The Potential and Limits of Nishida Kitarō's Philosophy

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In this essay, I shall discuss the potential and limits of the philosophy of Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945), regarded as the most important figure in modern Japanese philosophy. Nishida began his philosophy with a notion of a concept called "pure experience." In the *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* it is suggested that "like [William] James, Nishida articulates 'pure experience' as an immediate awakening in the stream of consciousness emerging prior to subject-object dualism. Yet it is widely agreed that Nishida reformulates 'pure experience' in light of his own study of Zen Buddhism" (AUDI 1999, 499). It is interesting to compare Nishida's philosophy of pure experience to Zen Buddhism, especially his position on the primacy of direct experience. But Nishida's philosophy of pure experience is not identical to Zen philosophy. From *An Inquiry into the Good* (1911), Nishida always tried to philosophize a variety of problems; Zen (or religion) is only one of the many aspects of Nishida's philosophy.[1]

So how are we to understand Nishida's philosophical projects? Gener-

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1. Nishida's philosophy of Zen or religious philosophy deserves a re-examination, but this lies beyond the scope of the present essay.

ally speaking, I would suggest that Nishida's philosophy always attempts to take a "third position." Abe Masao gave us a hint:

> On the basis of historical life innate in human existence, which is neither Eastern nor Western, he neither established a new Eastern philosophy nor reconstructed Western philosophy, but created a new world philosophy.[2]

In the case of pure experience, Nishida's purpose is to develop a new position to overcome intellectualism and voluntarism. He writes:

> In the past, psychology was primarily intellectualist, although in recent times voluntarism has gradually come to the fore, with exponents like Wilhelm Wundt. From a newer perspective, consciousness is always constructive no matter how simple it may be. The contrasts in its content are necessary for its establishment—if there were truly a simple consciousness, it would immediately become unconscious. (1911, 48)

From the citation above, Nishida's philosophy of pure experience can be understood as a third position beyond intellectualism and voluntarism. On other occasions, Nishida tries to apply this third position to overcome different kinds of dichotomies. What are the potential and limits of Nishida's philosophical project?

POTENTIAL

Interestingly, Nishida draws an analogy between his philosophical project and mining and refining. He writes, "I have to refine in a modern way the ore of Eastern culture, including precious metals" (NKZ 12: 160). But he also states, "I am just a miner. I have no time to refine the mined stones" (221). We may say that Nishida's philosophy is neither the mined stones nor metal as such, but the process of mining and refining. Different mined stones have different origins, but their full potential can only be realised after refinement. To achieve this task, it is necessary for us to reflect on our methods of refining. There are different ways

2. Abe Masao, "Buddhism in Japan," in CARR 1997, 787.

of reading Nishida, but I shall introduce a phenomenological reading of Nishida's philosophy. The reason for viewing Nishida's philosophy as a phenomenological philosophy is not to limit his philosophy to a "school" or "finished product," but to reveal the possibilities of Nishida's philosophical thought. Phenomenology is not a school, but an open way of doing philosophy. This is my understanding of phenomenology. Husserl's phenomenology is not, and should not, be understood as a Husserlian school. Rather, phenomenology is a way of going back to the most fundamental way of seeing.

Of course, phenomenology is not the only way of reading Nishida. Nishida's philosophy can be understood as metaphysics or as a philosophy of religion. I do not intend to belittle the research on Nishida's philosophy of religion, and phenomenology should not close the door on the philosophy of religion. It should not be closed as a philosophical system. To clarify my position, my phenomenological reading of Nishida is an attempt to interpret his philosophy as a third position, as Nishida suggests: "[i]t is necessary for a third position" (NKZ 12: 262). What is meant by a third position? It is a position beyond two opposite positions (materialism and spiritualism, mechanism and vitalism, dualism and monism, and so on), or an alternative to two contradictory concepts (life and death, East and West, good and evil, and so on).

In a lecture note on the "Introduction to Philosophy" (1910)—composed before the publication of his first major philosophical work—Nishida lists three metaphysical positions: monism, pluralism, and dualism (NKZ 15: 133). It may be oversimplifying to conclude a philosopher's philosophy with one single position, but at least it is fair to identify the basic philosophical positions along the development of his/her philosophical thought.

