

Nishida on the Freedom of the Will

An Interpretation of Chapter 17 of *An Inquiry into the Good*

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IT IS DIFFICULT to work out the position of the Kyoto School philosophers on the traditional Western philosophical issue of freedom versus determinism. On the one hand they tend to be very sympathetic to those Western philosophers who oppose determinism as materialistic and reductionistic, while on the other hand, their Buddhist sympathies require a rejection of the view of the self that is typical of those Western philosophers who defend free will.¹ Of course, this issue has also been controversial among Western philosophers, many of whom see the traditional dichotomy between freedom and determinism as false and seek some sort of middle ground, often called soft determinism or compatibilism. Hence, it is not entirely clear how the issue itself is to be understood even within a Western context. My intention in this article is to try to shed some light on the Kyoto School view of freedom and determinism by examining a classic expression of the Kyoto School position, namely, the chapter on the Freedom of the Will in Nishida Kitarō's *An Inquiry into the Good*.² My analysis involves a close reading of this chapter, and I urge the reader to review it while reading this article. I will argue that Nishida should be included among those who deny that there is a dichotomy between freedom and determinism; his view should be classified as a form of soft determinism.³

¹ That is, a view of the self as an individual, enduring, independent agent capable of initiating a causal series in an absolute sense.

² Chapter 17 in *An Inquiry into the Good*, translated by Masao Abe and Christopher Ives (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990). The original Japanese text was published in 1911. All references will be to this translation by Abe and Ives.

³ A classic statement by a Western philosopher of a position very similar to Nishida's can be found in W. T. Stace, *Religion and the Modern Mind* (New York: Harper Collins Publishing, Inc., 1952), pp. 248-258.

Nishida begins his discussion of the freedom of the will in this chapter by reminding the reader of his view, discussed in detail earlier in the text, that the will is to be thought of as the most fundamental aspect of reality rather than as simply a part of an individual. This is connected with his view that reality is most accurately spoken of as "the phenomena of consciousness"⁴ and with his interpretation of the process of reality as "constructive."⁵ Nishida then asks whether will in this sense is free or determined.

He opens his analysis by noting that people ordinarily "consider the will to be free."⁶ Naturally, this common view cannot be accepted by Nishida without considerable qualification since people also ordinarily consider the will to be only a part of the individual self. Hence, Nishida turns to a reflection on what is to be made of this common view of freedom. He makes two basic points: First, that the common experience of being free is always "within a certain sphere," that is, we see ourselves as being able either to do or to refrain from doing certain things in certain situations, and second, that ideas of responsibility, praise and blame, etc., arise from this experience.⁷ The rest of Nishida's discussion is based on an analysis of the first of these points. He never returns in the *Inquiry* to the question of how he understands the ideas of responsibility, praise and blame, etc. I will offer some suggestions about what his position on freedom implies about these issues at the end of this article.

Nishida focuses on the fact that the ordinary view recognizes that freedom only occurs "within a certain sphere" and makes a number of claims about the nature of the limitations or restrictions this implies. Starting from within the ordinary view, which he soon moves beyond, Nishida points out that when we think about bodily activity in the natural world, our control of things, and hence our freedom of action, is obviously quite limited. Hence, we think we are "truly free" only in the activity of thinking, yet even here there are limits. We have little control over which ideas occur to us at any given time, and, moreover, there are restraints built into the process of thinking as well.⁸ Here Nishida is apparently thinking of such things as the laws of logic. Thus, even in the ordinary view, freedom is clearly not absolute, so the question is how to understand freedom in a restricted sense. The extent of the restrictions on the

⁴ See Chapter 6, "Phenomena of Consciousness Are the Sole Reality," pp. 42-46.

⁵ See Chapter 7, "The True Features of Reality," pp. 47-50. Nishida's view of the nature of reality is the basis of his rejection of reductionistic, mechanistic determinism; see below.

⁶ *Inquiry*, p. 95.

⁷ *Inquiry*, pp. 95-96.

⁸ *Inquiry*, p. 96.

idea of being free that Nishida will now propose is quite substantial.

