

Between Aesthetics and Ethics

The Experience of Seeing in Nicholas Cusanus and Nishida Kitarō

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Despite common assumptions of an unbridgeable gap between the European λόγος and Eastern ways of thinking, it is possible to discover affinities through certain themes or overlapping folds in their distinct patterns of thought. The diversity of language and philosophical categories can make this task difficult, if not downright impossible at times. Yet this difference itself can be seen as a condition for the possibility of a true διάλογος grounded in relational identities.

Is there, in fact, sufficient common ground to negotiate such an exchange between different modes of perception and experience? I propose to address that question from a philosophical inquiry into aesthetical experience as seen in Europe and Japan. To do this, I will treat two thinkers belonging to two different philosophical and religious traditions: Nishida Kitarō and Nicholas of Kues (or Cusanus). Allowing the immense distances of space and time to stand, I will try to extract commonalities between the two.

To begin with, I will take *seeing* as the common core of the theoretical inquiries of Nishida and Cusanus. Both of them deal with *learning how to see*, and do so in a sense that cannot be reduced to the merely metaphorical. Seeing as *intelligere*, or as “being-in-the-world” (*in-der-*

Welt-sein), means to be engaged with things and to *know* them, whether through reason or through the senses. In seeing, the peculiar aesthetical relation between the “self” and the external world returns to its original character: it transforms and converts itself into an ethical relation. Seeing is caring, paying attention to, and learning to behave in a new way.

Cusanus finds a profound significance in the relation between body and mind, between the faculty of the physical senses and the transcendent form of knowledge unique to the soul. One of the high points of his speculation stems from his analysis of the role of the senses. His short essay *De visione Dei* was inspired by deep reflection on a small picture of the face of Christ which leaves the impression, as one looks at the picture, that the picture itself is looking back. The point of departure and the point of destination seem to be interchangeable. So, too, Cusanus observes, God himself sees and at the same time is seen by those he sees. His vision is absolute (*visio absoluta*), the root and condition of all seeing among finite creatures (*visus contractus*). Seeing, be it God’s or the creature’s, is the basis for a dynamics of “complication” (*complicatio*) and “explication” (*explicatio*) that allows for an integration of unity and multiplicity, of identity and difference. According to Cusanus, the divine vision is identified with creation: *seeing is creating*. Due to the reflexive capacity of the eye (*cum oculus sit specularis*), God’s infinite vision coincides with the creature’s limited vision—at least to those with the insight to recognize the fact.

For in Absolute Sight every contracted mode of seeing is present uncontractedly. For all contraction (of Sight) is present in Absolute [Sight], because Absolute Sight is the Contraction of contractions.... Thus, Absolute Sight is present in all seeing, since all contracted sight exists through Absolute Sight and cannot at all exist without it. (CUSA 1988, §8, 683; see also YAMAKI 2001)

Seeing and being seen, existing *from* God and *in* God, are correlative. For Cusanus, the finiteness of every being, its impermanence, always coexists with its absoluteness in God inasmuch as it is created by God. Thus, every reality is finite *qua* infinite, infinite *qua* finite for the simple reason that it is in God and at the same time comes from God. We may therefore assume that seeing has the capacity to reveal a relationship with

other human beings as well as with an invisible and transcendent Other that lies beyond being itself. Taking our lead from Sakabe Megumi, we can take a further step. Sakabe speaks of a transition captured in the Japanese terms *omozashi* 面差し and *manazashi* 眼差し:

Omozashi (the features, the intention of the face) includes in itself a complex or pluridimensional intentionality, whereas in *manazashi* we have only (at least comparatively speaking) a unidimensional intentionality or, more exactly, a one-way intentionality.... *Omozashi* is what is seen by the other and, at the same time, what sees itself, and also, maybe, what sees itself as an other. (SAKABE 1999, 244)¹

Here *omozashi* shows a structure of reciprocity, a relationship of mutual interdependence; a double bind, or a double movement of interaction.

