



Marcello Ghilardi, *Una logica del vedere. Estetica ed etica nel pensiero di Nishida Kitarō*

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IN HIS LATEST book, Marcello Ghilardi, a lecturer associated with the Department of Philosophy at the University of Padova, takes up the complex question of the notion of “seeing” in the thought of Nishida Kitarō and its relation to Japanese aesthetics. The linguistic and scholarly skills he brings to the task are yet another sign of the important contributions young scholars in Italy have been making over the past decade to the integration of Japanese philosophy into the Western philosophical tradition. Not that the book is an easy read. After a relatively breezy initial chapter tracing the outlines and major concepts of aesthetics in the context of Japan’s traditional arts and its encounter with Western thought in the nineteenth century,

Ghilardi dives deep into Nishida's notoriously recondite prose in the attempt to address a question "to this day little studied in any depth" (16). The demands on the reader, especially those coming to Nishida's philosophy for the first time, are considerable. But with arguments anchored solidly in the original texts and supported by a generous representation of secondary literature, one has the sense of an author in control of his subject and making his way steadily, *si che 'l piè fermo sempre era 'l più basso*. It is in the nature of Nishida's thought that to follow any of its key concepts through its entire course from start to finish is to end up with both a grasp of his overall vision and a feel for how he got to it. This book is no exception.

The three chapters devoted to Nishida, which make up the bulk of the volume, begin with a treatment of the development of his thought from his maiden work of 1911, *An Inquiry into the Good*, up to the collection of essays published in 1923 as *Art and Morality*.¹ It is here that Ghilardi singles out the notion of "seeing"—in particular, "seeing something by becoming it"—as one of the wedges Nishida uses to pry open the fundamental distinction between subject and object and replace it with the idea of a "no-self." As a consequence, a range of familiar ideas is liberated from the bias of "objective logic" and need to be reformulate—ideas like experience, will, intuition, action, awareness, truth, and even reality itself. With these pieces in place, the author introduces us to Nishida's claim that once the dominion of the subject has been overthrown, the good, the true, and the beautiful are understood to be inseparable. What is more, without the willing subject, the will can become an absolute principle of creativity, unifying the notions of art and morality that Western philosophy is at such pains to keep apart. Thus, for Nishida the "ought" is not something added to reality; nor is it a blind *Trieb* that swallows everything up. It is the natural vocation of human beings and all things to awakening.

The erasure of the borderlines between art and morality raises the question of the connection between the notion of reality as "pure experience" prior to subject and object on the one hand, and artistic creation as a form of pure experience on the other. This is the subject of the next chapter, which focuses on the idea of "acting intuition," Nishida's variation on Fichte's idea of *Tathandlung*. The notion of "absolute will" that had been at the core of *Art and Morality* is shown to have developed out of Nishida's struggles with neo-Kantianism in the attempt to account for the unfolding of the real world from pure experience. Ghilardi draws a straight line from there to Nishida's final philosophical standpoint, the "logic of place." What I found particularly illuminating was his exposition of the influence on Nishida of Konrad Fiedler (1841–1895), a figure all but entirely neglected among Nishida scholars. By gathering up the textual allusions and tracking them down, Ghilardi

1. The recent Italian translation of *Inquiry* by Enrico Fongaro, *Uno studio sul bene* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2007) and the unpublished French translation of *Art and Morality* by Britta Boutry-Stadelmann (whose name is given incorrectly on pages 89, 111, 158, and 205) both include commentaries that support Ghilardi at several key points in his argument.

