

An Inquiry into the Good and Nishida's Missing *Basho*

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ABSTRACT

In December 2010 Kyoto University hosted a symposium honoring the hundredth anniversary of the publication of Nishida Kitarō's An Inquiry into the Good. The following is an English version of a talk delivered on that occasion. In it I have tried to argue against the widely held view that this maiden work contains the germ of Nishida's mature philosophy, and at the same time to suggest that an early strain of ambiguity regarding the notion of the will points to a neglect of the natural world in his "logic of place."

Keywords

Nishida Kitarō, logic, place, Good, *basho*

I

An Inquiry into the Good is a frustrating book. The first time I read it, I thought it a hodgepodge of western philosophical opinions loosely organized around what seemed a rather shaky thesis. At the time I knew nothing of Nishida and almost nothing of Japanese philosophy. To decipher it I had no choice but to rely on my own education and resources, such as they were. Out of courtesy to the colleague who recommended it to me, I saw it through to the end. Once arrived, I did not feel particularly moved to read any more of Nishida's work, though the more I heard of him, the more I began to doubt my judgment. It was only after discovering Nishitani and Tanabe that I felt the urge to return to the man whose thought had inspired their own life work. As my image of Nishida slowly grew to the stature of his reputation, I came to understand the

importance of *An Inquiry into the Good* as a turning point in his career and in the history of Japanese philosophy.

Still, each time I returned to Nishida's first book text for another look I continued to be frustrated by it and failed to find very much that would illuminate his mature work. What I did find of interest was the random scatter of ideas—in some cases no more than an ambiguity of expression—that were to stimulate his formulation of “fundamental problems of philosophy.” I will take up one of them later, but for now I wish only to reiterate my view that *An Inquiry into the Good* merits admiration today more for the courage of its statement at a time when timidity was epidemic among students of western philosophy in Japan, than it does for its philosophical content or style of argument.

Regarding the ideas proposed in the book, one need only consult what Nishida was reading at the time, and in particular works of Schopenhauer, Wundt, James, and Bergson, to see where he picked up the main pieces for his mosaic. The patterns into which he arranged these pieces are presented as support for his starting thesis: the identification of a unified consciousness—that is, a consciousness prior to bifurcations into subject and object, knowing and willing, mind and matter—with reality as a whole. The results show an originality that can hardly be reduced without remainder to his sources.

The style of argument is something else again. Whether it is a matter of inductively tracing a line of thought to a conclusion or deductively spelling out the consequences of an initial hypothesis, the logic of *An Inquiry into the Good* differs at every step from that of the western philosophers Nishida cites. Neither does it demonstrate the loyalty to classical texts that characterize the kind of traditional argumentation we find in premodern Confucian, Buddhist, and Shinto thought. Large portions of the book read like clusters of *pensées*, and as such, the flow of the text from one idea to the next differs from what we find in most of Nishida's later work. The most obvious exception is his final essay, which, although intended as a summary of his thought, shares many of the stylistic traits of his maiden book and, like it, is frequently cited by Nishida scholars to refer to ideas whose foundational arguments lie elsewhere. To be sure, the importance of *An Inquiry into the Good* is easier to assess by setting it in the context of his later thought, but doing so tends to gloss over the question of how it could have had the initial impact it did, or how it strikes the first-time reader of Nishida.

Simply put, Nishida's book, standing on its own merits, would not have qualified as a lasting contribution to modern western philosophy. Had it been translated immediately into European languages, it would likely have amounted to little more than a curio among American and continental readers, who would