Nishida's final essay alludes to the idea that seeing one's own inner nature (*kenshō* 顕正) is to become a Buddha. In other words, "seeing" is what we call a conversion of the self, and any true religious experience deals with such a conversion or metamorphosis (NISHIDA 1986). Seeing is a definite form of experience, distinct from ordinary, superficial visual perception. For Nishida the pure experience of being in the world cuts through the opposition of a "strong" subject set against a wholly external object. The action or process of *seeing* seems more suited to describe this than the completed act of *sight*. What he has in mind is a kind of dynamic relation that can never be reduced to a substance or the hypostasis of a fixed and absolute subject. It is not that subject and object exist a priori and independently of one another. Rather, seeing *qua* "acting intuition" (*kōiteki chokkan* 行為的直観), as movement and relationship, enables the encounter of subject and object. "I came to realize that it is not that experience exists because there is an individual, but that an individual exists because there is experience. I thus arrived at the idea that experience is more fundamental than individual differences" (NISHIDA 1990, xxx).

In a collection of essays on ethics and aesthetics, *Art and Morality*

1. The notion of *omozashi* could be an interesting answer to Sartre's idea that "it is never possible to succeed in building a true reciprocity starting exclusively from the gaze" (244). See also SAKABE 1976.

(*Geijutsu to dōtoku* 芸術と道徳, 1923), Nishida compares his own thinking to the Platonic and Neoplatonic traditions, occasionally even citing specific passages to back this up. For example:

Seeing is not color; hearing is not sound. We cannot see seeing or hear hearing in the sense that we see color and hear sound. However, as in Plotinus' statement "in contemplation... I let drop from within me the lines that outline the form of bodies," color and form are produced by seeing as a continuity of pure acts. There must be this kind of consciousness of consciousness at the foundation of seeing color and hearing sound.

And a few pages further on:

Infinite complexity in quality means infinite complexity of acts. In these terms, what does it mean to say that a thing is red or blue? Just as we cannot say that visual perception is red or blue, we cannot say that the act itself is red or blue. In the case of a red or blue thing, even if its "existence" is an activity, red or blue are already functions, and it is not that the act is red or blue. It is only that the qualitative means something that is directly acting. As a certain quality it differs from such a thing as representation itself and thus must be something that always maintains itself. (NISHIDA 1973, 130, 133–4)

Nishida seems here to echo the texts of Cusanus *De Deo abscondito* and *De quaerendo Deum*, works that develop his major works, *De docta ignorantia* and *De coniecturis*, respectively. In *De Deo abscondito* we read:

For color is not apprehended in any way other than by sight; and in order that sight can readily apprehend any color, the center of sight is without color. Therefore, sight is not present in the realm of color, since sight is without color. Hence, with respect to the realm of color sight is nothing rather than something. For the realm of color does not attain unto being that is outside its own realm; instead, it affirms the being of all that is present in its own realm, where it does not find sight. Therefore, sight, since it is without color, is unnameable within the realm of color, for the name of no color corresponds to it. However, through its power of discrimination sight has given a name to each color. Hence, in the realm of color: all naming depends on sight,

but the name of sight... is thought to be the name of nothing rather than of something. (CUSA 1994, 304–5; cf. ECKHART 1936)

For Cusanus and Nishida alike, the activity of seeing—always in the sense of a creative process or production—is not reducible to a realm of “objects” with which seeing “works.” Hearing is not reducible to the sounds heard any more than seeing is the same as the colors seen. So too, the creative work of seeing and acting intuition cannot be absorbed without remainder into the seer’s activity. In other words, there is an enveloping here that is broader than individual feeling. The individual act or production, be it a particular perception, a work of art, or a movement, is a *complicatio* of the universal process of reality. The former reveals itself in the latter, such that any individual experience can be viewed as a particular realization of pure experience.

