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James W. Heisig

Nishida's Medieval Bent

One of the pillars of the philosophy of Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945) was a firm belief in the unity of consciousness and reality, a belief that ran throughout his writings without ever having been subjected to serious criticism. Quite the contrary, it appears to have been sheltered from criticism by a number of supporting ideas that Nishida shared with thinkers, in particular mystical thinkers, of the Middle Ages. The present essay considers four of those ideas—the *unus mundus,* the union of opposites, pure experience, and intuitive knowledge—and suggests alternatives available from the thinkers that had influenced Nishida's own development, notably Henri Bergson and William James. Whereas textual studies of Nishida, studies comparing him to other thinkers, and the application of his ideas to a wide range of questions have helped keep his philosophy in the forefront for the past generation and more, the author argues that a further development of his seminal ideas is required to secure him a place in the future of philosophical thought; and that part of that development consists in questioning his tacit but pervasive medieval bent.

KEYWORDS: Nishida Kitarō – mysticism – *unus mundus* – Middle Ages – empiricism – dualism – intuition – coincidence of opposites

James W. Heisig is a permanent research fellow at the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, Nagoya, Japan. The present essay is based on a presentation made on 22 November 2003 at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Atlanta, GA.

Almost from the first I have been of two minds about the philosophy of Nishida Kitarō. On the one hand, I was attracted by its originality. Like many an eager young Japanese student of philosophy, Nishida devoured everything he could about the dominant philosophical currents of the day and drank deeply, in the original languages, of the sources on which they drew. What set him apart was a knack for finding just the right thread to tug at in a particular system of thought until the whole would begin to unravel—and then that rare gift of knitting it all back together again in a new pattern. I never had the slightest doubt that in Nishida I was encountering a first-rate philosophical mind.

On the other hand, I could not help feeling troubled by a certain tone of cocksureness that seemed out of place for a philosopher writing in the twentieth century. By the time Nishida set pen to paper for the essays that would become his first book, the unrelenting assaults on metaphysics, epistemology, and logic that accompanied advances in science and the study of non-Western cultures had taken much of the edge of certitude off theories of the unchanging structure of being and the acquisition of truth. And yet when he wrote, Nishida avoided the hypothetical mode, asserting his views with a confidence apparently unmolested by that skepsis.

For years I shifted from one foot to the other in trying to decide about Nishida's philosophy, at one moment admiring the originality of his conclusions and at the next questioning the certitude with which he expressed them—but never quite able to find my balance. His discipline and genius were obvious; the reasons for his oracular surety were not. An innate ability to x-ray the most complicated questions gave his abstract language an authority that his neglect of everyday experience and the self-critical mood of contemporary philosophy seemed to diminish.

If I had to focus these general impressions on a single idea running through Nishida's writings, it would be his almost superstitious belief in the fundamental unity of consciousness and reality: a belief never questioned, never proved, never even argued, and yet never very far from his mind. Not that he was unaware of criticisms of that assumption, but for some reason he never seemed to let them rattle his confidence in it. At least we have no way of knowing how far this belief was tacit and unexamined, and hence to what extent it infected the fundamental contributions of his philosophy. I have come to suspect that the infection is widespread, and that the consequences for future developments in the line of Nishida's philosophy are serious but at the same more promising

than much of the textual exegesis occupying students of Nishida's thought. What follows is no more than a hint of an explanation of that promise.

The Intuition of an Unus Mundus

In 1916, five years after completing his first book, *An Inquiry into the Good,* Nishida published his first attempt at an overview of current philosophy for the inaugural issue of *Philosophical Studies,* a journal launched by the Kyoto Philosophical Society. At the time he was reading Windelband's newly published, and in fact final work, *An Introduction to Philosophy* (YUSA 2002, p. 134). Using that book as the basis for his class lectures seems to have encouraged Nishida to try his hand at composing his own survey of philosophy since Kant. He follows Windelband's novel approach of forsaking the traditional chronological approach for a thematic one and blending his own critique into his presentations of others' positions, but his opinions differ markedly from Windelband's on any number of counts. One of them in particular interests me here. I cite from the beginning and the end of that essay:

> During the Enlightenment everything mystical was discarded.... In German philosophy arguments about the nature of cognition are elaborate while their explanations of intuition are crude in the extreme. Profound philosophical minds like Meister Eckhart and Jacob Boehme are nowhere to be found in German philosophy today.... Husserl's phenomenological world is a kind of intuitive world, but seems to end up in what he calls a world of pure description...and, at least for me, is incapable of showing relationships in a world of intuitive flux.[1]

