

Philosophy, Religion, and Aesthetics in Nishida and Whitehead

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I

“What is true Reality?” is the fundamental question Nishida Kitarō asked throughout his long career. His first answer to this question was “pure experience,” which precedes the addition of any ideation whatsoever and which is prior to subject-object duality. Passing through an understanding of the true Reality as the “absolute free will,” Nishida then arrived at the notion of *basho* or “place,” which is “absolute Nothingness.” Through still further articulation, Nishida came to grasp the true Reality as the “dialectical universal,” “Self-identity in and through absolute contradiction,” and finally as the “world of historical reality.” In other words, in his later period Nishida understands true Reality to be the “world of historical reality,” which is simply another term for “pure experience,” the “place of absolute Nothingness,” or “Self-identity in and through absolute contradiction.” Since the notion of the world of historical reality is true Reality as understood by Nishida in his later years, in order to comprehend the relation between philosophy, religion, and aesthetics in Nishida’s thought we should try to understand it from the standpoint of the world of historical reality.

The world of historical reality, or the historical world, is not the world as understood to exist over and against the self. It is the world in which we are born, work, and die. It is the boundless openness in which the interrelationship between the self and the world takes place.

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It is the world realized at absolute present which includes infinite past and infinite future. It is the unobjectifiable and unconceptualizable living reality in which the human self and the environment mutually determine one another. Thus, the world is always forming itself "from the formed to the forming" in terms of a dynamic identity of opposition and contradiction. Speaking from the determination by the human self, this self-formation of the world is understood to be directed immanently; whereas, speaking from the determination by the environment, it is understood to be directed transcendently. The historical world consists of the self-identity of these two directions, immanence and transcendence, and always includes two opposing poles. In other words, in the historical actual world the transcendent is realized in the immanent and conversely the immanent is realized in the transcendent. Accordingly, the historical world is always confronting a crisis, and precisely because it is so, it is the living, creative, actual world.

It is the standpoint of art and aesthetics that goes beyond the conceptual realm and always grasps the transcendent immanently by means of physical and bodily production; that is, *poiēsis*. On the contrary, it is the standpoint of learning that goes beyond the actual realm and always grasps the immanent transcendently by abstracting and universalizing the particular entities. The actual, historical world consists of the identity of these two opposing directions, represented by art and learning. Thus artistic intuition and theoretical speculation stand contrary to each other and yet, fundamentally speaking, both of them are the historical, formative function of the actual world, which is the self-identity in and through absolute contradiction between the forming and the formed. Accordingly, art is not a product of merely subjective imagination but has an artistic reality as a product of more fundamental self-formation out of the historical world. Otherwise it is merely play, not art. Art is, however, an *immanent* self-expression of the objective, historical world. Thus, although true art is not separate from historical actuality, it is a kind of abstraction due to its one-sided direction. It is an objectification of life. On the other hand, learning is not a product of abstract speculation but has a universal reality as a product of more fundamental self-formation of the historical world. Even logic is a form of self-expression of the historical world in which a speculative self reflects the world in a constructive manner. Learning (including science) is, however, a *transcendent* self-expression of the ob-

jective, historical world. Accordingly, although true learning is not separated from historical actuality, it is a kind of abstraction due to its one-sided direction.

II

Now, what is the relationship between art and morality or between artistic creation and moral practice? Again these two stand in contradiction to each other. In artistic creation the self becomes an object: the self renounces itself into an object and expresses itself characteristically in and through that object. On the other hand, in moral practice, an object becomes the self: the self creates and changes an object through its body and mind in this historical world. *Praxis* indicates the self's activity in the manner of historical formative function. Otherwise morality remains something within human consciousness. Accordingly, in artistic creation the self becomes an object, whereas in moral practice an object becomes the self. However, both artistic creation and moral practice are self-formations of more fundamental self-expressions of the world of historical reality which is self-identity in and through absolute contradiction between the forming and the formed.

Nishida criticized ethics in the past by saying that it usually starts from the standpoint of the moral subject based on the abstract conscious self and does not escape subjectivism even when it emphasizes reason. In order to overcome abstract morality we must take practice as the historical practice creating things with oneness of body-mind in the historical world.