In this sense *seeing* is a way of taking part in the world, of penetrating it not only by reason but also by the senses. Seeing is carefulness and attention to what is in the world. For both Cusanus and Nishida, there is an essential relationship between sight and intellect. Not only is thinking a kind of vision, but the perceptive experience itself is an “acting” (*jikō* 事行), as Fichte recognized in his idea of *Tathandlung*:

The painter and sculptor think with the eye, and the philosopher sees with his mind. As Plotinus states, thinking is seeing. In what sense, then, can perception and thinking be distinguished? For what reason do we think that in perception the transition from act to act is immediate and unconscious, whereas in thinking there is a gap between acts and the transition is conscious? I think that we shall be able to understand this if we consider thinking to be the reflective direction of the will, which is the act underlying all acts, and by viewing it as the horizon of free unity with respect to every act.... Thinking, as the reflective direction of such a standpoint and as its determinative act, is independent and free with respect to all acts and is able to be unified. (NISHIDA 1973, 188–9)

In this passage Nishida clarifies the turn from the pure experience of perception—active and passive, creative and receptive at the same time—to the awareness of the experience in the discriminating activity of thought. Thinking introduces a “gap” between one act and another,

between one perception and another, and in this way is able to present these things to the conscious self. Conceptual thinking, as the reflective aspect of will, is able both to unify these acts in laying them out before a subject and to recognize in them a pre-subjective unity. In this way the experience is no longer “pure” (*junsui* 純粹) since the subject splits itself off from the object in order to think about it, to watch it from a distance. In so doing, it acquires a new form of completeness; it arrives at self-awareness. That said, it should be remembered that for Nishida the priority is always accorded the *experience*, not the subject that “has” or “feels” the experience. It is as if the experience were coming to “know itself” on its own through the activity of the subject.

In Japanese “experience” can be expressed as *keiken* 経験, a term that intimates something that “hits against” or “provokes effects” (*ken* 験) in a movement of flowing along, passing by, or weaving (*kei* 経); or conversely, something that produces effects *on* the flow of reality. It may even refer to the reality that is woven. In any case, *keiken* seems to point to a prior process more fundamental than a substance undergoing these effects. At the same time, experience is not the mere reception of impressions or sensations in an intellectual core or unity. It can also be referred to as *taiken* 体験, where *tai* 体 refers to a bodily dimension. The body is the vehicle of a kind of knowledge that precedes intellectual knowledge and follows from it (cf. YUASA 1989).

Similarly, we may consider Japanese expressions for “understanding” or “comprehension.” Though most commonly referred to as *rikai* 理解, the idea can also be rendered *rikai* 理会 (where *kai* refers to a “meeting” and *ri* to an “inner principle” or structure), *jitoku* 自得 (“gathering in a spontaneous way”), or *etoku* 会得 (“gathering in meeting”). In each case, the experience is a bodily one:

The body can be regarded as an expression of spiritual content from the aesthetic standpoint, but at the same time directly as an organ of spiritual content, for spiritual content functions and becomes actual through the body.... The body is the fusion point of various realms in the material world. (NISHIDA 1973, 80)

It is worth noting here that etymologically aesthetics refers to the dimension of perception (αἴσθησις), which lies at the basis of all theory

and practice. Moreover, the act of seeing links the visible and the invisible, immanence and transcendence, creating a relationship between them. Although seeing involves the senses, in the end it goes beyond the sensual.

The perceptual dimension leads to a deeper level. The surface of things is one with the profundity they conceal. Surface is profundity itself, surface *qua* (*soku* 即) profundity. It is not only “maniacal” inspiration (in the Greek meaning of *μανία*), or religious conversion that marks a metamorphosis of seeing and transformation of the self. Poetic and artistic inspiration likewise produces such effect wherever it reaches its highest levels of refinement and authenticity, surpassing all form even though it works *with* form. The inseparable relationship between form and formless is also seen by Nishida as a possible intercultural relationship between two worlds of thought, different but complementary: the Western and the Eastern:

In contradistinction to Western culture, which considers form as existence and formation as good, the urge to see the form of the formless, and hear the sound of the soundless, lies at the foundation of Eastern culture. (NISHIDA 1990, 211)

Going beyond the realm of “form” seems to indicate both a potential and sensitivity within Eastern thought as well as a special task. Nishida argues the importance of comparing and interlacing for broadening the base of encounter and deepening our way of being-in-the-world. This insistence on the “formless” connects directly, once again, to Cusanus:

For this obscuring mist, haze, darkness, or ignorance into which the one seeking Your Face enters when he passes beyond all knowledge and compassion is that beneath which Your Face can be found only in a veiled manner. (CUSA 1988, §6, 689–90)

