious in some work of recognised utility."²⁵ The individual's contribution to society, moreover, is not one-sided. For Green, the *a priori* determined ideal is only reflected to the individual with the mediation of the society he or she lives in.²⁶ As humanity continues to progress, the greater social and ethical goals available manifest themselves to the individual and, hence, mediate his or her own quest for self-realization. In this sense, because society helped to form the individual into what it is—or otherwise helps the individual realize what it ought to be—self-realization is not possible outside of a social context. Hence, we can find a feedback loop in which humanity's progress helps individuals pursue their own self-realization, which in turn contribute to the common good of society.²⁷

Thus, we find in Green's philosophy a powerful tool for an era of writers fixated on dispelling the notion that increasing individual autonomy would be detrimental to society as a whole, or that it would end in a form of selfishness that no longer has anything to do with the good of society. Indeed, the fact that Green's thought offered a coherent way to affirm the individual self while emphasizing the necessity of a common good in its realization made him a popular philosopher in various corners of Japan. Possibly because of this, however, interest in Green's ideas on self-realization did not necessarily end at strict interpretations of his work. Rather, after the initial importation of Green in the early 1890s, a number of competing or original versions of the TSR began to spread throughout the Meiji intellectual landscape.

One pattern which was particularly common in the late Meiji period was to produce simplified versions of Green's thought in order to more or less justify nationalist education policies. To be more specific, many nationalist writers started to emphasize the need for adjustments to Green's formula

25. GREEN 1997, 184.

26. GREEN 1997, 192.

27. GREEN 1997, 198–202.

in order to make it more suitable to the local environment. Due to the general distrust towards religion (and Christianity in particular) in late Meiji Japan,²⁸ it was preferable for many authors to replace Green's notion of an eternal consciousness (and the Christian undertones it entails) with the loyalty and filial relations stipulated in the imperial rescript.²⁹ In this way, many writers essentially came to equate individual self-realization with being a good member of the Japanese state. This was furthermore compounded by a seeming neglect for Green's more robust discussions of the political consequences of his own work, which provided a more nuanced picture of the dynamic between the individual's pursuit of self-realization and society.³⁰ Instead, many Meiji authors were content to accept the simple formula that the self-realization of the individual benefitted the common good.³¹ Because this formulation was so easy to understand, these nationalist readings would spread so far as to be circulated among lower-level educators (village scholars, to borrow Hirai's terminology), and thus flood late Meiji Japanese moral education with a watered-down version of Green's moral theory in which the individual's self-realization was to be found by becoming an upstanding

28. We should keep in mind that the 1890s specifically saw fierce debates concerning what has been called the conflict between religion and state. In particular, Inoue Tetsujirō's harsh response to the Christian thinker Uchimura Kanzō's failure to bow properly before the emperor sparked a great deal of controversy. Inoue believed that (even if Shinto, Buddhism, and Confucianism were not troublesome) Christianity was a danger to national morality, and hence inherently conflicted with the state of Japan's needs to find mental consistency. This disagreement between thinkers like Inoue and Christian authors was a major background for all parties discussing self-realization (PARAMORE 2009, 130–60).

29. HIRAI 1979, 118.

30. Insofar as I can tell, Green's discussions of rights, property, and social resistance in texts such as "Different Senses of 'Freedom' as Applied to Will and the Moral Progress of Man" and "Lectures on the Principles of Political Obligation" seem to have been almost entirely undiscussed by proponents of the TSR. This seeming lack of awareness of Green's political philosophy may be at least partially due to the fact that only the *Prolegomena to Ethics* was translated into Japanese, although it is also possible to imagine that this potentially inconvenient aspect of his thought was ignored, or at least sidestepped, to avoid potential backlash from the public or government.

31. Moreover, we ought to note that common good seems to have been taken to be something equivalent with the needs of the community or state in most cases, with very few bothering to consider what it might actually mean (HIRAI 1979, 122–3).

member of one's family and country.³² The end result was something akin to a bad parody of Fukuzawa: More cultivated individuals helped the state, so surely helping the state was the fastest way to individual cultivation.