At the end of this brief analysis, Nishida adds an important additional claim, namely, that freedom also is only present "when of two or more ways to unite ideas none has the strength to dominate."⁹ He does not claim that this is part of the common view of free will, and it would be difficult to defend the claim that it is, since people do commonly seem to assume that they are free to violate their most cherished principles. Nevertheless, this is a crucial element in Nishida's own view, as will become clear shortly. Perhaps he is reluctant to directly challenge an aspect of common opinion and simply introduces an alternative view in the hope that its greater plausibility will lead to its acceptance. Or, perhaps he would defend a hypothetical analysis of such claims. That is, the claim that I could have done otherwise is understood as meaning "I could have *if* I had wanted to." Some other idea might have had "the strength to dominate," though in fact that did not occur. Nishida takes ordinary experience and ordinary opinions seriously, but not uncritically. They provide a starting point which must be evaluated in terms of his general principles about the nature of reality.

As he makes clear later, Nishida is claiming that we can really only speak of freedom of choice in cases where we do not see any grounds for preferring one alternative to another. This is a much more narrow view than most defenders of free will have in mind. Before he says more about this point, however, he characterizes the standard debate between those who defend free will and the determinists. This will make clearer that he is seeking a middle ground between two radically opposing positions, neither of which is acceptable.

Nishida points out that those who defend free will, and he is now apparently talking about philosophers and not about what people ordinarily say, appeal to a "mystical power" that is completely independent of both internal and external conditions.¹⁰ Such an entity cannot be posited by someone who takes the interconnectedness and co-dependent arising of all things as seriously as Nishida does. To defend such a view would also violate the principle of no-self. Thus, insofar as he speaks positively of freedom, Nishida cannot mean something like this.

Nishida then characterizes determinism as holding that there is a sufficient cause of everything, including the will.¹¹ It is immediately made clear that Nishida is much more sympathetic to this view. He asserts that the claim that we can "choose motives freely without any cause or reason" is "totally mistaken." "There must be a sufficient reason for our choice of motives," either

⁹ *Inquiry*, p. 96.

¹⁰ *Inquiry*, p. 96.

¹¹ *Inquiry*, pp. 96-97.

in consciousness or beneath consciousness.¹² He defends this view of choice as always determined by prior conditions by arguing that if our acts of willing were not caused we would not experience ourselves as responsible for them. They would instead be fortuitous events with external causes. Thus, Nishida concludes that an appeal to internal experience proves not freedom, but determinism.¹³ Our choices are determined by "disposition, habit, and character."¹⁴

Nevertheless, Nishida now criticizes the determinist position. He objects that the proponents of this view claim that all phenomena are controlled by the sort of law of mechanical necessity that is assumed to rule in the natural realm.¹⁵ This sort of reductionistic view is not acceptable to Nishida for whom the most appropriate way to characterize reality in general is as the phenomena of consciousness. Of course, he is neither an idealist nor a dualist. His point is that the perspective of the natural scientist is an abstraction that has great practical usefulness, but does not capture the whole of reality.¹⁶ Especially when we are speaking of human actions we must use categories that cannot be reduced to naturalistic terms. "The reason behind the will . . . is not a mechanical cause as described by determinists."¹⁷ A description of the dispositions, habits, and character that determine our actions requires reference to patterns of interpretation and meaning that are not simply physicalistic,¹⁸ but it does not require reference to phenomena that are uncaused. This distinction between two versions of determinism is similar to the familiar distinction between hard and soft determinism, though Nishida's soft determinism is harder than some in the extent to which it restricts the nature of freedom.

Nishida concludes that the common experience of being free must be understood as the absence of "external" restraint, and not as the lack of any cause at all. "When we function . . . from the internal character of the self, we feel ourselves to be free."¹⁹ An act we experience as free, then, is one that we experience as an accurate expression of who we are, and its freedom consists precisely in this expressive character, not in the absence of causal conditions. Nishida recognizes that even this non-mechanistic determinism will be

¹² *Inquiry*, p. 97.

¹³ *Inquiry*, p. 97.

¹⁴ *Inquiry*, p. 96.

¹⁵ *Inquiry*, p. 97.

¹⁶ "The world described by physicists, like a line without width and a plane without thickness, is not something that actually exists." *Inquiry*, p. 49.

¹⁷ *Inquiry*, p. 98.

¹⁸ Insofar as these are presented as non-physical, they are also abstractions, of course. The disembodied thought does not actually exist either.

¹⁹ *Inquiry*, p. 98.

profoundly unsatisfying to many, so he offers a further clarification.

