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THE VARIETIES OF PURE EXPERIENCE: WILLIAM JAMES AND KITARO NISHIDA ON CONSCIOUSNESS AND EMBODIMENT

The Varieties of Pure Experience: William James and Kitaro Nishida on Consciousness and Embodiment

Joel W. Krueger

1. Introduction

The notion of "pure experience" is one of the most intriguing and simultaneously perplexing features of William James's writings. There seems to be little consensus in the secondary literature as to how to understand this notion, and precisely what function it serves within the overall structure of James's thought. Yet James himself regards this idea as the cornerstone of his radical empiricism. And the latter, James felt, was his unique contribution to the history of philosophy; he believed that philosophy "was on the eve of a considerable rearrangement" when his essay "A World of Pure Experience" was first published in 1904. While Western philosophy is still perhaps awaiting this "considerable rearrangement," James's notion of pure experience was quickly appropriated by another thinker who in fact did inaugurate a considerable rearrangement of his own intellectual tradition: the Japanese philosopher Kitaro Nishida (1870—1945), the founder and most important figure of the Kyoto School of modern Japanese philosophy. 1

Kitaro Nishida is widely recognized as Japan's foremost modern philosopher. His earliest major work, *An Inquiry into the Good* (1911), is generally considered to be the founding statement of the Kyoto School of modern Japanese philosophy. Other prominent Kyoto School figures, including Hajime Tanabe (1885–1962), Keiji Nishitani (1900–1990), and Masao Abe (1915–), each acknowledged the profound influence of Nishida's work on their own intellectual development. Pluralistic in his outlook and comparative in his methodology, Nishida was throughout his life deeply influenced by a number of western thinkers and religious figures (a trait shared by most other prominent Kyoto School figures). For instance, Nishida speaks favorably of Augustine, Kant, Hegel and Bergson, and concedes that these Western thinkers, among others, had a hand in shaping his thought. 2

But it was with James's formulation of pure experience that Nishida first believed that he had found a conceptual apparatus upon which he could ground the characteristic themes and concerns that have since been designated "Nishida Philosophy." Additionally, Nishida felt that James's idea of pure experience was able to preserve some of the more important features of Buddhist thought that Nishida looked to incorporate into his own system. Though he was only to practice Zen meditation for a relatively short 3 time, the distinctively Zen concern with cultivating an intuitive, pre-reflective insight into the nature of reality and experience was conjoined, in Nishida, with the Western emphasis on logic and argumentative rigor in a somewhat unlikely alliance. Nishida's life-long project was thus to wed the immediacy of experience as lived (what he termed "concrete knowledge") with a more formal-rational analysis of the structures of lived experience, an analysis utilizing the concepts and categories of the western philosophical tradition as Nishida understood it. Very simply, Nishida in this way believed that he was attempting to synthesize the philosophical worlds of east and west into a new form of inquiry that would prove mutually enriching to both traditions. And like James, then, Nishida's understanding of pure experience came to occupy the center of his entire life's work. It did so despite the fact that his later writings offer a somewhat reformulated and expanded version of pure experience that is meant to move beyond the psychologistic overtones that Nishida came to feel infected his earliest writings.[1] Yet an understanding of the place and import of his initial formulation of pure experience is critical if one hopes to grasp the overall thrust of Nishida's thinking (as well as the larger philosophical concerns of the Kyoto School considered as a unified movement). Moreover, James's particular understanding of pure experience and its function within his thought is sharpened when contrasted with the distinctive nuances of Nishida's own development of the idea. Thus a comparative analysis is warranted.

In this essay, I develop several points of convergence in the notion of "pure experience" as formulated by James and Nishida. I begin with a brief consideration of James's formulation of "pure experience." I then move to an analysis of James and Nishida on the bodily self. I argue that both men offer similar models of selfhood and embodiment that challenge classical substantialist conceptions of the self, as well as the mind-body dualism generated by these substantialist models. Furthermore, I argue that their respective analyses of embodiment are meant to throw into high relief the intellectualist prejudices of western epistemology: that is, the persistent tendency to assume the human beings are first and foremost cognitive subjects. James and Nishida both offer a radically reconfigured picture of human reality, one which stresses not only the embodied character of our being-in-the-world but furthermore the volitional-affective character—in short, our *active* character—that is in fact our fundamental mode of existence. I argue that James and Nishida similarly contend that it is this embodied-active character that actually generates anterior cognitive structures. Put otherwise, body both precedes and shapes thought. This claim then leads both thinkers to search for an ontologically primordial dimension of experience intended to undercut traditional metaphysical dualism: hence, the centrality of pure experience within their respective systems. Finally, I conclude by considering a number of important ways in which Nishida's utilization of pure experience extends beyond that of James, in that it grounds both his analysis of religious experience and his ethics. 4

