

REVIEW ARTICLE

Nothingness *and* (not *or*) the Individual: Reflections on Robert Wilkinson's *Nishida and Western Philosophy*

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Nishida and Western Philosophy. By Robert Wilkinson. Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2009. 184 pages. ISBN 9780754657033. Hardcover £50.00.

ROBERT WILKINSON'S *Nishida and Western Philosophy* joins a growing number of books in English on Nishida Kitarō 西田幾多郎 (1870–1945) and the Kyoto School, a list that includes Heisig and Maraldo 1994, Carter 1997, Heisig 2001, Kopf 2001, Yusa 2002, Wargo 2005, Goto-Jones 2005 and 2008, and most recently Davis, Schroeder, and Wirth 2011 and Soares 2011. A considerable obstacle to furthering the study of Nishida and the Kyoto School is the slower pace at which reliable English translations are appearing. Although Nishida is widely recognized not only as the most important modern Japanese philosopher, but also as an original thinker on par with the pantheon of modern Western philosophers from Descartes to Derrida, to date less than a third of his writings are available in English translation. For all its commendable qualities as a philosophical introduction to Nishida's thought, *Nishida and Western Philosophy* is limited by the fact that it is based almost entirely on the existing English translations. In addition to the often-remarked (and occasionally exaggerated) drawbacks of having to read Nishida through the lenses of translators and their sometimes less than literal reiterations of his peculiar Japanese prose in the English language, this also means that pivotal texts not yet available in English, such as “Basho” 場所 (Place)¹ and

¹ *Nishida Kitarō zenshū* 西田幾多郎全集 (hereafter, NKZ), vol. 4, pp. 208–89. Note that a complete translation of “Basho” has recently been published in Krummel and Nagatomo

“Watashi to nanji” 私と汝 (I and Thou),² could not be given their due attention. Furthermore, and less explicably, Wilkinson draws on only a limited range of the available secondary literature. Although he occasionally cites an English or French source, not only does he not make reference to any of the literature in Japanese or German, many of the secondary sources published in English on Nishida’s thought are oddly absent from his bibliography.³ Even some primary sources available in English translation are disregarded, leaving some important topics unaddressed. Most notably, Nishida’s controversial later writings on political philosophy receive only an oblique mention (p. 157).⁴ Wilkinson’s bibliography does not include Dilworth, Viglielmo, and Zavala 1998, which provides translations of some of Nishida’s texts on political philosophy, nor does it include much of the secondary literature on this topic such as Heisig and Maraldo 1994 and Goto-Jones 2005.

I do not mean to imply that a book on Nishida must refer to all the relevant literature that is available (a feat which would no longer be feasible in Japanese and which is rapidly becoming less so in English), or that it must treat all the major topics in his thought in detail, or even that one must read Japanese in order to write a book on Nishida. However, some of the shortcomings of Wilkinson’s interpretation of Nishida can be at least partially attributed to the limited sources on which he relies.

The strengths of Wilkinson’s relatively brief and accessible book, on the other hand, include its general clarity of presentation and argumentation, and its focus—announced in the title—on Nishida’s critical dialogue with Western philosophers ancient and modern. This approach is indeed a fruitful one, especially for readers acquainted with Western philosophy but not yet with Nishida. Wilkinson clarifies many of the issues at stake in Nishida’s dialogical confrontations with Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Leibniz, Kant, the Neo-Kantians, Fichte, Hegel, James, and Bergson. He also discusses—and stresses throughout—the influence of Zen 禪 on Nishida’s thought.

2012, and another abridged translation has appeared in Heisig, Kasulis, and Maraldo 2011. German translations of both “Basho” and “Watashi to nanji” are available in Nishida 1999.

² NKZ, vol. 6, pp. 341–427

³ Missing secondary sources include Maraldo 2010 (first published in 2005), which contains a good bibliography of works by and on Nishida.

⁴ All parenthetical page numbers refer to *Nishida and Western Philosophy*.

