

From Self-Reflexivity to Contingency

Nishida Kitarō on Self-Knowledge

ODAGIRI Takushi

In this paper I would like to clarify Nishida's ideas of the noumenal universal (*eichiteki ippansha* 叡智的一般者) and the world of the noumenal self (*eichiteki jiko no sekai* 叡智の自己の世界, or simply *eichiteki sekai* 叡智の世界), with particular reference to how these ideas relate to notions of apperception and self-awareness in the philosophy of his middle period. I will argue that his shift from an apperceptive universal to a noumenal one is a result of his understanding of self-reflection, or, more broadly, of self-knowledge and self-awareness. The following discussion is primarily based on writings dating from the years around 1930, especially *The Self-Aware System of Universals* (NKZ 4). My discussion will further center on the essays in the second half of that work, where his key concepts are explained most fully. These texts, as is the case in many of Nishida's writings, introduce terms unfamiliar to both the Japanese and English readers and in some cases ("self-aware universal," is a good example) involve philosophical neologisms in the English translation. In any case, I shall use their English equivalents throughout.

The problem of self-awareness, or self-knowledge broadly construed, is one of the central themes in Nishida's philosophy as a whole.¹ As I

1. Note that the term "self-knowledge" is ambiguous and the problems it raises may vary significantly from one philosophical tradition to another. Although this is

will explain below, self-awareness has a prime significance for Nishida in many respects. It is even possible to think that Nishida's philosophical inquiries arise from a certain special nature of self-knowledge broadly defined (or more specifically, what we shall speak of presently as "self-reflexivity"). For example, in his first book, *An Inquiry into the Good*, Nishida writes that the fundamental aim of philosophy is to inquire into the good and that ultimately, the goodness consists in "knowing oneself"² (NKZ I: 134). Nishida's interests in self-knowledge are not so much epistemological, as is the case with anglophone analytic philosophy, but are more closely tied to the logical and phenomenological problems of self-reflexivity. However, as he proceeds to investigate the nature of self-awareness, he begins to realize that his philosophical system does not explain a certain aspect of the phenomenon of self-awareness. I will call this aspect "openness" or "contingency." It is my task here to investigate in what ways this particular issue is important in Nishida's philosophical project.

Thus far we have been using the word "self-awareness" rather casually, but it is important to provide some clarity here. I define knowledge as justified beliefs, and self-knowledge, broadly, as one's justified beliefs

not a main concern of the present study, a brief remark is in order. There are notable differences between the anglophone analytic tradition and Nishida's thinking in regard to self-knowledge. In the analytic tradition, self-knowledge is largely discussed with respect to certain epistemic issues concerning one's own mental states. In contrast, Nishida tries to see knowledge of oneself entirely in terms of the self as agent. Thus, while the anglophone analytic philosophy treats self-knowledge as a special case of propositional knowledge, Nishida considers it a general problem of self-reflective awareness, with both epistemic and practical meaning. That said, there are similarities between their respective approaches and it is on these similarities that I wish to concentrate here. I will use the term "self-knowledge" in the wider sense in which Nishida used it.

2. This and similar remarks can be found in many of his writings. In fact, it is already reflected in the title of his first book, *An Inquiry into the Good*. Consider, for example, the following passage from that work:

There are various theories of goodness in academics, but in practice there is only one true/real notion of goodness. That is, [goodness] consists in nothing but truly/really knowing oneself. (NKZ I: 134)

The view that the goodness consists in (real) self-knowledge seems to be a consistent theme of Nishida's ethical thoughts throughout his life.

with respect to oneself as an agent. I define self-awareness as one's beliefs with respect to oneself, whether such beliefs are justified or not. Self-knowledge may therefore be considered justified self-awareness (a question we shall leave aside in the present paper). Beliefs here do not always mean conscious beliefs. One may have beliefs without being conscious of them. In a word, self-awareness is simply awareness of oneself as an agent in a straightforward, plain sense of the term. For Nishida, *jikaku* 自覚 (often translated either as "self-awareness" or "self-consciousness") is not simply self-awareness in this psychological sense. He often uses the word as a logical concept. In such cases, it does not simply signify self-awareness but also indicates a certain self-reflexive structure underlying psychological self-awareness. I will discuss this structure more fully later, but at least some preliminary remarks on this rather odd-sounding English term seem called for.

