

# The Difficulty of Understanding Nishida's Philosophy

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**T**HE PHILOSOPHICAL WORKS of Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945) form a body of work that is singularly difficult to understand—indeed, it is not unusual to read for pages with almost no idea of what it is that Nishida is trying to say. Yet at the same time there is something in his work that presses itself upon one and keeps one reading. One can sense through his labored words and phrases the central nature of the problems he takes up, as well as the almost physical passion with which he struggles to resolve these problems. Writing for Nishida was not the setting down of already thought-out concepts, but was rather part of the thinking process itself. Nishida compared himself to a miner deep in the earth, swinging his pick in search of the gold-vein of truth. And his words were indeed like swings of the pick, sometimes dislodging a precious piece of truth-ore, sometimes chipping the pick itself. The rough, irregular fragments he extracted were linked together through sheer tenacity of thought and left to us in the form of his writings.

One cannot help feeling that there must be a reason for the difficulty of Nishida's philosophical writings. His interpretations of other philosophers (as in *Gendai ni okeru risō shugi no tetsugaku* [Contemporary idealistic philosophy]) are both clear and to the point, and his personal essays are penned in a style that is lucid, simple, and vigorous. Why then do his thoughts become so labored when he turns to his philosophical treatises, the works that evoked from him his profoundest reflections? There are a number of reasons, no doubt, but the most fundamental may have been that many of the issues Nishida sought to

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clarify lay in philosophical territory hitherto unexplored, forcing him to operate in the absence of appropriate philosophical language. It was as though he had to create as he went along a syntax for a grammarless tongue, and the result was often what Nishida himself characterized as "confused, jumbled thinking" (19:636). In his philosophical thought "subjective logic" and "predicative logic"—to use Nishida's own terminology—are entwined and interwoven, and visible, verifiable connections between one form and another are unexpectedly (and quite frequently) severed by sudden changes of subject between one paragraph and another. One may discern three things at work here: 1) a tension arising from the encounter of differing traditions; 2) a certain lack of homogeneity in Nishida's thought; 3) a primality and thoroughness in his inquiry, together with an exceptionally protracted development of ideas. Let us examine each of these features a bit more closely.

### *The Encounter of Different Traditions*

Nishida's philosophy took form at the historical moment when the problem of "East and West" was emerging with a sometimes violent force. Nishida was on the one hand deeply rooted in the spiritual traditions of the East, and on the other profoundly influenced by the history and concerns of Western philosophical thought. The tension between the two distinct traditions formed the reality within which he strove to articulate his philosophy, but, as Nishida himself commented, "it was an impossible task." One might say that between the nonconceptual practice of the East and the reflective philosophy of the West—to take for the moment the extreme expressions of the respective traditions—there is a gap so fundamental as to be unbridgeable. Nishida, though sharing with his contemporary Natsume Sōseki (1867–1916) the painful sensation of being pulled apart by the respective poles of East and West, nevertheless threw himself deliberately into the gap between the two, an act emblematic of his conviction that the East-West problem was a *world-historical* problem, one central to the success or failure of the effort to create a truly global world.

Unfortunately, the language that had evolved in the course of Western philosophical history did not allow Nishida to articulate and develop the ideas that took form in this tension-filled East-West gap. Even those thinkers that most influenced Nishida, like Aristotle, Hegel,

and Leibniz, were decisively transformed at the core of his philosophy: "that which is subject and cannot be predicate" became "that which is predicate and cannot be subject," the dialectic of process became the dialectic of place, and the monad became "the monad that exists only in relation to other monads." There was no ready-made logic and terminology for a form of thought that strove to reinterpret in terms of *topos* (*basho*) the substance at work in these transformations, nor for the philosophy that developed out of them. Nor was the language of the East any more capable of expressing the movement of Nishida's thought. Suitable though it is for the delicate expression of the world of fundamental awakening (as when Nishida, after swiftly brushing an India-ink circle, wrote "The circle of the heart-moon—its light swallows the myriad things"), it does not by nature lend itself to the articulation of philosophical speculation. Nishida, "confused and jumbled" though his thoughts may have been, devoted his entire philosophical career to the creation of a new logic. The reading of Nishida must thus be accompanied by an awakening to the East-West question that was so central to Nishida himself.

In truth, though, the fundamental issues addressed by Nishida are not defined solely by the boundaries of East and West. Nonconceptual practice is not something that is confined to Eastern tradition, nor is philosophy as an ever-deepening process of reflection something that is confined to Western tradition. Both relate to the overall potential of the human being in a global world. Although the East-West question provided for Nishida a historical "place" for thought, it was the issue of human potential as expressed through nonconceptual practice and reflective philosophy that comprised the very material of his philosophy. And it was the space that stretched between the two—a space characterized by a heterogeneity rooted in unresolved tension—that formed the space in which Nishida's thought took form.

