

Education and the Philosophy of the Kyoto School

PAUL STANDISH

Institute of Education, University of London

KITARO NISHIDA AND THE KYOTO SCHOOL

Let me emphasise that my remarks here are those of an amateur, but I thought it would be a good idea to start with some kind of introduction to the Kyoto School and especially to its most important thinker, Kitaro Nishida (1870-1945).¹

What has come to be known as the Kyoto School developed in this university on the strength of Nishida's work and that of his most prominent followers, especially Hajime Tanabe (1885-1962) and Keiji Nishitani (1900-1990). It continues to be the most distinctively Japanese contribution to what we think of as philosophy. In a sense philosophy did not exist in Japan prior to the Meiji Restoration, following the prolonged period of Japan's closure to the outside world (1600-1868). With the Restoration came a commitment to discover developments in Western culture and a kind of renaissance in Japan in intellectual life and in the arts. Philosophy was part of that renaissance, and its newness at the time is indicated by the fact that a new word had to be created for it (*tetsugaku*). Of course, in a broader sense, there had been philosophical enquiry through the centuries in Japan but nothing like the systematic study that had developed in the West. Nishida's originality is commonly taken to lie in the way that he brought a distinctively Japanese element—deriving from Buddhism in certain respects, though certainly not in any straightforward way—to his scholarship and engagement in Western philosophy.

For present purposes, and in the light of the interests of this colloquium (in philosophy and psychology), I propose to concentrate on Nishida's philosophy of mind.

Mind, matter, and the methodology of doubt

Nishida questions the familiar question of how thought relates to things in the world. Is the mind a blank slate (*tabula rasa*) upon which things make their impressions, as the (philosophical) empiricist says? Or do things exist as things only insofar as they are perceived: *esse est percipi* (to be is to be perceived), as the (philosophical) idealist says. Nishida's objection to both of these explanations is that they assume too much. He writes: 'To understand true reality and to know the true nature of the universe and human life, we must discard all artificial assumptions, doubt whatever can be doubted, and proceed on the basis of direct and indubitable knowledge' (Nishida, 1990, p. 38). This falls short of the critical thinking that is needed:

Highly critical thinking, which discards all arbitrary assumptions and starts from the most certain, direct knowledge, and thinking that assumes a reality outside the facts of direct experience are in no way compatible. Even such great philosophers as Locke and Kant fail to escape the contradiction between these two kinds of

thinking. I intend to abandon all hypothetical thought and to engage in what I call critical thought. When we survey the history of philosophy, we see that Berkeley and Fichte also take this approach (p. 42).

We tend to believe, he argues, that there are two types of experiential facts—phenomena of consciousness and phenomena of matter—but actually there is only one: phenomena of consciousness. This remark might make us think that he must be committed to a kind of idealism. But in fact his position is different, for the idealist tends to posit, without evidence, that there is a thinking being that has these thoughts, whereas in fact all we can be sure of is that there is experience. The idea of a thinking being is an assumption we make on the basis of this experience, but this assumption leads us astray. Hence, adopting a term previously used by the philosopher-psychologists Wilhelm Wundt and William James, he claims that we need a philosophy based on ‘pure experience’: ‘In pure experience, our thinking, feeling, and willing are still undivided; there is a single activity, with no opposition between subject and object’ (p. 48). Contrary, then, to the view that subject and object are realities that can exist independently of each other and that phenomena of consciousness arise through their interaction, Nishida tries to show that there are not two realities, mind and matter, but only one. Subject and object must then be understood as abstractions from pure experience, and it is failure to realise this that leads to pervasive errors in our thinking: ‘Taking the distinction between subject and object as fundamental, some think that objective elements are included only in knowledge and that idiosyncratic, subjective events constitute feeling and volition. This view is mistaken in its basic assumptions’ (p. 50). Any belief that there must be a realm of hard empirical fact rests upon dichotomisations that are not inherent in the fact itself: ‘As a concrete fact, a flower is not at all like the purely material flower of scientists; it is pleasing, with a beauty of color shape, and scent. Heine gazed at the stars in a quite night sky and called them golden tacks in the azure. Though astronomers would laugh at his words as the folly of a poet, the true nature of stars may well be expressed in his phrase’ (p. 49).

In the above quotation it was said that thinking, feeling, and willing are one. The reason for this is that experience is always in a state of activity, even in its apparently more passive forms. That is to say that it is always motivated by some interest in which the will is operative. Hence, there is always an activity of will through which both the subject of consciousness and its object come into being, and this will is not a purely personal thing. This tells us something about the self too. When I think of myself as something to question (Who am I? What kind of person am I?), the thing that we think of as the self is in fact false. The reflective self is not the true self because the reflective self does not act. By contrast the self that matters is what is realised in pure experience. The will is the activity that most clearly expresses the self, and it is in the action of the will that we are most clearly conscious of ourselves (p. 91), but, if I have understood this right, this is not a *self*-consciousness in the familiar sense: it is more like an absorption in what we are doing.