have been left wondering why this medley of borrowed ideas was being taken so seriously in the academic world of Japan. This is by no means a harsh judgment to render on a first book by a young philosopher. Indeed, it is not very far from the way Nishida himself judged it at the time as “failing to reach its aims” and “incomplete,” and a decade later as “unsatisfying and best taken out of print.”¹ The fact is, he quickly turned his sights away from the book’s central thesis and did not himself take it as the foundational work others took it to be. His subsequent writing, beginning with the venture into neo-Kantian thought he began a year later, followed a quite different strategy, both in his phrasing of questions and his style of argument. What is more, Nishida did not accept the opinions of those in Japan who immediately hailed it as a triumph, nor would he have agreed with those who later looked back on it as a philosophical masterpiece. When Kurata Kyakuzō praised it in 1912 as “finely scented pale blue bellflowers growing out of dried-up, sterile earth in the mountain shadows,” prompting a rise in sales and readership, Nishida was not impressed.² Representative of later views among Nishida’s disciples is a long and careful study of the major themes of the book by Nishitani Keiji, which states at the outset that “*An Inquiry into the Good* is an original *tour de force* that would have assured it a place among other great systems of thought even if Nishida had not developed it further” (Nishitani 1991, 96). Nishitani’s assessment is difficult to accept at face value. His interpretations not only rely on hindsight; they include a generous amount of his own ideas to help fill in gaps in Nishida’s progression of ideas and to provide a wider context from which isolated statements can take on meanings not supported by the text itself.

If these statements seem to tarnish Nishida’s halo at the very point where Nishida scholars have labored to burnish it, it is only because I believe that Nishida’s development, together with its self-criticism, should be taken more seriously. After all, great philosophies do not come to birth all grown-up, like Pallas Athena emerging from the head of Zeus in a full suit of armor. They thrive or degenerate, survive or vanish through criticism much more than through mere textual analysis, exegesis, and comparison. As Whitehead used to tell his students, “Criticism is the motive power for the advance of thought... To be refuted in every century after you have written is the acme of triumph” (Whitehead, 122). A century after the publication of *An Inquiry into the Good*, Nishida’s philosophy has reached a point where the book deserves more studied critique by scholars who know his thought best. Although I by no means count

1. Nishida 1990, xxix–xxxi. I have used this translation throughout for convenience sake, though the translations have had to be adjusted at some points.
2. Documented in Michiko Yusa, 130.

myself one of them, I take heart in the courage of that first book as I try to trace a line to what seems to me a serious deficit in his logic.

II

Among other stylistic traits, Nishida's writing contains two different kinds of "core sentences" that are often confused, especially when deprived of their surrounding context. The first are what we may call *distilled statements*. These come at the conclusion or at a temporary resting point in the course of an argument. Anyone who has read Nishida knows what it is to feel overwhelmed by one's own misunderstandings and half-understanding, and to wonder how far Nishida himself is complicit in the confusion. The more one reads, of course, the more one recognizes a hint of things going on that never quite make their way to the surface of his texts: leaps in argument, dim intimations of connections never followed through on, oblique allusions and subtle shifts of view that slip by unnoticed, and neglected assumptions. But like seeds sown in the furrows of the text, every so often, at the most unexpected moments, they blossom into the sweet fruit of a ripe summation. One follows him page after page as he thinks with his pen, cutting through a thick jungle of possibilities and counter-possibilities: if this is so, then that must be so; but if that is so, then this must be so.... And then, all of a sudden, one is stopped short by a sentence or two of such concentration and lucidity that one reaches for a pencil to mark it in the margins. The discovery of clarity in ambiguity is part of the charm of his work, and anyone who has tried to bring Nishida's writings to another language knows how difficult it is to convey this characteristic blend of frustration and enlightenment. I have the impression that these little distillations are the backbone that supports a great deal of Nishida scholarship. Like pearls on a string, they give a glimpse of his ideas in systematic form, minus the torture of how he gets to them. But the fact, remains, he does get to them by a more or less controlled process of argumentation.

There is another class of core sentences that we may call *oracular statements*. They are not argued conclusions but a kind of authoritative declaration.³ Unlike topic sentences that lead into a discussion, these statements arise abruptly and disconnected from their environment, like flowers mysteriously blooming in the desert air. To all appearances, these oracular statements are as important to Nishida as are the distillations, but their function is different. Taken on their own, their form of discourse is doctrinal and regularly given to exaggeration.