The reference to Eckhart and Boehme in an essay on philosophy since Kant is more than a casual aside on Nishida's part. It is surely meant to reject an argument that runs throughout Windelband's book right to the last page: namely, that there is no solution to the problem of how to reconcile the idea of the oneness of existence, "one of the most solid of all the assumptions of our philosophy of reality," with the *fact* of dualism, "the most certain of all facts." As Windelband sees it, from the time of Plotinus all attempts to posit an inexpressible One rising above all the diversity of the world and the antithesis that make our thought about the world possible may have been emotionally satisfying, but in the end they are intellectually bankrupt. Nowhere in his argument is mention made of Eckhart or other mystics of the high Middle Ages, except for a passing allusion to "the whole of medieval mysticism," which he proceeds to subsume under his general critique of Plotinus. Later he takes a broad swipe at a "mystical tendency that has infected the thought of our time..., that forswears a

1. *Nishida Kitarō zenshū* (NISHIDA 1978, hereafter NKZ) 1: 335, 366. The essay is entitled simply "Contemporary Philosophy."

conceptual knowledge of its subject, abounds in picturesque language and glowing imagination, but yields no firm and distinct results." Boehme is singled out for wallowing in "obscure figures of speech and assumptions that were little more than aspirations." The closest Windelband comes to acknowledging the importance of mystical thought is to cite the "impressively simple" but ultimately erroneous idea of the *coincidentia oppositorum* as found in Giordano Bruno or Nicholas of Cusa, an idea which he laments as having been as "foundational" for later thinkers like Spinoza and Leibniz (WINDELBAND 1923, p. 79, 84, 329, 358).

It is not hard to see why this did not sit well with Nishida. Having struggled in *An Inquiry into the Good* to unify subject and object in consciousness, it must have been a shock for him to read one of the leading thinkers of what was then the dominant philosophical movement in Europe suggesting that such efforts were little more than an outdated form of mysticism or a sophisticated form of religious sentimentalism. Instead of backing down, Nishida steps forward and proclaims a depth in mystical thought "nowhere to be found in German philosophy today." In the years ahead, as he wrestled his way free of Neo-Kantian epistemology, he never let go his conviction of the fundamental unity of reality and of the ability of the mind to intuit it as a union of opposites. Nor did he abandon his critique of the subject-object dichotomy in modern philosophy. Time and again he lays the blame for this fragmentation of the unity of consciousness at the feet of the Cartesian *cogito*. In the essay just cited, for instance, he faults both the Neo-Kantians and the phenomenologists for constructing their various views of the world from the *cogito* (NKZ 1: 359). Later he will spell out how Descartes betrayed his own radical method of critical negation when he spoke of the thinking self as an external substance whose existence was beyond doubt, thereby distracting the philosophical imagination into a critique of the way the thinking subject grasps the objective reality of the world[2] and losing sight of the *unus mundus*.

There is nothing particularly medieval about the intuition of an *unus mundus,* and it was surely not Nishida's intention to claim there was. Nor does his insistence on a single reality whose identity consists in a union of opposites and is present as such to a consciousness that has ascended to a state of self-awareness suffice to qualify it as a form of medieval mysticism. (In fact, Nishida refused to see his thought as in any sense "mystical.") But there are other aspects to his thought that suggest more of a medieval bent to his fundamental philosophical orientation than he or his followers seem prepared to admit.

Before singling out what I think these aspects are, a word about where such an attempt fits in the current state of Nishida studies. Bluntly said, it does not

2. See his "Essay on Descartes," NKZ 11: 147–88. For an Italian translation of this piece, see Matteo CESTARI 2001; a French version appeared recently in TREMBLAY 2002, pp. 252–82.

seem to fit very well anywhere. It is perhaps only natural that the bulk of Nishida scholarship has focused on analyzing his thought and its development. This includes comparing his ideas to those of the philosophers who most inspired him, to those whose thought he tried to go beyond, and even to thinkers he did not know or read. Studies of these sorts abound. Criticism, in large part, has clustered around what is surely the weakest point of his thought, namely his views on culture, politics, and world order. What I referred to as, and what I think Nishida would agree to have been, his fundamental philosophical orientation seems by and large to have escaped confrontation.

Admittedly it is difficult to know where to locate Nishida in the intellectual history of his age in general and of Japan in particular. If there was such a thing as an historical a priori—or *episteme,* as Foucault calls it—at work in the age when Nishida was writing, setting the horizons for what can be thought, shaping the way facts appear within that field of vision, and defining the conditions in which discourse about things can be said to be true, Nishida did not belong to it, or at least not comfortably. In the attempt to think in terms intelligible both to Western modernity and to traditional Japan, his inclination to certain medieval ideas helped him keep his footing in the straddle. In a word, he seems to have set a certain cluster of ideas aside as a kind of sacred preserve, walled in by his own instinctive sentiment of their verity. This sanctuary of ideas gave him a middle ground from which to seek the reconciliation of East and West that had eluded so many others. The question is whether such ideas belong to Nishida's fundamental orientation or merely served him as an ancillary stimulus, or more radically put, what remains of Nishida philosophy without them. Before tackling that question, I would like to single out four principal ideas that characterize what I am calling his medieval bent.