2. James on Pure Experience

The starting point of James's thought is a deeply (though not exclusively) empirical concern. His work as a whole is founded upon a consideration of concrete experience: the world as experienced by an embodied, embedded, and acting agent. Explicating the lived structures that constitute our uniquely human way of being in the world, James insists, is the key to understanding the antecedent categorizations, conceptualizations, and other intellectual ways of organizing the world that are founded upon these experiential structures, and which emerge through our action within the world. These intellectual structures ultimately reflect the practical concerns of human beings as they simultaneously shape and are shaped by the world they inhabit and act within. His "concrete analysis," as he terms it, thus provides the methodological trajectory of his philosophical considerations. James writes that "concreteness as radical as ours is not so obvious. The whole originality of pragmatism, the whole point of it, is its use of the concrete way of thinking."[2] And therefore all philosophical reflection, as an intellectual movement away from a more concrete analysis into abstract conceptual analysis, invariably must return "…back once again to the *same practical common-sense* of our starting point, the pre-philosophic attitude with which we originally confront the visible world" if it is to remain faithful to our 5 lived experience.[3] It is in concrete experience that the world as given, within the "aboriginal flow of feeling" that is the "much-at-onceness" of pre-conceptual phenomenal experience, that we discern the deeper features of reality—such as cause, continuity, self, substance, activity, time, novelty, and freedom.[4] This "pre-philosophic" attitude through which we initially face the world is captured in James's development of the concept of "pure experience" as the foundation of his radical empiricism.

James's brand of radical empiricism therefore looks to ground his empirical philosophy on the raw material of experience as given. Of this methodological principle he writes: "The postulate is that the only things that shall be debatable among philosophers shall be things definable in terms drawn from experience."[5] With his distinctive notion of pure experience, James looked to probe what he perceived to be the underlying experiential unity behind language and reflective or conceptual thought. Mirroring a basic Zen Buddhist presupposition that Nishida will later utilize for his own ends, James argued that conceptual analysis could never provide an exhaustive account of human experience in its phenomenal richness. And like Nishida and Zen, we can pinpoint a suspicion of concepts and conceptual analysis that underwrites James's formulation of pure experience. This suspicion led some contemporary critics to dismiss his claims on this point as endorsing a kind of undisciplined irrationalism and has contributed to a lingering caricature of James as anti-logical.[6] 6

Why the suspicion of concepts in James? An analysis of this feature of James's thought will prepare us for this tendency as we find it in Zen and developed in Nishida, discussed below. However, I cannot do justice to James's important position on this point within the confines of the present paper's concerns. Therefore I will limit my discussion to a few salient quotes and a bit of analysis. To begin simply, James was suspicious of the idea that conceptual or propositional thought functions as the primitive—and thus irreducible—interface between self and world. On this conceptualist or "intellectualist" line, as James refers to it, all thinking and experience involves concepts. No concepts, no experience. James instead argues that the phenomenal content of embodied experience *as experienced* outstrips our capacity to conceptually or linguistically articulate it. In other words, James insists that many of our basic experiences harbor *non-conceptual content*. That is, many of our experiences have a rich phenomenal content that is too fine-grained and sensuously detailed to lend itself to an exhaustive conceptual analysis.[7] For example, we can have visual experiences of colors and shapes of things for which we lack the relevant concepts (a previously unfamiliar shade of magenta or a chiliagon). And this ability holds for other sensory modalities as well. For our ability to describe or report a wide-range of tastes and smells lags far behind our capacity to actually *have an experience of* a nearly infinite spectrum of tastes and smells. In other words, the deliverances of our senses continually run ahead of both our descriptive vocabularies as well as our conceptual abilities. Though James does not address the notion of non-conceptual content as explicitly as many contemporary philosophers of mind—and furthermore, it's not clear that he's entirely consistent on this point, as I discuss below—James does continually insist that there is a truth to our concrete experience of reality that conceptual analysis and the formal truths of logic cannot explicate. Thus James is moved to write the following passage, which (not surprisingly) caused considerable consternation among many of his contemporary commentators: 7

> *I have finally found myself compelled to* give up the logic, *fairly, squarely, and irrevocably. It has an imperishable use in human life, but that use is not to make us theoretically acquainted with the essential nature of reality. Reality, life, expedience, concreteness, immediacy, use what words you will, exceeds our logic, overflows and surrounds it.*[8]

However, to understand James's basic contention here, it is important to note that he does not dismiss 8 the instrumental utility of concepts. (This point is one which a number of his critics failed to see). And James is certainly not suggesting that we disregard the formal truths of logic altogether, of course. Rather, his insistence that logic can be "given up" is an insistence that the problem at stake is not with concepts and logical truths *per se*, but rather with the way that philosophers (especially, once again, those endorsing an "intellectualist" view) habitually *relate* to conceptual and/or logical analysis. James claims that concepts are merely "map[s] which the mind frames out,"[9] and which enable us to organize and cope with a particular aspect of reality making up the environment(s) with which we are concerned. He says elsewhere that "the only meaning of essences is teleological, and that classification and conceptions purely teleological weapons of the mind"[10]—retrospective reconstructions of the portion of reality that demands our attention at any given moment. In this way, concepts have a clear instrumental necessity. They are invaluable in both organizing our experiences as well as enabling us to report, share, and discuss our experiences with other language users. But concepts, James insists, do *not* capture the irreducible essence of that which they purport to describe. There is always another aspect under which a thing can present itself, another way that a thing can be investigated and categorized. Again, concepts pick out whatever properties of a thing that "is so *important for my interests* that in comparison with it I may neglect the rest."[11] In this way, concepts "characterize *us* more than they characterize the thing."[12]