In his early works, prior to the 1920s, Nishida uses *jikaku* to frame his investigation into self-awareness, replacing his earlier notion of "pure experience" and signalling a new emphasis on the latter's self-reflective nature. In explaining this new concept, Nishida often refers to Josiah Royce's Gifford lectures, *The World and the Individual*, with particular reference to its "Supplementary Essays."³ In these essays, Royce explicates some general features of what he calls "recurrent self-mirroring systems," using concepts resembling what we nowadays commonly call a self-similar "fractal," a pictorial representation of the Mandelbrot set. Nishida seems to find useful similarities in Royce's notion of a "self-resembling system" found in these essays to his own notion of *jikaku*, particularly its self-reflexive nature.

3. Josiah Royce, *The World and the Individual*, vol. 1, "Supplementary Essays, Section III: Theory of the sources and consequences of any recurrent operation of thought. The nature of self-representative systems." Royce characterizes the nature of the absolute as recurrent self-representative (self-mirroring) systems. But Nishida interprets the "map" metaphor in his own way, emphasizing both the dynamic self-unifying (acting) aspect of the self-reflexivity, and an apparent paradox arising from it. Far from considering it simply a model of his own views, Nishida sees it as posing certain problems to his philosophical systems. His thought experiment in the early and middle periods has to do with certain deficiencies in the map-drawing metaphor. This point will be elaborated in due course.

In *Intuition and Reflection in Self-Consciousness* (NKZ 2: 1–271), Nishida draws on Royce’s analogy to explain the self-reflexivity of *jikaku*.⁴ Suppose I am attempting to draw a complete map of England while I am in fact in England. Suppose, further, that my drawing must be complete in the strict sense of the word, that is, it must contain each and every phenomenon in England, including my actual activity of drawing the map. (As I will explain later, due to this self-reflexive nature of the drawing-act, the act has a self-differentiating character. One can interpret this special self-reflexivity as an analogy for self-awareness. In other words, the analogy suggests that self-awareness also has a self-differentiating character.)

JUDGMENTS, SELF-AWARENESS AND THE NOUMENAL WORLD

In order to investigate important features of self-reflective awareness (or self-knowledge in the broader sense defined above), Nishida rigorously sets out in his early works to examine this particular paradigm of self-reflexivity. Allusions to the analogy become less frequent in his middle and later writings, even though he continues to use the term *jikaku*. This shift in his thinking can be traced back to his analysis of the threefold logic of universals, most clearly elaborated in the second half of *The Self-Aware System of Universals* and in a few of the earlier essays in his subsequent book, *The Self-Aware Determination of Nothingness* (NKZ 5: 1–141). Taken together, these texts illuminate the shift in Nishida’s thinking and help us get a better grasp of Nishida’s philosophical system as a whole.

In a 1928 essay entitled “The Noumenal World” (NKZ 4: 101–49) and composed two years after his seminal work, *Basho*, Nishida offers a concise yet fairly comprehensive summary of his middle-period philosophy. In it he outlines his threefold system of universals and defines its key technical terms—individual, universal, and world—to explain the basic logic underlying his system, namely, that everything that is, is “located

4. For a more detailed discussion of the issue, consult John Maraldo’s thoroughgoing treatment of the self-mirroring system (MARALDO 2006).

within” (於いてある) something more universal than itself. Simply put, each individual is situated within an encompassing universal. (Nishida does not himself elaborate further his spatial metaphor of “place,” which leaves a certain ambiguity in his threefold system of universals. This is an important issue, but falls wide of the present paper.)

The frame of phenomena describable in terms of a particular individual-universal pair is called its “world.” Nishida mentions three levels of individuals and their corresponding universals. First, the basic form of knowledge is judgment, which belongs to the individual at the first level. Its universal is referred to as a *universal of judgment* (*bandanteki ippansha* 判断的一般者). The second level, which rests on a universal of judgment, is the level of the apperceptive, self-aware self. Its corresponding universal is a *universal of self-awareness* or *apperceptive universal* (*jikakuteki ippansha* 自覚的一般者). The third and final level is that of the noumenal world, the world of a universal underlying the self-aware universal; it is referred to as the *noumenal universal* (*eichiteki ippansha* 叡智的一般者). In the concluding section of his essay Nishida discusses a certain inadequacy of this threefold system, and briefly introduces a fourth level, that of *religious consciousness* (*shūkyōteki ishiki* 宗教の意識). The following table summarizes the scheme:

	INDIVIDUAL	UNIVERSAL	WORLD
LEVEL 1: Judgment	concepts/ objects	universal of judgment	the world of nature
LEVEL 2: Apperception	the self-aware self	the self-aware universal	the world of consciousness
LEVEL 3: Intellectual Intuition	the noumenal self	the noumenal universal	the noumenal world
LEVEL 4: Religion (self-negation)		(absolute nothingness)	the world of religion