Philosophy as usual?

It is important that this is understood not just in terms of epistemology (of how we come to know things) but as an account of reality itself, for this is Nishida’s sustained purpose. But up to this point, I want to suggest, the argument has taken place at a

level that is more or less exclusively intellectual, in the familiar terms of Western (especially Anglophone) philosophy. This may constrain our sense of the scope of his project. Perhaps the reference to will and feeling above lead beyond these terms, to something different in the name of philosophy. To turn in this direction then is to try to see how the influence of Buddhism—which surely must be thought of not just as a set of ideas but as a practice, a way of life—leads beyond these intellectualist confines.

I do not mean to exaggerate this intellectualism in the Western philosophical tradition, for plainly there are thinkers whose work escapes its bounds. Even in so austere a work as the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, we find Wittgenstein saying that ‘The world of the happy man is a different one from that of the happy man’ (Wittgenstein, 1961, 6.43), a thought that closely matches Nishida’s reminder to us that ‘Buddhist thought holds that according to one’s mood the world becomes either heaven or hell’ (Nishida, 1990, p. 49). And there is a robust tradition that, since classical Greece at least, has understood philosophy as a way of life. But there is a narrowing, professionalization of philosophy in the modern period, supported by the growth of universities, that inhibits this broader development. (Perhaps this is particularly an English disease.) It may be significant in this respect that, in the years following the Meiji Restoration, interest in Japan moved away from English philosophers such as John Stuart Mill and towards their contemporaries in Germany. The influence on Nishida in this respect is more evident still where he speaks of nature’s relation to spirit (*seishin*, *Geist*, spirit/mind/psyche). Nature cannot be objectively independent of spirit but must involve a union of our senses of sight, touch, and so forth. And—as if following Schopenhauer—nature cannot be understood independently of the will. The basis of the infinity activity that is spirit and nature is what Nishida calls ‘God’. He has no time either for ‘infantile’ conceptions of a god who stands outside and somehow controls the world, nor for hard-headed materialists who take material force as the basis for the universe, but he identifies his thought rather with the negative theology of Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464).

Bearing in mind the inseparability of religion and philosophy in Buddhism, it is perhaps not surprising that the religious continues to be prominent in the subsequent development of Nishida’s thought. In Section 2, which will relate his work more directly to currents in 20th Century Western philosophy, I want to gesture towards the questions of transcendence, nothingness, silence, and place (in Nishida: *basho*, sometimes translated as ‘locus’) that run through his work, knowing that others here are better qualified than I am to discuss these matters directly. But before this, something should be said about his philosophy as a philosophy of nothingness.

Whereas in the West being has been taken to be the ground of reality, the East, Nishida observes, seems to have taken nothingness as its ground. What can this mean? This, no doubt, is an elusive idea—yet it is as well to remember that the idea of being as ground is itself also one that is difficult to grasp. (It is arguable that a preoccupation with ontology is pervasive, but it is foregrounded only in a particular philosophical tradition.) Nishida begins, as we have seen, by seeking to overcome (to render as nothing) the self that imagines itself to be a subject perceiving the objects of the world. Later, however, he comes to think of this in more radical terms, as something that surpasses any thought of coming to be or ceasing, as an absolute that escapes any relativisation, any defining opposition. In my remarks about place below I shall try to make this more clear. It should be said, however, that Nishida’s thinking here is not governed solely by ideas drawn from Zen Buddhism, although to the outsider the resonances here may seem powerful ones.

Let me turn to some connections with Western thought to try to say something more about these matters.

NISHIDA AND THE WEST

The sketch of Nishida's philosophy of mind in the previous section suggested some fairly obvious lines of influence that he drew from his scholarship in Western philosophy, as well as pointing to aspects of his departure from this and to his originality. The two Western philosophers I have been asked to expand on here particularly are Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida, and I shall do this in relation to the themes mentioned above. Let me first say something briefly about the strong connections of Heidegger with Japan.