While these nationalist re-iterations of Green may have (for better or worse) left the most significant mark on Japanese history out of any form of the TSR, it is likely that the interpretations which used this concept of self-realization as a means to criticize late Meiji education policies are of more interest to us. Although there is some debate concerning the extent of his connection to Green's philosophy in particular, it seems to me that Ōnishi Hajime's (1864–1900) theories on moral idealism and self-realization can be considered particularly important for outlining the discursive framework in the background of Nishida's early philosophy.³³ Ōnishi's basic philosophical position, outlined in his masterwork *The Origin of Conscience* (良心起源論), emphasized the fact that morality and self-realization could not be reduced to loyalty to one's nation, Darwinian/Spencerian theories of evolutionary developments in human civilization, or rational self-interest. Ōnishi instead emphasized the importance of the conscience, the internal desire to pursue one's ideal self, in creating moral individuals.³⁴

The clearest application of these principles came in Ōnishi's essays on education. As a direct response to the idea that religion (Christianity, specifically) was dangerous to a unified Japanese national morality and should thus be left out of education, Ōnishi counter-attacked by claiming that loyalty to the state could never suffice as the basis for self-realization and moral cultivation when educating young individuals.³⁵ Theories that only aim to create loyal citizens of the state cannot give individuals the resources they

32. HIRAI 1979 116–25.

33. Some scholars have pointed out that the period in which Ōnishi's writings were written and the small number of direct references to Green ought to make us question whether or not Green was actually in the background of his work. Thus, although Ōnishi's compatriot Tsubouchi Shōyō stated clearly that Green was the base for Ōnishi's theories about self-realization, there is still some doubt as to the level of Green's influence on Ōnishi. We shall forego trying to solve this problem at the moment on the grounds that we are more interested in the topics of self-realization and moral idealism than we are in the historical process of scholarship on Green in Japan (KATAYAMA 2013, 125–6).

34. OHS I: 151–4.

35. OHS II: 219–32.

need to pursue their ideal self. For Ōnishi, if education was to be meaningful, it had to reach the level at which the individual could have the space needed to explore philosophical or religious problems. Just as we have stated above, there needed to be something more for these ideals to be met, and education needed to allow the individual to come into contact with the deeper questions of life, and not merely urge on their development as citizens.³⁶

In this aspect of looking for something that goes beyond the state, we can find a new feature of Japanese considerations on the problem of the individual that (as we shall see soon) was highly important for Nishida. Of course, scholars like Ōnishi who pursued a form of self-realization which went beyond loyalty to the state still justified the individual's position by operating within the framework of self-realization benefitting society as a whole. Moreover, if looked at on a surface level, it may even appear as though Ōnishi does not differ substantially from his opponents aside from the fact that he believes that allowing space for philosophical or existential questions is more conducive to educating well-cultivated citizens.³⁷ Although we will not defend Ōnishi (or any other proponents of the TSR)³⁸ from such criticism here, we should note that merely improving statist educational theories was at least not Ōnishi's goal. For scholars of Nishida, it is important to note that authors like Ōnishi attempted to see self-realization as something which has a value in itself that cannot be reduced to its usefulness to Japanese society.

Perhaps the most important difference we should keep in mind is that thinkers like Ōnishi were more willing to accept the religious or spiritual aspects of moral idealism as a *ground* for the correlation between individual self-realization and society. Although Ōnishi claimed specifically in *The Origin of Conscience* that his philosophy of moral ideals and conscience do

36. OHS II: 71–9; 331–8.

37. HIRAYAMA 1989 provides a summary and answer to such critiques.

38. With that said, however, we should note that it would be far more difficult to criticize Green himself on this point. In his previously mentioned political philosophy, Green asked questions concerning the limits of individual freedoms, rights, and social resistance that would require far more time to criticize than the less nuanced statement of many Japanese scholars that the self-realization of the individual benefits the whole of society.

not require one to assume the existence of God,³⁹ he did leave open a path for a religious ground of society based on a larger human spirit (to which each individual is connected).⁴⁰ Even without relying on a specific theology, Ōnishi seems to imply that self-realization is important insofar as it implies a meeting point with the most ideal form of the human spirit and thus cannot be reduced only to the value it has for the state of Japan.