3. The final three sentences of the chapter on "Religion" are a good instance of the difference between an oracular statement and its argument. Nishitani uses them almost verbatim, though without reference, to open his *Religion and Nothingness* (Nishitani 1982).

Often, though not always, they may turn out to have been intuitive flashes of insight that will not be submitted to the argumentative process until later. Perhaps it is in the nature of the *bon mot* to tend to hyperbole, but if one begins to jot down the things identified in *An Inquiry into the Good* as “greatest,” “highest,” or some other superlative, and then adds to the list the numerous references to “all” and “every,” the inconsistencies are too glaring to overlook. This may be one of the reasons scholars have an easy time citing lines from earlier writings in support of later ideas, and such a hard time showing precisely where his thinking changed course. In both cases, Nishida’s own oracular statements take on an almost scriptural quality: they do not need to be defended or referenced, and they can be cited “out of context” precisely because, at least initially, they *have* no wider and more fully articulated context.

An Inquiry into the Good relies again and again on such statements, which may run from a single short sentence to several sentences. Even where the same term appears again and again, Nishida’s way of holding it up and turning it around and around to examine it from different angles and consider its consequences, the oracular style is retained. Take, for example, the idea of “pure experience” with whose explanation the book opens. Unlike William James, from whom he took the idea, Nishida restricts pure experience to the experience of a conscious state, and identifies this as the “sole reality.” For James, consciousness was only a “portion” of pure experience, “the stuff of which everything is composed” (James 4:4). The two essays in which he spells this out, both published in 1904, contain a startling number of coincidences with Nishida’s early thought. I have no doubt that Nishida never more than dipped into James’ “The World of Pure Experience,” and find it unlikely that he even read the first few pages of “Does Consciousness Exist?,” where the refutations of neo-Kantianism would have spared Nishida an immense amount of labor, not to mention the slide into psychologism that he would later reject. The rejection of the subject-object, consciousness-content dichotomy, the insistence on continuity-in-discontinuity in perception and cognition, and the treatment of consciousness as a function rather than as an entity are not only crystal clear in James, they are carefully argued, taking into account counter-positions. Without that essay, it is hardly surprising that Nishida misunderstood the arguments of the pure experience essay, which explicitly refers back to it.

Be that as it may, Nishida begins by declaring the foundational nature of consciousness in its pure and direct form as coterminous with reality itself. His topic sentences are concentrations of conclusions, each of which represents views that are declared but not spelled out or fitted out with premises. They are set in a framework that gives the appearance of a logical progression of thought,

but in fact the framework is not supported by an appeal to data or to philosophical texts of those who have thought about these matters. The faint scent of a generalized Buddhist insight into the illusory, phenomenal nature of reality is the closest we can come to a tacit assumption that hold the framework in place.

Many, if not most of the declarations on pure experience will be taken up by Nishida in later works for proper argumentation, though not in the same order or framework in which they are represented here. This makes their relationship to later, more distilled statements tenuous, certainly not enough to allow us to speak of a “development” of ideas. And this is the point I wish to make here: the development of ideas cannot be traced through similarity of wording alone. One needs to show a development in the argument or context within which the wording appears. In the case of pure experience, the primary context is the attempt to show that the power that holds consciousness together is prior to the distinction between the subject and the material world, and that the unity of consciousness is one with reality. At the time, Nishida hoped this would clarify the goal of human existence, in which he saw only “one true good: to know the true self” (NKZ1: 145). This means understanding the “control of a unifying power at the base of the mind,” which, he imagined, in turn to be somehow connected to God as “the unifier of the universe” (NKZ1: 159, 161). None of this amounted to a precise philosophical question, and while it stands to reason that he dropped the approach as misleading, we have to seek an alternative significance for the obvious coincidences of wording in later writings.

