

Confucian thought in early Nishida

The work of the Japanese philosopher Nishida Kitarō (1870-1945) has come to be seen as an attempt to create a system that incorporates both Western philosophy and insights gleaned from the Zen Buddhist tradition. However, this interpretation fails to account for the variety of influences that lead Nishida to formulate his unique insights. In his early work Nishida refers extensively to the Confucian tradition as well as to Buddhism, a fact which becomes especially important when we turn to Nishida's interpretation of key problems in ethics.

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THE JAPANESE PHILOSOPHERS who have come to be known as the 'Kyoto School' are perhaps best known for their attempt to integrate Zen Buddhism and Western philosophical perspectives. While this is undoubtedly an interesting and unique aspect of their thought, it is certainly not the only avenue which is worthy of exploration. An investigation of other influences on the work of Kyoto School thinkers reveals interesting angles which have been largely ignored in English language scholarship. Especially notable is the influence of Confucianism on the early work of the foremost member of the Kyoto School, Nishida Kitarō.

The idea of Kyoto School philosophy essentially evolved from the work of Nishida Kitarō (1870-1945). The publication of his first work, *An Inquiry into the Good* (1911),¹ has been heralded as the beginning of Modern Japanese philosophy. The main concept of the book, the idea of 'pure experience' (*junsui keiken*), is often seen as the pivotal idea in Nishida's entire philosophical project. The general consensus among scholars is that while the phrase 'pure experience' was a direct translation of a term from William James, the content of the idea is generally believed to have been drawn largely from Nishida's experience of Zen meditation during the period from the late 1890's to 1906. Thus, the perception of Kyoto School philosophy as the 'merging' of Zen ideas with Western philosophy seems to find validation in the very origins of the tradition.

However, even a quick glance at the index of *Inquiry* is enough to indicate that such an analysis is simplistic. In the text, Nishida refers frequently to the Confucian tradition. I will show shortly that this is not merely incidental; rather, in order to understand properly Nishida's much ignored ethical project we must investigate thoroughly the Confucian roots of *Inquiry*. However, for now we must ask why this lacuna regarding Confucianism developed within Nishida scholarship in the first place? The answer can be found in the explicitly Buddhist orientation of subsequent Kyoto School philosophy. The philosophies of figures such as Nishitani Keiji (1900-1990) and Masao Abe (1915-2006) rely heavily on themes from Buddhist thought. It is inevitable, then, that they themselves should re-read such themes back into Nishida at the expense of other possible sources of influence. Nishitani's biography of Nishida provides a prime example of this tendency, as he consistently attempts to interpret the Zen significance of Nishida's thought, even if there is evidence to the contrary.² Thus, it is no surprise that subsequent Western scholars were equally inclined to focus on the 'Zenist' aspects of Nishida's thought. Such an approach has had an interesting and perhaps far from desirable impact on the direction of Nishida scholarship.

For example, the tendency to see Zen as the overriding influence on Nishida has led scholars to emphasise the metaphysical aspects of Nishida's thought and, thus, to overlook its ethical importance. The idea which 'pure experience' expresses, that of experiencing the world as a 'oneness' without the traditional mediums of subject and object, causes numerous problems for those engaged in philosophical analysis. We may legitimately ask how such an idea can be the basis of a philosophical system when it must necessarily be expressed through the dualistic medium of language. We may also ask whether such a 'oneness' is desirable at all, given that dualism is central to much of our

Above inset left to right: Wang-Yang Ming (1472-1529), Nishida Kitarō (1870-1945) and Confucius (551-479BC).

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reasoning, especially with regard to ethical issues, where distinguishing good from evil is the central question. With a concept such as 'pure experience' at its core, what happens to Nishida's moral philosophy? It seems we are left with a view of Nishida as a thinker who prefers abstract metaphysical reasoning to the practicalities of everyday ethical concerns. It is exactly such an accusation which is often levelled in the direction of Nishida by those who point to his culpability during the war period. The focus on 'pure experience' as a metaphysical or meditative experience of the world tends to reinforce the perception of dangerously abstract and antinomian 'ivory tower' philosophising, which is both out of touch with the real world and dangerously open to manipulation.