Problems arise, however, when the structures of our conceptual "maps" are thought to provide an isomorphic blueprint of the inner structure of reality itself. In Zen parlance, this presumption of isomorphism constitutes a "clinging" to thoughts and concepts. As long as we recognize the instrumental utility of concepts, which indicates both their necessity for human life and communication, as well as their intrinsic limitation when it comes to delivering over the reality of a life as experienced that forever exceeds comprehensive articulation, we can use them effectively. But James insists that when logic and concepts (both of which are a "static incomplete abstraction"[13] of a more dynamic reality feeding our phenomenal experience) are taken to be a literal reflection of reality, our intelligence becomes distorted. The "static incomplete abstraction" is mistaken for the real, and the vibrancy of phenomenal experience is crystallized into static categories that fail to do justice to its lived richness. Thus James urges that "our intelligence cannot wall itself up alive" in logic and conceptual analysis, but must instead "at any cost keep on speaking terms with the universe that engendered it."[14] This universe is the universe of pure experience. 9

In this way, then, James was ultimately concerned with a holistic appraisal of self and nature—including, it must be noted, a sensitive consideration of the *felt sense* of life in its perpetual unraveling—that emerges from the center of a life creatively engaged in everyday living. Rather than begin a separate investigation of self *and* nature, a dichotomy presupposed by his "intellectualist" opponents, James looked instead to inaugurate a new brand of philosophy that had, as its goal, a harmonious integration of self *in* nature. This consideration included the inarticulate (or again, non-conceptual) dimensions of our lived existence that continually defy purely logical or conceptual analysis. This feature was to be the cornerstone of his self-initiated "considerable rearrangement" of the methods and aims of philosophy as classically conceived. Moreover, it is an essential feature of his philosophy that sets him very much at odds with the more austere, purely epistemological characteristics of modern philosophical preoccupations.[15] This pursuit of concreteness and immediacy led James to begin his investigations with he termed "pure experience": reality understood as "a that, an Absolute, a 'pure' experience on an enormous scale, undifferentiated and undifferentiable into thought and thing."[16] 10

Pure experience for James therefore grounds any phenomenology of human experience. According to James, pure experience is the non-conceptual givenness of the aboriginal field of the immediate, a phenomenal field prior to the interpretive structures (and concomitantly, subject-object bifurcations or conceptual discriminations) that we subsequently impose upon it. Pure experience is prior to the reflexive thematizing of the cogito in language and thought. To use a Zen expression, pure experience is a pure *seeing*. It sees the world but does not thematize it. Nor does it 11 organize it by employing various "teleological weapons of the mind." Rather, it simply bears mute witness to the world in all its "blooming, buzzing confusion." Refining this rather vague idea somewhat, James offers the operative thesis of his "principle of pure experience" when he says that

> *My thesis is that if we start with the supposition that there is only one primal stuff or material in the world, a stuff of which everything is composed, and if we call that stuff "pure experience," then knowing can easily be explained as a particular sort of relation towards one another into which portions of pure experience may enter.*[17]

James thus looked to locate a primordial experiential realm that undercut the dichotomized metaphysical and epistemological poles of both subjectivity and objectivity. His "pure experience" was in part a solution to the immanence/ transcendence paradox this dichotomy engenders. The intellectualist project of trying to reduce the objective world to categorical distinctions, or a purely conceptual analysis, ultimately failed due to the inability of human categories to adequately capture the richness and pluralistic vivacity of how things are, and how they are experienced in the phenomenality of their concrete becoming. Conversely, the empiricist attempt to reduce the subjective world to the objective world exhibited a kind of hermeneutic insensitivity, in that it failed to adequately concede the inescapable presence of *mediation* within our experience of the world, and the *perspectival* nature of this experience: the fact that our understanding is filtered through the contingencies of differing interpretive frameworks, conceptual filters as finite structures of human subjectivity (such as categories of language, history, culture, art, etc.) By locating his starting point within the realm of pure experience, James found a point of departure prior to the subject-object polarity that dualistic thinking posits as primary reality. And he does so without appealing to a trans-experiential principle of unification, transcendental "substances, intellectual categories and powers, or Selves" that belong "to different orders of truth and vitality altogether," and that are subsequently required to bind together the empiricist picture of discrete, atomistic sense-impressions.[18] 12

> *Out of this aboriginal sensible muchness attention carves out objects, which conception then names and identifies forever—in the sky "constellations," on the earth "beach," "sea," "cliff," bushes," "grass." Out of time we cut "days" and "nights," "summers" and "winters." We say* what *each part of the sensible continuum is, and all these abstracted* whats *are concepts.*[19]

For James, therefore, the phenomenal world is both ontologically and epistemologically prior to the objective world and the subjective world. James's analysis led him to a primordial level of unified experience that arises prior to the subject-object distinction, and provided the ground for an ontology that harbors no aperture for any brand of metaphysical dualism. In doing so, he furthermore safeguards the irreducible primacy of our nonconceptual phenomenal experience, which emerges from the sensory modalities of an agent immersed and acting within a living world. 13