### *Heterogeneity*

This lack of homogeneity in Nishida's "space of thought" is, I believe, the principal factor that makes his ideas so labored and his treatises so difficult to understand. An example is Nishida's "philosophy of pure experience," which appears at first glance to be relatively straightforward but which is in fact taut with an extraordinary internal strain and

dissonance, especially between the expression of pure experience in its most primitive form (“at the moment of seeing a color or hearing a sound there is no subject or object”) and the format of philosophical exposition adopted in *Zen no kenkyū* (An Inquiry into the Good; 1910).<sup>1</sup> This philosophy attempts to “explain everything” on the basis of the proposition that “pure experience is the only reality,” but this pure experience—being a primitive, immediate event—is not something that rests well in the formal confines of a philosophical proposition. If anything it acts to destroy such propositional forms.

Thus at the foundations of pure-experience philosophy there exists a elemental clash between the core proposition of the philosophy and a force that tends to dissolve this very proposition. There is, in other words, a jarring encounter of philosophy and that which is not philosophy. These forces continually relegate Nishida’s thought back to the wilderness that lies between reflection and prereflection (a wilderness consisting not of reflection or prereflection themselves but of a *realization* of pre-reflection based on a breaking through of reflection, so that an element of this breakthrough is always present in reflection). In this wilderness the very principles of thought are subject to a thorough reevaluation. (Nishida, aware of the self-contradiction in these principles, later propounded the principle of the self-identity of contradictories.)

All of Nishida’s thought, including his concept of self-awareness, his notion of place, and the philosophy of his later years, is informed by this multidimensional, heterogeneous dynamic of prereflection, reflection, and the reflection of reflection. The asymmetry of this thought system, stretched as it is between the extremes of radically immediate prereflection on the one hand and rational reflection on the other, renders it just as unworkable as a physical movement that attempts to simultaneously fly in the sky, run on the ground, swim in the water, and dig in the ground. It is as though one attempted to perform Heidegger’s *Denken* [thinking] and *Dichten* [poetizing] concurrently, with each infusing the other. It is little wonder that Nishida’s ideas proceeded so laboriously and his treatises became ever more obscure. If, however, we can see the movement of Nishida’s thought as an attempt to realize, through the impossibility of speculation, the nature of reality as reality, then the

<sup>1</sup> Nishida’s first book, and the representative work of pure-experience philosophy.

reading of Nishida can become an occasion for perceiving that which thought should truly direct itself toward.

*The Character of Nishida's Thought*

The intercultural tension and internal heterogeneity we have seen in Nishida's thought placed him in the difficult position of having to rethink things from their very foundations. This meant a thoroughgoing investigation into the origins of even those notions generally regarded as self-evident, such as the nature of things, of understanding, and of the self.

Nishida had a taste for immersing himself in especially difficult problems and struggling to dig himself out. He asks, for example, "What is the meaning of 'self-awareness'? Self-awareness is the knower knowing the known; one can say that in self-awareness the knower becomes one with that which is known." So far we understand, or at least we think we understand. Then, with Nishida's next question, "But what is the meaning of *knowing*?", the ground of premises that had seemed so self-evident suddenly crumbles beneath us and we are off on an inquiry into the nature of knowledge, including such problems as how we can *know* that we know. The difficulty of dealing with such primal questions often steers Nishida's reasoning into paths quite arduous to follow.

Let us take up one more example. "It is possible to doubt the existence of anything," he says, "but we cannot doubt the existence of the 'I'. Even if we claim to do so, it is 'I' who entertains the doubt. With us, to exist and to know are the same. Even the fact of doubting must mean that there is an 'I'." We can easily follow Nishida's Cartesian reflexes this far. But he is compelled to inquire further, asking "What then is this 'I'?" (7:85).

To read the philosophy of Nishida is thus to learn to question all things—including our own point of view—from the very source. Indeed, this may be seen as the most fundamental element of the philosophical quest.

The final element I have identified as contributing to the difficulty of Nishida's thought is the extremely protracted nature of his discussions. Nishida, as can be seen in a book like *Jikaku ni okeru chokkan to hansei* (Intuition and Reflection in Self-awareness), would start a particu-

lar work as an organized treatise, patch on one idea after another without any sense of system, attempt to reexpress things in a more orderly fashion but once again add new thoughts, try to extricate himself by reinterpreting what he had written, decide to change direction, and so on and so forth until he was left with a volume that is more like a long-continued series of articles than a single organized work. This pattern characterizes every treatise in the more than five thousand pages of his *Collected Works*, so much so that one almost has to view these writings as parts of a single giant thesis that Nishida continued building upon throughout his life. Each treatise has a title of its own, but this simply indicates the focus of the work; the studies are concerned not so much with presenting a particular theme as they are with further developing an ongoing line of reasoning. Thus the serious student of any particular treatise must at the very least have read the preceding and succeeding treatises as well, and preferably all the treatises in the *Collected Works* (patiently enduring the endless repetitions).