My own impression is that the most one can say of Nishida’s attempt to reduce all of reality to pure experience is that it stimulated him to think things out more carefully on his own. There is no sense in which the rest of his work can be seen as an exegesis on an original, inspired text. *An Inquiry into the Good* was not the sort of book that could have been bundled up in a basket and floated down the river to be picked up downstream and educated into a great prophetic text to galvanize an identity for Japanese philosophy. It belongs too much to what came after it to suppose otherwise. It was so much Nishida’s own book that only *he* could have pulled out the themes that to us today, in the light of his collected works, may seem self-evident.

The same thing could be said, even more forcefully, of his chapters on God and Religion, in which oblique allusions to other philosophers—though not their arguments—figure more prominently in the body of the text. If I am not mistaken, the mature Nishida would have been the first to recognize the patchwork nature of *An Inquiry into the Good* and been befuddled by scholars trying to make it into a manifesto he spent the rest of his life spelling out in detail.

III

In an attempt to come to terms with *An Inquiry into the Good* on its own grounds, I would like to take up Nishida's idea of the will. After the long and sterile battle with neo-Kantian thought that followed his first book, it was this idea that signaled his exit. The resulting elevation of will to absolute status marks a turning point, but there are subtle hints of that view discernible already in the ambiguity of the notion of will we find in *An Inquiry into the Good*. We may begin by condensing what Nishida has to say about the will into five statements, all of them relativizing volition to the primordial unity of consciousness in pure experience, and hence to reality itself:

1. Will as such is neither external action nor a faculty but a kind of rational thinking, and as such is that part of consciousness that unifies mental images as they pertain to the action of the subject.
2. Mental representations of willing can alternate between the subject of knowing and the object of willing. Thus, the presence of willed objects signals a rupture of the primordial unity of consciousness.
3. Prior to conscious will, there is a passive, goal-oriented instinct that is an unexplainable fact. In consciousness, will is an apperception that reaches unity through a progression from the impulsive feeling of motivation to the fixation on a goal in desire to the generation of action in decisions based on sufficient reasons more or less clearly known.
4. Psychologically, the will is a primary form of all phenomena of consciousness, though not as fundamental as reason,⁴ and as such clearly expresses self-consciousness.
5. Philosophically, since it is consciousness that creates all reality, including material bodies, will, insofar as it serves as a unifying element in consciousness, belongs at the base of reality.

It is possible, but probably not very useful in the long run, to show which parts of the theories of will in Schopenhauer, Wundt, and James Nishida picked up on and which he passed over. Once again, what is missing, though, is a clear explanation of how these conclusions were strung together. His next step after *An Inquiry into the Good* was rather to rephrase a question that had gone unan-

4. The English translation, which is at times lax with its use of particles, refers to will as "the fundamental unifying activity of consciousness" (for example, Nishida 1990, 123), but the subservience of will to reason would indicate that it be reduced to "a fundamental activity" along with the *drive* for knowledge. Also, the English phrasing makes it seem as if Nishida agrees with Höffding that will controls understanding; see Nishida 1990, 123).

swered in the book as a whole, namely, what it means to say that the knower can know itself. (We may recall here that Schopenhauer's insistence on self-knowing as grounded in will led him to conclude that the self knowing itself is not a genuine form of knowledge.⁵) It may be mere coincidence, but Nishida's initial intuition of will as part of the foundation of reality is directly connected, at least chronologically, to an extended treatment of self-reflective knowing that sets out to affirm much the same thing through a painstakingly argued confrontation with neo-Kantian ideas. It was only at the end of this adventure, in 1917, that he returned briefly to his discussion of the will. He opens with a statement that echoes but also advances the position of *An Inquiry into the Good*:

The truest core of our immediate experience is *absolute free will*, which holds activities of various kinds together in unity, and which provides the internal bond of various systems of experience. If we compare systems of experience to circles, the line joining their centers is absolute free will, so that what unites them is not a static cognition, but infinitely dynamic autonomous will.