THE INFINITE IN THE FINITE WORLD

The transition from a finite to an infinite world has been singled out as the turning point from medieval to modern thought.[3] For the Greeks, and the scholastic philosophers who followed them, limitlessness (*apeiron*) was a sign of imperfection: what is infinite is undetermined, and what is undetermined is a lower level of being. Medieval mystics stand as an exception insofar as they tried to avoid the dualism of an infinity completely transcending the determinations of the world and to locate the infinite *within* the finite world.[4] The figure of God incarnate in Christ represents infinity become a "locus" for the world and our experience and knowledge of it. We find this in Eckhart's idea of the birth of God in the ground of the soul and later in Cusanus's reading of Eckhart's sermons,

3. The classical source for this view is BLUMENBERG 1966.

4. BRIENT (2002) traces this idea in the mystical thought of Eckhart and in a much more explicit way in Cusanus.

where the world becomes an "infinite process" and Christ becomes an infinite "where" in that process.[5]

In Hegel we have the first sustained attempt to distinguish "determination" from "finitude," allowing for the absolute to be both infinite and self-determining. What makes infinite reality *infinite* is that it is absolutely self-determining in its relationship with relative, finite, historical beings. Hegel's break with the medievals is clear: the absolute is by nature infinite, and any notion of the infinite that is simply a negation of the finite, an infinite finitude in which the determination of the finite is "limitless" and open-ended, is a "bad infinity."

Nishida remains ambiguous on the whole question. Although he frequently pauses to note how his view of reality differs on one or the other point from Hegel's, I do not recall anywhere that he takes up the question of the infinity of the world explicitly. His absolute of nothingness is, like Hegel's absolute of being, infinite and yet self-determining in the world. He also follows Hegel in identifying the absolute with self-consciousness emerging in the history of the world. But for Nishida the absolute of nothingness as such lies ultimately beyond the reach all human awareness of it, except insofar as the emergence of self-awareness in the world is an expression of that absolute at work. In this sense his criticisms of the transcendence of the Judeo-Christian God concern only the extent to which that transcendence denies the working and self-expression of God in the world.

All of this seems to reintroduce the dualism that Hegel had thrown out. When all is said and done, the world is finite for Nishida and the absolute is infinite. His problem was how to locate a finite world of becoming in an infinite absolute of nothingness without losing the unity of reality. His solution was the logic of locus that offers a sort of *analogia determinationis* in which the absolute of nothingness is infinitely self-determining vis-à-vis the world, and the finite of being is finitely self-determining within the limits of the world. The logic of a self-determining absolute is Hegelian, but the vision of the world on which it is grafted is medieval.

Nishida's strategy for constructing an *unus mundus* is a mixture of Eckhart and Cusanus. Like Eckhart, he sees God and the world as sharing a common "groundless ground" beyond being and becoming.[6] And like Cusanus, he sees that contact with the infinite rubs off on the finite and transforms it into an

5. See the 1456 sermon of Cusanus, "Ubi est qui natus est rex Iudeorum?" § 4. The seeds of Cusanus' views can be found even before Eckhart in the writings of Ramon Llull, who says of God: "To be infinite, it is fitting that He should be in every place and outside of all places." From his 1287 work, *Felix, or the Book of Wonders*, cited in Vega 2003, p. 98.

6. See McGinn (2001, pp. 35–52) for a solid and comprehensive presentation of Eckhart's idea of "ground." It is difficult to determine how far and precisely when Nishida himself recognized the coincidence. Only in his followers, particularly Nishitani and Ueda, has it been worked out in the context of the original sources.

infinitely open finiteness, a sphere without a circumference.[7] This is how I read Nishida's frequent allusions to the "infinite process," the "infinite many," and the "infinite universal determination" of the world, and, in obvious allusion to James, even of the "infinite fringe of consciousness." The fact is, Nishida's world is not infinite in the same sense that his absolute is infinite. It is the finite world as the medievals understood it, limited but related to an infinite God. Its only "infinity" is its "infinite drive" to determine itself. In other words, it totters on the edge of what Hegel called "bad infinity."[8]

We do not need to accept the value judgment implied in Hegel's term to appreciate the point that the absolute must not become a mere inverse image of the world, possessing everything that the world lacks but wants. In the end, the distinction is probably too simple, since it dismisses as "bad" much of what is in fact very good about the relation of limits and the desire to transcend them. But it does draw a sharp line that allows us to see Nishida as standing on the other side of the divide from post-Hegelian thought. There was, however, another option open to him.

