



Robert Wilkinson, *Nishida and Western Philosophy*

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ROBERT WILKINSON has given Western philosophers a first-rate introduction to the thought of Japan's preeminent modern philosopher, Nishida Kitarō. I know of no single monograph, in any Western language, to compare with it for its careful, critical, and comprehensive treatment of Nishida's wrestle with the thought of Aristotle, Plato, Kant, Fichte, Hegel, James, and Bergson. But more than a simple account

of this important chapter in the history of philosophy, Wilkinson's book argues in detail a thesis more often repeated than demonstrated textually with any thoroughness: that Nishida's consistent project was to articulate, in a rational form derived from Western philosophies, the core of the Zen experience of *satori*. His conclusion is that the project succeeded precisely insofar as it failed to achieve that aim and drove him to formulate his own categorical framework, an achievement that the author judges "a significant addition to human philosophical understanding" (161).

The book is a digest in the best sense of the term. Rather than take the simpler route of dismantling Nishida's texts to ferret out the culture- and epoch-specific biases that underlay his thinking, Wilkinson has chosen to read Nishida on his own terms. No time is spent addressing suspicions of "reverse orientalism" or locating a hidden "imperialistic agenda"; readers interested in arguments on where to place Nishida on the spectrum of moral responsibility for Japan's militaristic escapades would do best to look elsewhere. These pages are more in the nature of an experiment with reading the texts in the light of what Nishida himself was reading, mulling over his responses, and then reconstructing the arguments in an ordered, intelligible language accessible to those familiar with the Western sources that most strongly stimulated Nishida. In a sense, one may say that the author's deliberate sidestepping of political questions has highlighted an important range of questions eclipsed in the rush to *re-read* Nishida before taking the trouble to *read* him.

The fare is too rich for a short review such as this to summarize, let alone to debate with fairly. I can only spread the table here in the hopes that it will attract the wide critical attention it deserves. The best way to do this would be to reproduce in its entirety the final "Summary and Conclusions" in which Wilkinson reiterates the course he has taken. (The canons of an academic journal prohibit me from doing so here, but it would be a thoughtful, and probably profitable, gesture for the publishers to make it available online.)

The opening chapter aims to set out Nishida's "starting point" in Zen Buddhism by identifying a number of key concepts for the Western reader. Given the many interpretative variations to ideas like nothingness, dependent origination, and no-self, not to mention the immense scholarly discussion about what these concepts actually mean in the Buddhist canon, the presentation achieves balance by sidestepping controversy. No doubt many readers will feel uncomfortable with the citation of Abe Masao, Hisamatsu Shin'ichi, and D. T. Suzuki as authorities on Zen's philosophical assumptions. As the book progresses, however, it becomes more and more clear that in fact it was just in such generalized, historically and textually unrefined terms that Zen thought functioned in the background of Nishida's philosophy. This is important for assessing Wilkinson's thesis that "unless these are (*sic*) ideas are understood, Nishida's reactions to Western philosophies, both positive and negative, are not fully understandable" (28). Later on the point will be made explicitly that they belong to a set of tacit assumptions that allowed him to adopt a familiar philosophical vocabulary to create a most unfamiliar system of

thought. In other words, Nishida's reliance on certain key Zen ideas was more in the nature of a "philosophical faith" than of a studied attempt to understand these ideas in their native context.

In Nishida's writings, philosophical ideas are engaged with rational precision; Zen texts are cited in passing to bolster ideas of his own that are not identified as Buddhist at all. In the end, Wilkinson seems almost to make a virtue of this strategy on the grounds that the assumptions were able to sustain a position of "conceptual incommensurability" (160) different from that upheld by traditional, Aristotelian assumptions precisely because they were tacit. In order to erect the divide clearly, as the author himself seems to realize, one would have to extend it beyond the case of Nishida. No sooner does one do so, then, than one runs into recent research that questions the incompatibility of ego logics and no-self logics from the experiential ground up. To give only one example, Alison Gopnik's recently published research on the brain activity of small children provides solid—and fascinating—neurological evidence of the close resemblance between their modes of thought and those described as the foundation of Buddhist epistemologies.¹

Be that as it may, I believe Wilkinson is fundamentally correct in his claim about where Nishida's philosophy got its start, but I wonder if the thread of an early *satori* experience runs as patently throughout his whole thought as the author would have us believe. We immediately want to ask why Nishida did not bring this all much more to the surface for critical review. Wilkinson's explanation that Nishida was committed to doing philosophy only goes so far. One may suppose that Nishida's scholarly conscience made him uncomfortable with tackling Buddhist philosophical ideas on the same standards as he tackled Western ones.² He must have been aware of another, "scholarly incommensurability" of his own where Buddhist thought was concerned. That said, we may note that direct successors like Tanabe Hajime and Nishitani Keiji were less intimidated than Nishida in their conscious attempts to integrate Pure Land and Zen ideas into their own refinements of a philosophy of nothingness. Add to this the fact that neither Nishida nor his principle disciples ever argued for anything approaching Wilkinson's central thesis or lent any support to his thesis of the final noncoincidence of Zen and Western philosophy. Two years before he died, Nishida penned a letter to Nishitani regarding the latter's response to an essay on "The Objectivity of Knowledge." His words capture well the ambiguity in Wilkinson's thesis:

1. See Alison Gopnik, *The Philosophical Baby: What Children's Minds Tell Us about Truth, Love, and the Meaning of Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009).