While the first two levels (the judgmental and apperceptive) are by and large given adequate explanation in the preceding papers, the significance of the third level (the noumenal world) is not clearly laid out until

much later, in his paper on “The Noumenal World.” This paper represents an important précis of Nishida’s thought experiments on the level of the world of the noumenal universal. After a fairly exhaustive treatment of the notion, Nishida goes on to argue in later essays that there is still another level underlying the noumenal, namely, that of religious consciousness. In any case, we may begin our discussion here with a brief summary of the third level, taking our lead from the opening paragraph of that essay:

Since propositional knowledge arises from the self-determination of a universal, when we think of something, this thinking must include a self-determination of the universal by the universal itself and within itself. I believe that there are three classes of such universals, on the basis of which we can begin to think of three kinds of worlds. (NKZ 4: 101)

Nishida begins by restating his basic assumption that knowledge is the self-determination of a universal. That is to say, everything that *is* must be *located* within (subsumed under) something more universal than itself. More generally, the meaning of “to be” is “to be within,” as John Maraldo puts it.⁵ (This structure is central to Nishida’s middle philosophy, constituting his logic of *basho* or logic of universals.) For example, Nishida claims that a judgment is not simply a judgment *per se*, but is always located *within* a universal (the universal of judgment), the latter serving as a “place” for the former.

Leaving aside the full philosophical argument for this claim we may note that, historically speaking, Nishida’s thesis of self-determination

5. Maraldo’s text reads:

Nishida articulated the *topoi* also in terms of what we may call a *me-ontology*, from the Greek *meon* or non-being. The topos of being describes the world of nature. The topos of relative nothingness comprises the field of consciousness that is no-thing with respect to the things of which it is conscious. This nothingness however is still opposed to being, and so differs from the absolute nothingness that underlies both sides of the opposition. Here and elsewhere Nishida plays on the word for absolute in Japanese, *zettai*, which literally means breaking through or overcoming opposition. His premise is that the meaning of “to be” is “to be within”; the ultimate within is the topos of absolute nothingness. (Maraldo 2008).

stands in opposition to the mainstream epistemology of his time, namely, neo-Kantian theories of knowledge. Kantians define an epistemic act as a subject's constitutive act with regard to an object. Nishida criticizes this epistemological paradigm, arguing that the knower (*shirumono* 知るもの) must belong to a different dimension from the known. Rather than start from this neo-Kantian paradigm, he proposes his own paradigm of an epistemic act, that is, the subsumption or enclosure (*tsutsumu* 包む) of an individual within a universal.⁶ Nishida's project in *The Self-Aware System of Universals* is to formulate a system based on this principle of enclosure or subsumption to explain a variety of phenomena, epistemic as well as nonepistemic. The phenomena in question range from simple conceptual judgments to more complex or universal phenomena such as those associated with practical, aesthetic, and religious issues. He classifies these phenomena according to three types, which he defines in terms of the three universals discussed above. What Nishida means by these terms is actually a relatively simple fact, as I shall try to show in what follows. In a word, we shall see how Nishida rationalizes the necessity of

6. Nishida often uses a Japanese term *tsutsumu* 包む (to enclose, to subsume, or to contain) almost interchangeably with other terms: *utsusu* 映す (to mirror or to reflect) and *miru* 見る (to see). They all have special connotations in his writings, and also collectively reveal Nishida's metaphysical commitments. However, it is difficult to translate these terms precisely into plain English, let alone capture their linguistic connotations. For example, the connotation of the word *tsutsumu* is partly based on its usage in mathematics and set theory, and it is often, though not always, preferable to understand the other two in a similar mathematical sense. English equivalents do not permit this overlap.

At the same time, Nishida's own explanations of these metaphors can often be obscure. For example, he sometimes writes that consciousness can be thought of as a "place" into which contents are "placed." This sometimes implies that consciousness is a mathematical set under which contents are subsumed as members of the set. But this same relation is also expressed through the metaphor of mirroring in which a universal is a "place" that reflects individuals. Once again, these obscurities tend to dissipate in translation. Nishida further tries to generalize this basic relationship of containment, subsumption, and mirroring to include any relation between a universal and an individual in his system. That is to say, at each level of his thought experiment, a universal is a "place" (or set) under which individuals are subsumed or a "mirror" on which individuals are reflected. Nishida seems to be conflating a number of conceptual elements that need distinguishing. These are questions that deserve fuller treatment than I can give them here.

the third level in the system, leaving aside the fourth, religious level and its complex relationship to the third level.