3. Nishida and James on the Bodily Self

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Nishida quickly honed in on a feature of James's notion of pure experience that he felt resonated with Zen Buddhist overtones: namely, that it was a state of experience *prior to the subject-object distinction*, and prior to cognitive reflection or conceptual analysis. He reiterates James's formula when he states concisely that, "From the standpoint of pure experience, there is no such thing as an object divorced from the subject."[20] (Though James felt that the non-duality of subject and object was one of the essential features of pure experience, this aspect does not appear to have the same significance for him that it does for Nishida, as we'll see below). David Dilworth writes that this feature of pure experience, "'the unity of subject and object', becomes the central idea of Nishida's whole career, which reached its culmination in an explicit Zen ontology of the 'field of nothingness' beyond subject-object distinctions."[21] This feature of pure experience was attractive to Nishida because it spoke to the Zen aesthetic religiosity subtly guiding his thought at this stage—despite the fact that Nishida seems to have intentionally avoided any explicit references to Zen in his early works. Nonetheless, the possibility of actually *realizing* pure experience within a lived practice soon became the basis for Nishida's mature analysis of art, morality, and religion. For, consistent with the fundamental principles of Zen, Nishida's use of "pure" is normative. That is, he argues that experience is "richest in its own subjective immediacy, after it has been 'emptied' of the noise of meanings or the illusions of words and ideas."[22] According to Nishida, "Meanings and judgments are an abstracted part of the original experience, and compared with the original experience they are meager in content."[23] (Recall James's earlier remarks about concepts as "static abstractions").

Pure experience is thus normatively superior to any other mode of experience in which discriminations or distinctions of any kind have comprised the immediacy and spontaneity of an experience without dualistic bifurcations. And experience "purified" thusly discloses an intuitive truth about the inner nature of reality—an ontological and ethical truth that subsequently finds fruitful expression in the spheres of art, religion and morality. Yet the meaning found within these different disciplines ultimately originates, Nishida contends, from within the lived standpoint of pure experience. Nishida's earliest major work, *An Inquiry into the Good*, already reflects this contention. The major topics which comprise the book's structure—the question of Reality (Section Two), the Good (Section Three), and Religion (Section Four)—are all considered from the standpoint of pure experience (Section One). Thus it is that Masao Abe writes that, with *An Inquiry*, "Nishida has developed the system of pure experience."[24] 15

To understand Nishida's conception of pure experience, we must first begin with a consideration of his notion of the self. According to Nishida, the authentic or "true self" is only realized in pure experience: it is a mode of being-in-the-world in which ego-consciousness has been negated, and the 'emptied' self actively engages the world and others in a state of selfless openness and radical receptivity. However, any attempt at a concise summation of Nishida's notion of the self is a difficult enterprise. It exhibits a complex structure, and harbors a detailed analysis of the many modalities of human self-awareness.[25] Additionally, it grew even more complex as Nishida's thought progressed, and his earlier analysis of pure experience was subsumed by his later formulations of the self as the place (*basho*) of Absolute Nothingness. Yet despite these alterations, we can say that both James and Nishida offer conceptions of the self that bear a number of striking similarities. These similarities become even more pronounced with their respective analyses of the lived body. To first begin simply, however, it is apparent that, like James, Nishida articulates an anti-essentialist model of personhood. That is, he, too, formulates a model of selfhood without appealing to a fixed substratum or permanent "something"—whether it be a single, self-sufficient substance or a transcendental unifying ego—that is alleged to comprise the most essential aspect of human reality standing over against an external world. Instead, Nishida agrees with James that the self is best understood to be a *process* or *relational field*. 16

In developing his model of the self, Nishida displays a very Jamesian concern with the situatedness of the body within its living ambiance—an organic, continually-changing environment or context of action that shapes and is simultaneously shaped by the somatic engagement of the body as it moves within this 17 living ambiance. While these concerns are not as prominent in Nishida's earliest works, they later dominate his mature considerations of how to expand his initial analysis of pure experience to include its place within the development of the social-historical world and the temporal self. Both James and Nishida here anticipated a number of contemporary issues in philosophy of mind and consciousness research, in that each was deeply attuned to the critical role that embodiment and sensorimotor capacities play in both generating and shaping our cognitive structures and sense of self. James and Nishida each offer sophisticated phenomenological considerations of the subject-body and its generative function within the experience of selfhood. I will begin by looking at James on this point.

For James, the body is the organizing center and locus of continuity in all conscious experience. More simply, the body for James is the seat of personal identity. And the self for James is therefore not a fixed substance, but is rather constituted in the flux of temporal development and relational interaction of the lived body embedded within a particular environment or context of activity. Thus the self is not a pre-fabricated *thing* but rather a process of *becoming*. The self is continually in-the-making, constituted by a stream of acts of selective attention, which are themselves governed and shaped by the pragmatic interests and ends of human concerns as realized through our bodily engagements with our environment. James further suggests that this formative dimension of selfhood "exceeds either conceptualization or verbalization."[26] For "the return to life" at this primal level "can't come about by talking. It is an *act*."[27]This is not to suggest that he believes the sum total of states comprising our cognitive life to be ultimately reducible to our bodily-affective existence, however. Rather, James would argue that all conscious states contain within themselves an irreducible reference to the subject-body; and furthermore, that their meaning is determined by this reference. He writes in the *Principles* that any consideration of consciousness must not neglect 18

> …the body, and central adjustments*, which accompany the act of thinking, in the head.* These are the real nucleus of our personal identity…. *They are the kernel to which the* represented *parts of the Self are assimilated, accreted, and knit on.*[28]

Similarly, in a characteristically rich footnote to "The Experience of Activity," he writes: 19

> *The world experienced (otherwise called the 'field of consciousness') comes at all times with our body as its centre, centre of vision, centre of action, centre of interest. Where the body is is 'here'; when the body acts is 'now'; what the body touches is 'this'; all other things are 'there' and 'then' and 'that'. These words of emphasized position imply a systematization of things with reference to a focus of action and interest which lies in the body; and the systematization is now so instinctive (was it ever not so?) that no developed or active experience exists for us at all except in that ordered form…. The body is the storm centre, the origin of co-ordinates, the constant place of stress in all that experience-train. Everything circles round it, and is felt from its point of view.*[29]