Tracing the Confucian influence on Nishida's early work is not intended simply to satisfy academic curiosity; nor is it an attempt to suggest that somehow Confucianism is more 'important' in Nishida than the Zen Buddhist influence. Both traditions, among others, played a role in the development of Nishida's thinking. However, the balance in favour of a Buddhist interpretation needs to be redressed somewhat in light of the ethical perspective Nishida expresses in *Inquiry*, a perspective which is often ignored in the rush to interpret 'pure experience' as a form of Zen experience. Just as with the Buddhist interpretation, we can look towards Nishida's biography for evidence of the Confucian influence on his thought.³ We see a thinker clearly knowledgeable about this tradition, in particular the work of Wang-Yang Ming (1472-1529). Nishida seems to have been fascinated by one doctrine in particular, that of the 'Unity of Knowledge and Action' (Chn. *chih hsing hoi*, Jpn. *chigyōdōitsu*),⁴ which suggests that one cannot have purely theoretical knowledge, that in fact once one knows something, this knowledge will inevitably manifest itself in action. Bridging the gap between theoretical and practical knowledge was, for Nishida, the key to overcoming the ethical dilemmas which had plagued Western philosophy for centuries.

In *Inquiry*, Nishida would re-formulate Wang's insight as 'Conduct' (*kōi*). 'Conduct' can best be interpreted as 'pure experience' manifest as action. An example of what 'Conduct' means in real terms is provided by Nishida in the last chapter of *Inquiry* entitled 'Knowledge and Love', which was an earlier essay appended to the text. Here Nishida refers to the famous story from *Mencius* 2A:6 about the child about to fall into the well and the fact that anybody witnessing this action would act instinctively to save the child (*Inquiry* p.174/ Jpn. p.244). For Nishida, this is how 'pure experience' becomes manifest as 'Conduct' in the ethical sphere. In *Inquiry*, one of Nishida's key criticisms of what he calls 'Rational Theories' of ethics in Western philosophy is the idea that somehow one can be in possession of an abstract idea of 'the good', that one can 'know' an ethical truth solely via the intellect. For Nishida, following in the footsteps of Wang, such knowledge is impossible. The fact that there must be a concurrent manifestation of knowledge as action is the key, which Nishida felt, distinguished his ethics from thinkers in the Western tradition, such as Kant and T.H. Green. If one is in possession of such knowledge of 'the good', there would be no doubt, since ethical action, such as saving the boy from the well, would result. This stance also has implications from an epistemological perspective, as it rebukes the idea of ethical knowledge

as a purely private issue; rather, any ethical knowledge must inevitably become manifest as a public act, which is open to scrutiny and criticism. Such a stance is in direct contrast to what happens when we interpret Nishida's understanding of 'pure experience' as a Buddhist idea. With such an interpretation, the very private nature of the experience results in the impossibility of proving its veracity in the public sphere, leaving any recourse to 'pure experience' as an explanatory concept open to objections from the fallacy of the 'argument from authority'. One cannot claim universal truth for a concept on the sole basis of the authority of one's own experience of the said concept. There has to be a means to provide proof to a wider community, otherwise such claims from experience become authoritarian assertions. Nishida's idea of 'Conduct' as the manifestation of 'pure experience', drawn from the Confucian tradition, takes the concept beyond the purely personal, and into the public, ethical sphere.

While I have focused on the influence of Confucianism on the early Nishida, it is clear that this particular influence waned as Nishida's career progressed. Nonetheless, 'pure experience' remained key to much of Nishida's subsequent philosophical development, despite metamorphosing into numerous different guises. While there is no agreed manner of dividing Nishida's philosophical thought into 'phases', it seems fair to suggest that the idea of 'pure experience' becomes less a psychological or metaphysical concept as Nishida's thought develops. He seems to want to interpret 'pure experience' as a kind of logical concept, which can somehow transcend the subject-object dualism which is inherent in language. This leads to a distinctly 'Zen' undercurrent in many of his later works, culminating in the explicitly Buddhist orientation of his last published texts.⁵ To my mind, it is a shame that Nishida's thought did not continue to move in the direction of the ethical issues highlighted in *Inquiry*. The suggestion of an inter-subjective practical ethics, which functions beyond the duality of subject and object, and indeed of good and evil, is a fascinating prospect, the possibility of which is enough to justify further investigation of the significance of Nishida's ethics.

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References

1. See Nishida, Kitarō. 1990. *An Inquiry Into the Good*, trans. Abe, Masao and Christopher Ives. For the Japanese version see Nishida, Kitarō. 2006. *Zen no kenkyū*. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten.
2. Nishitani, Keiji. 1991. *Nishida Kitarō, Yamamoto Seisaku and James Heisig*, trans., Berkeley: University of California Press. See for example p.25.
3. See Wu, Guanghui. 2000. 'Nishida tetsugaku no tōyōteki seikaku (ōyōmeigaku juyū chūshin ni)', *Nihon no tetsugaku*, No.1:11, pp.76-89.
4. Nishida refers to Wang's idea of the 'Unity of Knowledge and Action' in *Inquiry* p.91 (Jpn.p. 132).
5. See Nishida, Kitarō. 1987. *Last Writings: Nothingness and the Religious Worldview*, trans. Dilworth, David A., Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.