On Zen as the “Starting Point” and “Invariant Core” of Nishida’s Philosophy

Wilkinson’s thesis is that “Nishida’s reactions to western thought are only intelligible if they are assumed to be expressions of a view of human experience formed mainly by Zen” (p. 2). In his first chapter he ambitiously attempts to sketch “some of the principal points of *philosophical doctrine* involved in Zen,” which are said to form not only “Nishida’s starting point” but also “the invariant core of his thought” (pp. 27–28, emphasis added). “All the changes and developments in Nishida’s philosophy” are said to be “changes only in order to try to articulate better the Zen outlook: that outlook itself never ceases to be the source of Nishida’s philosophical vision” (p. 6). In this one place Wilkinson qualifies this claim as follows: “This is not quite to say that Nishida’s is a philosophy ‘based on’ Zen: ‘based on’ is too inexact a relational term to capture the complexity of the position” (p. 6). But he does not elaborate on this complexity and it is not clear in what sense he is not in fact arguing, throughout the book, that Nishida’s philosophy is indeed based on—as well as devoted to giving a philosophical account of—Zen experience. On the complexity of the relation between Nishida’s philosophy and Zen, Wilkinson would have done well to consult Ueda Shizuteru’s insightful and influential works on this topic, which include an article available in English translation.⁵

Even if one affirms the close relation between Nishida’s philosophy and Zen (which I along with most scholars do), it is questionable whether one can simply say that the “two constant features” of Nishida’s thought are “the Zen conception of the world which Nishida seeks to articulate” and “the western philosophical manner in which he seeks to articulate it” (p. 151). The sense in which Nishida may have challenged or modified the methods as well as the content of Western philosophy may be debatable, but most scholars would refrain from saying that his “Zen outlook” was not significantly influenced in any way by the Western philosophies he spent his life studying. Many would also argue that Nishida is a highly original cross-cultural philosopher who does not belong *wholly* to any single tradition and whose thought cannot be simply identified with any pre-established set of doctrines. In any case, even if one thinks of Nishida as a philosopher of Zen, the problem with beginning a book on his philosophy by laying out the “philosophical doctrine involved in Zen” is that it puts the cart before

⁵ See Ueda 1991, pp. 171–257; Ueda 2002, pp. 11–105; and Ueda 1993. See also Davis 2004.

the horse. Nishida's struggle no longer makes sense if we think that we can "[set] out Nishida's central beliefs, the ones for which he sought to find a conceptual articulation in western thought" (p. 9) *beforehand and without his help*. Although the relation between experience and conceptual thought is a philosophically controversial one, it would be more compelling to say that the starting point and abiding core of Nishida's thought was strongly influenced by his Zen "experience" than it would be to say that these were based on any set of philosophical doctrines or theoretical principles that were already formulated prior to his thought.

Nishitani Keiji once showed great displeasure when it was suggested that he "provided Zen with a modern fundamental theology."⁶ Like Nishida, Nishitani thought of himself first and foremost as a philosopher who pursues, so far as possible, an unbiased search for truth. Decades earlier, when asked by Nishitani about the relation of his own philosophy to Zen, Nishida replied: "Certainly, it is fine if *you* say [that Zen is in the background of my thought], but if ordinary uninformed people call my thought 'Zen', I would strongly object, because they do not understand either Zen or my thought. They simply bundle together X and Y as the same thing, which is to misunderstand both my thought and Zen."⁷ While Wilkinson could hardly be dismissed as an ordinary uninformed person, Nishida would likely have urged more caution in "bundling together" his philosophy and Zen as "the same thing." Moreover, I will return later to a specific problem with reading Nishida through the lens of a misconception—or at least an overgeneralization—of the attitude toward the individual in Zen and Eastern thought on the whole.

