

Fichte's Philosophy in Nishida's *Lecture Notes on the Philosophy of Religion* (1913/14)

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Introduction

In previous studies on Nishida's philosophy, the relationship between Neo-Fichteanism within Neo-Kantianism and Nishida's philosophical reflections following the publication of *An Inquiry into the Good* (1911) has been largely overlooked.

However, with the publication of the supplementary volume of *The Complete Works of Nishida Kitarō* by Iwanami Shoten in 2020—edited with an explanation by Director Hiroshi Asami of the Nishida Kitarō Museum of Philosophy in Ishikawa—the significance of this relationship has come to light. In this volume, the *Lecture Notes on the Philosophy of Religion* (1913/14)⁽¹⁾ reveal Nishida's keen interest in Fichte's thought during his atheism controversy period, approached from the perspective of the philosophy of religion. Moreover, they demonstrate Nishida's profound understanding of Fichte's position on religious thought.

Thus, this paper aims to clarify Nishida's interpretation of Fichte's philosophy in his *Lecture Notes on the Philosophy of Religion* and, in doing so, provide an opportunity to deepen our understanding of Nishida's religious stance.

In relation to these lecture notes on religious studies, there exists a set of notes taken during the lectures by Shin'ichi Hisamatsu⁽²⁾, a disciple of Nishida and one of modern Japan's representative Zen thinkers. In this paper, I would like to refer to *Hisamatsu's notes* as appropriate.

1. Fichte in Chapter 2: “Various Approaches to the Study of Religion (Philosophy of Religion)”

Nishida summarizes Fichte's theory of religion as follows in Chapter 2: “Various Approaches to the Study of Religion (Philosophy of Religion)” in his *Lecture Notes on the Study of Religion*.

After Kant, German idealism took a metaphysical direction. Of course, this does not mean a return to the pre-Kantian metaphysics that Kant had dismantled. Rather, it is a metaphysics built upon and passing through Kant's epistemology. The same applies to the

philosophy of religion.

Among Fichte's important works on religion are *On the Basis of Our Belief in a Divine World-Governance* (1798)⁽³⁾ and *Appeal to the Public* (1799)⁽⁴⁾, the latter written in response to accusations of atheism during the so-called Atheism Controversy.

Fichte's philosophy takes Kant's categorical imperative, that is, practical reason, as the fundamental principle that gives content to being. Ought is more fundamental than being; being is established through ought. True being is not something static or complete but rather an activity, an unceasing stream of becoming—an infinite moral progress. This world is the development of the moral will. Even within the intellectual ought that constitutes nature, there is a moral ought. Such an unconditioned ought, which serves as the basis for eternal progress, is God.

God is the moral world order—that is, the active ordering (the order that orders). God, as such a moral order, moves us from within. Finding joy and blessedness in this is our religion. Fichte's religion is the “religion of joyful and righteous action.”⁽⁵⁾

According to Nishida, Fichte's philosophy constructs a new metaphysics based on Kant's establishment of epistemology, grounding being in moral ought. For Fichte, being is not something static but rather an infinite moral progress. God is identical with this moral world order, which moves human beings as an inner moral drive. Nishida states that Fichte's theory of religion emphasizes ethical practice as “the religion of joyful and righteous action.”

In the *Hisamatsu Notes*, prior to Nishida's assertion that “ought is more fundamental than being,” he can be seen to have stated the following: “Fichte interpreted Kant's moral foundation as the fundamental principle underlying the entire universe in terms of its content. For Fichte, ought constitutes the very ground of the whole universe.”⁽⁶⁾

2. On the Relationship with Neo-Kantianism (Windelband's *Preludes*)

Nishida focuses on the Neo-Fichteanism of the Neo-Kantianism of that time as follows. Nishida refers to Windelband in the following manner.

Within Neo-Kantianism, what may be called a 'Neo-Fichtean' movement can be found in the Marburg School and the Baden School. [...]