Removing the “veil,” one can break through the “wall of the coincidence of opposites” (*muris coincidentiae oppositorum*), there to find what Cusanus calls the “inaccessible light” (*inaccessibilis lux*), the “non-differentiated white” against which all phenomena in the world emerge like brushstrokes on a canvas. There, one can find the absolute nothing that has no name, the emptiness from which everything emerges and to

which everything returns. This blinding light is at the same time a hazy mist (*caligo*) or perfect darkness, for in the divine absolute the opposites coincide. This absolute nothingness is the abyss, the *Abgrund* (or *Ungrund*) in which religious philosophies East and West can meet. It may also be the connection between ethics and aesthetics, the link to their transforming relationship.

In Cusanus's doctrine, however, the being of God appears as a foundational principle, the ontological origin of all beings. Nishida's "place of absolute nothingness" (*zettai mu no basho* 絶対無の場所) is never intended as so ontologically "full" a principle. Rather, it is empty, even of itself, and lays no claim to being a principle. It is a universal background, a contradictory horizon that contains all contradictions and all possibilities, a horizon within which phenomena come to be without actually being created by it. For their part, phenomena give the background the possibility of being thought about (by consciousness). Thinking and phenomena thus exist because this background envelops them like a womb.

Contact with and care for the world are always a necessary part of aesthetics and ethics, and of religion as well, insofar as all these imply a living praxis, an involvement with life in all its aspects, a way to take one's place in the world. In Cusanus, God is at one and the same time the "artist" and the "art" that brings to reality the infinite richness of the world. It is from the nondifferentiated and unnameable ground that the forms of reality emerge. Proceeding from this ground of "immanent transcendence" (*naizaiteki chōetsusha* 内在的超越者), one is able to grasp phenomena in their richness and in their impermanence, and to grasp them together with the place in which they are located. In this necessary paradox of grasping *at the same time* unity and multiplicity, identity and difference, we see a possible point of connection between the thinking of Cusanus and Nishida.

The distinct modes of discourse developed by Cusanus and Nishida, for all their differences, each lead to a kind of awareness. Artistic and aesthetic experience come to realize that it is only in accepting the necessity of *distance* that one can truly encounter the world in its multifaceted reality, and at the same time that this distance has meaning only as a transcendental form of the proximity that binds us to the world. The reference to philosophy of art as an inquiry into the dynamic potential and

inner significance of the artist's activity and proximity or distance from her is not coincidental. As Simone Weil writes:

Looking and waiting are the attitudes that correspond to the beautiful. Until one can conceive, want, and desire, the beautiful does not appear. This is the reason why, in all beauty, we find contradiction, bitterness, and absence. (WEIL 2002, 267)

Substituting the term *relationship* in the above for “beautiful” and “beauty,” the statement retains its validity: in every relationship—intellectual, affective, or spiritual—there is contradiction; every presence confronts us with absence. For a relationship to be sustained, whatever is related must in fact negate itself, thus disclosing a symbolic value lacking apart from the relationship. If there were no absence, there would be no suitable reason for the ongoing dynamic of relating. Emptiness, void, openness are thus necessary for things to exist: either things exist in relation or they do not exist at all. At the same time, the distance between things guarantees freedom in relation. It is in that distance, in the absence of the other, that I can move and determine myself. Every process of determination implies change, which cannot take place in unmoving stillness. On the one hand, if we move with determination towards the object of our desire, we tend to erase the vital ingredient of the space needed to preserve the relational play between ourselves and what it is we desire. On the other hand, the attempt to preserve the distance without recognizing its dialectical character turns it into an extrinsic separation that wipes out the terms to be related. Every deep vision entails waiting: the theoretical seeing of the thinker, the tender glance of the lovers, the vision of the painter.