brings into relief a problem that will occupy him in his final chapter, namely, the relationship between artistic “seeing” and the body. Again and again he draws attention to a certain anomaly in Nishida’s thought: even as the separation of body and consciousness is overcome in the creative act of self-expression without a willing, thinking, feeling, acting self, the preference for the visual over the other senses remains. Even when he tries to bring eye and hand together in the art of painting, Nishida favors the eye. Seeing is made to serve as a metaphor for “awakening” and “understanding,” but touch is not. As Ghilardi shows, this not only provides a critical point of contact with Cusanus, but “In Plotinus as well Nishida discovered this same centrality of seeing, and along with it an essential relationship between vision and understanding, between seeing and thinking” (170). The author is careful to avoid the claim that Nishida’s “place” is in any sense spatial, but the flow of his argument suggests that here, too, the predominance of the visual is not without its consequences. In any case, his conclusion steers clear of these criticisms: “The encounter of Nishida’s decidedly Japanese sensitivity with a tradition at the opposite pole—the neoplatonic—results in something completely unexpected: the intuition of a place, prepared by art and by thinking purified of the hypothesis of an ego-subject, at which the ‘true Self’ is to be recovered, near at hand yet beyond the reach of all dualism and negativity” (194).

Having arrived at the end of the book, the idea of a “decidedly Japanese sensitivity” introduced in the opening chapter is called on to close the circle. The problem is, the connections are not very explicitly drawn in the three chapters on Nishida’s thought. True, the idea of “no-self” returns again and again, but things like *mono no aware*, *yūgen*, *sabi*, *wabi*, *omoi*, *jō*, *yohaku*, and so forth, which are identified as the core of what is a “decidedly Japanese” aesthetics, are left aside. Even if Nishida did not use these terms himself, some bridge to them in his own philosophy would have been helpful. Furthermore, it is hard to sidestep the criticism that Nishida’s claim to have done Western philosophy one better in terms of keeping in touch with reality in its most concrete form by abjuring object-centered logics is seriously threatened by the abstractness with which he treated what should be the most concrete of all philosophical questions: aesthetics. Indeed, the first citation in the book endorses the view of the historian Katō Shūichi in his *History of Japanese Literature*: “At every point of their history the Japanese have expressed their own ideas not so much in abstract philosophical assumptions as in concrete literary works.... Literature and art thus form the core of Japanese culture” (25). If Nishida’s philosophy is to qualify as Japanese, it would somehow have to respond to this demand, if not completely satisfy it. This same retreat from the concreteness of everyday experience applies equally to morality. Ghilardi shows us how Nishida’s “ought” is far more basic than ordinary conceptions of morality, but the road back from pure, subjectless experience to the recovery and preservation of sensitivity to pain, injustice, and evil has also to be shown as “decidedly Japanese.” These are not new ques-

tions, but they are critical ones for a philosophy that strives as hard as Nishida's does to identify art and morality.

Technically, there are two matters I bring up because they point to a more general problem with works in Western languages on Japanese philosophy. First, more thought should be given to just whom the sinograms interposed in the text are intended for. For example, who would possibly need to know the Japanese transcription for *Heian jidai* but would not need those for *Kokinwakashū* (both terms appearing on page 27)? Why write out *sabi* in kana? There are numerous places where the Japanese writing is indeed helpful to communicate a nuance or eliminate ambiguity. But insofar as the presence of the kanji slows down reading for all but a small majority of readers, they should be used judiciously. (The only mistaken Romanization that caught my eye was on page 199, where the glyph for "being" is given as *yū* rather than *u*.) Second, it seems odd that so many books in the field, this one included, should lack an Index. It is hard to understand how indexes made manually, before computerization, should be more numerous and often better prepared than those we have now.

On balance, these are minor quibbles, more than offset by the care with which this book was produced. Edizioni Mimesis is to be congratulated for a handsomely produced volume priced within the reach of an audience far wider than that of the majority of recent English books in the field (a good example being a book reviewed in this same issue, Robert Wilkinson's *Nishida and Western Philosophy*, which is slightly shorter in length but 380 percent more expensive). I have no doubt that Ghilardi's contribution will serve as an important resource not only for Nishida studies but for Japanese aesthetics in general. The high standards he has set himself are a tribute to the great strides the study of Japanese philosophy has made in Europe.

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