Even in the philosophy of religion, which draws closer from Kant to Fichte, this tendency is present. It seeks to define the religious in terms of epistemology. “At the foundation of all cultural consciousness, there is faith. There is a sense of oughtness. Culture is shaped

by normative consciousness. At the core of all normative consciousness, there is faith. This is what makes it religious.” (The Sacred in Windelband)(7)

According to Asami’s notes, this passage describes the content of the chapter “The Sacred (Das Heilige)” in Windelband’s *Preludes* (1907)(8). Windelband indeed states here: “Thus, the sacred cannot be defined in any other way than through the sum of the norms that govern logical, ethical, and aesthetic life.” (Windelband, 1907, p. 424.)

Nishida examines the connection between the thoughts of Fichte and Windelband by referring to Otto Siebert’s *The philosophy of religion in Germany in its current main representatives* as follows(9).

“The most crucial question here is that of the cognitive value or truth content of religion. Following Fichte’s path, Eucken, Claß, and Windelband took as their starting point the central point of consciousness—the opposition between the nature of the soul, which follows the laws of phenomena, and norm-consciousness—and recognized within religion the grasping of norm-consciousness as a transcendent reality. (Fichte, however, did not do so in a metaphysical sense.)(10)”

Asami notes, “Furthermore, the inclusion of Windelband’s name is Nishida’s insertion,” and points out that it was Nishida who insightfully conducted an examination aligning Windelband’s thought with that of Fichte(11).

According to *the Hisamatsu Notes*, Nishida focuses here on Eucken and provides a detailed explanation of his thought. That is to say, “Eucken originates from Fichte. Eucken holds that religion is by no means fantasy or superstition, but rather a true reality in our lives. Our life is effort. Life develops from the individual toward the whole, and from the external toward the internal. When such life, in its most inward aspect, develops into an effort to unify the whole, it becomes the divine life, that is, the spiritual life. Religion is the manifestation of such absolute life in our spirit.(12)”

In a letter dated January 1913, Nishida remarked, “Eucken’s thought seems somewhat crude; it is by no means possessed of the genius of someone like Bergson.(13)” For this reason, I take it that he regarded Eucken’s philosophy as lacking the potential to transcend in any significant way the sphere of thought defined by Fichte’s philosophy(14).

3. Nishida's Interpretation of Fichte in Chapter 5 "God", and Chapter 6 "God and Man"

In this context, Nishida further refers to Windelband, identifying within Christian theology two fundamentally distinct doctrinal approaches: Thomism and Scotism.

Thomism

Thomas acknowledges the reality of the divine will. However, he considers it to be a necessary consequence of divine intellect. In other words, he believes it is determined in content by the intellect. Thus, the divine will is bound by the wisdom of God, which surpasses it.

Scotism

This view sees such a notion as a limitation of God's omnipotence. According to the teachings of Scotus, God created the world purely out of absolute arbitrariness. If He had wished, He could have created the world in a different form. There exists no cause that surpasses this completely indeterminate will of His.

According to Thomas, God commands the good because it is good. According to Scotus, it is good only because God wills and commands it⁽¹⁵⁾.

According to Asami's note, this is a quotation from Windelband's *Textbook of the History of Philosophy*⁽¹⁶⁾, and in this way, Nishida clarifies his understanding of Fichte as follows.

Thinking along these lines, God must not be understood as an objectively existing being, but rather as something like Fichte's "ought". According to Fichte, being arises from the "ought." The world is constituted through the construction of the "ought." What was for Kant the categorical imperative of practical reason becomes, in Fichte's philosophy, the foundation of being. In Fichte's view, this world is the infinite realization of the "ought," and the unconditional "ought" that forms its basis is God. God is an active ordering—that is, an order that orders.

Therefore, in Fichte's philosophy, at the foundation of theoretical "ought" lies the moral "ought"; in other words, because Kant's categorical imperative serves as the basis for the theoretical "ought," God is the moral world order. Its essence is the moral "ought," and the moral "ought" is at the same time the theoretical "ought." The idea of the most real being and the most perfect being are thus unified. In modern terms, God becomes the normative consciousness⁽¹⁷⁾.