In Nishida's case, we can assert that his philosophical position at all stages is basically against dualism. Modern philosophy presupposes many dichotomies, such as mind and body, subject and object, form and material, particular and universal, *noema* and *noesis*, self and other, and so on. These can be traced back not to Descartes himself but to the Cartesianism that inevitably falls into the problem of solipsism. We can view Nishida's philosophy as opposed to all kinds of dichotomies, but is Nishida's own philosophical position one of monism or pluralism? This is

a difficult question to answer. On the position of monism, one may identify Nishida's early philosophical position as a monism, or more precisely, a "monism of pure experience." Nishida's notion of pure experience is phenomenological in a certain sense, especially in the opposition to philosophical dualism; but the metaphysical position of the "monism of pure experience" may cause theoretical difficulties in developing itself as a phenomenological philosophy. As for pluralism, we would note Nishida's interest in Leibniz's monadology. But in the end, his philosophical position is essentially different from that of Leibniz: Nishida's philosophical thought is not pluralistic. Even though Nishida's later philosophy suggests a social-historical approach to the problem of the other, the body, and life, Nishida has no intention of developing a pluralistic philosophy. Nishida's position is neither monist nor pluralist. Rather, it is a philosophy based on a logic of the one and the many.

Nishida's position on Japanese culture does not argue the case for cultural pluralism; rather, he tried to link Japan and the world. Nishida's theory of Japanese culture coincides with his theory of philosophy, which can be regarded as a Japanese philosophy that can overcome the philosophical problems of the West. It is neither an Easternized nor a Westernized philosophy, but a philosophy that can challenge the modern notion of the ahistorical Cartesian self, and return to a historical reality that can be understood in both ordinary language and in the life-world. In other words, it can be understood as a third position. Nishida calls his theory "radical objectivism":

> I believe that the world of the contradictory self-identity of the one and the many is necessarily, on the one hand, a world which can be thought of throughout as mechanistic, and on the other hand, a world which can be thought of throughout as ideological. However, such views [that is, mechanistic or ideological views which try to explain actuality from a standpoint which negates actuality] are views which, in fact, we always hold outside the world of historical actuality. Absurd though it may seem, from the world of actuality, we conceive of a world which passes beyond actuality, and from the world in which we do exist, we entertain the thought of a world in which we do not exist. To speak in this way is not to think of the world subjectively. The so-called objective world which is conceived by simply negat-

ing man, is, in fact, always conceived in opposition to man, and so is rather itself something which does not get rid of subjectivism. The true objective world must be that which goes beyond ourselves, and which conversely embraces us. It must be a world which makes of ourselves its individuated plurality. In this sense I am a radical objectivist. (Nishida 1940, 361; translation modified)

Nishida's is a third position: to philosophize on the "logic" of identity in contradictions. As Heisig suggests, Nishida's notion of contradictories can be understood in what we might call contraries or correlatives (Heisig 2001, 66). Of course, Nishida is not speaking of "contraries" in classical logic, such as "all men are mortal" and "no man is mortal"; rather, he is dealing with contraries or correlatives such as "being" and "nothingness," "life" and "death," "I" and "you," "one" and "many," and so on.

Nishida's logic of absolute nothingness is usually explained as a logic of *soku*. For example, the *is* in "one is many" is not in the sense of an equation, but in the sense of *soku*. The underlying principle of *soku* is the so-called "logic of absolute nothingness": the one and the many are contradictory, but in the logic of absolute nothingness they are necessarily the same. In fact, this "logic" is not original with Nishida. It can be found in the Buddhist tradition of the *Kegon* doctrine, where the one and the many are the same (see Blocker and Starling 2001, 43–44). Nishida's "logic" is, however, not appealing to all his critics. For example, Nishida's logic of "the one and the many" (一即多) is crucified as a "mess" (イッショクタ).[3] This criticism is certainly not sympathetic, but instead of overlooking Nishida's logic of "the one and the many," phenomenology can be used as a tool to explore its potential.