(Nishida 1987, 154; emphasis added, omission restored)

Nishida goes on, in an imagery of concentric circles that will later form the basis of his logic of *basho*, to speak of this absolute will that transcends the limits of cognition as a "mystery, inaccessible to cognition but approached in art and religion." Not only does he shift his stance to give will a primacy over reason, he also cuts the idea of "reality as experience" free of its role as unifier of consciousness in order that it may serve as a more encompassing absolute to unify the world as a whole. In what can only be an allusion to Schopenhauer, he declares that "the world of the thing-in-itself is the world of will and can be reached only by will" (Nishida 1917, 156). But where Schopenhauer would identify the system of the world with nature, Nishida returns to talk of God:

Since absolute will unifies all world of experience to form a single system, one may hold, with religious people, that the world is a personal manifestation of God and history the biography of God. The world of truth would be the thought of God. (Nishida 1987, 162, omission restored)

Already in *An Inquiry into the Good*, God was described as the unifier at the base of the mind and therefore of the universe. Since Nishida did not conceive of God as other-worldly, and since he held God to be no more and no less symbolical a way of speaking than our talk of the "world," he was able to take a step that none of the philosophers on whom he drew would dare take in such simple terms, namely to define God as a conscious, personal force at work in the world:

5. See the succinct statement in *On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason; And on the Will in Nature* (Schopenhauer 2010, §6).

The relation between the universe and God is the relation between the phenomena of our consciousness and their unity . . . God is the unifier of the universe and the universe is a manifestation of God. This comparison is not metaphorical—it is a fact. God is the greatest and final unifier of our consciousness; our consciousness is one part of God's consciousness and its unity comes from God's unity. . . . The universe is an expression of God's personality. (Nishida 1990, 161)

This was the position he moved away from with his idea of absolute will.

Putting this all together, Nishida's search for an "absolute" ground to reality led him beyond a description of a unified mind and beyond an idea of a personal God as a unifying principle for all minds to an idea of pure will as a "vital force" in all that exists. Experience was no longer to be limited to the "pure experience" of consciousness; it had become, as it was for James, a generalized name for existence as such. Mind, with all its activities, was tentatively relocated as the effects of a non-human, impersonal, non-conscious force of will. There are statements in *An Inquiry into the Good* that seem to forebode this view and statements that seem to deny it, but the vagueness of his language suggests that he had not yet thought the matter through to his own satisfaction.

IV

Granted that Nishida's style of argumentation changed dramatically in the years that followed *An Inquiry into the Good*, it is clear that the stimulus of ideas and half-ideas ventured in that book remained within him for some time after his neo-Kantian period. When he does return to discuss the will, it is to assign it the function of a provisional unifier of consciousness, preserving the bifurcation of an inner world of mind from an outer world of nature and establishing a moral ought (cf. NKZ 2: 285, 394–395). It is still referred to as free (NKZ 2: 425), but only as an a priori of consciousness, not as an absolute. It is as if the idea of absolute free will had been erased from his thought, later to be absorbed without remainder into the general notion of God.

It is not my intention to argue that this was a mistake, but only that an unfortunate and lasting consequence of that choice was the subsequent neglect of the world of nature. Nishida's first account of "nature" is based on the premise that, like all of reality, it is a "concrete fact of consciousness that includes both subject and object." As part of pure experience, it engages in the unifying activity of consciousness and in that sense can be said to "possess a kind of self" that is reflected in each of its concrete forms. But to see a "force" at work in nature as such is to project human volition into the natural order, and thus to objectify what is really only an "analogical inference" that points to a pure experience beyond our will and the forces of the natural order (Nishida 1990, 70–72).

And what that, nature is poured in its entirety into the general mold of consciousness as the sole reality.