Nishida's interpretation of Fichte is thus consistent with the standpoint of Windelband. Indeed, Nishida situates the above understanding within the framework of Windelband's philosophical thought. That is to say, Nishida states that "as Windelband says, the metaphysical reality of normative consciousness is God. The sacred is the normative consciousness of the true, the good, and the beautiful, as experienced as a transcendent reality.⁽¹⁸⁾"

According to *the Hisamatsu Notes*, Nishida explicates as follows: "Windelband, following Fichte's ideas, also regarded God as the immediate reality of normative consciousness. He conceived of the metaphysical reality of normative consciousness as God. He says that the sacred is the normative consciousness of the true, the good, and the beautiful, experienced as a transcendent reality.⁽¹⁹⁾" Thus, *the Hisamatsu Notes* make it clear that Nishida regarded Windelband's and Fichte's ideas as essentially the same.

4. From Neo-Fichteanism within the Neo-Kantian School to Shinran of Jōdo Shinshū

Nishida's interpretation of Fichte is connected to the issue of grace. What, then, does this problem of grace truly entail? The problem of grace is incompatible with reason, and even in medieval philosophy, the contradiction between nature and grace was a central concern. While the material and spiritual worlds each follow their own laws, the question arises: how can divine grace operate within such a framework? If salvation and atonement are made possible through grace, then the manner in which grace functions must be addressed. From Nishida's standpoint, this issue also relates to the relationship between self-power and other-power in human existence. The integration of grace and nature is thus seen as an integration of two different perspectives—those of intellect and will. It follows that the world must be viewed not only through reason, but also from the standpoint of moral demand⁽²⁰⁾.

Nishida, drawing on Fichte's standpoint, understands the Kingdom of Grace as a truth grounded in moral consciousness. He identifies two perspectives on the Kingdom of Grace: one is the idea that "this grace is entirely for this very Shinran," and the other is that "God sacrificed His only Son," which means "for the salvation of sin." According to Nishida, these two perspectives share the same significance—they both express the idea of atonement for the fall into sin, and are based on practical moral awareness. Furthermore, Nishida states that "the world is grounded in the body," and for the devout, each fact of nature appears as divine providence, meaning "nature itself is grace." He explains that ordinary nature, more than religious tradition, can become the Kingdom of Grace for the truly devout. Thus, grace does not destroy nature but exists in harmony with it. Nishida remarks, "This idea, I believe, ought to be interpreted in light of Fichte's position that the ground of being is the unconditional

ought." He then poses the question, "Should intellect be understood as will?"—and adds, "In this respect, neither Thomas Aquinas nor Duns Scotus is yet truly fundamental."⁽²¹⁾

According to *the Hisamatsu Notes*, "For a believer, each and every natural fact of this world can appear as a divine representation. Nature, therefore, is grace itself. (According to tradition, ordinary nature immediately becomes the Kingdom of Grace for the deepest believers.) Grace does not destroy nature. / This idea, I think, should be interpreted in light of Fichte's conception of the ground of being as absolute ought. Or perhaps it should be understood through the conception of knowledge as will. In this regard, neither Thomas nor Scotus has yet been fully thorough."⁽²²⁾

Nishida regards religious truth and artistic truth as essentially identical. Both are grounded in intuitive experience that transcends logical apprehension and express the profound truth inherent in the inner world of human existence. In contrast, the natural world is understood as a surface-level reality based on pragmatism, belonging to the empirical and practical domain, though it too possesses a certain normativity. This natural normativity can be integratively subsumed under the deeper religious norm. However, dogmatic philosophy, by refusing to conceive of God as an inner normative consciousness and instead positing a transcendent external being, inevitably generates a conflict between the Kingdom of Nature and the Kingdom of Grace. In response, Nishida cites the example of artistic appreciation, wherein aesthetic intuition and mechanical analysis coexist without contradiction, thereby suggesting that the apparent opposition between nature and religious normativity can likewise be integrated under a higher unifying principle⁽²³⁾.