Philosophy is established when learning and knowledge, instead of moving externally or objectively, internally reflect themselves and enter into their deepest basis; that is, philosophy actualizes itself when through self-reflection the objective knowledge turns into subjective, existential self-realization which has personal significance. In philosophy, the self reflects itself within itself. This personal, existential realization of the self is nothing but the self reflecting the world within itself and becoming a focal point of the world. Speaking from the standpoint of the world, the world reflects itself within the self and becomes an expression of the self. In short, philosophy is the self-realization of true self and the self-realization of the true world at one and the same time.

All learning, arts, and morality touch upon the basic reality of the self-identity in and through absolute contradiction. They come into being out of the absolute relationship between the self and the Absolute. But in the direction of moral practice, for instance, we do not confront the problem of the self's existence because its direction presupposes the existence of the self.

Religion is realized when the self goes beyond learning, ethics, and aesthetics and enters into an absolute relation with the Absolute—that is, when the self faces the absolute alternative concerning whether to follow one's own self or to follow the Absolute by giving up the self. This is a crossroad of eternal life and eternal death that the self is, fundamentally, always facing.

The direction of historical and social practice as represented by morality, art, and learning is different from religion in which the self confronts the Absolute in the locus of self-existence. The former takes values in question, whereas the latter takes the very existence of the self in question. As God asked Abraham to sacrifice his only son Isaac, the self is asked to effect its absolute negation. At the bottom of our existence the self perpetually faces absolute death. Through absolute death, however, we enter into eternal life. To enter into eternal life does not indicate an entrance into a meditative life on the far shore, but rather to work in this historical world as a focal point of the Absolute and to form the world historically. In this sense, religion is the most basic fact of our daily life.

Philosophy in the past viewed the world from the standpoint of the self and did not question the existence of the self. Even Descartes, who emphasized *cogito ergo sum*, established his philosophy within the perspective of the conscious self and did not penetrate deeply into the basis of the conscious self by breaking through it. Nishida strongly demands the radical transformation of such a subjectivistic standpoint, and emphasizes the realization of the unconceptualizable and unobjectifiable true Reality as the absolute Nothingness, self-identity in and through absolute contradiction, and the world of historical reality. To Nishida, the most fundamental fact in the realization of the historical world is the fact functioning beyond the bottom of the realization of our conscious self as the self-identity in and through absolute contradiction. It is a relationship established by the absolute other in which the self relates to itself. Here philosophy and religion converge. However,

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philosophy and religion are not immediately identical. Starting from the realization of the above-mentioned fundamental fact, religion reveals the standpoint in which fact *thoroughly becomes* fact itself. By contrast, philosophy, though starting from the same realization, presents the standpoint in which fact *reflects* fact itself. Thus it may be said that religion and philosophy represent two opposing directions implied in the most fundamental fact of true Reality.

Thus the fundamental fact of true Reality cannot be grasped by the objective logic which has made natural science its own model or which is based on the conscious self. On the other hand, Nishida's logic of place as absolute Nothingness is the logic of the fundamental fact of completely unobjectifiable true Reality. As Nishida says:

My logic of place as [the logic of] the self-identity in and through absolute contradiction is nothing but a logical attempt at grasping the world from the standpoint of realization of the historical self.¹

The standpoint of the realization of the historical self is beyond and yet includes the realization of the conscious self. Our conscious self is realized within the world of historical reality. Thinking, feeling, and willing all are realized in the process of historical development of the world which is the self-determination of absolute Nothingness. The world of historical reality is the most immediate, unobjectifiable true Reality in which learning, arts, and morality all are grounded.

III

Let me compare Nishida's philosophy with that of Whitehead, particularly in terms of their understandings of philosophy, religion, and aesthetics. Many scholars have already determined that the modes of thought found in these two philosophers have remarkable similarities. In his earlier work *Art and Morality*, Nishida emphasizes the unity of truth, beauty, and goodness and his emphasis shows a considerable parallel with Whitehead's discussion of truth, beauty, and goodness in his book *Adventures of Ideas*. In my view, however, this is merely an apparent similarity and there is structural and qualitative difference be-

¹ *Nishida Kitarō Zenshū* (The Collected Works of Nishida Kitarō), Vol. X, p. 118.

tween Nishida and Whitehead. Nishida states in the preface of *Arts and Morality*, "I pursued the internal relationship between intuition and moral will in the relationship between intuition and reflection of volitional self."² He discusses unity of truth, beauty, and goodness from the standpoint of *Zettai-ishi* 絶対意志: that is, the absolute Will. Going beyond intellect, emotion, and volition in the ordinary sense, the absolute Will is realized in the infinite depth of free self which can be attained only by renouncing the self. The union point of truth, beauty, and goodness is realized only in this infinite depth of the absolute Will. However, we hardly find an equivalent standpoint in Whitehead's *Philosophy of Organism* which is strongly oriented to speculation.