Despite these reservations, I think that chapter 1 of *Nishida and Western Philosophy* does in many respects provide an engaging overview of some of the features of the "Zen outlook" as formulated both in traditional texts and by modern writers such as Nishida's lifelong friend Suzuki Daisetsu Teitarō 鈴木大拙貞太郎 (1870–1966); an outlook that, it is fair to say, deeply informs the starting point as well as later stages of Nishida's thought. These features include: "the view that standard human awareness . . . is not the only possible form of experience"; that another, more fundamental mode of experience is possible even though normally hidden from us; that "conceptual ratiocination does not reveal this deeper stratum of experience but rather conceals it"; that "the ego of everyday experience . . . is among the constructs of reason"; that there is a "true or real self which is the ultimate reality, the unifying

⁶ See Bragt 1992, p. 28.

⁷ NKZ, vol. 19, p. 225; Yusa 2002, p. xx.

power of the universe”; that “our ordinary conception of time is mistaken”; that “the law of non-contradiction is not sacrosanct”; that “dichotomies often taken to be ultimate . . . are not so”; and that “the historical, everyday world is important, and that other-worldliness is not an appropriate response in life” (pp. 28–29).

On Nishida's Critical Dialogues with Western Philosophers

In chapter 2, Wilkinson compares and contrasts Nishida's early philosophy, as found in his maiden work *Zen no kenkyū* 善の研究 (An Inquiry into the Good, 1911), with that of William James, from whom (in part) Nishida adopted the term “pure experience.” Wilkinson explains how both James and Nishida are concerned to show that subject/object dualism arises from a more original level of non-dual experience, but also how their appraisals of the latter differ: in contrast to Nishida, there is an “absence of a religious impulse” to return to pure experience as a deeper and more unified level of reality in James's radical empiricism (p. 59). While he makes good use of James's writings along with an array of references to *Zen no kenkyū*, Wilkinson could have also drawn on—or least referred the reader onward to—some of the previous research published on Nishida's early philosophy of pure experience, such as Feenberg and Arisaka 1990, and Fujita 2004.

Chapter 3 is devoted to Nishida's second major work, *Jikaku ni okeru chokkan to hansei* 自覚に於ける直感と反省 (Intuition and Reflection in Self-Awareness, 1917)—or rather to what one of the translators acknowledges as the “rather drastically edited” English translation of this text, a translation that took “bold liberties which at times amounted to a complete rethinking and paraphrasing of the text.”⁸ Aside from the question of the merits and demerits of working solely from this interpretively abridged translation, there is the question of whether this work deserves this much attention (one of three chapters on the development of Nishida's philosophy) in the first place, since it represents but an early formative stage on the way to *Nishida tetsugaku* proper, which is generally held to begin a decade later with *Hataraku mono kara miru mono e* 働くものから見るものへ (From the Actor to the Seer, 1927). Be that as it may, in chapter 3 Wilkinson does manage to shine some clarifying rays of light into the thicket of Nishida's critical dialogues with the philosophies of the Neo-Kantians, Fichte, and Bergson during this transitional early period of his development. He explains how Nishida takes issue with the fundamental tenants of both Kant and the Neo-Kantians,

⁸ O'Leary 1987, p. xi.

namely their basic distinctions (or dualisms) between thought and being and between value and fact (p. 92); how Nishida was deeply sympathetic with Bergson's philosophy of intuition and duration but nevertheless found it, in the end, to be a one-sided corrective to such dualisms; and how Nishida found in Fichte's *Tathandlung* the idea of a non-dual origin of act and fact that he could agree most closely with, except that for Fichte this act was a "precondition for possible experience" while for Nishida it is "our most immediate and concrete experience" (pp. 97–98).

Chapter 4 of *Nishida and Western Philosophy* is entitled "Nishida's Later Philosophy: The Logic of Place and Self-Contradictory Identity." It should really have been divided into two chapters, since it covers both Nishida's *middle* and *later* periods, which need to be carefully distinguished.