James thus argues for a conception of the self that sees the body and mind as part of a fluid, integrated whole. The self is constituted through the relational interaction of body, mind, and its lived environment. 20

In a later work, Nishida also comes to see the body as the seat of personal identity. Like James, he emphasizes the non-conceptual character of pure experience—the subject-body understood as a non-cognitive circuit of engagement within its living ambiance or field of somaticity—and the generative function the subject-body fulfills in the structuring process of selfhood and personal identity. He terms this bodily immersion within a living ambiance the "dialectical" relation between self and world. Nishida suggests that it *reflection* (conceptual analysis) that introduces an existential bipolarity or distance between self and world. Reflection is always a retrospective reconstruction, through language and thought, of the purity and richness of preverbal bodily experience. Pure experience, however, is prior to this dualistic split. And the *acting body* is the point of interpenetration in which the self expresses itself *in action*, prior to thought. Thus by actively engaging the sociohistorical world, the bodily self simultaneously shapes and is shaped by the world of which it is a part. Subject and object distinctions are not applicable to this kind of "acting-intuition," as Nishida calls it, which unfolds on a preverbal plane of pure experience. Acting intuition is the experiential mode of non-dual engagement with the world. It is a selfless mode of action in which "*the world becomes the self's body*."[30] In short, it is pure experience realized as an existential modality. More will be said about Nishida's "acting-intuition" in a moment. 21

As part of their analysis of the body and experience, James and Nishida (anticipating some of the most distinctive themes in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's later work) both stress the basic *ambiguity* of the subject-body as the malleable locus of our embodied existence. If the sense of self is generated by the lived experience of the subject-body, both men contend, the "self" that arises from this stream of experience is therefore a self with exceedingly fluid boundaries. Nobuo Kazashi encapsulates this point quite nicely when he suggests that 22

> *The "ambiguity" in the sense of the indeterminacy or vagueness that permeates our existence in the world derives from the "ambiguity" of our embodied being in the sense of its irreducibility either to the transparency of self-consciousness or the inertia of matter.*[31]

For both James and Nishida, the self simply *is* the continual modulation between the expansive self-transcendence of consciousness-as-selective-interest, and the contraction of the self experienced as a corporeal body—a material entity over against other material entities. James says that "our *full* self is the whole field [of experience], with all those indefinitely radiating subconscious possibilities of increase that we can only feel without conceiving…."[32] The acting subject-body is the dialectical center of tension within this modulation, the exhalation and inhalation of the subject-body experienced both as seer and as seen, as motor of activity and as object within another individual's field of experience. James suggests that this dialectical tension testifies to the fundamental ambiguity of the subject-body. It betrays an ability of the experienced self to "treat it [self] as physical or non-physical according as we take it in the narrower or in the wider context, and conversely, of course … non-mental or as mental."[33] This fact leads James to conclude in the following sentence that "the body is the palmary instance of the ambiguous." And since the body is the seat of personal identity for James, we can conclude that the self is, too, "the palmary instance of the ambiguous." Similarly, Nishida writes that a human being is not merely a concept-generating cognitive being, but furthermore a being "of which there is no self unless there is a body," and "A body is that *which is seen* as well as *that which sees*." The embodied self therefore harbors a fundamental ambiguity as its being. The subject-object being of the self for Nishida generates the bipolar model of his notion of acting-intuition. As subject, the body actively engages its 23 environment; yet as object, it is the passive recipient of sensible intuitions pressed upon it by the environment that it in part creates and shapes. This active-passive circuit is the relational mode of our being-in-the-world and the basic structure of the embodied self.

It must be immediately noted, however, that the Jamesian and Nishidian self is not merely a rudderless oscillation between the two poles of self-as-subject and self-as-object, an anchorless *deus* lacking a corporeal *machina* to call its own. Rather, it is this self-as-oscillation that generates a living field of experience—what James terms the "field of consciousness," and what Nishida refers to as the "lived world"—at the center of which is the subject-body. The subject-body provides an experiential orientation, and serves as a center of action from which the subject-body penetrates (and is penetrated by) the living ambiance of its environment through its practical concerns and selective activities. James writes that the "objective nucleus" of every human being's experience is "his own body [which] is, it is true, a continuous percept."[34] He continues: "…and equally continuous as a percept (though we may be inattentive to it) is the material environment of that body, changing by gradual transition when the body moves."[35] Again, for James the self is constituted by the dialectical interaction of body, mind, and environment. The nodes of this relational circuit are what *collectively* generate our sense of self: an "ambiguous," fluid self whose boundaries are continually shifting and changing. 24