Nishida continues in the same paper:

The so-called noumenal world must be transcendental to our thoughts. How are we able to think of such a world? If to think of something is the self-determination of a universal, what universal is it by whose self-determination the noumenal world is being thought of? (NKZ 4: 101)

Two questions are being raised here. How does one think about thoughts transcendental to one's own self-awareness (namely the aspect heretofore referred to as the "noumenal world")? And what is the nature of the universal that underlies such transcendental thinking? These are essential issues with respect to the noumenal universal, the third level of his system.

In the section 5 of the same paper, Nishida further elaborates the questions in the following terms:

The "noumenal self," given what has been said thus far, is not only not able to be determined by the universal of judgment, it is also incapable of being determined by the apperceptive universal as a conscious being. That is to say, it is not determined as a kind of knowledge but as something that itself determines knowledge. (NKZ 4: 122)

In other words, the noumenal self is not a kind of object of knowledge but rather something that makes knowledge of objects possible. It follows that one is not able to know the essential nature of this noumenal self through self-reflection. This is an important thesis of Nishida's paper and raises the same questions once again: How should one think of this noumenal self? What is the nature of the universal underlying it?

It would appear that Nishida is offering conflicting views of the noumenal character of this third-level universal. On one hand, he clearly emphasizes the transcendental character of the noumenal universal. (The passage above is one such example.) On the other, he frequently refers to the noumenal self as accompanied by conflict and doubt, which seems inconsistent with its transcendental character. For Nishida, the concreteness of the third-level universal is somehow to be seen in close

association with its transcendence. We therefore need to clarify the relationship between this third level and the apperceptive (self-aware) universal of the second level, showing how the former transcends the latter. This brings me to the main task at hand.

JIKAKU AS SELF-CONTRADICTIONARY JUDGMENT

In order to understand the precise relation of self-awareness (*jikaku*) to the noumenal universal, we need to clarify the former. That, in turn, requires some explanation of just what Nishida understands by his second level of the self-aware or apperceptive universal and its accompanying sense of “world.” It may help to show certain similarities between Nishida’s scheme and that of Kant.

First of all, Nishida claims that, by its very nature, self-awareness obliges us to think of the apperceptive self as temporal. Nishida argues that our grasp of the contents of a proposition rests on the special, self-reflexive structure of *jikaku*. Put somewhat crudely, his logic runs as follows: A proposition consists of a subject term and a predicate term. The constitutive aspect of a judgment is the containment of the subject term by the predicate. This relation of containment is nothing other than the self-containment structure of self-awareness itself. That is to say, the self-containment structure of self-awareness is constitutive of the temporality that enables judgment. In the Kantian framework, this constitutive aspect of self-awareness is called the “unity” of apperception.

Second, Nishida holds that the temporal structure of self-awareness requires a constitutive first person (a “transcendental” unity of apperception, in Kantian terms) as its transcendental postulate. In other words, a consciousness of “I think” must underlie any consciousness of a propositional content. Thus first-person awareness (apperception) is constitutive of both judgmental knowledge and the temporality behind it.

Nishida makes these and similar claims at several points throughout *The Self-Aware System of Universals*. I cite only one passage to illustrate the point:

Our self-awareness (*jikaku*) manifests itself in the form of time.... The *noesis* [of self-awareness] consists in the simple form in which the self

reflects itself inside itself. This is the form of “time,” and based on this form of *noesis*, the *noema*, as an object of consciousness, becomes the content of experience.... “Time,” ...seen from the standpoint of the apperceptive universal, is nothing other than *noesis* as a form becoming conscious of itself within itself. (NKZ 4: 119)

The conclusion we may draw from this and similar passages⁷ is that self-reflexivity of self-awareness underlies our consciousness of judgments. Thus, Nishida seems to argue that a first-level judgment already presupposes a second-level self-awareness.

This, in rough outline, is Nishida’s argument. It should be clear now why Nishida considers a transition to the second level necessary. It also brings into relief the basic form of Nishida’s logic, which we may summarize as follows: The transition from the first level to the second is necessitated by the inadequacy of the first-level universal, but this very inadequacy is already implied in the concept of the universal of judgment itself as a first-level universal. That is, the very nature of the first-level universal necessitates its transition to the next level. Nishida explains:

When a concrete universal is subsumed under a more concrete universal, the latter [individual] located in the former universal comes to manifest its self-contradictory [nature]. (NKZ 4: 108)

Seen from the viewpoint of first-level universal, the judgment that I think

7. For example, we may single out the following passages:

When a subject-term is placed on a predicative plane, they are united as a judgment. The determination of a predicative plane as a subject term is a “judgment”.... There must be something like an “I” at the basis of this judgment. That is to say, what directly manifests the transcendental predicative plane as it is, is self-aware, apperceptive awareness. (NKZ 4: 26)