In the absence of an English translation of "Basho" or other essays included in *Hataraku mono kara miru mono e*, in the first part of chapter 4 Wilkinson relies mainly on the translations of "Eichi teki sekai" 叡智の世界 (The Intelligible World) and the "Sōsetsu" 総説 (General Summary) from Nishida's subsequent volume, *Ippansha no jikaku teki taikei* 一般者の自覚の体系 (The Self-aware System of Universals, 1930). He explains the attempt in these works from Nishida's middle period to account for all of experiential reality in a system of universals or enveloping "places" (*basho* 場所). The shallowest "universal of being" is that which contains the objects of the natural world as treated by the physical sciences, while the deepest levels of the "intelligible universal" include the values of truth, beauty, and goodness. Wilkinson is not right, however, to equate the intelligible universal with the place of absolute nothingness (p. 110); according to Nishida the latter envelops the former, which is still delimited by the opposition of noesis and noema.⁹ In any case, as Wilkinson correctly points out: "Underlying the whole analysis of the various *basho* is [Nishida's] assumption that ordinary, everyday experience . . . is both the most concrete and the most complex form of experience" (p. 105). In other words, the hierarchy of universals analyzed in Nishida's middle-period philosophy reiterates his fundamentally anti-reductionist thesis that the world as we directly experience it—the "daytime perspective" replete with feeling and volition as well as cognition—is the most inclusive and thus the most real dimension of reality, the concrete world of non-dual experience from which the scientific world of lifeless objects is but an abstraction.

A third of the way into chapter 4 Wilkinson turns his attention to Nishida's later period of thought, writing: "Though Nishida never explicitly recanted

⁹ See NKZ, vol. 5, pp. 176–77, 180; Nishida 1958a, pp. 130, 134.

the complex system of the planes of consciousness or *basho* . . . he came to focus more on what he termed the historical world and its dynamism” (p. 117). In fact, Nishida considered this to be a major shift in his thought (as do most Nishida scholars), a shift that first of all got under way when he began to take seriously the question of interpersonal alterity in “*Watashi to nanji*” (1932). It is also clear that Nishida’s attention was turned toward history and society in large part by the criticisms he received from his junior colleague Tanabe Hajime 田邊元 (1885–1962) and from his student Tosaka Jun 戸坂潤 (1900–1945), who were influenced for their part by Hegel and Marx.¹⁰ In his preface to the second volume of *Tetsugaku no konpon mondai* 哲学の根本問題 (Fundamental Problems of Philosophy, 1934), Nishida claims to have turned from a standpoint that sees the world from the self to a standpoint that situates the self in the dialectically self-determining world.¹¹

The Underappreciated Importance of the Individual for Nishida (and Zen)

The significant shift in Nishida’s logic which takes place between his middle and later periods calls for more careful attention. In the first part of chapter 4, Wilkinson refers to Nishida’s “logic of the predicate” in contrast to Aristotle’s “logic of the (grammatical) subject,” and in a subsequent section he discusses Nishida’s later logic of “absolutely self-contradictory identity.” But he does not clearly elucidate the relation between these; specifically, he does not explain how a significant change in Nishida’s logic was brought about by a shift to a more thoroughly dialectical conception of the relation between universal and individual. Let us briefly retrace this development.

For Aristotle the substratum (*hypokeimenon*) of reality is the individual substance (*ousia*), and accordingly the basis of cognitive judgments is the individual treated as the (grammatical) subject that cannot itself become a predicate, that is to say, the individual that possesses attributes without being wholly determined by or reducible to them. In his middle period Nishida turns this around to see reality as a system of predicates that cannot become subjects within their own fields of determination. Now, this might seem to imply that the existence as well as the definition of the individual could be wholly accounted for by means of the self-determination of these universals, and then Nishida’s middle-period thought would resemble a kind of Neoplatonic idealism (compare p. 148). However, as Wilkinson notes, Nishida

¹⁰ See the essays by Tanabe and Tosaka in Fujita 1998. For a detailed account of the development of Nishida’s later philosophy in response to Tanabe and Tosaka, see Itabashi 2008. For briefer accounts, see chapter 5 of Fujita 2007 and Elberfeld 1999, pp. 119–22.

¹¹ NKZ, vol. 7, p. 203; Nishida 1970, p. 107.

agrees with Aristotle that “[no] list of universals, however extensive, can wholly specify an individual” (p. 106). For Nishida, the true individual can only be understood as a self-determination of the ultimate universal which is beyond any determinate form, namely, the place of absolute nothingness.