That said, there is a certain ambivalence towards the natural world concealed in the idea of the will proposed in *An Inquiry into the Good*. Clear passage to this ambivalence is provided by Nishida's use of the term *yōkyū* (要求), which, depending on the context could be translated as need, requirement, drive, or, as I shall do here, *demand*. As best I can recall, the word never figures dominantly in later writings and shows very little verbal concordance with these first uses, which makes it easy to overlook. Even within its native context, the term does not at first glance seem important to his general description of the will, let alone an important, if unacknowledged, challenge to it.

To give an idea of the variety of uses and the importance of the concept for locating the status of will—setting aside the handful of cases in which the generic sense of the word, as in the requirements of the law of causality or the practical demands of life in general—let us consider the following three clusters of ideas, all stated as patchworks of Nishida's own words.

1. There is a universal *demand* behind will and feeling, and behind rational activity in general that is different from physical *demands*. Human beings have a *demand* to survive, but this cannot account for the loftier goals of the will, since the most powerful *demands* are not the most valuable or the most pleasurable. The innate *demands* of consciousness are the truest and deepest.
2. These fundamental *demands* of consciousness are facts that hold the key to reality, but they take various forms, making it necessary to repress the lower forms for the sake of the higher. The only *demand* in the universe with absolute value is the *demand* of personhood for unity of consciousness. It is the cause of will and reason, but is weaker in will and stronger in reason, which is active behind all instinct and whose satisfaction is the highest good.
3. The greater parts of our urges are all social, but the highest satisfaction is to actualize an individuality in the self that is not centered on merely subjective *demands*. The only way to be aware of the deepest *demand* for this is to revert to a state prior to rational deliberation, where one can hear it as an inner voice. By first satisfying the self and then giving satisfaction to others, one comes to the greatest *demand* of all, the religious drive to achieve unity with the universe, a *demand* that precedes all particular activities of consciousness.

What strikes one about Nishida's appeal to the notion of *demand* is that it sets up certain contradictions that are otherwise easy to gloss over in the text. Contradiction, both logical and ontological, did not bother Nishida in the long run. Indeed, he was later to confirm their importance in his logic of *basho* where contradiction was what prompted the break through from the limitations of one *basho* to a more encompassing one, as well as in his idea that contradiction accounts for dynamism. In any case, I see three principle contradictions here, all of which are reconcilable only by taking a step beyond the standpoint of *An Inquiry into the Good*.

First, there is an apparent inconsistency between the *demand* for the unity of consciousness as the supreme and highest *demand* and the claim that there is a *demand* for a unity with reality deeper than consciousness alone. While viewing "the mind as a system of *demands*" (Nishida 1990, 150), Nishida grounds these *demands* in something that is not mind. Because he sets up a hierarchy among *demands*, or at least admits that there is one, we cannot dismiss the problem. At the same time, because the phenomena of consciousness have been called "the sole reality," what unifies consciousness is already identical with what unifies reality. The misfit between the *demands* and the power leaves us with a doubt about this identity.

Second, the *demand* for love of others is introduced as if it were something higher than love of self, but the *greatest* good is associated with the *demand* to know the true self and not with love of others. These two *demands* need reconciling at a level beyond self and other, but the *demands* and goals of the universe that might be thought to accomplish this are always brought back to the satisfaction of the self.

Third, the *demand* behind will is made subservient the *demand* for knowledge and both of them subservient to the *demand* to unify the two in consciousness. (Curiously, no specific mention is made of a *demand* for feeling, which also has to be part of that unity.) This sets up a fundamental contradiction between the two most basic *demands*: on the one hand, there is a *demand* to split consciousness into higher and lower functions, and on the other, there is a *demand* to heal the split. This leaves us with two choices: either consciousness is both its own disease and its own medicine; or there is a *demand* within consciousness for a cure outside of consciousness. In the former case, the sole reality is not simple and unified (as was claimed for "pure experience") but complex and divided; in the latter, consciousness and its phenomena are not the sole reality.