Limitations

As a third position, Nishida's philosophy is quite consistent. It can be regarded as a Japanese philosophy that can even overcome the

3. The two notions have the same pronunciation: *isshokuta*. Nobechi 1997, 50. According to Nobechi, this critique is from Itō Kichinosuke (伊藤吉之助, 1885–1961).

philosophical problems of the West. It is a third position: neither an Easternized nor a Westernized philosophy, but a world philosophy genuinely global in its aims. But what are the limits of this philosophical project?

Here, I shall highlight some problems in Nishida's philosophy. His philosophy overemphasizes the logic of life, but not ethics and life. One may argue that Nishida's view of life and the environment can be regarded as a pioneer in earth ethics, which suggests the idea of "thinking like a mountain" (Kosaka 2001, 186–7). Nishida may be seen a a pioneer of deep ecology, which does not see the environment as an object, but as something that one must "become." At the same time, it would seem that Nishida's philosophy of life fails to provide insight into the ethical problems of life. For example, can Nishida give us some insight on the ethical problem of abortion? He may argue that even an embryo has "active maintenance," which is a biological concept borrowed from J. S. Haldane (1860–1936). Indeed, Nishida admits that Haldane's position is closest to his own philosophical thought (NKZ 11: 289). Concerning the problem of life, one may ask: What is life? When is the beginning of life? When is the end of life? But there is another set of questions that also need to be asked: How can I live a better life? Should I accept that brain death is the end of life? Should I support organ transplantation? Is euthanasia morally justifiable? What does it mean to be an ethical person?

Nishida's third position may develop a philosophy of life, but a philosophy of life is miles away from ethical theory. Although Nishida studied the ethical theory of T. H. Green at the beginning of his career, he did not continue to develop an ethical theory. It is not my intention here to criticise Nishida for his failure to give us an ethics of life. Even if he failed to do so, his philosophy still provides us with insight into various philosophical problems. What I am trying to point out here is the limit of Nishida's phenomenological philosophy: it may provide us with some insight on what one can know, but it fails to provide us an ethics on what one ought to do.

Nishida has never developed an ethical theory as such, but he has reflected on what is good and what is evil. For example, he took as his life's motto: "A man should be a broken jade and be ashamed of a whole clay roof tile" (丈夫玉砕恥瓦全にあり, see Shimomura 1990, 33). This means that a man should die for his spirit rather than preserve his body.

This was originally an ancient Chinese saying that was later imported into Japanese culture.[4] Needless to say, this motto shows a hierarchy of values. There are good and bad values in Japanese culture, but good and evil are ethical concepts that are independent of the hierarchy of values. To kill a person is absolutely evil, no matter what one's cultural values happen to be. Even though Nishida prefers some particular values over others, we still have to ask: What is good and what is evil in a universal sense? Nishida tries to justify the primacy of religion concerning the ground of good and evil:

> The historical world realizes itself in the form of nations. Yet I do not say that the nation itself is the absolute. The nation is the fountainhead of morality, but not of religion. As the nation is a form of the absolute's own self-formation, our moral actions must reflect a national character; but the nation does not save our souls. The true nation has its ground in the religious. (Nishida 1945, 122)

It seems that Nishida tried to dissolve the distinction of the ethical good and evil and to search for a trans-ethical "absolute good." For example, in "The Logic of Place and a Religious Worldview" he suggests that God must have the face of Satan:

> A God who merely opposes and struggles with evil is a relative God, even if he conquers evil; a God who is only a transcendent supreme God is a mere abstraction. An absolute God must harbor absolute negation within, and must be a God who descends into ultimate evil. The highest form must transform the lowest matter into itself; absolute *agape* must reach even to an absolutely evil person. (Nishida 1945, 74–5, translation modified)

Nishida did not see "logic" as *a priori* formal logic independent of the *a posteriori* world. Such a view becomes suspect if it leads to the

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4. 玉砕 originally meant "breaking a piece of jade." It became a word referring to the suicides of Japanese soldiers and civilians in World War II, who were asked to choose an "honourable" death rather than surrender on the island of Iwo Jima.