This is where Wilkinson’s account needs to be supplemented by following Nishida’s concern with the “true individual” (*shin no ko* 真の個, *shin no kobutsu* 真の個物) into the texts of his later period,¹² in which he develops an “absolute dialectic” that subsumes both the logic of the subject and the logic of the predicate. In the second volume of *Tetsugaku no konpon mondai*, Nishida writes that “in the self-determination of the true dialectical universal there must exist the determination of individual-qua-universal and universal-qua-individual, the determination of the subject-qua-predicate and predicate-qua-subject. The true *hypokeimenon* has meaning neither merely in the direction of the subject nor in the direction of the predicate. It must be an absolute self-identity as the unity of absolute contradictories.” Nishida goes on to acknowledge here that what he “once called the self-determination of the self-aware universal” had referred to only the predicative, noetic side of this bilaterally dialectical relation.¹³

In his later thought, Nishida thus becomes increasingly concerned with the status and role of the individual, which he repeatedly stresses is not simply determined by universals but also “counter-determines” (*gyaku gentei suru* 逆限定する) them.¹⁴ As the later Nishida is fond of saying, the true individual is a “creative element of a creative world.”¹⁵

These indications of the importance of the individual for the later Nishida take us back to Wilkinson’s first chapter and forward to his concluding reflections, and specifically to his problematic characterization of Zen and Eastern thought on the whole as being anti-individual. In his initial presentation of the philosophical principles of Zen, Wilkinson defines “non-dual” as “*wholly* undifferentiated,” which he says implies that all distinctions

¹² For other treatments of the importance of the individual in Nishida’s later thought, see Cestari 2008 and Laurent 2011.

¹³ NKZ, vol. 7, p. 238; Nishida 1970, p. 124. See also NKZ, vol. 11, pp. 388–91, 416; Nishida 1986, pp. 13–15; Nishida 1987, p. 84.

¹⁴ See NKZ, vol. 7, pp. 305ff.; Nishida 1970, pp. 163ff.; NKZ, vol. 8, pp. 313–14.

¹⁵ NKZ, vol. 8, pp. 314, 339; NKZ, vol. 10, p. 307. Wilkinson comes closest to attending to the importance of the individual for the later Nishida when he considers Nishida’s adoption and adaptation of Leibniz’s notion of “monads” that mirror the world from their unique perspectives. Wilkinson notes that the difference is that “Nishida’s selves are fully interactive with the world, and indeed contribute to its constant self-formation, whereas a Leibnizian monad is windowless—a non-interactive substance” (p. 133).

are ultimately “illusory” (p. 8). Yet non-duality in Zen does not ultimately refer to a monistic One that denies the reality of the differentiated Many, but rather to a dynamically integrated condition of “not one and not two” (*fuichi funi* 不一不二), that is, to seeing the Many in the One and the One in the Many (*issokuta, tasokuitsu* 一即多·多即一). As Wilkinson himself indicates in places, for Zen and for Nishida the non-duality of reality is not a matter of oneness without manyness, but rather a matter of a “unity of opposites” for which Nishida sought a logical principle with his idea of “absolutely contradictory self-identity” (see pp. 117, 125–26, 148–49).

Taking off from Nishida’s own schematic distinction between a Western proclivity toward a metaphysics of *being* and *form* and an Eastern proclivity toward a metaphysics of *nothingness* and *formlessness*, Wilkinson ends up asserting that a cooperative meeting of East and West is impossible on account of their incommensurable attitudes toward the individual. In sharp contrast to the “depth of the belief in the reality (and indeed value) of individuals in western culture,” Wilkinson claims that “Nirvana (like its close logical analogues, *moksha* in Hinduism, and the state of being a sage [or *shengren* 聖人] in Daoism) is the condition in which anything the West would call being an individual ceases. . . . Thus in these traditions the state of being an individual is . . . a condition to be overcome” (p. 158). While Nishida’s comparative philosophy of cultures remains worthy of careful and critical consideration, Wilkinson’s characterization of Eastern metaphysics—including Nishida’s philosophy—as anti-individual will strike many readers as a misleading overgeneralization if not an anachronistically dichotomizing Orientalism. At the very least, it is a claim in need of more careful explanation and qualification. There are many Eastern as well as many Western schools of thought about the individual. We need to also attend to important distinctions made within many of these schools between “ego” and “true self,” between *jīva* and *ātman*, between *ga* 我 and *jiko* 自己, and so on. It could certainly be argued that Eastern traditions have more clearly and consistently rejected *atomistic* and *substantial* conceptions of the individual, but this does not by any means necessarily entail a rejection of the individual and individuality altogether. The annals of the Zen tradition, after all, are filled with uniquely expressive personalities!