Nishida seeks to understand the human being in the light of religion and to reflect on the relationship between God and human life. He states, "Religious demand is the demand of life. The demand of life seeks the unification of our mental life." Furthermore, "To seek the highest unification of mental life is to strive to be connected with the highest ideal—in other words, to attempt to realize the highest ideal." Thus, Nishida concludes: "The essence of religion lies in this, and the highest goal of such religious effort—that is, the highest ideal—is God."⁽²⁴⁾

Conclusion

Underlying Nishida's understanding of Fichte's philosophy, as examined above, is the content of his major work *An Inquiry into the Good* (1911), which had already been published before his lectures on the philosophy of religion. In conclusion, let us consider the connection between his interpretation of Fichte and this principal work of his. Nishida makes the

following claim:

“What we called the objective world cannot exist independently of our subjectivity. The unifying force of the objective world and that of subjective consciousness are one and the same. [...]”

If we consider the world as existing apart from consciousness, it might be said that all things exist independently of one another. However, if we take the view that the phenomena of consciousness are the only reality, then at the foundation of all phenomena in the universe there must be a single unifying force, and all things must be regarded as manifestations of the same reality. As our knowledge advances, we become increasingly convinced of this underlying unity.⁽²⁵⁾”

According to Nishida, “good” is the “realization of personality.” For human beings, it is not the rational, objective world that is primary, but rather the subjective world of experience. However, we fail to notice the principle that the universe and the human self are fundamentally one. Nishida argues that it is through the “intellectual intuition” of “pure experience”—an experience in which subject and object are not yet divided—that we can reach the “universal will” of the cosmos. For him, the good is nothing other than the practice of this universal will⁽²⁶⁾.

References

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- K. Nishida, *Letter (Taishō 2)*, 1913. (=NKZ 18, 1966)
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- K. Miki, *Regarding Professor Nishida*, 1941. (=MKZ 17, 1968)

- (1) *The Complete Works of Nishida Kitarō*, Supplementary Volume, Iwanami Shoten, 2020. The date of composition for these *Lecture Notes on the Philosophy of Religion* is estimated by Director Asami. (=NKZ nS)
- (2) *The Complete Works of Nishida Kitarō*, Supplementary Volume 4 (Lectures), Iwanami Shoten, 1952. (=NKZ oS4)
- (3) J. G. Fichte, *Über den Grund unseres Glaubens an eine göttliche Weltregierung*, 1798.
- (4) J. G. Fichte, *Appellation an das Publikum*, 1799.
- (5) NKZ nS, 218f.
- (6) NKZ oS4, 242.
- (7) NKZ nS, 221.
- (8) NKZ nS, 237. W. Windelband, *Präludien. Aufsätze und Reden zur Einleitung in die Philosophie*, Tübingen, J. C. B. Mohr, 1907, S. 414-450.
- (9) NKZ nS, 222.
- (10) Vgl. Otto Siebert, *Die Religionsphilosophie in Deutschland in ihren gegenwärtigen Hauptvertretern*, Langensalza, H. Beyer & Söhne, 1906, S. 78-79.
- (11) NKZ nS, 237. The original German text by Siebert is as follows: "Hier haben ihm nach dem Vorgang Fichtes Eucken und Claß mit Recht den Zentralpunkt des Bewußtseins, den Gegensatz der erscheinungsgesetzlichen Seelennatur gegen das sich als Einheit fassende Normbewußtsein oder den Geist zum Ausgangspunkt gemacht und in der Religion die Erfassung des Normbewußtseins als transzcenderer Realität erkannt." (S. 79) HATANO Seiichi remarks as follows: "Eucken is one of the most remarkable phenomena in contemporary intellectual circles. His influence is widespread outside of Europe, and among those who are serious about the fundamental problems of the world and life, there are quite a few who look to him for the basis of their future philosophies. / Eucken is not satisfied with simply treating philosophy as a synthesis of science, as is the case with most philosophers. He believes that the primary task of philosophy is to clarify the basis of life and show its ideal, or rather, that as the ideological realization of life itself, it belongs to its deepest and highest formation. / Precisely because his philosophy was born from such thoughts, it is not out of touch with modern trends in thought. And he is by no means a blind admirer of them. There are few who have been able to embrace the modern spirit as deeply as he has, and few who have been able to see so keenly into its shortcomings. Socialism, individualism, naturalism, historicism, intellectualism, emotionalism - modern people are swayed and drifting in all sorts of directions, and in order to consider the path they should take, he threw himself into the raging waves of these trends of thought. The focus of his efforts was to bring unity to the incoherent world of thought and to lay the foundation for a unified and moving forward." HATANO Seiichi, "Preface," in *Eucken, The Views of Life of Great Thinkers*, translated by ABE Yoshinari, Iwanami-shoten, 1912, p. 1. Gustav Class (1836-1908) is a professor in Erlangen. He is a representative of ethical idealism and spiritualism in the wake of Kant and Lotze.
- (12) NKZ oS4, 253.
- (13) NKZ 18, 163.