Since we distinguish a concept and its negation, there must be something [universal] that encloses [*tsutsumu*] them both. This already implies that it be something like a transcendental predicative plane, which cannot be a subject-term but can only be a predicative-term.... We can only think of it as “I,” as an immediate self-determination of the transcendental predicative plane on the basis of which we can think of what encloses both the concept and its negation. In order for us to think of change [over time], we must reflect on the “I”. (NKZ 4: 28)

(or that I am) is contradictory because the complexity of this particular judgment is not completely represented by its form. The reason is that the first person “I” is a grammatical subject-term, but it functions as the predicative plane in the judgment. This fact, Nishida argues, obliges us to consider self-awareness as a transition to the second level.

If the very concept of the universal of judgment implies an underlying, apperceptive universal, the necessity of its transition to the third-level may also already be entailed in this second-level universal. One would then want to ask how the apperceptive self becomes self-contradictory when we take into consideration more concrete facts of self-awareness. In other words, one can ask: Why, for Nishida, should this second-level universal inadequate be seen as for empirical epistemology? The answer comes as no surprise.

Just as judgment presupposes self-awareness, so the very concept of the self-aware universal already anticipates what is self-contradictory in this concept. Epistemology at the second level lacks certain concrete facts about our knowing, that is, it is still knowledge in the abstract. It does not fully represent the concreteness of epistemic acts of everyday life. It is therefore necessary to investigate further. In short, Nishida does not consider the second level a thoroughgoing representation of our epistemic practices insofar as it misrepresents, or represents inadequately, much of the phenomena of knowing and awareness.

At each level, then, Nishida’s main concern is to recognize the sense in which his system is still incomplete. In the case of the second level, this obliges him to move to a third level in order further to incorporate into his noumenal universal and its “world” more of the concrete facts related to epistemic acts. Nishida often argues that if *jikaku* is merely construed epistemically (as *chiteki jikaku* 知的自覚), it does not manifest its complete form; at its most profound, *jikaku* is a willing (*ishiteki jikaku* 意志的自覚). This volitional dimension of self-awareness (or earlier, of pure experience) appears frequently in his writings. Given the strong emphases on the epistemological, the second level tends to underrepresent the practical side of self-awareness. Clearly this is an important part of his shift to a third level, but there is something still more complex in the shift that must not be overlooked.

SELF-AWARENESS AS RECURRENCE

As noted above, in his early works Nishida frequently cites Royce's idea of recurrent self-representative systems as a model for his concept of *jikaku*. At the time, Nishida often depicted *jikaku* as a self-mirroring or self-resemblance, on the analogy of the "world-map." The analogy, which Nishida retained throughout the development of his system, not only indicates the nonrepresentational, or volitional, nature of self-knowledge, but it also reveals certain difficulties in conceptualizing volition as a cognitive activity. Nishida outlines its basic structure:

My self-reflection does not simply mean that I reflect on myself. It also entails an infinite unifying development. As Royce says, the will to mirror the self inside the self involves an infinite series unfolding. For example, suppose one's intention is to draw a complete map of England while one is in England. As soon as one has successfully completed one drawing of the map, there arises a new intention to draw a still more complete map. And so on without end.... When the self mirrors itself, it does not reflect itself as something separate from self but as something within it. In so doing, the self adds something to the self. Knowledge of the self is also an act of self-development. (NKZ 2: 13-14)

Nishida's logic here should be self-explanatory, but it gives us an opportunity to restate the basic structure of the question we are treating here. If I am to draw a complete map of England while I am in fact in England, the map must contain each and every phenomenon in England, including the activity of my drawing it. This necessitates, as Nishida writes, a self-development of the activity. Here we have his paradigm of the self-reflexive nature of *jikaku*.

The analogy reaches further to include the self-reflexivity not only of *jikaku* but of self-knowledge in general. We may consider the structural similarities by supposing that one is reporting verbally on one's own mental states, or at least the mental states I attribute to myself. In doing so, I am also reporting my beliefs about my having those mental states. Thus the self-reflexivity of the activity of making a map is by and large analogous to one's reports on what one knows about one's own mental states. They each display a similar self-mirroring structure.

The analogy holds even if one remains in silent self-reflection. We may suppose self-knowledge requires not only the capacity to know one's mental states but also to be able to think about them. Such cognitional self-knowledge has the same self-mirroring structure as self-reflexive verbal reports, at least in certain important aspects.