Nishida is not far from Cusanus even when he traces a continuity between art and religion in which the latter complements the former, rendering it effective and true:

Artistic discipline—that is, the purification of physical movement—means subsuming the standpoint of knowledge within that of the will. Moral behavior is another instance of this. In moral behavior we attempt to purify the whole self.... But it is the religious dimension that goes to the very essence of this standpoint. In this dimension,

there is nothing that is not an expression of the self of all things (*ban-butsu jiko* 万物自己). (NISHIDA 1973, 206; translation adjusted)

Beyond the formal technical level, one can return to see things and live them in their simplicity. The personal or individual self is not lost but taken up into a wider context. Its truth and positive meaning are not judged by obscure, mystical standards but by the fruits it produces.² The whole of life is intensified and every act becomes an expression of the art of living and dying. Thus Nishida concludes in the final essay of *Art and Morality*:

Our losing the self objectively does not mean losing our individuality. The self does not cease to exist. We discover infinite good and sadness beyond Spinoza's "intellectual love." To enter into the realms of Beauty and the Good, we must pass through the gateway of truth. Within the gate lies eternal and imperishable true reality. On this side of the gate the self that we see within consciousness in general is nothing more than a shadow of a darker instinct. (NISHIDA 1973, 206–7)

The vestiges of Platonism discernible between the lines as a dichotomy of the two sides, beneath and beyond the "gate of truth," is softened, nuanced, and even dissolved altogether once we grasp the proximity of Nishida's thought to the dialectical and (philosophically) mystical character of the relationship between the phenomenal world and ultimate reality, that is, between everyday consciousness and profound insight.

This contradictory and paradoxical character of life derives from absolute nothingness or emptiness. Japanese aesthetic experience is marked by the creative and embracing quality of this emptiness, as poetry, painting, calligraphy, flower arrangement, the construction of gardens, Nō theatre, and the like bear witness. *Mono no aware* 物のあわれ can be seen as an expression of this same emptiness on the level of human emotional response.

Can this emptiness be related to the haze Cusanus speaks of? For the Christian philosopher, there is indeed a perfect coincidence between the

2. "Whether a person's extraordinary intuition is simply an idle fancy or truly an objectively real intuition hinges on its relation to other things, on its effects" (NISHIDA 1990, 31).

absolute brightness and clarity used to symbolize God's encompassing light and the mist or haze that obscures our human vision. It is in fact out of this haze that we know what it means to overcome the domain of human reason and surpass our ability to name things. How name the unnameable? How express the inexpressible? By correlating the opposites (*soku* 即) to see light in haze and total clarity in total obscurity. Relying on our most profound capacity for seeing, we are drawn beyond the senses; it is a seeing that carries us beyond seeing. One metaphor Cusanus uses to describe the all-encompassing place from which all phenomena are emerge is a circle with an infinite radius, whose circumference is nowhere and whose center is everywhere.

If the curved line becomes less curved, in proportion the increased circumference of the maximum circle, which cannot be greater, is minimally curved and therefore maximally straight. Hence, the minimum coincides with the maximum....

For the identity in an infinite circle is so great that it precedes all oppositions—even relative oppositions. For in an infinite circle other and different are not opposed to identity. (CUSA 1988, *i.13*, 21; *i.21*, 35)

Cusanus's metaphor is geometrical and seeks to express the perfection and infinity of the absolute which, by definition, is ineffable. Nonetheless, the context of the metaphor remains strictly theoretical. Given that we can *in-tend* God (in the sense of the Latin term *intentio*, which carries the sense of *tending* toward someone or something) only by way of metaphor, we may imagine God as an infinite circle that embraces all possible forms. In a circle, the principles of line and circumference combine. An infinite circumference is at the same time a straight line, the opposites coinciding.

Beyond its particular application, the metaphor helps us understand the great importance that mathematics and geometry held in the fifteenth century as a source of analogy for theological and philosophical reflection. In this regard, we recall the particular use Nishida makes of the famous episode reported in the *Vite dei più illustri pittori* of Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574): “According to one story, when Pope Benedict XI asked Giotto to show him a work that demonstrated his ability as a painter,

Giotto simply drew a circle. In morality, we must attain to Giotto's circle" (NISHIDA 1990, 145). One is struck here by the fact that, whereas in the European tradition the anecdote is taken to refer to Giotto's wonderful *technique* of producing geometrical form without the use of a compass, for Nishida it has a *moral* significance. He seems to be thinking in terms of the circles (*ensō* 円相) drawn by Zen masters, which have nothing to do with geometrical skill or with any tangible metaphysical quality. For Nishida the circle is a figure of a moral perfection, of a purity that must first be an internal reality in order to be expressed externally.