In a brief appreciation of William James's novely of thought, Henri Bergson notes that the needs of modern reason are fulfilled by imagining the world as *infinite,* in contrast to antiquity, which saw it as finite; James, on the other hand, saw it as *indefinite,* leaving reason less satisfied and diminished in importance but the totality of the human person "immeasurably enhanced" (BERGSON 1946, pp. 250–51; This is close to Bergson's own rejection of an omniscient and omnipotent God in favor of an "immense" one.)

It seems to me that the introduction of a notion of the indefinite between the infinite and the undetermined would be useful for sorting out Nishida's ambiguities regarding the absolute. In the context of James's thought, this would require the substitution of a radical pluralism for the unity of an *unus mundus*—a step that Nishida could not take because of his attachment to the Hegelian relationship between self-awareness and the nature of the real. Something different is called for in his case.

Had Nishida simply wanted to present absolute nothingness as a more radical metaphysics than a metaphysics of being, there would have been no problem with accepting an indefinite view of the world. But he wanted to see nothingness as the completion of consciousness in its highest achievable state, the point at which the narrow locus of ordinary awareness is liberated from its confinement

7. ABE Masao (2003, pp. 104–111) is inaccurate in his oft-repeated claim that the West sees this as a "circle" and Nishida as a "sphere." Both Cusanus, and the Gnostics from whom Nishida took the idea, understand the image as spherical, not as a two-dimensional circle. He himself acknowledged the point later, but persisted in the view that Nishida's sphere somehow complements the Christian penchant for viewing the absolute as a circle.

8. NISHITANI seems to have been alert to this ambiguity in Nishida and its tendency to "bad infinity" (1982, p. 70).

to a world of subject and objects, of individual entities and their predicates, to the full consciousness of reality as it is. From the viewpoint of human experience, the notion of absolute nothingness had to locate the limitations of the reasoning mind and see through them. The unity of the intelligible world had to lie beyond the confines of the bifurcating mind. He depicted this ascent of consciousness as a series of ever widening concentric circles, the last of which was drawn with a broken line to indicate the "infinite" locus of absolute nothingness. This was the context in which Nishida adopted Cusanus's image of a sphere whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.

The main problem with Nishida's logic of locus is that there is nothing more to be said about the relation of self-awareness to absolute nothingness once it has been "intuited." Everything ends in a kind of still wonder, a union of absorption not unlike the mystical states of the medieval authors he found so appealing. The model can be *applied* to traditional religious symbolism,[9] but its explanatory power seems to be exhausted. This was part of Tanabe Hajime's complaint in dismissing it as no more than a variation on an already too abstract Neo-Platonic model of the One and the many.[10]

If, however, we see the broken circle of absolute nothingness as a mark of the indefiniteness of the world, this would mean that one is always thinking within limits and that there are always new frontiers beyond those limits. What for Hegel would be no more than "bad infinity" would have the salutary effect of bringing Nishida's logic closer to ordinary experience. Rather than leap to the notion of an infinite, whose practical consequences are a static state of mind, the idea of a continually receding awareness of the absolute—grasped and released, grasped and released, again and again—might do fuller justice to his insistence on the human struggle between ineffability and the need for self-expression.

The same can be said of the dual function of Nishida's notion of locus. It is *place,* or the concrete achievement location; but it is also *space,* or the abstract possibility of location. This space in turn is a *utopia* in the sense that it cannot itself be located in any place but is a pure, infinite, and finally static horizon. At the same time, it must be an *atopia* in the sense that it can only be understood insofar as it locates specific places within it, an indefinite, movable horizon.[11] The utopian idea of the absolute of nothingness has no meaning for Nishida

9. Thinkers like Yagi Seiichi 八木誠一 and Onodera Isao 小野寺功, for example, have applied it to the relationship of God with humanity and to the inner dynamics of the trinity respectively.

10. NISHITANI's refutation of Tanabe's critique (1991, pp. 182–83) overlooks this aspect.

11. I have found GARGETT's essay (2001) on virtual spaces useful for making sense of statements such as: "Perception is *Sein* in an *Absolutes Nicht-Platz* [utopia].... Activity becomes meaningful when its locus is nothingness, that is, when a *Nicht-Platz* [atopia] stands on its own, when nothingness has taken on the significance of the 'real'" (NKZ 13: 284, 286).

without the atopian idea of the intelligible world of being.[12] That is to say, only the concept of the indefinite gives meaning to the idea of the infinite process of the world. Putting it this way amounts to a critique of pure infinity of the world, which seems to me closer to what Nishida was out to do than his actual language indicates.