If "freedom means to function according to one's character," he continues, how does this differ from natural processes, which could also be said to fit this description? When water flows and fire burns are they not functioning according to their character?²⁰ The issue here is about what distinguishes a process that is conscious. Nishida asserts that insofar as acts of willing are conscious they are aware not only of what is done but also of what is not done. This awareness of possibilities other than the actual events is what distinguishes the conscious from the natural.²¹

It is here that we see how Nishida can maintain the prospect of genuine openness in the process of reality while still defending a form of determinism. Our awareness of other possibilities opens up a much greater range of variation for future development. Nishida's determinism is not "blind." Since the prior conditions in the case of conscious acts contain an awareness of alternatives, future divergences are made possible that would not be possible without this awareness. As we become more knowledgeable about our characters and the possibilities in the world we act in, the consequences of our being who we are is affected by this awareness.²²

It is clear, then, that Nishida defends determinism, though of a non-mechanistic sort, and "reduces" freedom to the experience of not being "externally" restrained. It is at this point that we might expect a discussion of the nature of responsibility, especially the question of whether we are responsible for our characters, but it is not forthcoming. Nevertheless, a number of conclusions seem to follow in a straightforward way from Nishida's version of determinism.

In the first place, the only sense in which it would seem that we can speak of responsibility is as purely causal. I am responsible for those actions that are caused by my character, i.e., my "free" acts. I cannot be responsible for my character, however, because I do not exist prior to or independent of my character. My character must have prior causes, just as my acts are caused by my character, but I do not exist apart from it so as to serve as its cause. Rather this character and the acts that emerge from it constitute the process that is me. Hence, my character is not chosen, it is given to me by the elaborate context in which I come into being. Insofar as I am "free," I act in accordance with it, and the only time I do not do that is when "external" restraints prevent it. (One of these "external" restraints may be an inadequacy in my awareness of the qualities of my character and their implications for the situations I

²⁰ *Inquiry*, p. 98.

²¹ *Inquiry*, pp. 98-99.

²² *Inquiry*, p. 99.

am in. In other words, there is a sense in which I can act contrary to my character out of ignorance.)

For the ordinary understanding, this analysis of responsibility will seem inadequate. Something important is missing, namely, the idea of moral consequences, of being subject to praise and blame for the acts for which I am responsible. If my responsible acts are an expression of my character for which I am not responsible, what happens to the notions of praise and blame, of moral responsibility? Reflection on this question is an important source of the common notion of the "mystical power" that is entirely independent of the process of reality that Nishida rejected earlier.

It is useful to note that on Nishida's view actions of praising and blaming, insofar as they are responsible, free acts (in his sense), will only be expressions of the character of the person doing the praising and blaming. There is no ground independent of the contingencies of our own characters from which we can make judgments. Just as in the case of the notion of responsibility, we are left with a picture of the actor as under the control of forces over which the actor has no control. How is this to be reconciled with the ordinary sense of responsibility?

I would suggest that the crucial element in the ordinary notion of moral responsibility is not the idea of an independent agent as the ultimate cause and hence the justified focus of praise and blame, an idea that Nishida clearly cannot accept, but rather the idea of obligations for certain kinds of actions, actions that are responsive to a particular situation. Being responsible in this sense is not connected with some notion of being the ultimate cause of the situation.

A good example of the kind of thing I have in mind is the response many people have to the recognition of past injustice in their communities. In many cases where it can be shown that the racial discrimination of past generations, for example, has resulted in unequal opportunities for some members of the community, many people accept the responsibility to make sacrifices so as to redress such injustices even though they were not themselves the cause of the injustices. Hence, they will approve funding special programs for the victims and will make contributions of money and time to help them. This can be seen as accepting responsibility for actions that the people accepting responsibility clearly did not themselves perform.

This offers an analysis of the salvageable content of the notion of responsibility that fits well with Nishida's view of freedom. Just as being free does not mean being the ultimate cause of your actions, so being responsible does not mean that either. Being free means acting in ways that accurately express your character, and being responsible means taking on the burden of lessening the suffering caused by past actions, whether these were your own actions or

COBB: NISHIDA ON THE FREEDOM OF THE WILL

those of others.

There is a broader issue that arises at this point. In what sense are there good and bad actions for Nishida? In what sense is there a general moral principle to which one can appeal? In what sense can we speak of good and bad characters? The answer is to see that these questions presuppose just the view of reality that Nishida is rejecting. As with the Zen tradition in general and with any form of determinism, reality is seen as valuationally neutral at the ultimate level. Rather than worrying about these sorts of traditional moral questions, the proper response is to allow your character to express itself. Nishida shares the common Buddhist expectation that when not constrained by egoism, that expression will reflect the cooperative enhancement of life, i.e., compassion.