The dialectical nature of embodied existence is given a more extended treatment at Nishida's hands. According to Gereon Kopf, Nishida's mature work distinguishes three epistemic attitudes (thought, will, and intuition) that establish three interrelated worlds of experience around the pole of the subject-body: the *phenomenal world*, the *lived world*, and the *actual world*.[36] *The phenomenal world*, according to Nishida, and the epistemic attitude of *thought* that establishes it, is the realm of everyday "inauthentic" experience. It is the world experienced from within the static *cogito*: a world of dualistic separations between self and world, subject and object. And therefore it is *reflection* that "carves up" the undifferentiated plenum of pure experience and, as James would put it, contracts reality to a limited number of aspects selected to meet some pragmatic concern. Thought is what separates pure experience into functional fragments, objects for a consciousness-as-selective-interest. And Nishida says that reflection is thus a second-order experience "adulterated with some sort of thought," supporting the "addition of deliberative discrimina-tion." Thought establishes a binary structure within reality. Reflection "fixes" the self into a static *cogito*, or ego-self, as the enduring pole within the stream of experience. This is what pulls us out of the "quasi-chaos" of pure experience and introduces the existential separation between the self and a seemingly external world. 25

The *lived world* for Nishida is the phenomenological field of experience in which the hard mind-body/subject-object distinction is weakened (by being rendered *ambiguous*), and the active body is recognized as intimately linked both with the *cogito* as well as the "external" world in which it is embedded. If the static *cogito* of the phenomenal world confronted an external reality from the vantage point of the disembodied subject, the lived world is the experiential dimension in which the body is felt as the locus of an affective, somatic immersion within its living environment. It is in and through the body that the *cogito* injects itself into the world. The body is felt to be the instrumental expression of the *cogito* within its living ambiance, and thus their relation is felt to be one of unity and mutual interpenetration. The lived world arises from the active engagement of self and world. 26

Finally, the *actual world* is established by acting-intuition. Put simply, it is a non-dual field of pure experience in which mind-body/subject-object distinctions are not simply weakened but dissolved altogether. In practical action, the self assumes an experiential standpoint from which it engages the world immediately and pre-reflexively, prior to a reflective self-awareness that constitutes the conscious self *as* over against a world of objects. It denotes a state of knowing-by-*becoming*. Nishida gives some examples of this nondual state: "For instance, it is such occasions as a person's scaling a cliff, holding on for dear life, or a musician's playing a composition he has mastered," or as "when our mind, forgetting 27 both self and things, is lost in a sublime music, the entire world becomes a single melodious sound."[37] Acting-intuition, as an existential modality, is the experiential standpoint from which embody pure experience, according to Nishida.

4. Nishida on Realizing Pure Experience

James's and Nishida's respective considerations of the self and our bodily existence share a number of intriguing parallels. Yet with their analysis of pure experience, which is ultimately meant to ground their analysis of the bodily self, the two men begin to part ways. As mentioned above, perhaps the most significant difference between James's and Nishida's respective notions of pure experience is that, for the latter, pure experience is a state that can be experientially realized within a lived *praxis*. Conversely, James seems to view pure experience as essentially a limit-concept. Though "pure experience" is the name James affixes to "the immediate flux of life which furnishes the material to our later reflection with its conceptual categories"[38] —and thus remains still consistent with Nishida's formulation of pure experience as non-conceptual bodily experience—he then moves away from Nishida when he immediately announces that only an immature or malfunctioning consciousness can actually *have* a pure experience. That is, "only new-born babes, or men in semi-coma from sleep, drugs, illnesses, or blows, may be assumed to have an experience pure in the literal sense of a *that* which is not yet any definite *what*…."[39] James suggests that, for a properly functioning consciousness, the flux of experience always comes as *given*; given to an organizing consciousness that immediately fills a pure experience "with emphases … salient parts [that] become identified and fixed and abstracted" so that experience always arrives as already "shot through with adjectives and nouns and prepositions and conjunctions."[40] 28

Strictly speaking, then, we can never have an authentically "pure" experience anterior to the interpretive structures through which we engage the world. Experience for James always blossoms within a practical-thematic manifold, and unfolds as already encrusted with overlapping layers of meanings and pragmatic textures. Experience exhibits a teleological significance all the way down, it would seem. Thus it's not clear that James would follow contemporary philosophers who claim that a significant part of our common everyday perceptual experiences are in fact non-conceptual, or "pure" in Nishida and James's sense. But it's not clear that James is wholly consistent on this point, given earlier remarks (cited above) suggesting that experience, *as experienced*, harbors phenomenal content that cannot be completely linguistically or conceptually articulated. 29

If James ultimately believes that we cannot have a "pure experience," Nishida surely disagrees. For pure experience as *praxis*, as a state of awareness or an experiential mode of a deep ontological attunement—a mode of attunement "emptied" of all interpretive and discursive structures—will become the standpoint for genuine religious, moral, and aesthetic awakening. Pure experience is realized experientially as an existential modality of *intuition*. By "intuition," Nishida has in mind a kind of inspiration or creative capacity of the self to peer into the inner nature of reality and the (non-conceptual) relational structure that binds all things together in a primordial interdependence. It is a mode of awareness that constitutes "a higher cognitive faculty for attaining a correct conclusion without employing inferential judgments."[41] In short, it is an intuitive apprehension of the basic unity of all things: 30

The intellectual intuition is nothing more than a further enlargement and deepening of our state of pure experience. That is, it is a disclosure of a great unity in the process of a developing system of consciousness. That a scholar acquires a new insight, or a moralist a new motive, or an artist a new imagination, or a religious figure a new awakening, are all based upon a *disclosure of this kind of unity.*[42]