UNITY AS A UNION OF OPPOSITES

From his earliest work, Nishida is interested in recovering a unity of what the mind has torn apart. In *An Inquiry into the Good* he sought a unity of consciousness disrupted by the fiction of a world divided into subjects and objects. As this quest for unity matured into his logic of locus, he came to adopt a pattern of proposing his ideas that is distinctively medieval, and indeed that he seems to have recognized as such: the *coincidentia oppositorum.* Once again, the fact that this pattern of thinking harks back to the Middle Ages does not make it inappropriate or wrong. The medieval inheritance of philosophy is too important and too pervasive to dismiss its rhetoric or ideas simply on the grounds of old age. My question is rather whether in this particular case the idea might not have developed meantime into other forms more suited to the aims of Nishida's philosophy. I think it has.

Nishida's first allusion to the pure logic model of a union of opposites appears in an essay written shortly after the publication of *An Inquiry into the Good* in which he mentions Rickert's idea of "the unity of the one and the other or the unity of the manifold" as the foundation of logical thought. Accepting Rickert's idea that the "one" of this unity is qualitatively distinct from the units that make it up, he notes that the identity implied in saying that "something is something" (he uses the term *self-identity* [*jiko dōitsu* 自己同一]) implies a negation of its being something "other" than what it is. In place of a simple idea of "identity" (which is what Nishida's *self-identity* means, as is clear from the fact that he uses the same term 自己同一 to translate Fichte's "I am I" [NKZ 3: 363][13]),

12. This is how we might make sense of the cryptic lines in a transcript of Nishida's 1926 lectures concerning the need to locate nothingness within being, and not the other way around, in order to speak of a conscious will (NKZ 13: 279).

13. In general "self-identity" is only Nishida's way of saying what we prefer to express in English with the simple term "identity." In general the choice of meanings between identity as (1) a quality of self-understanding, (2) the unity of a complex entity, and (3) the selfsameness of an entity, is not the problem in Western languages that the use of any single Japanese term for all three senses would entail. Nishida's "self-identity" refers to the second. It has nothing to do with a "self," except insofar as identity implies something being "itself." Nor does it collapse opposites into a selfsameness. Thus the "identity *of* absolute contradictories" does not mean that contradictories are in fact identical, but that the "unity" of a particular entity is *composed of* absolutely contradictory elements. I assume this, and not a rebuttal of Nishida, to be NISHITANI's intention in a note appended to the English translation of his major work in which he states that the identity of life and death cannot be objective but only experiential (1982, p. 289, n. 8).

he found in Rickert a suggestion that the identity of anything—the human individual is only a paradigm—consists in the opposites that combine to make it up. Nishida's only addition is the suggestion that the sort of intuitive understanding seen in art shows a similar sort of dynamic at work (NKZ 1: 256–7, 267).[14] The important point here is that he recognizes that it is not only individuals who secure their identities by setting themselves against other individuals, but that the opposition of one thing and another characterizes the dynamic activity of all unity, including the final unity that embraces all individual unities of opposites. This idea was to prove fundamental to the direction his thought would take. The fact that Nishida's oppositions are always set up as binary confirms the suspicion that he never parted from the idea that something's "identity" was an analogue of the identity of an individual *I* confronting an individual *You* (or at least of a particular subject confronting a particular object).

In shaping his logic of locus, Nishida developed the idea of an "identity of absolute contradictories." His writings are full of references to a "self-identity of absolutely opposing things." As he puts it, "to think of something as self determining itself" requires an idea of "a self-identity of absolutely opposing things" (NKZ 7: 105). Although the idea of *coincidentia oppositorum* was well known to Nishida from early on, it is not until a very late essay that he makes clear reference to it, observing that "the philosophy of *coincidentia oppositorum* is best expressed by a logic of locus" (NKZ 11: 139) and that "intuition is...the locus in which the opposites are located" (NKZ 13: 306). The identity of absolute contradictories is meant to describe reality in its entirety and our awareness of it. Thus all relative contradictions needed to be set in a higher order of absolute contradiction.

The problem is that the idea of a union lying behind all opposition is universally applicable only in the most abstract sense: the meaning of the pattern diminishes the more universally it is applied. Thus the opposition between subject and object, God and humans, I and Thou, life and death, motion and stillness, past and present, the created and the creating, the expressing and the expressed, are useful as an index of the *fundamental form of all forms of reality*. But the closer one draws to the *actual form of reality*, to the world as it is ordinarily experienced, the more unworkable the formula becomes. This is why Nishida must elevate ordinary experience to abstract heights in order to have anything to say, and why the continued repetition of the pattern quickly grows—as he himself says in his final essay—"stale."[15]

Someone will surely object that Nishida's idea of uniting absolute opposites was only intended to describe a very fundamental structure of reality. But this

14. The only thing approaching a "union of opposites" in *An Inquiry Into the Good* is the attempt to return to a consciousness prior to the separation of the world into subject and object.