As a final note, I would like to point out that Ōnishi was not at all alone in utilizing a sort of macro-personality as a means to reconcile the relationship between individual self-realization and the benefit for society. While Ōnishi was cautious in discussing any possible theological aspects of self-realization, many philosophers of the time embraced this notion of a macro-personal human spirit much more actively.⁴¹ Although there are plenty of philosophers to choose from, perhaps the best example of utilizing a macro-personality to unify individual self-realization and society comes from Ōnishi's disciple, Tsunashima Ryōsen (1873–1907). Tsunashima argued that having a religious consciousness of being one with this greater human spirit was a *necessary* component of self-realization. In his earlier years, Tsunashima seems closer to Green, even utilizing the term “eternal consciousness” in order to assert his understanding of God as a macro-consciousness, which he then affirms as the basis for the coincidence of individual self-realization and society.

In his later years, Tsunashima developed a unique (and more radical) position based on “seeing God” to become conscious of oneself as a part of this macro-personality. To be more specific, Tsunashima argued in favor of a mystic consciousness of seeing oneself as one of God's children, which in turn allowed one to simultaneously achieve his or her own individual self-realization, while also directly witnessing something more universally human.⁴² Although the terminology changed during his early and

39. OHS I: 150.

40. SAKO 1995, 87.

41. Inoue Katsuhito mentions several examples of this phenomenon from various perspectives and with various goals. He lists Inoue Tetsujirō, Inoue Enryō, Kiyozawa Manshi, and Miyake Setsurei as other examples of this phenomenon. We will focus on Tsunashima Ryōsen here, because his connections to both Nishida and Green's conception of self-realization are most readily discernible (INOUE 2011, 64–8).

42. MUSHIAKI and YUKIYASU 1981, 94–5.

later years, the critical point we should remember is that the grounds for self-realization and its importance did not come from the state. Although it was beneficial to the state, it was in meeting with this more universal human spirit that grounded both the social value of self-realization and its worth for the individual.

When we look at the way Meiji authors utilized this concept of the TSR on a superficial level, we find that the most basic framework in which debates concerning individualism took place had not changed from early times. Insofar as all proponents of the TSR believed that the pursuit of individual cultivation was necessary for the benefit of society, their work can very much be considered as a revamped attempt to solve the same problem which their early Meiji counterparts had already tried to solve, but this time by using new ideas on moral ideals. However, it is of crucial importance for us to recognize that there were now new layers to these debates which would have allowed asking the deeper question of what it might *mean* for the individual to achieve self-realization. Now, in addition to an emphasis on how stronger individuals would be necessary for a stronger society, there was furthermore a burgeoning sense that individuals required something *beyond* the state or society. Specifically, in cases like Ōnishi and Tsunashima, there were debates on whether or not the quasi-religious, existential aspects of individuality were necessary for individual self-realization (and thus necessary for a stronger society). As we shall confirm in the next section, it was in the context of just such a movement that Nishida himself attempted to carve out space for his unique ideas on self cultivation.

NISHIDA KITARŌ, INDIVIDUALISM, AND GOING BEYOND MEIJI ETHICS

Now, it is finally time for us to draw our attention to the philosopher whose work is the very motive of this investigation, Nishida Kitarō. Because our interest is simply sketching out Nishida's connection to the debates we have described above, I would like to first give a semi-biographical look into his factual involvement in them and then move on to highlight how this may have shaped his argument. As a quick note before beginning this task, I would like to state explicitly that we do not have enough space to deal with the nuances of Nishida's own original position based on his

notion of pure experience put forth in *An Inquiry into the Good*, or the ways in which it improved upon the work of his predecessors. My goal here is merely to give some brief background information that could help us interpret Nishida's position in a new light.

Nishida himself was born in 1870, at the beginning of the Meiji era. It should thus not be a surprise to anyone that even though it did not seem to be in his nature to care deeply about politics, growing up in the dynamic early Meiji era did have an effect on him. Despite the fact that his early philosophical writings were markedly unpolitical in nature,⁴³ Nishida did demonstrate an interest in individualism from a young age. The young Nishida celebrated the ratification of the constitution in 1889 and, moreover, reportedly thought very favorably of Fukuzawa Yukichi (if not only out of moral principles).⁴⁴ Moreover, Nishida participated in a writing circle known as the "Respect the Individual Society" alongside several of his classmates. This group served as a vessel for Nishida and his classmates to discuss how the Japanese state should proceed in the future.⁴⁵ Nishida's writings (as well as those of his compatriots) were marked by a mix of youthful idealism and "progressive views" concerning the future of the Japanese people.⁴⁶ Keeping this context in mind, we should not be surprised to see that Nishida would lament later in his life that mid-Meiji educational reforms gave his previously "family-like" school an unfortunately militaristic atmosphere.⁴⁷ Nishida remarked in his later years that he even followed his classmate, Yamamoto Chōsui, in dropping out of school as a result of his dissatisfaction with this change.⁴⁸ Thus, even if he did not construct formal arguments about concrete political affairs in his early philosophical work, it does seem safe to say that issues concerning the tension between individual liberties