In fact, pure experience realized as an existential modality is equivalent to "a deep grasp of life," which "the sword of logic cannot penetrate … and desire cannot move."[43] It is therefore not merely a limit-concept but an experiential standpoint. And pure experience, once again, becomes a normative principle that can be embodied in certain practices. Nishida thus erects a hierarchy of experiential standpoints, the foundation of which is his formulation of pure experience. (It would seem that conceptual analysis, if not at the extreme *other* end of the experiential spectrum from pure experience, would be very close to it). The richness and vivacity of reality as it is in itself is only "known" through this kind of intuition: a non-conceptual bodily consciousness" realized within a felt unity of self and world. And the realization of this standpoint of pure experience is finally for Nishida the standpoint from which we realize an authentic and integrated human reality, an awareness which finds its fullest expression in moral, religious, and artistic practices. 31

The basic form of Nishida's development of pure experience, insofar as it is discussed in *An Inquiry into the Good*, is quite similar to James. Yet Nishida abruptly parts ways with James when he says that pure experience, realized as an existential standpoint, is equivalent to a kind of "true religious awakening." Nishida's disciple Keiji Nishitani, perhaps the most well-known Kyoto School figure in western circles, says that, "In essence, pure experience is something religious."[44] To understand why Nishida's pure experience is rendered with such profoundly religious overtones, we must understand his notion of Ultimate Reality, or what he calls absolute nothingness. Absolute nothingness is not a something apart from the dynamic of pure experience. Therefore Nishida's identity of pure experience and absolute nothingness compels him to afford the former a status James will not give it. In short, pure experience for Nishida is both the primordial foundation of consciousness *and* the ultimate ground of all reality. Pure experience, realized as an existential modality within lived *praxis*, becomes a non-dual union with the ultimate ground of reality—with absolute nothingness. Consciousness is thus prototypical of ontology, for Nishida, for "the self is the key to explaining the universe."[45] At the termination of the descent into the ground of consciousness, one reaches the ground of all reality. Pure experience is the exhaustively unitive state in which one unites with the Absolute. Nishida writes: 32

In the facts of direct experience, there is no opposition between subject and object and no distinction between mind and matter; matter in itself is mind and mind in itself is matter, and there is only one actuality … the unity of spirit and nature is not a unity of two types of systems—fundamentally they exist in one and the same unity.[46]

At times, Nishida does not hesitate to call pure experience (understood as the absolute ground of reality) God. Consciousness of the nondual unity of the interiority of the self and the ground of reality within pure experience is thus an experience of God: 33

As discussed before, though God is personal we cannot view God as identical with our subjective spirit. God should rather be compared to the state of pure experience in which there is no separation of subject and object and no distinction between the self and other things. This state is the alpha and omega of our spirit and the true face of reality.[47]

Awakening to pure experience—or an experience of God *qua* absolute nothingness—is therefore coextensive with a profound ethical awakening, according to Nishida. The ontological and ethical truths of Nishida's formulation of pure experience are therefore simply two sides of the same fundamental reality. When one has awakened to the ontological truth of pure experience, one has simultaneously realized a comprehensive ethical awakening. Nishida defines *love* as the deep union of subject and object: "To love something is to cast away the self and unite with that other."[48] And later, "When we are absorbed in something the self loves, for example, we are almost totally unconscious. We forget the self, and at this point an incomprehensible power beyond the self functions alone in all of its majesty…."[49] In the dissolution of the static ego-self that is realized in pure experience, the "emptied" self then enters into the deep self of everything else. It unites with the same ground of reality that grounds all other things. This intuitive experience discloses the fundamental circuit of interconnected relations that binds all things together at their foundation. And thus do we realize that, at our depths, we are essentially related to all other people and things. Pure experience for Nishida thus realizes the unity of being and value. 34

The *volitional* dimension of this discovery received the most attention in Nishida's later works. Following *An Inquiry into the Good*, Nishida's technical understanding of *acting-intuition*, discussed briefly above, and its relation to the "place" (*basho*) of absolute nothingness became the primary category for denoting the experiential dynamic through which embodied pure experience becomes realized in our relations with others, and expressed within artistic and religious practices. Nishida very quickly came to realize that the idealistic, voluntaristic tendencies of his early discussions of pure experience had failed to capture the dynamic *affective* aspect of pure experience considered as *praxis*. His more elaborate formulation of acting-intuition was meant to correct this deficiency, and to offer a more concrete explanation of how pure experience is realized within everyday existence practices. For pure experience was not simply a retreat into inner stillness. As a kind of aesthetic cultivation, the embodiment of pure experience was incomplete without an external expression in the realm of action and interpersonal relationships. Therefore pure experience, appropriated from James and reconfigured to meet Nishida's religious interests, realizes the unity of being and value—and it becomes the ultimate standpoint for human self-awakening and moral life. Whereas pure experience is the ground and starting point of human reality for James, it is rather for Nishida both the foundation as well as the terminal point of human development. 35

5. Conclusions

This essay has attempted to elucidate a central but difficult notion in the thought of two of the more creative and original thinkers of the last century. As discussed above, "pure experience" serves as the cornerstone of James and Nishida's respective ontologies. Consequently, both summarily reject any sort of dualistic rendering of the world that partitions off the contents of our mental experience from the concrete world of experience in which we embody and act out this content. Yet both thinkers equally reject a materialist view of reality. James and Nishida insist that the richness of our phenomenal life in its first-person immediacy cannot be reduced to an impersonal neural substrate, for instance, or some other wholly physicalist basis. Pure experience is therefore their attempt to secure a space for both the first-person ontology of consciousness as lived *as well as* the third-person ontology of the physical world in the greater structure of the real. It negotiates a "middle way" between the Scylla of dualism and the Charybdis of materialism. And it does so without lapsing into a phenomenalist or idealist denial of our thoroughly embodied, physical existence. Furthermore, the model of consciousness and embodiment that emerges from this ontology of pure experience is an attempt to preserve the truly "dialectical" (in Nishida's use of the term) relationship between self and word. Consciousness, for James and Nishida, is not a pre-given "thing" but rather an emergent process, shaped and fed by the body's agency: its action in 36 and interaction with its world of experience.