2. The same may be said of the influence of Chinese, particularly Daoist, ideas on Nishida. See the carefully documented essay by Michel Dalissier, "Nishida Kitarō and Chinese Philosophy," in Lam Wing-keung and Cheung Ching-yuen, *Frontiers of Japanese Philosophy 4: Facing the Twenty-first Century* (Nagoya: Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, 2009), 211–50.

As for whether Zen can be said to be present in the background, it is quite so. I have never been one of those who know Zen, but since people completely and fundamentally misunderstand it, I am of the view that Zen is something that sees life as a true grasp of reality. I want somehow to combine that with philosophy, impossible as such a thing is. I have had this desire since my thirties. But since it is you, I can say that when ignorant students are in the habit of referring to me as Zen and the like, I oppose it with all my might. Such people do not know Zen and do not understand my philosophy. They merely equate x with y and mistake both my philosophy and Zen.... (dated 19 February 1943).

At most, we have to say that Wilkinson has laid out the question intelligibly for further discussion, though I myself doubt it will hold up to closer scrutiny.

The body of the volume is composed of three chapters on principal landmarks in the development of Nishida's philosophy. The first takes up *An Inquiry into the Good* (given in its British spelling in the "Preliminary Notes" and on page 145), where Wilkinson presents a coherent restructuring of that maiden work, pulling the kaleidoscope of oracular sayings apart and rearranging the pieces around the central problem of how to account for "the unity of consciousness" within an ultimate reality of "pure experience." Although I doubt Nishida had anything approaching the level of Wilkinson's understanding of William James, I do not doubt that Nishida would have read this chapter with approval and even learned from it.

The next chapter focuses on *Intuition and Reflection in Self-Consciousness*, Nishida's struggles with the neo-Kantians, Fichte, and Bergson. Not surprisingly, Wilkinson ends up pretty much where Nishida himself did, convinced that the whole battle had been an exhausting experience of diminishing returns. Still, he makes a good case for the importance of this middle period as having liberated Nishida from the heavy shadow of the dominant philosophies of the age. As befits the material (and this is still truer of the original in its entirety, as opposed to the English condensation from which he worked), the author's resume is less unified and comprehensive than it was in the former chapter. The sections on Bergson, and especially on Fichte, though brief, are full of hints helpful for what follows.

The final and longest of the three core chapters is devoted to the logic of *basho*, Nishida's crowning philosophical achievement. The summary of the logic in its mature form is easy to follow and will no doubt prove useful as a companion to Robert Wargo's *The Logic of Nothingness*. The originality of this chapter lies in its analysis of Nishida's points of contact with and divergence from Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Leibniz, Kant, and Hegel.

I noticed a few problems with transcription that might be cleared up in a reprint: *yu no basho* for *u no basho* (105), *joteki* for *jōteki* (157), *yūgen* for *yūgen* (173); and the Sanskrit *ñ* is consistently given as *ñ*. Also, reliance on David Dilworth's translation of Nishida's final essay (*Last Writings: Nothingness and the Religious Worldview*) has occasioned a couple of minor infractions: Nishida does not cite Cusanus for the image of the infinite sphere whose center is everywhere and whose circumference

nowhere (the image actually comes from a pseudo-Hermetic text, the *Liber xxiv philosophorum*), and he does not criticize Kant's ethics of practical reason as "bourgeois" (for which Japanese Marxists at the time was already using a different word) but as "civic" (139–40). Likewise, a citation from the Schinzinger translation (*Intelligibility and the Philosophy of Nothingness*) where Fichte and Schelling are criticized because "the willing one and the seeing one do not enter their perspective" is read as referring to a "willing, seeing oneness" (147), where the original text makes it clear that Nishida is referring to "one who wills and one who sees," not to a metaphysical One.

All things considered, Wilkinson's decision not to engage directly with current Nishida scholarship does not affect the book adversely. On the contrary, steering clear of debates over translation and historical context seems to have aided him in presenting the kind of fair reading that has eluded others and that Nishida himself, towards the end of his life, complained his critics had denied him.

Robert Wilkinson has done Nishida studies an admirable service. There is much to be learned from *Nishida and Western Philosophy*, and one can only hope that more and more Western philosophers will take the time to learn it.

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