In another respect, the structure of Royce's map drawing is analogous to Dedekind's definition of an infinite set, namely, a set whose members have a one-to-one correspondence to all members of its proper subset. By definition, the map that is to be drawn must have a one-to-one correspondence to everything in England, and the drawing of the map is also part of that totality. The structure of Nishida's *jikaku* is like this. When one reflects on oneself, reflective consciousness contains all the contents of one's consciousness *including* the awareness of one's doing the self-reflecting. This self-awareness is at once identical with the reflective self and external to it. In fact, when reflecting on oneself, reflective consciousness is not perfectly simultaneous with the consciousness being reflected; there is always a delay. In this sense, the analogy with Dedekind's infinite is not perfect.

In any case, Nishida considers self-reflexivity the essential structure of consciousness. He refers to the self-identity of the self as "intuitive" (*chokkan* 直観) and to the exteriorizing act of self-reflection as "reflective" (*hansei* 反省). He further distinguishes two forms of *jikaku*, the purely epistemic (*chiteki jikaku* 知的自覚) and the volitional (*ishiteki jikaku* 意志的自覚). The difference can be explained by the same mathematical analogy. Epistemic self-awareness is equivalent to the simple fact of the self-identical, self-differentiating structure of the set. Volitional self-awareness is like the self-development of the infinite set. That is, being volitionally self-aware means not only that one's self-awareness sets up a difference to itself, but also that this entails an infinite process of self-determination. Self-awareness (the set) is volitionally self-aware if its differentiating nature is seen as an autonomous self-development.

There are at least two distinct questions to be raised concerning this analogy of the world map. First, this analogy has to do with the drawing of the map and not the map itself, on the activity rather than the product. In this sense, its primary focus is not the fact of self-reference but the act of self-reflection. It touches on the self-differentiating nature

of self-awareness and, at least to some extent, illuminates the volitional quality of self-awareness. As such, the activity of making a map cannot claim a simple one-to-one correspondence between the map and the mapped. Something is invariably left over. Self-knowledge cannot be reduced entirely to a cognitive mapping of past conscious states for present consciousness; the self-aware self always necessarily stands outside of itself, inhibiting perfect self-reflection. One might even conclude, based on this analogical thought experiment, that self-reflection is an outright impossibility. Empirically, however, these difficulties do not detain us. I have no problem speaking, for instance, of my mental attitudes without any major difficulty. Cognitive self-knowledge alone is incomplete without the non-epistemic quality of will.

Secondly, even if we focus on the nonepistemic, self-differentiating aspect of map drawing, the problem still remains and indeed becomes even more complicated. The self-differentiating quality of the self-aware self is also “mapped” or mirrored in the self-reflective act. Hence even a single act of self-reflection already involves a kind of Dedekind infinite. The self-reflexivity of the activity, like the drawing of the map, entails an infinite series. Think of any particular section of the map as an instance of self-reflection. As I try to make my map complete, my drawing itself becomes part of the object to be reflected, expanding the range for the completed map and making it impossible for the drawing ever to catch up with its subject matter. It is the same with willing. Even if we consider it a self-differential act, willing remains a limited form of (*gentei* 限定) self-awareness. Nishida finds even Fichte’s “will” to be limited in this sense. The true nature of self-awareness, he insists, is not its acting, let alone its knowing. Its nature is simply indeterminate: for empirical self-awareness, the noumenal self is an “outside.”

In short, Nishida does not think of self-awareness and self-knowledge as either epistemic or volitional. One does not know one’s self-reflection cognitively or as an object of will. The analogy of self-mirroring disqualifies both these models for explaining first-person thinking.

During his middle period (beginning with his *basho* essay of 1926), Nishida shifts the focus of his inquiry from the self-mirroring structure of *jikaku* to the threefold system of the universals. The change is accompanied by what we may call his “contingency thesis” on self-reflection

and, by extension, ethics and aesthetics. In “The Noumenal World” he displays a growing concern with the exteriority or openness of rational self-reflection. For example, in §3 of the essay, Nishida argues that the self in its authentic sense (*shin no jiko* 真の自己) is beyond the determination of judgments or propositions, and that one’s self-reflection can only capture a shadow of this self:

Even the self-aware universal is something determined. What lies beyond it can no longer be determined by judgment in any sense. We can only determine it in judgment [as a noumenal universal] by seeing the shadow it reflects on the *basho* of the self-aware universal, its determinative plane. This is how that which lies beyond determination [the noumenal universal] is able to determine itself. Therefore, this true [noumenal] self determines itself by casting its shadow [on the *basho* of the self-aware universal]. In consciousness, only these shadows are visible to us. (NKZ 4: III–I2)

This is how Nishida guides us into the third, noumenal level of his thought experiment. The noumenal self is here described as fundamentally external to one’s self-awareness, and it is this special exteriority (the noumenal self as an “outside” for self-awareness) that occupies Nishida thereafter. As we shall see, he associates the exteriority of the noumenal self with the contingency of self-reflection. That the noumenal self is external to self-awareness is due to the indeterminate nature of self-reflection itself.⁸ It is to this “contingency” thesis that I now turn.