Not only does the aim of a total “cessation of the individual” not apply to Nishida’s thought, which in fact, as we have seen, increasingly stressed the reality and value of the individual, this characterization of the goal of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Daoism is disputable, even as a general tendency: The ontological reality of individual selves is maintained in many forms of

Hinduism (including Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta and Dvaita Vedānta); the Daoist sage generally remains an identifiable individual even as he or she lives in harmony with the *dao* 道; and Mahayana Buddhism explicitly renounces the “cessation nirvana” of the so-called Hinayana schools. Bodhisattvas seek “non-abiding nirvana” as they vow to remain individuals helping other individuals (whose life streams are interdependent yet not indistinguishable), and Nāgārjuna and others go even further to proclaim the non-duality of nirvana and samsara. In general, the reaffirmation of the world of mundane reality in Mahayana Buddhism is also a reaffirmation of individual differences. In Zen, equality that merely annihilates individual differences is known as “bad equality” (*aku byōdō* 悪平等), and attachment to such a state of non-individuation is known as “emptiness sickness” (*kūbyō* 空病). Wilkinson himself notes that “nothingness” or *mu* 無 is not only “absolutely non-dual, in other words, undifferentiated in every way” (p. 10), for “it would be better regarded as a verb denoting the pure activity of emptying. *Mu* empties everything, including itself, incessantly”; in other words, emptiness (of an atomistic substantializing of individual distinctions) empties itself out into fullness (of dynamically interrelated individual distinctions). Hence, for Zen “the One and the Many are in a certain sense identical; the *samsara* and nirvana are one and the same” (p. 13).

Nishida did not disregard the differences among the Many individuals by submerging them back into a universal One. In fact, insofar as a universal has determinate content, that is, insofar as it is a “universal of being,” Nishida insists that “between true individuals . . . there cannot be a so-called universal which includes them.” “Moreover,” he goes on to say, “dialectical determination must be understood in terms of individuals mutually determining one another in the sense of a self-identity of absolute contradictories.”¹⁶ Only the ultimate “universal of nothingness”—which acts as the place or the medium of this dialectical interaction between individuals—can contain true individuals, and it can do this only by means of its own self-negation: “When the universal truly negates itself it must become a world of individuals.”¹⁷ This kenotic self-negation of the absolute which enables the existence of the relative, in other words, the self-emptying of the One into the Many, is the heart of Nishida’s understanding of God or ultimate reality as absolute nothingness.¹⁸

¹⁶ NKZ, vol. 7, p. 312; Nishida 1970, p. 167, translation modified. See also NKZ, vol. 6, p. 381 and Davis 2011.

¹⁷ NKZ, vol. 7, p. 313; Nishida 1970, p. 167. See Wilkinson’s p. 148.

¹⁸ See NKZ, vol. 11, pp. 397ff.

Choosing East or West: A Problematic Conclusion

Wilkinson concludes his book by saying that we have to “make a choice” between Nishida’s fundamentally Eastern philosophy of Zen and Western philosophy. Wilkinson claims that we are presented with a Kierkegaardian either/or decision to make between Eastern and Western ways of thinking about reality (pp. 159–61). While there are indeed profound differences between Nishida’s philosophy and many of the main streams of the Western philosophical tradition, and while Nishida’s philosophy is certainly deeply connected with certain Eastern traditions of thought and practice (especially Zen), there are three basic problems with Wilkinson’s conclusion, which identifies Nishida with the East and which posits an either/or choice between East and West. First of all, it exaggerates the agreement on fundamental principles both among Western philosophers (the Aristotelian conception of individual substances, for example, is hardly accepted by all Western philosophers from Heraclitus to Heidegger) and among Eastern schools of thought (there are great debates on a number of fundamental issues both within and between schools of Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism).