15. *Furuki* 旧き, NKZ 11: 434. There is a second kind of identity that is weaker and is made up of a combination of contradictories that are *not absolute*, for example, the emperor and the people of Japan. This is contingent on the larger idea and does not affect the point I am making here.

only pushes the question further back, forcing us to ask if there is anything in reality that could possibly be allowed to count as evidence against the pattern. Nishida was undeterred by such question up to his last essay in which he confirmed his position by stating that the "coincidence" of the opposites worked in inverse proportionality: the greater the distance between the opposites, the more intimately the unity they formed.

Further suspicions are aroused by asking whether Nishida in fact overcame the subject-object dualism as successfully as he thought he had. Rather than break down the logic of dualistic thinking, which would entail a challenge to the universal applicability of binary opposition itself, he directed attention again and again to a greater whole in which the opposites were distinct but not separate. And by leaving them as absolute opposites united on a field or "locus" of consciousness, he in fact elevated the subject of consciousness to a privileged position above the rest of the world. The problem, once again, is not that he accepted "consciousness as the measure of all things," but that he left the assumption tacit.

Be that as it may, Cusanus, to whom Nishida scholars like to refer, actually had a quite different idea of the *coincidence of opposites,* one which, as Ernst Cassirer suggested, separates him from the Middle Ages and places him at the brink of modern philosophy. Cusanus's idea was to reintroduce the idea of the "actual infinite" that Aristotle had dismissed, and he does this by seeing all contradiction as rooted in a non-contradiction of God—" the simplicity before any roots, before the principles of being and not-being."[16] Hence, contradictions in the world are not absolute but coincide precisely because they fall on a common spectrum grounded in that which is infinite. Opposites are always related to each other as "more or less" participating in that ground; opposition is not absolute but relative to its place on the continuum. The truth of the infinite appears in the finite world as an infinite search, a "tendency to the absolute infinite." This recognition of a finite world with an infinite drive is close to the way Nishida combines finitude and infinity, though he appears not to have noticed it.

It is no coincidence that both Tanabe and Nishitani neglected to carry on Nishida's "identity of absolute contradictories." It is not just that they left him his own jargon, but they each took a different direction—Tanabe in the direction of an absolute mediation in the concrete, specific world, Nishitani in the direction of a logic of *soku* (affirmation-in-negation) at work in the structure of human awareness. At least indirectly this suggests other choices that Nishida himself may have considered. In any case, for his idea of a dialectical universal to reach its local conclusion, it may have to let go on the idea of simple absolute opposition, even in the revised sense that Cusanus gives it. The ordinary historical

16. See his *De Deo abscondito.*

world of experience, where things relate to one another and awareness of these relations is achieved, is never a world of simple opposition between *two* opposites. Things "take place" through a constellation of numerous conditions. The reality is closer to what Rickert suggested as a "unity of the manifold" than to a "unity of the one and the other." In Whitehead's words, everything that is, is an event that occurs as a "concrescence" of forces; each point in time and space is a meeting point of a manifold of vectors. The determination of the world, even if seen as the self-determination of an infinite absolute, cannot simply gloss over this conditioning or dismiss it as secondary and at the same time claim to be talking about the real world. For Nishida's philosophy to approach the world more closely, it would seem that a way has to be found to dissolve the marriage between the logic of locus and the identity of a single pair of contradictories.

EXPERIENCE PURE AND IMPURE

The stimulus for Nishida's notion of pure experience, the first pivot of his philosophical thought, as he himself suggested, was William James. In fact, James's idea of pure experience is nether "pure" nor is it "experience" in Nishida's sense of those terms. Here again we see what I am calling Nishida's medieval bent at work, transforming a phrase that signaled radical pluralism, confusion, and objective factuality for James, into an idea of unity, harmony, and private intuition.

From the very start Nishida's idea of pure experience was intended as a "unifying principle" for consciousness. In much the same way that our skin provides a boundary to distinguish one individual body from another, individual consciousnesses need something to distinguish them one from another. The "identity" of a particular consciousness cannot lie in the mere physical encasement of the brain in a cranial cavity, because one cannot speak of consciousness except as a form of interaction with the world. By its nature, consciousness overflows the skin. Nishida rejected the idea of the individual body as a mere receptor of sense data that are then processed by the consciousness mind. This way of thinking did not get to the original state of the interaction of mind and world, or what he called "pure experience." The subject-object distinction was an idea imposed on a more basic, *pure* event of interaction.

So much for its purity. By naming it *experience*, Nishida thought he had also set himself on the firmest of "empirical" footings. Whereas ordinary empiricism focused on empirical data, Nishida reached back to an earlier stage of consciousness. He rejected the suggestion that his "experience" was a form of "psychologism,"[17] that is, it was no mere private, subjective form of self-introspection. At the same time he was not prepared to take a position similar to the

17. See the preface to the 1936 edition of *An Inquiry into the Good* (Nishida 1990, p. xxxi).

phenomenologists and call it "objective." He wanted pure experience to take the place of Hegel's mind as the principle of reality itself, and yet the only access to pure experience was through individual consciousness. The only conclusion one can reach is this: as long as Nishida used the term "pure experience," he did not ask the kinds of questions that would establish his position vis-à-vis the critical questions raised by the various positions he was rejecting. It was enough for him to have cracked through the subject-object distinction. As his thought developed, he let the idea of pure experience and these accompanying questions fall by the wayside, focusing instead on the nature of the interaction of consciousness and the world.