EXTERIORITY, CONTINGENCY, DIALOGICAL CONTENT

In an important sense, Royce’s self-representative system of the “world map” does not offer us an analogy to the phenomenal nature of self-knowledge. The model does not take into account the element of

8. While both epistemic and volitional self-awareness may imply the impossibility of complete self-reflection, volitional self-awareness has a certain advantage here. Viewing self-awareness as self-determinative suggests that it is contingent. In this sense, the second or volitional form of self-awareness is closer to noumenal self-awareness, the form of self-awareness at the third level.

indeterminacy in an agent's ongoing rational reflection. The analogy considers every step of drawing the map (self-reflection) to be cognitively determinable, even though the process itself may be infinitely regressive. This very assumption needs to be questioned.

We tend to think of the content of our thought as cognitively transparent, but there is good reason to doubt that such is the case. Consider the following example. I suppose myself to be leading a happy life, but after a series of sessions with a clinical psychoanalyst, I discover that there are traumatic memories from my past that I have repressed, and I come to realize that I have been deceiving myself about my life. What had been supposed as certain self-knowledge turns out to be fallible and contingent. This is, of course, a common phenomenon, as self-examination of one's thinking often leads to unexpected discoveries. At any moment, I may have to revise my judgments and change my beliefs. The "world map" analogy is incapable of adequately representing this "open" structure of self-reflection.

This fundamental openness is the focus of Nishida's discussion of the third level of the noumenal universal and the fourth level of religious consciousness. In postulating the third level and depicting the noumenal self as an agonizing agent, Nishida seems to consider indeterminacy or contingency an important ingredient of rational self-reflection. Such indeterminacy is particularly evident in one's practical, aesthetic, and religious self-reflection. Nishida singles out truth, goodness, and beauty as three kinds of noumenal ideas:

The three kinds of noumenal self are these: that which sees the idea of truth, that which sees the idea of beauty, and that which sees the idea of goodness. (NKZ 4: 135)

When one reflects on one's moral judgments, one's thoughts about oneself are underdetermined. A moral judgment is contingent on its being open to future reconsideration. The same contingency seems to hold in aesthetic and religious self-reflection. Nishida even suggests that theoretical judgments are open to such contingency. In short, all three types of noumenal ideas show the indeterminate quality of ongoing self-reflection.

To take Nishida's claim a step further, the possibility of reconsidering

practical, aesthetic, and religious ideas suggests the possibility of a “dialogical critique.” My self-reflection is taken to be contingent precisely because it is subject to revision by myself and others. This fact is already implied in the contingency thesis with respect to self-reflection. My first-person thinking cannot be necessary insofar as it is *potentially* open to reinterpretation and critical examination through dialogue with others.

Nishida writes in the same essay that the noumenal self is a conflicted self (*nayameru jiko* 悩める自己) or a self confused and gone astray (*mayoeru jiko* 迷える自己).⁹ This clearly shows that the noumenality of the third-level universal consists, at least in part, of the conflicts and doubts that accompany us through life. Without entering into a detailed definition of this noumenal universal, its basic nature is rather straightforward. Since thinking in the concrete involves moral and practical dimensions, it can often be led astray, and this fact, Nishida felt, needed to be incorporated into any account of thinking. He further implies that these aspects of rational thought display a special openness or contingent nature. I see as an essential feature of the third level of Nishida’s schematic.

Since an agent’s self-reflection is contingent by nature, the noumenal self is often accompanied by doubt and conflict. For this reason, Nishida states, the noumenal self can take on a religious consciousness:

In the noumenal world, what is oriented towards *noesis* always has an aspect of countervalues. [Generally] the more deeply the self sees inside itself, the more [intensely] the self is conflicted. It is in this anguished soul that one finds the most profound reality in the noumenal world. (NKZ 4: 141)

Nishida’s point here is that the noumenal self is fundamentally an autonomous agent and as such must contain both values and countervalues.¹⁰

9. For example, Nishida writes that “one wandering in confusion is closest to God,” and “Insofar as the universal of intellectual intuition is founded on the universal of absolute nothingness, one can see the self wandering in confusion” (NKZ 4: 144). These comments suggest that the conflicting and contingent nature of the noumenal self has some special connection to the self-identical religious consciousness. This interdependency between noumenal thoughts and religious consciousness is a complex issue that needs fuller treatment in its own right.