Secondly, Nishida sought a new *encompassing* logic, not simply an *alternative* logic. It is true that he sometimes referred to this more encompassing logic as the further development of an “Eastern logic,” but most often he insisted that philosophy, logic, and science must be universal and do not belong to Japan or any other nation or region of the globe. In any case, Nishida’s new logic would include, rather than merely stand opposed to, the “object logic” that has predominated in the West.¹⁹ “I am not saying that logic is of two kinds, Western logic and Eastern logic. Logic must be one. It is just that, as the form of the self-formation of the historical world, it has taken different directions in the course of its development.”²⁰ Nishida sought the underlying root of this logic of the historical world, the root from which stemmed both Eastern and Western ways of thinking. As Ueda notes, Nishida’s philosophical path was ultimately aimed, not simply at siding with the East in opposition to the West, but at “digging down in between East and West.”²¹

Thirdly, the quasi-existentialist idea of “choosing” the philosophical principles in terms of which one is inclined to think about reality would indeed

¹⁹ See NKZ, vol. 10, pp. 474–75; NKZ, vol. 11, p. 416; Nishida 1987, p. 84.

²⁰ NKZ, vol. 12, p. 289; Nishida 1958b, p. 356, translation modified.

²¹ Ueda 2011, p. 31.

be a form of individualistic voluntarism that is foreign to Nishida, who always sought universal truth by means of unbiased philosophical reason in conjunction with the religious practice of emptying oneself of egoistic partiality. To end by saying that as individuals we can and must simply “choose” which philosophy best accords with our status quo manner of experiencing the world would be, for Nishida, as for most philosophers in the West as well as in the East, to abandon the core commitment of the philosophical endeavor. Unlike theology, philosophy is not based on a given set of doctrines. And unlike the sciences, which normally operate on the basis of their own presuppositions and hypotheses, “philosophy,” writes Nishida, “seeks to dig down further beneath these presuppositions and return to their origin, so as to bring them under the sway of what is immediately given.”²² Nishida goes on to say that “what is immediate, truly concrete, and originary, is in fact the content of religion. At this point, philosophy and religion converge. But philosophy seeks to illuminate this conceptually, while religion experiences it, and seeks to live it directly.”²³ Although Nishida calls this most fundamental level of experience “religious,” this means for him nothing otherworldly or “mystical” but rather “the factual basis of our everyday life” from which “science too originates.”²⁴ For Nishida, philosophy is a discipline which takes us back toward, as well as reflects upon, this fundamental level of experience. In other words, philosophical thinking involves an ego-negating practice that opens up a deeper level of self-awareness.²⁵ Philosophy is not just a matter of “working out rigorously the consequences of one’s foundational beliefs [which are] dependent on equally foundational experience” (p. 159); it is also a practice of examining and in the process enriching and potentially altering one’s foundational experiences, a practice of putting in question and often revising one’s fundamental beliefs. Philosophy does not just *reflect on* and *express*, but also has the potential to *deepen* and *transform* our lives. It is not a matter of choice but rather a love of wisdom that inspires an ethos of “going to the truth of things” (*mono no shinjitsu ni yuku* 物の真実に行く), an ethos that Nishida thought could connect, rather than divide, East and West.²⁶

²² NKZ, vol. 15, p. 47.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ NKZ, vol. 10, pp. 119–20.

²⁵ See NKZ, vol. 11, pp. 173–74.

²⁶ See NKZ, vol. 12, pp. 280, 346.

ABBREVIATION

NKZ *Nishida Kitarō zenshū* 西田幾多郎全集, by Nishida Kitarō 西田幾多郎. 19 vols. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1987–89.

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