The structural and qualitative difference between Nishida and Whitehead becomes clearer when we compare Whitehead with Nishida's later work. Referring to the proceedings concerning Nishida's view of true Reality from the standpoint of the world of historical reality, I would like to note the following four points as evidence of the structural difference between the two philosophical systems.

First, Nishida's notion of the world of historical reality as the true Reality and Whitehead's notion of creativity as "the universal of universals characterizing ultimate matter of fact"³ apparently seem quite similar, because they both are completely nonsubstantial and the most immediate direct reality which includes change and development. However, in Whitehead, creativity, which is crucial to an understanding of process, indicates ongoingness, which is "the advance from disjunction to conjunction, creating a novel entity other than the entities given in disjunction."⁴ Here we see the priority of conjunction over and against disjunction in the notion of process and creativity. This means that process and creativity are understood to be uni-directional, future-oriented, and non-reciprocal. On the other hand, in Nishida, the world of historical reality is realized in the absolute present in which past and future work together through self-contradiction. It is not uni-directional but rather reciprocal. To introduce the

² *Ibid.*, Vol. III, p. 239.

³ *Process and Reality*, corrected ed. (New York: The Free Press, 1978), p. 31.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

terms conjunction and disjunction in Nishida's notion of the world of historical reality, conjunction has no priority over and against disjunction. Nor does disjunction have priority over conjunction. Instead, being determined by absolute present, conjunction as it is is disjunction and disjunction as it is is conjunction.

Second, this difference derives from the fact that in Nishida the realization of the world of historical reality is inseparably connected with the realization of individual self, which is realized to be a focal point of the world by completely renouncing itself. In this respect Nishida emphasizes the eternal death of the self as the essential moment for eternal life. The unity of truth, beauty, and goodness is realized only through the eternal death of the individual self and not before that. On the contrary, in Whitehead, particularly in *Process and Reality*, there is almost no reference to death even in the ordinary sense, to say nothing of eternal death. Although the perpetual perishing of actual entities is much talked about, it is not thoroughly, but only partially, realized, as the following quotations show: "Actual entities perpetually perish subjectively, but are immortal objectively. Actuality in perishing acquires objectively, while it loses subjective immediacy."⁵ This is because Whitehead's philosophy is that of the organism, in which the notions of process and becoming are emphasized without the realization of absolute Nothingness.

IV

Third, it is remarkable in Whitehead that God is understood to have a dipolar nature, that is, primordial and consequent nature, and to be both transcendent and immanent in his relation to the world, as clearly shown in this quotation:

It is as true to say that the World is immanent in God, as that God is immanent in the World.

It is as true to say that God transcends the World, as that the World transcends God.⁶

Unlike most Western philosophers, including Hegel, Whitehead clearly

⁵ Ibid., p. 29.

⁶ Ibid., p. 348.

emphasizes the interrelationship between transcendence and immanence, God and world. However, the dipolar nature of God (and actual entities) in Whitehead is essentially and qualitatively different from the self-identity in and through absolute contradiction of God in Nishida. In the dipolar nature of the Whiteheadian notion of God, transcendence and immanence are understood to be 50–50 in their interrelationship without contradiction, whereas in Nishida's notion of God as the self-identity in and through absolute contradiction transcendence and immanence are understood to be 100% and 100%. Someone may say that for both transcendence and immanence to be 100% is quite absurd and illogical, because the total would be 200%. Such a refutation would be made by those who are confined by objective logic, understanding everything objectively from outside. Nishida rejects such an objective logic and tries to establish the logic of *basho* (place); that is, the logic of the unobjectifiable absolute Nothingness. In his standpoint, transcendence is fully realized only by total negation of immanence, and immanence is fully realized only by total negation of transcendence. Transcendence and immanence are identical through self-contradiction in the total negation of total negation. Accordingly, the self-identity of 100% transcendence and 100% immanence is possible because it takes place in the realization of absolute Nothingness. It is a completely unobjectifiable and truly subjective or existential standpoint which embraces not only radical opposition but also absolute contradiction.