Much the same holds true for the distinctive terminology that one encounters in the respective writings. Such expressions as “the self-limitation of place” (*basho no jiko gentei*), “active intuition” (*kōiteki chokkan*), and “the historical body” (*rekishitekishintai*)—as well as the famous “self-identity of absolute contradictories” (*zettai mujunteki jiko dōitsu*), which by itself sounds so formulaic, abstract, and assertive—can be fully understood only within the context of the full body of Nishida’s philosophical work. Unless one has a concrete knowledge of the developments in Nishida’s thought that produced a need for these particular expressions, they are of very little meaning.

All of this makes it necessary to read and reread Nishida’s work before it can be understood. Given the laborious nature of the individual pieces, this only adds to the overall difficulty of studying his thought. If one is able to read (as opposed to understand) Nishida’s work, it is only because the energy to do so is provided by a certain empathy with the issues that occupy Nishida himself. Without this empathy the reading of Nishida is of little philosophical benefit. For this very reason it is a philosophy that inevitably attracts criticism from a variety of directions.

We have examined several of the reasons that Nishida’s philosophical texts are so hard to read. If we possess an empathy with the

philosopher's concerns, however, we discover that his works contain something in addition to difficult turns of phrase. As we work our way from one demanding page to the next, we find that, just as a pick sends off sparks that momentarily illuminate the dark mine shaft, Nishida here and there comes out with short comments that point to the meaning of the entire work. "Objects come and illuminate me" (10:427); "Become one with things when you think, become one with things when you act" (10:158); "To live is to engage in objective [ego-less] creation, for our existence is a physical one"; "Reality is fluid"; "When the relative meets the absolute then death must occur. . . . It is only through death that our ego can come, through inverse correspondence (*gyaku taiō*), into contact with God" (11:396).

Although such comments can be rather enigmatic in the full context of Nishida thought, the flash of light they provide momentarily illuminates not only the direction and nature of the overall discussion but the very reality of the reader who is willing to share Nishida's quest.

Nishida, as mentioned above, produced writings other than his philosophical treatises. There are light essays like "The Background of Goethe" (*Geete no haike*) and "The Beauty of Calligraphy" (*Sho no bi*); reminiscences like "Old Texts in Kanazawa during the Early Meiji Period" (*Meiji no hajimegoro, Kanazawa no kohon*) and "When I First Studied under Hōjō Sensei" (*Hōjō sensei ni hajimete oshie o uketa koro*); plus diaries, letters, and poems in Chinese and Japanese. As we noted, these works are all marked by clarity, economy, refinement, and substance (qualities that are all the more striking in contrast to the laborious nature of his treatises). In them something direct and frank is quite fluently expressed. As the exigencies of the occasion demanded they were sometimes warm and sometimes cool; sometimes light and sometimes profound; sometimes friendly and sometimes severe; and sometimes informed by sorrow. One feels upon reading each individual piece that one has been handed something unobtrusive but of fundamental significance, something possessed of a highly tempered simplicity and naturalness.

And one senses, finally, that what Nishida's treatises are attempting to convey is no different than what these other works are saying. Both aspects of Nishida's writing—the clear, plain wording of his more informal work and the often belabored language of his philosophical studies—emerge, I am convinced, from the same fundamental place. "The

profoundest philosophy," he writes, "is born when we grasp most deeply the meaning of ordinary, everyday life" (14:267-68). His treatises represented his thoroughgoing investigations of these commonplace issues, while his essays and diaries formed the simple, straightforward expression of an everyday life in which the complexities had resolved themselves to reveal a transparent profundity.

For the philosopher, philosophy is "the only thing that is truly necessary." Yet even for the philosopher the final, ultimate issues are the question of life and the question of death. Living with personal suffering, family distress, and the various historical trials of his time, Nishida continued both his questioning and his writing till the moment of his death. He once asked himself, "What pleasure is there in life?" His simple answer was, "To breathe is one such pleasure" (13:439), adding that "ultimately speaking, [the greatest pleasure] is to be content with everyday life"<sup>2</sup> (11:452). "I love the sea," he wrote, "I feel something infinite at work there" (12:173).

There is a fundamental inquiry that informs the entirety of Nishida's life and work: "What is this self of ours? And what is this world of reality in which we are born, in which we work, and in which we die?" This inquiry has two aspects that are questioned as one: "this self of ours" (that is, the self of "I and thou," of self and self, of the infinite "monads that exist only in relation to other monads") and "this world" in which we exist. The world in question here is the world of reality, composed of a complex layering and fusion of the world of samsara ("this world in which we are born and in which we die"), the world of everyday existence ("this world in which we are born and in which we work"), and the historical world in which West encounters East, North faces South, ethnic groups clash, and great nations rise and fall. If we take Nishida's inquiry—an inquiry issuing from depths of the world of suffering—and accept it as his legacy to us, then we too may find our thinking "confused and jumbled" as we strive to deal with these nearly insoluble problems. But perhaps we can do so with the anticipation of finding a certain contentment (*Gelassenheit*).

TRANSLATED BY THOMAS L. KIRCHNER

<sup>2</sup> A rather inadequate rendering of the term *byōjōtei*, which indicates that the truth is replete in everyday life just as it is.