43. Whether or not the same can be said of his later life and work is perhaps a more difficult question. Luckily, it is not our job to consider the matter here.

44. YUSA 2002 64; GOTO-JONES 2005, 52.

45. YUSA 2002, 25–9.

46. YUSA 2002, 25, 28.

47. NKZ 10: 414–15.

48. NKZ 10: 415. This may not be the only cause for his decision to drop out, however. Yusa reminds us that a general disdain for projects done in the science course and a belief that he could study effectively alone were also important factors in his decision (YUSA 2002, 23–6).

and the increasing emphasis on conformity were of great interest to the young Nishida.

Apart from his interest in social issues, he was fascinated with the aspects of individuality that went beyond politics. We have already alluded to some degree to these concerns when discussing the TSR, but for many thinkers in the mid-to-late Meiji period, it had become increasingly important to allow individuals the space to explore the religious and existential questions that assail them over the course of their daily life. Even beyond ethics and philosophy in the strict sense, literary movements like the “I-novel” clearly demonstrated a newfound and widespread interest in the individual’s personal or private life in late Meiji times.⁴⁹ Nishida, of course, was a paradigmatic case. For him, the very need of philosophy was none other than considering these existential and religious problems of the individual.

Philosophy is not necessary for those who have never met with suffering in life, or otherwise those who do not look for something deeper in life even after meeting with adversity. However, anyone who has ever met adversity or wondered about life in its entirety will surely have felt some kind of anguish. They will certainly try to find a new meaning in life, or to be reborn into a new one.⁵⁰

It seems that for Nishida, the exploration of the “problems of life (人生の問題)” was a critical part of one’s growth or self-cultivation. It makes sense, then, that the quasi-religious aspects of self-realization played such a major role in his early ethics (as we shall see later). This interest in dealing with the anguish that assaults one on the personal level could very well have been a major spark for Nishida’s interest in self-cultivation.⁵¹

Perhaps even more important for his formation as a philosopher, though, was his education at Tokyo Imperial University. Nishida attended Tokyo Imperial University from 1891 to 1894 as a “special auditing student” and

49. WALKER 1979.

50. NKZ 16: 286–7.

51. A full-fledged investigation of the importance of these problems of life in Nishida’s work and its relation to his intellectual, philosophical or even literary environment would require at least another article to discuss exhaustively. The topic of problems of life was a serious one that seems to have manifested itself throughout his career (INOUE 2011, 26–8).

took classes from several notable scholars. Of specific importance is the fact that, during this time, Nishida took classes from the earliest importer of Green, Nakajima Rikizō. It is furthermore almost certain that he would have listened to Nakajima's earliest lectures on Green. Even if he had not attended these early lectures, it is fairly certain that Nishida was influenced to some degree by Nakajima's work on Green.⁵²

Beyond being exposed to Nakajima's thought, Nishida showed interest in the work of the aforementioned Ōnishi and Tsunashima as well. Nishida stated several times that he thoroughly respected Ōnishi and was an admirer of his work.⁵³ Although our goal here is not a comparison between the work of Nishida and Ōnishi, it is worth further noting that the categories utilized to divide different types of ethical theories in *An Inquiry into the Good* are the same as those used by Ōnishi in his lectures on ethics.⁵⁴ Tsunashima was also reportedly influential to Nishida's understandings of religion and God, with Nishida having written that he was "moved" by Tsunashima's work.⁵⁵