What, then, does the dipolar nature of God in Whitehead mean in comparison with Nishida? As I said before, in Whitehead's notion of the dipolar nature of God transcendence and immanence are understood to be 50% 50%. On that basis their interrelation and interaction are fully realized. And when the totality of transcendence and immanence are understood not to be 200% but 100%, it sounds quite reasonable, without contradiction. However, in this case the totality of transcendence and immanence, that is, the interrelationship between transcendence and immanence, is objectified from somewhere without. In emphasizing the interaction between transcendence and immanence, between God and the world, where does Whitehead himself stand? Does he take his stand in God, in the world, or somewhere in between? It is impossible for Whitehead to grasp the interaction between God and the world simply by taking one of each as his stand. Neither is it

possible for Whitehead to take his stand somewhere in between God and the world in grasping the interaction between the two unless he completely renounces his individual self and undergoes eternal death. However, we cannot find evidence of any realization of eternal death and the absolute negation of the individual self. This necessarily leads us to the conclusion that although in the Western philosophical tradition Whitehead is exceptional for his emphasis of the interrelationship between God and world, between transcendence and immanence, he nonetheless objectifies and conceptualizes the very relationship between them. (We should recall that Whitehead calls his own philosophy a speculative philosophy.) The result is his notion of the dipolar nature of God, which is structurally different from Nishida's notion of God as self-identity in and through absolute contradiction. Thus, I must say that Whitehead's philosophy is still based on the objective logic which Nishida rejects as not being the concrete logic of true Reality. This structural difference between them may also be clear when we consider that Whitehead's notions of process and becoming do not include the realization of absolute Nothingness, and his notion of the interrelation between God and the world has no equivalent to Nishida's important notion of *Gyakutaiō* 逆対応, the inverse correspondence of polarity, which is, for Nishida, crucial to the man and God relationship. In spite of this structural difference between Nishida and Whitehead, if one emphasizes the similarity and affinity between their philosophical systems, one merely creates misunderstanding of both philosophical systems.

Fourth, if we introduce the Hua-yen doctrine of fourfold *Dharmadhātu* (Dharma world) to interpret Whitehead's and Nishida's philosophies, we may say that Whitehead's philosophy represents the *Riji Muge Hokkai* 理事無礙法界, that is, the world of interpenetration between the universal and the particular without hindrance, whereas Nishida's philosophy represents the *Jiji Muge Hokkai* 事々無礙法界, that is, the world of interpenetration between the particular and the particular without hindrance. For, due to his strong emphasis on interaction and interpenetration between transcendence and immanence, between God and world, Whitehead's metaphysics may be closely compared with *Riji Muge Hokkai*. (Even in this regard I would like to reverse myself, because in Whitehead all actual entities are actual occasions, but God alone is not an actual occasion although he is certainly an actual entity. This we see from the following quotation: "The term

'actual occasion' will always exclude God from its scope."⁷ For the word 'occasion' implies a spatio-temporal location, whereas God is one non-temporal actual entity.⁸ Accordingly, the interpenetration between God and the world is not completely realized.⁹ For this reason I characterized Whitehead as representing the *Riji Muge Hokkai*.)

On the other hand, Nishida's philosophy is well represented by *Jiji Muge Hokkai*. For in the world of historical reality in Nishida's philosophy, individual entities thoroughly interact with each other throughout the universe. Even transcendence and immanence, God and the self, the absolute and the relative interact with one another through absolute negation *qua* absolute affirmation. This complete interaction and interpenetration between all individual entities is possible simply because it occurs in the 'place', or *basho*, of absolute Nothingness. Here again we clearly see the structural and qualitative difference between Nishida's philosophy and that of Whitehead.

Accordingly, an emphasis on the similarities between Nishida and Whitehead may be likened to an emphasis on the similarities between the whale, which is a mammal and not a fish, and the shark, which is a fish and not a mammal, simply because both whale and shark swim in the same ocean.

⁷ Ibid., p. 88.

⁸ D. W. Sherburne, *A Key to Whitehead's Process and Reality*, p. 207.

⁹ Since I have discussed this point in my essay "Mahayana Buddhism and Whitehead" included in *Zen and Western Thought* (University of Hawaii Press, 1986), I will not touch upon that issue here any further. See *Zen and Western Thought*, pp. 154-168.