Nishida did not acknowledge these problems explicitly in *An Inquiry into the Good*, but there is another and more serious difficulty lying in the shadow of these various contradictions, one that turns out to have been a stimulus to his

move beyond the limitation of this first book: the question of the relationship between personal, conscious will, and the power of will in wider reality. His oblique allusion to the human mind as “part of the consciousness of God” did not bring the problem to the surface. Strictly speaking, if God is the epitome of unity, there should be no “parts” at all. Indeed, since God is not *demand*ed by anything outside of God, when Nishida comes to identify God with absolute will, he has to exclude anything that issues *demand*s or manifests a will, including instinct, motivation, desire, and decision. In a word, if God is an absolute that wills, it cannot be by analogy with the will treated in *An Inquiry into the Good*.

The idea of God is not one of Nishida’s clearer ideas and is so often attached to *tobon mots* that perhaps we should not make too much of it. But insofar as God is spoken of as “absolutely infinite”⁶ and as a “power” that is accessible to direct experience, the notion of a cosmic *demand* is at least indirectly hinted at. The progression from instinct to motivation to desire to decision is set up in such a way that the subject is seen to move from a true, primordial state of “paradise” to lesser states of divided consciousness. To return from dividedness to original unity means cutting off all desires and all decisions based on mere “freedom of choice.” However, the next step to an “absolute *free* will” logically required seeing will as a force working in the cosmos *of itself* and independently of consciousness. In taking that step Nishida stepped over the human historical world as well as the natural world. Instead, he reintroduced talk of a God who looked so suspiciously like a fully individuated, unified self that the borderlines between self and God all but vanished. The “intelligible world” remained the “world of the intelligible self.” That left him with the problem of how to return to engagement with and moral responsibility towards the actual world of ordinary human experience.

Nishida’s own protestation to the contrary, the assumption that the most fully concrete reality is one that displays a unity of absolute contradictories transcending the comings and goings of mind is a high-level mental abstraction. At most, it is a “form of the forms” that reality takes in the concrete. The actual contradictions that beset human experience in its most concrete form, as we all know, are not paired against one against the other in a pure, absolute, and intelligible form. They come at us from all sides as a disorderly struggle for attention; weak and strong, connected and disconnected, clear and vague they come at us. It is only in trying to sort all this out that we are able to lift ourselves above the concrete and bring order to the commotion, or that failing, to express it, just as it is, throughout whatever symbolic medium we have at our disposal.

6. The English translation has anachronistically translated “fully nothing” as “absolute nothingness” in reference to God (Nishida 1990, 82).

The true concreteness of human history cannot be explained simply on the basis of a mutual interpenetration of the maker and the made. It entails the immediate struggle for order through the ongoing reconstruction of an intelligible world and the cultivation of habits of thought and action in the actual world that alone render it “concrete.” Complaints against the abstractness of Nishida’s view of the historical world hounded him to the last from all sides, leaving him finally to admit, in the last words he wrote before he died, that his critics had not been persuaded (Nishida 2011, 668–669).

Rather than enter into a discussion of the development of Nishida’s later ideas on the concreteness of the intelligible-historical world, there is a more serious criticism to be faced. Simply put, his brief sortie into absolute will aside, the highest cosmic force, the absolute *demand* of reality, remained bound in Nishida’s thinking to the absolutizing of self-awareness as the “highest good,” such that even God can be reduced to the “internal necessity” at work in consciousness (Nishida 1990, 145, 133). To the end his idea of “no-self” was attached to the primacy of human subjectivity. In *An Inquiry into the Good*, Nishida shows mixed feelings about the anthropomorphism involved in attributing human mental functions to the universe, but at least he seems open to the idea of nature as alive and as the foundation for human feeling, will, and knowledge (Nishida 1990, 50). True, his notions of God, the *basho* of the intelligible-historical world, and absolute nothingness would approach this cosmic dimension, but never with the strength of will or *demand* that would give it primacy over human consciousness.