We need to attend here not only to the affinities and disjunctions of the two discourses, but also to the transition from aesthetics to ethics, which is always something "in the making." We find ourselves at every moment engaged in this transition, in the interstices of this "between" (*ma*, or *aida* 間) that divides the two thinkers and their modes of discourse even as it links them.

Awareness of *ma* proceeds from perception of a distance or a break. It is a kind of aesthetic awareness (at once perceptive and emotional) arising from a fissure. It appears within a discontinuity and is structured to reflect that fact. At the same time, it establishes a link of continuity, without which there would be no recognition of the difference. Thus *ma* allows for a continuity-in-discontinuity, or in Nishida's term, *birenzoku no renzoku* 非連続の連続. As we noted, it has both an ethical or relational dimension and an aesthetic one. We see this in communication, which involves an emotional aspect that cannot be reduced to the intellectual content being communicated, and a perceptual aspect. When two persons meet, they share an intermediate place that is the exclusive domain of neither. Recognition of this *ma* allows one to *live* one's relationship to others. Conversely, when *ma* is not attended to, we speak of a rupture in communication in which the intervening "between" is removed (*ma ga nukeru* 間が抜ける). The "awareness" entailed here is not that of one subjective "I" standing in opposition to another subject (or object). "Aesthetic consciousness" is born of the *ma* in which identities are inter-related, in which individuals structure themselves and know themselves only through a discourse that is an *intercourse*. In Nishida's words, self-identical individuals know each other by "negating" each other. Indeed, it is only through negation that I come to know myself, "negating" the

other by its difference from me and thus aiding others to know themselves as well. Every particular self-consciousness exists in a disparity, in a dynamic “continuity of discontinuity.” Every element is never merely individual and never separated from the place (*basho* 場所) to which it belongs and from which it comes to be. This place embracing the totality of beings—physical, psychological, and spiritual—is what Nishida refers to as the “place of absolute nothingness” (*zettai mu no basho* 絶対無の場所). It may be compared to the infinite circle of Cusanus’s metaphor for God, as the horizon of all the possibilities to come.

In all faces the Face of faces is seen in a veiled and symbolic manner. But it is not seen in an unveiled manner as long as the seeker does not enter, above all faces, in a certain secret and hidden silence wherein there is no knowledge or concept of a face. (CUSA 1988, §6, 689)

If we can get behind the veil that blinds us, Cusanus suggests, we can break through the wall of the coincidence of the opposites (*murus coincidentiae oppositorum*), there to find the inaccessible light (*inaccessibilis lux*), the undifferentiated white from which every trace of reality originates and into which every phenomenon is dissolved. This blinding light is at the same time a perfect haze and darkness. It is the abyssal ground of the *Abgrund* in which the Japanese philosophical tradition and European mystical experience transect. But how can we *speak of* this encounter?

The dimension of “seeing,” as a movement that opens us to the “other” —to the presence of the other as an alterity that is forever lodged within ourselves—constitutes an invitation to the interlacing that animates all possible sensorial experience. This suggests an idea of *bioaesthetics* as a dimension of aesthetics that attends to the reciprocity between sensation and reflection in human beings. The encounter of Nishida and Cusanus offers one concrete example of reflection on the “between” that belongs to human existence and shapes the forms of life as they affect our relationship to others, our identity and our difference. These questions will require further inquiry not only for philosophy but also for the related disciplines of psychology, sociology, and anthropology. In any case, we cannot escape the fact that it is a *problem for thought* as such and its relationship to life. Faced with the kind of “otherness” we encounter

in another language or culture, we are reminded of the importance of interrelatedness. Differences of time and place as well as differences of custom and behavior are decisive in our attempts to understand human relationships of all kinds, internal and external. Artistic and philosophical traditions can assist in dissolving rigid notions of identity and opening cultural and intellectual habits of thought to the novelty that life has to offer.

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