10. This is an important element of Nishida’s idea of the noumenal self. In §8 of “The Noumenal Self” he writes:

This is the reason he states that the noumenal self is often conflicted. This special openness amounts, in fact, to the noetic autonomy of the noumenal self. He goes on to claim that this conflicted self, “the most profound reality in the noumenal world,” is what can be transformed into religious consciousness. Here again Nishida is trying to capture the contingent nature of thinking, a third-level “openness” that belongs to the first-person phenomena of the noumenal self.

In his late writings, Nishida elaborates this notion of contingency further to the point of having to adjust the entire terminology of his system: the third level is renamed “the historical world” (*rekishiteki sekai* 歴史の世界) in contrast to the “natural world” (*shizenkai* 自然界) and the “world of life” (*seimeikai* 生命界). These latter two correspond roughly to the first and the second levels of his middle-period schematic. Moreover, Nishida sees the historical world as distinguished primarily by its openness and contingent nature. His insistence on including the element of decision and volition as part of daily life may help explain the focus in his late writings on the historical world and its problems. From the passage cited above we can recognize a similar concern in his middle period.

The textual evidence for the views I have argued above are numerous, but here I restrict myself to a representative few. The following two quotations (§§7–8 of “The Noumenal Self”) show the concrete nature of the noumenal self-awareness as consisting in its essential openness.

One might think of the noumenal world as a heavenly world that transcends real life. But such a thought arises only because one tends to think of the world of ideas merely with respect to its noemic transcendence. [In truth] we, as free persons, are actually living in this noumenal world. (NKZ 4: 138–9)

Living in the noumenal world as “free persons” highlights the structurally indeterminate nature of the self in the noumenal world and accounts for conflict and doubt. Nishida stresses here that the “world of ideas” (*ideyakai* イデア界), which is the noumenal world, is nothing other than

It is true that the noumenal self contains and sees ideas, and ceaselessly attempts to actualize them. However, the noumenal self may also contravene values. Only thus can the noumenal self have its noetic autonomy. (NKZ 4: 140)

the immanent experience of concrete, everyday life. Since the self in this concrete (third-level) world is free, noumenal self-reflection is fundamentally indeterminate. The following passage supports this view:

When we transcend the apperceptive self, we become the noumenal self. That is to say, the self goes beyond the world of so-called internal consciousness, and subsumes within itself objects of the transcendental realm, thereby becoming directly conscious of what is [transcendentally] objective. One might tend to think of this [noumenal self] as a unification of the subject and the object, or “intellectual intuition....” But such a view would misinterpret *noesis* as *noema* [object].... When the self transcends itself and becomes what underlies itself, the self becomes free, that is, it becomes a free will. In other words, the self becomes a free will when it subsumes within itself what is objective. (NKZ 4: 140)¹¹

Full appreciation of this passage requires closer attention to the preceding sections of the text than I can give it here. I would only note Nishida’s criticism of a certain understanding of intellectual intuition. He argues here that the noumenal self noetically transcends apperception, and thus that its intellectual intuition is fundamentally free. The noumenal ideas (beauty, truth, or goodness) are not determinable either by judgment or by apperception. Precisely how one pursues these ideas is fundamentally indeterminate: one can always reconsider one’s idea of beauty (or goodness or truth), and thus redefine one’s volitional attitude towards it. In short, one’s practical pursuit of these ideas is essentially free and open to future revision.

In summary, for Nishida, the main problem of the second level is its misrepresentation of essential openness in noumenal (or historical) thought. Because theories based on a self-aware universal are too

11. In current Japanese scholarship, the term “transcendent (*chōetsuteki* 超越的 is strictly distinguished from “transcendental” (*chōetsuronteki* 超越論的), but this terminology was not in place when Nishida wrote his paper. One needs to judge from the context which term is appropriate where. Hence the compound word *chōetsuteki taishō* 超越の対象 in this passage seems to mean what he otherwise calls *eichiteki noema* 叡智のノエマ, that is, the three noumenal ideas of truth, goodness, and beauty. I have therefore opted to render it “transcendental objects.”

epistemic in their orientation, his theory cannot capture this concrete nature of self-reflection. Nor can it account for the dialogical content implied in noumenal thought. Nishida's idea of the noumenal self—the self transcending the merely self-aware self—and the shift of his investigations from the latter to the former, is necessitated by this particular problem in his philosophical system.

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Abbreviation

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