Nishida read *Sein und Zeit* (*Being and Time*) soon after its publication in 1927, but evidently he was critical in various ways. At one level this seems surprising as both philosophers are centrally concerned with overcoming the subject-object dichotomisation that has characterised so much of Western thought, and in some respects Nishida's emphasis on pure experience seems to resonate with Heidegger's insistence that the unified structure of being-in-the-world is fundamental. But the main point of difference would presumably be over Heidegger's preoccupation with the question of being (that is, of Being rather than beings, of *Sein* rather than *Seiendes*). It is worth drawing attention, nevertheless, to the fact that Heidegger's book was generally received with understanding and enthusiasm in Japan. There were five translations into Japanese before the first translation into English, in 1962, and a steady stream of Japanese scholars visited Heidegger in the years that followed the book's publication. For his part, Heidegger greatly appreciated this reception, believing, it seems, that his work had found in Japan an audience capable of reading it well. Moreover, in his 'Dialogue with a Japanese', he eulogised the Japanese way of life and thought (and the Japanese language), seeing it as offering a real alternative to the degradation of the West (of the English-speaking world in particular), whose thought had been progressively colonised by technology.

It is against this backdrop that I turn first to the consideration of questions of space and place.

Nothingness and place

It is not until Heidegger's later writings that his ideas in this respect are most fully developed. While *Being and Time* gives a strong sense of the contextual, holistic nature of being-in-the-world, it is with the later idea of the Fourfold (*Vierung*) that this is elaborated in a more striking way. Heidegger adopts the idea of the Fourfold partly in the move away from his earlier direct enquiry into the nature of Being. The Fourfold is to be understood in terms of four forces or influences that condition our experience, whose crossing might be thought of a characteristic of the places in which we find ourselves. Places, to be sure, are not geometrical spaces, to be identified by points on a grid, but constructed rather out of meaningful relations. The Fourfold comprises *earth*, *sky*, *gods*, and *mortals*. The earth is to be understood in terms of our need for sustenance: it is where we plant our feet and lay down to rest; it is the source of our daily food and shelter. The sky refers to the changeable circumstances of human lives, including the changing seasons and the way these affect us, but

extending also to our own vulnerability to moods. The gods represent not personified deities but rather those higher aspirations by which we are drawn, those things that lead us think beyond the satisfaction of our needs. That we are mortals perhaps speaks for itself, though it is important to situate this in relation to Heidegger's earlier writings about our being-towards-death as an existential structure of our lives. We live our lives (at some level and no doubt intermittently) in the knowledge that we shall die, in a way that animals do not: animals are not mortal; they merely expire. And this awareness of our own mortality casts its shadow back across our lives as a whole. Hence, in speaking of the *crossing* of this Fourfold, Heidegger is echoing the Christian idea that we live our lives under the sign of the cross, but he is turning this to non-Christian purposes. The Fourfold is not to be understood as referring to some special state that we occasionally reach but as applicable to each and every circumstance in which we find ourselves. Looking at your life and circumstances in this way helps, for example, to show the gods you are serving. This helps us to understand the places where we are.

Insofar as the Fourfold is a means of thinking about place, I want to contrast it with Derrida's pondering of Plato's *Timaeus* in his text entitled *Khora*, a term that recurs in the Plato dialogue. The Greek word *khora* is difficult to translate: at one level it means 'place', but it also means womb, and so carries a suggestion of referring not just to *this* place as against *that* place but rather to the origin of place and space themselves. Plato's dialogue is in part a cosmology in which precisely such things as the origins of place and space and world are at issue. Derrida is interested by the possibility of thinking of something that must lie behind or condition space and place as these are understood, in our common lives and in our philosophy.

While Heidegger's conception of the Fourfold might perhaps be taken to suggest an occupying of space and place without remainder, where all terms are positive, Derrida's account in *Khora* might conceivably convey something closer to the nothingness behind being that Nishida seeks to reveal. I offer this only as tentative remark, but let me support the view a little further by referring to one of Derrida's last works, his *Paper Machine* (2005), published in French in 2002. In *Paper Machine* Derrida pays much attention to the significance of documents in identifying us, especially in the light of the situation of those who are 'without papers' (such as asylum-seekers). But he presses the ideas here to deeper questions about the nature of writing, in documents, books, electronic devices. What, he asks, is the support for writing, by which he means, what is it that writing is on—the paper, the stone, the screen? This attention to what supports writing parallels, I believe, his concerns with what it is that supports or lies behind space and place, a groundless ground, a support without foundations.

If this thought seems a little strained, let us relate it to a contrast between Western and Japanese art. Whereas the Western painter tends to populate the canvass, covering it in every part, even decorating the frame, in Japanese art the image lies, as it were, floating against a paper background that has not been worked, that is nothing, but that is the support for the image. Does this begin to connect with the philosophy of place in Nishida?