- (14) My sincere gratitude is due to Masakatsu FUJITA, Professor Emeritus at Kyoto University, and Satoshi URAI, Program-Specific Assistant Professor at the Hakubi Center for Advanced Research of Kyoto University, for their invaluable guidance.
- (15) NKZ nS, 350.
- (16) NKZ nS, 391. Cf. Wilhelm Windelband, *Lehrbuch der Geschichte der Philosophie*, Tübingen und Leipzig, J. C. B. Mohr, 1908, S. 273.
- (17) NKZ nS, 350f.
- (18) NKZ nS, 351.
- (19) NKZ oS4, 345.
- (20) Cf. NKZ nS, 370.
- (21) Cf. NKZ nS, 371.
- (22) NKZ oS4, 363f.
- (23) Cf. NKZ nS, 371f.
- (24) Cf. NKZ nS, 372.
- (25) NKZ 1, 76f.
- (26) Nishida's disciple Kiyoshi MIKI described Nishida as follows: "There is something Oriental and intuitive in the professor's philosophy. He probably learned this from Zen. However, it doesn't seem to stem solely from Zen. The professor also has writings such as 'Gutoku Shinran' ('Shinran the Stupid Stubble-haired'). Furthermore, one senses his resonance with the thought of Motoori Norinaga as well. I believe it is correct to say that the Oriental element in the professor's thought is something unique, personally realized by the professor himself. Herein lies the novelty of his philosophy. It has points of connection that resonate even with figures like Goethe. Regarding the recent popularity of Zen, I suspect the professor rather views it with distaste. What the professor aims for is a uniquely Japanese philosophy. Yet, he always says, 'One must penetrate through Western logic to reach that point.' He teaches young people, 'One should read Eastern books for self-cultivation, but to do philosophy, one must still study Western philosophy.' He probably means that to practice philosophy as an academic discipline, one must research Western philosophy, but insofar as philosophy is more than mere scholarship, it is essential to assimilate Eastern thought. I believe that depth in philosophy ultimately stems from the depth of a person's character. Depth is not something that can be imitated, nor can it be learned. The depth of Nishida's philosophy is grounded in the profound character of the man himself. Even considered apart from scholarship, purely as a human being, the professor is a figure rarely seen in our time." (MKZ 17, 308f.) Nishida described Shinran as follows: "Although I was born into a Shinshu Buddhist family and my mother is a devout follower, I myself am neither a believer in Shinshu Buddhism nor particularly knowledgeable about it. However, based on the story that the Saint [Shinran], during his lifetime, called himself a 'foolish bald one' (gutoku) and emphasized these two characters, I infer from what I know that these characters 'gutoku' not only aptly represent the Saint's character but likely also proclaim the doctrine of Shinshu Buddhism and simultaneously reveal the very essence of religion itself. Among humans, there are wise and foolish, virtuous and wicked. Yet however great it may be, human wisdom remains merely

human wisdom, and human virtue remains merely human virtue. No matter how long the sides of a triangle, the sum of its angles remains equal to two right angles; it changes nothing. Only by turning oneself completely around once, by abandoning this wisdom and this virtue, can one obtain new wisdom, possess new virtue, and enter new life. This is the true essence of religion. [...] Unless one returns to the naked reality of one's own being and becomes one who has revived after oblivion—having released one's grip at the cliff's edge—one cannot know this. That is, only those who have deeply savored the reason why the 'foolish bald one' is truly the 'foolish bald one' can know this. The Saint's 'foolish bald one' (gutoku) must surely be a 'foolish bald one' in this sense. Whether it be called 'other-power' or 'self-power,' all religions must come down to savoring these two characters: 'gutoku'." (NKZ 1, 407f.)