Against this background, we cannot be surprised by the fact that Nishida's early ethics appear to be a peculiar permutation of the TSR. Even before his first major work, *An Inquiry into the Good*, one of Nishida's earliest philosophical projects was his summary of the important points put forward in Green's *Prolegomena* published in 1895.⁵⁶ Even if Nishida distanced himself from Green's work in due time, it is clear that Nishida had read a significant amount of Green's ethics in his early years. More important than his being familiar with the work of Green and of his Japanese counterparts, though, is the basic fact that Nishida's early work on ethics focused precisely on the realization of personality. Specifically, Nishida's "Ethics First Draft" seems to demonstrate that Green remained in the background of Nishida's ideas on topics concerning the will and moral character.⁵⁷

The influence of Green on Nishida continued until *An Inquiry into the Good*. This fact is confirmed by Nishida himself when he writes that "[t]he

52. SAKO 1995, 95–7; YUKIYASU 2008, 108.

53. KATAYAMA 2013, 131.

54. KATAYAMA 2013, 200.

55. MUSHIAKI and YUKIYASU 1981, 206–22.

56. NKZ 11: 3–22.

57. NAKAJIMA 2011, 153–155.

good is the realization of personality.”⁵⁸ For Nishida, developing one’s self leads to even higher ideals which realize even greater goods, which in turn manifest themselves socially in one’s personal character.⁵⁹ In much the same way that we have outlined in the previous section, Nishida also relied on the pursuit of certain ideals held by the self because this is necessary for its completion or perfection. Indeed, although Nishida’s unique concepts of both pure experience and a true self are unmistakably new additions to this line of thought, the attribution of the good to the pursuit of the self’s various ideals seems to fall largely in line with the TSR.

Some scholars seem to have taken this evidence so far as to claim that Nishida’s early thought was either based on (or a restatement of) Green’s thought. There is no need to evaluate this claim with a thematic comparison between the two (those already exist, after all).⁶⁰ However, recognizing the influence of the TSR may help us in analyzing the structure of Nishida’s argument in *An Inquiry into the Good* as well. Namely, if we accept that Nishida attempted to use TSR’s line of argument to provide serious attempts to answer the same old questions we have touched upon in the previous sections, the opposing side of his argument becomes visible. Although potential critics are not listed by name, the arguments against his ideas on personal self-realization and individualism all maintain the same structure that we have seen previously. The straw men that Nishida poses against his own theory all seem to argue against individualism or self-affirmation on the basis that the pursuit of individual self-realization may be detrimental to the state or, otherwise, that it is somehow selfish. To these objections, Nishida offers the same defense as his predecessors by showing how the cultivation of the individual benefits everyone. Individuals must first aim to support them-

58. NISHIDA 1987, 142. Original translation of 実現 modified from “actualization” to “realization.”

59. NISHIDA 1987, 124.

60. HIRAI 1979 in particular seems to value Green’s influence on Nishida’s thought to almost extreme levels. Takeuchi 1970 also stresses the decisive impact of Green’s ethics on Nishida’s formation as a philosopher. Inoue 2011 provides a more sober diagnosis showing that, while Green was unquestionably in the background, Nishida eventually came to find his work rather insubstantial. A more solid, schematic comparison between Nishida and Green regarding self-realization in particular can be found in MIZUNO 2001.

selves before they support their country.⁶¹ Moreover, a society will only truly shine when the individuals that constitute it are able to exercise their talents without repression and achieve self-realization.⁶²

As one final textual observation, I would like to mention that the quasi-religious aspect of self-realization found in some of his predecessors also remains present in Nishida's philosophy. Even putting aside Nishida's experience with Zen Buddhist meditation or his interest in Christianity, it is obvious that he took religion to be a key component to self-realization. Indeed, Nishida directly takes self-realization to be equivalent with the quasi-religious act of finding the true self in returning to pure experience or, otherwise, God. While space restricts us from comparing and contrasting any of the authors mentioned, Nishida does seem to have followed many of his Meiji predecessors in positing God as a macro-personality. More important for us to recognize, though, is the fact that Nishida—like many of those aforementioned predecessors—was also able to take this convergence between individual consciousness and universal spirit as the ground for the genesis of society and morality, and thus justify the value of individual self-realization for society.⁶³

Although, unfortunately, we do not have time to consider the ramifications of this basic biographical and textual evidence, this does not mean that we have come away empty-handed. Over the course of this section, Nishida's relationship to his predecessors has become quite clear. Specifically, we have seen through a largely biographical assessment of the background of his work that Nishida was an inheritor of previously discussed ideas of self-realization. In particular, it would seem, we can group Nishida in with previously discussed thinkers like Ōnishi and Tsunashima, insofar as Nishida also utilized a quasi-religious consciousness in order to ground his concept of self-realization. This similarity extends to the fact that this religious aspect of self-realization was largely used to motivate or justify the exploration of the existential aspects of selfhood that went beyond the scope of the individual's relation with the state. Hence, we seem to have gained a more or less clear view of where Nishida stands in relation to his predecessors.