Language, silence, and transcendence

Let me digress here to say that, when I have been in Japan, I have often found myself defending a view to the effect that language conditions human being, in a way that has been found too 'Western'. Given the ways in which Buddhism (and perhaps Eastern thought more generally) seeks to move beyond language, this reaction is understandable. But I have not wanted to be a defender of the talkativeness of the West! The point, as far as I am concerned, is a more logical one: it is the Wittgensteinian one to the effect that initiation into language goes hand-in-hand with initiation into a community, and without this a human life is not possible (except in a merely biological sense). This is not at all to advocate talkativeness, any more than it is to disparage silence. Heidegger helps here when he says that '*Hearing and keeping silent [Schweigen]* are possibilities belonging to discursive speech' (Heidegger, 1962, p. 161). This is so in the sense that animals cannot *keep* silent; they cannot refrain from speech. So my view is that *practices* of silence need to be understood are possible only for the being that has language.

As will become apparent in Section 3 of this paper, a doubt that I sometimes felt in reading the papers presented at the INPE symposium was that the idea of pure experience, in Nishida's earlier work, was somehow being associated with a notion of transcendence, with connotations of purity of a rather different kind. If a purification of experience were Nishida's concern, this would surely be in tension with the more intellectually confined notion of pure experience, where this was deployed to resist the positions of the empiricist and the idealist, identified in Section 1 above. There is a slipperiness about this term, I think, especially given the further associations with Pure Land Buddhism (*Jodo-Shu*). Nishida moved away from the use of this term quite early on, but he develops his account of transcendence, and I think this is important for those who seek to interpret his thought for education. Transcendence is normally associated with a movement upward, toward what is higher, and this has been its dominant connotation, in religious domains of thought and in the Western philosophy. I am happy to find that Nishida sometimes speaks of a *transcendence down*, which for me echoes thoughts I have found in Henri David Thoreau and in Stanley Cavell's interpretations of his work. It seems, moreover, that this might usefully be related to deconstruction in Derrida's work, where the unravelling of things simultaneously produces something new, and this continually. I shall be pleased if this can be discussed more fully, in Professor Nihimura's response and Professor Maehira's comments and in the ensuing discussion.

In the remainder of this paper, it is necessary for me to lay the way for the remarks Professor Nihimura has prepared, for these are a continuation of his comments to me towards the end of the symposium. Hence, I repeat her the salient points in the response I presented to the speakers on that occasion.

POSSIBILITIES OF BECOMING: THE AESTHETIC AND THE POLITICAL

In the papers presented in the INPE symposium it was clear that 'becoming' was to be preferred to 'being', and 'transformation' to 'education', and those preferences seem important in resisting notions of fixed stages of maturation and clear teleologies. The prominence that is given by Motomori Kimura (1885-1946), on Nishimura's account,

to the individual's loneliness and anxiety seem also a powerful antidote in this respect. Nishida identified his own conception of the human being's relation to the world in terms of *poiesis*. His logic of place (*locus*, *basho*) is especially rich in overcoming Western subject-object dichotomisations, coinciding in certain respects with insights from phenomenology, but also providing an account of the background of nothingness that is distinctly Japanese. This is something different from the more existential thematisation of nothingness in Heidegger, I believe, and perhaps closer to Jacques Derrida's explorations, in *Khora*, of aspects of Plato's *Timaeus*.

But there are still, in the philosophy of education derived from the Kyoto School, certain assumptions of progression or development that are in tension with possibilities of transformation. Can a theory of becoming, especially under institutional pressure towards explicit formulation, avoid sliding into claims regarding stages of development? Can it avoid losing sight of the variety of human experience? The contract I have in mind can be illustrated by the difference between the Great Doubt, in Buddhism, which involves passing through a series of stages on the way to enlightenment, and scepticism as this is explored in the work of Stanley Cavell, which sees the human tendency *continually* to call the conditions of being into doubt as inherent to the human condition. So my question to the exponents of this philosophy of education has been whether they retain a quest for foundations.

In relation to Nishida's 'active intuition' and the kind of pure experience found in intense concentration (e.g., in a piano recital), Shoko Suzuki makes the remark: 'It is as though one were making a decision with absolute confidence in the face of abiding ambiguity. In other words, it is as though the action of intuition arises by the diffusion of knowledge through the body.' This may connect in certain respects with the idea of 'flow' or of being 'in the zone', as the basketball coach puts it. Nevertheless, the formulation here is a much richer evocation of the idea.

Is such a state of being, however, something we should always aspire to? My concern is with what such moments may block? Is there not an 'impurity' of experience that is inherent in the human condition, lived as it is with others with diverse purposes, and vulnerable as it is to our own irritability? Should we really transcend the messiness of human life? Do Nishida's remarks about a transcendence that goes *downwards* offer something closer to the kind of return to the ordinary I am suggesting here?

NOTE

- 1 For comparison: William James (1842-1910), John Dewey (1859-1952), Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951), Bertrand Russell (1872-1970).

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