In any case, Nishida's "pure experience" is as distant from the thinking of James as the Middle Ages are. Nishida insisted that the drive to seek a single principle of unity in reality prior to the emergence of the notion of subjectivity is a matter of "empirical fact." He distinguished it from the "arbitrary assumption" of Francis Bacon that a subject can intuit objects in the world (NISHIDA 1990, p. 39). But in fact, what Bacon meant by *experimentare*—the experience of the intuiting individual—is much closer to Nishida than either of them are to the idea of publicly verifiable fact. In the end, it is the testimony of the experiencer that establishes fact, not the convergence of the results of a community of experiencers based on agreed methods of observation. Any logic based on such experience is beyond any such controls, which is precisely what Husserl (whom Nishida accused of turning intuition into "pure description," NKZ 1: 366) calls "psychologism." Bluntly put, one is asked to *apply* Nishida's category of pure experience to one's own intuitions of reality, but here again, there is nothing that could possibly count against the applicability.

There is no need to labor the point that this is centuries removed from the radical empiricism of William James. Like the medievals before him, Nishida sought the height of experience in a unity of consciousness in which the individual was drawn out of the world of the many and united with the One. The intuition of such a unity was not simply a loss of subjectivity but touched on the ultimate nature of reality itself. For James, what made experience *pure* was that it was irremediably *impure* and not subservient to the clean-cut expectations of the categorizing mind. What made it *experience* was not the discovery within consciousness of the same principle of unity that governed reality, but a stepping into the flowing stream of a changing, impermanent, radically plural world. For James, "there is no place you can stand from where the universe looks to be one," and no amount of intuition can override that confirmation of a plural world. Where Nishida stood to see that oneness was clearly, for James, no more than an "arbitrary assumption."

The intuition of unity that Nishida sought in Cusanus, Eckhart, and Boehme may have been lacking in modern German philosophy as he read it. But it was not the same desire for "the more" that James admired in the mystics' drive for

unity with the divine. To counter the challenge implicit in the very texts Nishida was reading at the time he borrowed the term "pure experience," Nishida's philosophy would have to examine the "intuitive" leap in his logic from a unity of consciousness to a unity of reality.

KNOWLEDGE PRIVATE AND COMMUNAL

Knowledge, for Nishida, could only be grounded on the intuition of universal principles, and the expansion of knowledge, on the observance of how these principles take concrete form in the world. The surest knowledge was philosophical knowledge, and the height of philosophical knowledge was self-awareness. Where self-awareness was lacking, understanding was incomplete. All other knowledge—scientific, technical, or artistic—was derivative and conventional. Despite the starting point in experience, abandoned once it has yielded its intuition of unity, the logic of Nishida's approach is deductive in nature.

The most obvious problem with this sort of philosophical vision is that it has a difficult time distinguishing one event in history from another except as particular manifestations of a universal. Since no possible event in history could ever break that ultimate unity, since no particular could break free of the universal in terms of which it is determined, the obvious distinctions of time and space that allow us to observe history in the making and to remember the history of events gone by are reduced to abstract forms of opposites uniting with one another: past and future collapsed into an eternal Now, specific loci abstracted to manifold centers of the infinite, circumferenceless expanse of reality. Along with the forfeit of the distinctions that allow us to seek patterns in history goes a forfeit of the right to make moral statements regarding which events should be supported and which suppressed. Without some sense of a linear history under the control of conscience, *all* of history is located in the same moral environment. The only evil is the evil of failure to recognize this, the evil of bifurcating within consciousness what is originally unified. The concreteness of morality is removed from the sphere of individual virtue, decision, and discipline and elevated to the inexorable workings of the universal.

The problem goes back to the nature of knowledge. In medieval thought rational knowledge of the natural world was subject to revelation about a supernatural world, and the laws of nature were complemented by divine mandates. As a way of defining the limits of knowing and acting, such a mode of thought shackled the mind and heart with conventions beyond the reach of critical thinking. Modern philosophy broke those chains and obliged religion to seek its contributions to culture and history elsewhere. Even if this displacement of religion ultimately led to a fragmentation of life and a loss of a sense of unity, as Nishida, like Hegel before him, recognized, the insight is irreversible. Hegel replaced the dualism of a supreme being beyond the world of

becoming with a unified reality of mind, and from there sought to displace the dualism that Descartes and Kant had reinstated, at the same time insisting that history is a process whose meaning and direction can be deduced from the observance of human events.