61. NISHIDA 1987, 132–5.

62. NISHIDA 1987, 137–8.

63. NISHIDA 1987, 126, 145, 161.

CONCLUSION

Looking back, the portrait we have painted of Nishida's relation with Meiji individualism is a fascinating one. Particularly when we consider the scale of these debates as it relates to Nishida's personal history. Debates concerning the individualism spread by thinkers like Fukuzawa took flight when Nishida was but a young child in the early 1870's, and their development greatly affected his early life. Whether it be the changes in educational policy that contributed to his decision to leave school, his subsequent education in Green's philosophy as a university student, or his personal interest in problems concerning day to day life, Nishida seems to have essentially grown up immersed in the problem of Meiji individualism. When we look at this picture, we see the image of a philosopher struggling alongside his compatriots in an era desperate to deal with new ideas in a rapidly changing society.

The aesthetic value of this research, however, is secondary. The most important question left to ask is what we stand to gain by looking at Nishida's early work from this new perspective. While I will only be able to provide brief considerations on the topic, I think it is worth our time to survey the possible ways that we could proceed based on this new knowledge.

First, the clearest conclusion we can draw is that Nishida was likely much more influenced by his historical background than is typically acknowledged. When we look at this historical process, we can see the *problems* that Nishida inherited, as well as the *framework* he took over from those before him. To be specific, we have seen that the problem Nishida has inherited is none other than that of how to reconcile the need for individual autonomy and moral cultivation with the needs of a society that (from the time of its importation) often treated such ideas as a possible threat. In addition to the fact that this helps us understand the goal which Nishida himself faced while addressing the problems of life, as it were, it can also help us recognize the tools he used to avoid likely counter-arguments from possible opponents. Capitalizing on this opportunity, however, will have to wait until another contribution.

Additionally, it seems to me, placing Nishida's thoughts in its proper historical context will likely give us the benefit of being better able to observe how Nishida's unique philosophical contributions affected early twentieth-century Japanese individualism. Nishida's relation to the Kyoto-school has

unmistakably been well documented. With that said, however, serving as a precursor to the philosophy of the Kyoto school is likely not the only way that *An Inquiry into the Good* impacted Japanese thought. Rather, it would seem, Nishida's ideas concerning the notion of a true self resonated with many young Japanese. Thus, better clarifying how Nishida's work fits into the larger picture of early twentieth-century Japanese thought can likely bring new insights as to how individualism spread throughout the Meiji-era and afterwards.

This is perhaps most evident when we consider Nishida's impact upon the development of early twentieth-century Japanese "self-cultivationism (教養主義)" and "personalism (人格主義)" in particular. These trends reflected early twentieth-century Japanese writers' growing interest in personal development and truths that are somehow "greater" than those that relate to political or social issues.⁶⁴ Specifically, this tendency was most apparent amongst university students and aspiring writers, who voraciously fed upon texts that encouraged the pursuit of one's true self or the cultivation of one's personality.⁶⁵ While we do not have time to undertake the task here, exploring the manner in which Nishida's thought was received amongst young students and authors could prove to be an important contribution to understanding the development of individualism in Japanese intellectual history.

Thus, we can see that many topics concerning Nishida's relationship with individualism (specifically within the context of Japanese society) remain as of yet unexplored. While the explication of the historical background of Nishida's work is an important first step in accomplishing these tasks, we cannot hope to shine light on any of them here. We will thus end the current contribution and return to the matter at another time.

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64. NAJITA and HAROOTUNIAN 1989, 734–41.

65. Namely, texts like Abe Jirō's *Santarō's Diary* (三太郎の日記), and *An Inquiry into the Good* proved particularly popular amongst young Japanese writers. Cf. SHIKANO 1991, 176–7.

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