In this regard, the saving grace for Nishida’s logic would have been to find a more foundational place for time in his account of will. By this I mean a broader sense of time than that bounded on one end by self-awareness and on the other by the eternal now. History would have to be liberated from its anthropocentric bias. Even if we think only of planet earth, the brief lapse of the evolution into human consciousness does not merit the status a “universal of all universals” that would allow it to embrace the whole of the natural world as a subordinate. Discounting the story of the emergence of life some ten billion years into the earth’s nearly fourteen billion year history is not only philosophically illogical, it is irresponsible. For human intelligence to survive the damage that the history of civilization has inflicted on our native habitat and to maintain the most basic conditions for the possibility of consciousness itself, it does not help philosophically to reduce the natural world to the maidservant of self-awareness. The greater story requires that the direct line from human consciousness to the realm of religion, absolute nothingness, and God be broken to make room for the absolute mediation of the natural world. Between the final, infinitely open

basho of reality itself and the *basho* of the intelligible-historical world, a place must be made for a *basho* of the natural world in whose story everything human beings are and do is inextricably “located.”

The proper idiom for speaking of the natural world as a *basho* is that of a pre-conscious dynamic, of a *demand* whose contradictions are not neatly lined up to synthesize into the kind of “self-identity” appropriate to talk of consciousness. In terms of the central thesis of *An Inquiry into the Good*, this means removing the unity of consciousness from the equation of pure experience with reality, and in its place introducing *demand* as the qualifier that holds the equation together. The formulation would be: It is not that there is consciousness and therefore there is *demand*, but there is *demand* and therefore there is consciousness. It is out of such *demand* that life and consciousness were born and also out of that *demand* that we may one day render them extinct. In a sense, whether or not one attaches a teleological unity or moral *ought* to this general *demand* is a specification of consciousness and as such does not affect the underlying drive. *To make the intelligible-historical world the foundation of our natural environment, the ultimate basho of our experience beyond which lies the religious realm of nothingness, is to support at a primary level the very subjugation of the natural world that has begun to rise up in rebellion against our technological civilization and the life-style we have grown accustomed to.*

As much as this suggestion directly contravenes the positions Nishida took in the opening sections of his essays on “Logic and Life” and “I and You,” the reasons for doing so are more than theoretical. They are not even moral in the strictest sense. They grow, as we have said, from demonstrable facts that philosophical reasoning cannot afford to neglect. The notion of a cosmic *demand* that envelops and empowers the whole of human consciousness and history is only one way of approaching these facts of course, but it seems to suggest a corrective to Nishida’s *basho* logic that would help restore to his philosophy a consideration of those concrete forces of nature that have been harnessed by the powers of consciousness and history to sicken the planet. If, as Nishida quipped in *An Inquiry into the Good*, “hope is a state of disunity in consciousness” (Nishida 1990, 27), then it is precisely from such disunity, and not from any rarefied awakening to aboriginal unity, that we need to have a second look at the natural world and our obligations towards it. The neo-Kantian call for a reconstruction of the objective world out of the “transcendental forms” and categories seen to reside in “pure consciousness” or “consciousness-in-general” ended up in a moral reflection restricted to the human order. I do not see any evidence that Nishida ever fully liberated himself from this enterprise. Such a philosophical orientation, when set in the context of the ongoing ravaging of the natu-

ral world without which there would be no self-awareness, no philosophy, and indeed no civilization at all, seems to have its priorities backwards and to be complicit in the moral indifference. It may be difficult to imagine precisely *how* Nishida would have reformed his thinking to incorporate the natural world as the primary *basho* of being, but it is even harder to imagine that he would have lacked the courage to face this pressing concern which Nishida scholars seem systematically to exclude from their evaluations of his work.

Abbreviation

NKZ 西田幾多郎全集 [*Complete Works of Nishida Kitarō*]. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2003–2009.

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