Nishida never took this step. And if, unlike James and Bergson, he did not conceive that "the whole of things could have been much superior to what it is," neither did he subscribe to the Leibnizean idea that this is "the best of all possible worlds." He simply did not make the question part of his philosophical vision. And, at a much lower level of abstraction, this same indifference passed over to individual morality.

The reason for this may not lie so much in Nishida's preference for abstraction as in his identification of insight and experience with private consciousness. For all his attempts to transcend ego-centered, subjectivistic thinking, Nishida's thought remained centered on the "purity" of individual experience, uncontaminated by the thought-processes of others. Like the *speculum mentis* of the medievals, Nishida's consciousness was not determined by the consciousnesses of others or by anything like a *Zeitgeist.* At most it was seen as the self-determination of the world, which is simply another way of refusing to take the determinations of history seriously. For an intuition of the real to be true, it had to be free of all such influence, a harmonious interaction of reality with individual consciousness in which each reflects the other and nothing is lost or added.

Bergson, too, championed intuition as the supreme form of perception, and went so far as to ground the coldest data of science on such intuition. But there is a crucial difference: for Bergson the mind was shaped by the community of minds, and shaped so radically that no self-reflection would be possible without that community. Consciousness was social. Nishida was surely aware of this from his early reading of Bergson, but his own efforts to introduce anything like a socially-conditioned mind stopped short at the image of a single *I* facing a single *You* and discovering itself through the negation of itself in the other. As such, the idea of morality, and its connection with conventional thinking and social mores, blears the frontiers between the *ought* and the *is.* I am not persuaded that any rereading of his texts will clarify the matter. What is called for is a development of Nishida philosophy beyond the point that Nishida himself was able to take it.

Advancing Nishida Philosophy

It is time to return to the question of what all of this means for the future of Nishida's philosophy. To say that Nishida had a medieval bent is not the same as saying that his philosophy is fundamentally medieval. It is in fact unthinkable except in the twentieth century. But neither does this mean that the ideas

singled out above are merely incidental to his thought. They are so much a part of his thought that it may well be that the sorts of alternatives suggested above would only end up erasing its principal inspiration.

So we are left with a paradox, though not an uncommon one for any philosophy insofar as it carries with it tacitly vestiges of the past inconsistent with its professed worldview. Obviously Nishida is using resources and asking questions that place him in the twentieth century where a medieval would have been completely lost, and yet he is answering those questions and interpreting his resources with certain medieval formulas that seem to have escaped sufficient critical attention.

It should be clear that, at least in the four areas indicated, I consider Nishida's medieval bent a disability for the advance of his thought. This is so not merely because there are better alternatives, but also because that medieval bent isolated him from history, leaving him so free to juggle his abstractions that throughout the latter sections of his final essay he was able to accuse others of being abstract while asserting that he himself stood firmly rooted in the concrete. But the still greater disability is the one inflicted by those students of Nishida who safeguard his *system* at the cost of forfeiting the spirit of inquiry and the adventure that drove him.

Confronting Nishida's medieval bent may help preserve something of what was lost from the mystical tradition. On this point his initial instincts seem to me solid and still valid. At the same time, questioning that bent may help us better to see Nishida's ideas as milestones on a road that still lies ahead rather than as cornerstones of an unmovable cathedral. Nishida's texts are buried once and for all in books that cannot be revised. For those content with seeing philosophy as the history of ideas, this is enough. But to take the further step of simply repeating what he thought, or applying it *tel quel* to problems of today, misses the adventure and risks making a debility of what was in fact Nishida's greatest strength: his constant self-questioning. Nishida philosophy is different from the study of what Nishida wrote. Nishida developed by reading, borrowing, altering, and discarding. Up to his last essay, he rarely stepped into the same river of thought twice. Why should his essays become sacred texts when Nishida philosophy is so much more exiting than Nishida exegesis? Why should placing Nishida on the autopsy table be more faithful to his philosophy than breathing new life into the inheritance he left behind?

For my part, I am convinced that there are certain anachronisms in Nishida's philosophy that can be cured—but not without liberating Nishida philosophy from the confines of Nishida's writings. I am not so presumptuous as to suggest what might have happened had he read different philosophers, or had he read some of them more carefully. The possibility of answering such questions died with Nishida. At the same time, I see no need simply to share his assumptions in order to acknowledge his legacy, especially since Nishida himself

could never have worked out his philosophy merely by understanding the thinkers who went before him and embracing their assumptions. The closer we look at the grind of the glasses Nishida wore when he read, the more we see something distinctively medieval about it. As critical as this was for his contribution to thought in the twentieth century, it needs to be advanced if his writings are to be read long into the twenty-first. If there is no place for such thinking in the circles of Nishida philosophy, then the future of that philosophy cannot rest there either.

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