Finally, it is interesting to note that Nishida, given his Zen orientation, seems to have been attuned to the ethical possibilities of pure experience in a way that James was not prepared to see. For Nishida, pure experience can be cultivated in bodily practice and subsequently given aesthetic and ethical expression. Thus while Nishida expresses an obvious debt to James, his extension of pure experience, and particularly his vision of pure experience as a form transformative *praxis*, enriches James's discussion by introducing a practical dimension to the notion that James would likely have acknowledged as faithful to his larger pragmatic vision. 37

Southern Illinois University
jwkruege@siu.edu

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Notes

[1] Of this Nishida writes, in "Upon Resetting the Type": "As I look at it now, the standpoint of this book is that of consciousness, and it might be thought of as a kind of psychologism. Yet even if people criticize it as being too psychological, there is little I can do now." He continues, "I do think that what lay deep in my thought when I wrote it was not something that is merely psychological." This remark is quote by Masao Abe in the introduction to Nishida's *An Inquiry into the Good* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1990).

[2] James, *The Meaning of Truth* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975), pp. 115—116.

[3] James evidently approvingly marked this sentence of Shadworth Hodgson, in the latter's "Common-Sense Philosophies," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 1 (1888): 25. See Charlene Seigfried's *William James's Radical Reconstruction of Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), p. 205.

[4] James, *Some Problems of Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), pp. 53—54.

[5] James, *Pragmatism, and Four Essays from the Meaning of Truth*, ed. Ralph Barton Perry (New York: Meridian Books, 1955), p. 199.

[6] Critical reactions to James's perceived "anti-logical" stance are discussed in Ralph Barton Perry's *The Thought and Character of William James*, repr. (Nashville, Tenn.: Vanderbilt University Press, 1996).

[7] For several contemporary discussion of nonconceptual content in this vein, see Michael Tye, *Ten Problems of Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995), Christopher Peacocke, "Nonconceptual Content Defended," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 58 (1998): 381—388,

and York H. Gunther, ed., *Essays on Nonconceptual Content* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003).

[8] James, *A Pluralistic Universe* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977), pp. 96—97.

[9] James, *Some Problems of Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 43.

[10] James, *The Principles of Psychology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), vol. 2, p. 961.

[11] Ibid., p. 961.

[12] Ibid.

[13] James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, p. 94.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Seigfried, *William James's Radical Reconstruction of Philosophy*, p. 24.

[16] James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 66.

[17] Ibid., p. 40.

[18] Ibid., p. 45.

[19] James, *Some Problems of Philosophy*, p. 50.

[20] Nishida, *An Inquiry into the Good*, p. 23.

[21] David Dilworth, "The Initial Formulations of 'Pure Experience' in Nishida Kitaro and William James," *Monumenta Nipponica* 24 (1969): 93—111, at p. 97.

[22] Ibid., p. 98.

[23] Nishida, *An Inquiry into the Good*, p. 9.

[24] Ibid., p. xvii.

[25] For an in—depth analysis of Nishida's understanding of selfhood, see Gereon Kopf's excellent study *Beyond Personal Identity: Dogen, Nishida, and a Phenomeno-logy of No-Self* (Richmond, UK: Curzon Press, 2001).

[26] James, "The Continuity of Experience," in *The Writings of William James*, ed. John J. McDermott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), p. 297.

[27] Ibid., p.297.

[28] James, *The Principles of Psychology*, vol. 1, p. 341.

[29] James, "The Experience of Activity," in *The Writings of William James*, p. 284.

[30] Quoted in Nabuo Kazashi, "Bodily Logos," in *Merleau-Ponty, Interiority and Exteriority, Psychic Life and the World*, ed. Dortohea Olkowski and James Morley (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), p. 116.

[31] Kazashi, "Bodily Logos," p. 110.

[32] James, "The Continuity of Experience," in *Writings*, p. 296.

[33] James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, p. 153.

[34] Ibid., p. 65.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Gereon Kopf, "Temporality and Personal Identity in the Though of Nishida Kitaro," *Philosophy East and West* 52 (2002): 224—245, at p. 238.

[37] Quoted in Yasuo Yuasa, *The Body: Toward An Eastern Mind-Body Theory* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), p. 65.

[38] James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, p. 93.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Ibid., p. 94.

[41] Yasuo Yuasa, *The Body: Toward An Eastern Mind-Body Theory*, p. 66.

[42] Quoted in ibid, p. 66.

[43] Kitaro Nishida, *An Inquiry into the Good*, p. 34.

[44] Keiji Nishitani, *Nishida Kitaro*, trans. Yamamoto Seisaku and James W. Heisig (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 95.

[45] Kitaro Nishida, *An Inquiry into the Good*, p. 160.

[46] Ibid., p. 160—161.

[47] Ibid., p. 164.

[48] Ibid., p. 174.

[49] Ibid.