5. It is necessary to distinguish bad (*schlecht*) from evil (*böse*). The former is related to the value judgments of a person or a society, while the latter is related to ethical issues with universality, disregarding the preference of any single party. For example,

view that logic alone can overcome good and evil.[5] For example, Nishida mentions the famous story of Abraham and his son (NKZ 10: 163). One may sacrifice his/her son or daughter to God, but we have to say that killing a person is universally an evil act, whether it is based on a "religious reason" or a "justified belief." At the same time, Nishida's philosophy failed to answer the ethical questions of why killing is evil, or how we can overcome evil in human nature.[6]

As a pioneer of Japanese philosophy, Nishida makes it clear that he is merely a novice in the search for wisdom. However, he is ambitious to solve the various philosophical problems of East and West. He writes:

> Since the beginning of the Meiji period, Western cultures have been imported into Japan; by learning from them we in the East have made noteworthy progress. We still have much to learn, and it is incumbent on us to continue to develop by absorbing world cultures. Obviously, however, this does not mean that we should continue to absorb and digest Western cultures but rather that we must create a new global culture while being sustained by our Eastern heritage, which has nurtured us for thousands of years. (NISHIDA 1937, 271)

Japanese philosophers were not mere passive learners of Western philosophy, but they tried to compare the differences between the East and the West. Many among them not only studied philosophy as such, but they also sought to identify the shortcomings of Western culture. Nishida

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we would say it is bad to be lazy, but we would not say laziness is an evil act. However, in the case of murder, we would not say it is bad, but it is in all cases an evil act. In other words, good and bad refer to values, which are essentially different from the ethical concepts of good and evil. It is not a matter of degree between bad and evil, since the two concepts are qualitatively different.

6. Prior to Nishida, the problem of evil was debated among Japanese Confucian scholars, many of whom disagreed with Chinese Confucianism that every person can become a sage since human nature is more evil than good, and that the only way to overcome evil is through strict laws and social controls. Japanese Confucianism tried to break the parallelism between Orthodox Confucianism and legalism. The doctrine of the Sorai School, one of the most important schools in Japanese Confucianism, had a rather legalistic manner. Ogyū Sorai (1666–1728), the founder of the school, was a Confucian scholar who had the ability to read ancient Chinese classics, and was widely regarded as a Sinophile. However, he was also one of the first Japanese scholars to recognise the importance of legalism (BLOCKER and STARLING 2001, 102).

and others, who sensed "the rise of the East," also sense a resonance in European philosophers who were speaking of "the decline of the West." Consequently, Japanese philosophy became a conscious movement "to overcome the West." This notion was a natural point of departure for many philosophers in Japan during the first half of the twentieth century. "To overcome the West" meant, on the one hand, to defy Western culture, and on the other, to uncover the uniqueness of Japanese culture.

According to Noe Keiichi, Nishida's philosophy can be seen as a postmodern philosophy in that it takes a stance against the dualism of modern philosophy. However, Noe correctly notes that Nishida's philosophy of life is inevitably socio-biological. Nishida did not confine his philosophy to biology, but he extended it to social concepts such as history, society, national polity (国体), race, and blood:

> Nishida unconsciously confused the concept of blood in the biological dimension with that of blood in the social and cultural dimension, and identified the latter in the end with an ethnic definition of nationality. This is a trap into which thinkers who try to combine biology with sociology easily fall, as is seen in the case of social Darwinism and socio-biology. (NOE 2003, 29)

In fact, Nishida made a controversial reference to the Nazis in his discussion of Japan as a "nation state" (NKZ 12: 415), apparently seeking to justify the myth of Japan as a homogenous national polity, but what if Nishida had known of the Nazi policies of racial purification? In fact, many Japanese believed that the "Japanese way" was the future of mankind, and that Japan was justified in "liberating" other Asian nations. Japanese philosophers might have stopped Japan from entering the war, but unfortunately, the story of modern Japan turned tragic with the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. This tragic sense of life is deeply rooted in Japan's postwar philosophy.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this essay, I have discussed the potential and limits of Nishida's philosophy. No doubt Nishida is an important figure in Japanese

philosophy. Yet research on Japanese philosophy should not be reduced to the historical study of philosophical doctrines and concepts. It needs to aim at developing a third position that avoids the pitfalls of cultural monism and relativistic pluralism. The most important task of Japanese philosophy is neither to attack nor to defend one or another "school" of Japanese philosophy, but critically to rethink the potential and limits of the thought of Japanese philosophers. In the end, philosophy is not a showroom for finished products, but an ongoing process of mining and refining.

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