



Michiko Yusa, *Zen and Philosophy: An Intellectual Biography of Nishida Kitarō*

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THE MOST RECENT work of Michiko Yusa constitutes an exciting study of the life and work of Nishida Kitarō, the founder of the so-called Kyoto school and, arguably, the most creative philosopher of Japan in the twentieth century. It is based on the premise that a philosopher's work is situated in her/his life and successfully combines historiography with philosophical reflection.

Thus, *Zen and Philosophy* fills a glaring lacuna in the field of the Kyoto school studies, where English language accounts of Nishida's life have been limited to bits and pieces scattered in introductions, to translations and monographs, encyclopedia articles, and tributes to him by his students, such as the translation of Nishitani's Keiji's *Nishida Kitarō: The Person and his Thought*. The continually growing interest in and appreciation of the philosophical achievements of the Kyoto school in the fields of comparative philosophy of religion and interreligious, especially Buddhist-Christian, dialogue, is reflected in an increase in publications on the philosophies of Nishida and his students Tanabe Hajime and Nishitani Keiji as well as their inclusion in recent philosophy textbooks in the English language. This increase only exemplifies the need for such a work, especially when it is as carefully researched and crafted as the present one. The fascinating insights into the life of Nishida Kitarō Yusa presents illuminate the questions and experiences that drove Nishida to construct a philosophical system, and thus put a face on and breathe life into the man behind the often far too abstract thought system known as Nishida philosophy. I particularly appreciated Yusa's observation that Nishida developed his notion of "love," a key concept of his essays "Self-Love, Other-Love, and Dialectics" and "I and Thou," during his courtship of Yamada Koto, his second wife, and the first months of their marriage. In addition, Nishida wrote "The World as the

Dialectical Universal,” which contains the philosophical foundation of his later assertions of individual liberties against a totalitarian program in 1934 when the Japanese government increased repression of what was perceived as resistance to the ultranationalist ideology of the day. The present work also elucidates the complexity and intellectual vitality of Nishida’s Japan and the Kyoto School, which, unknown to quite a surprisingly large number of readers reliant solely on English-language publications, extended beyond the trinity of Nishida, Tanabe, and Nishitani.

In addition, the present work, like its earlier Japanese version by the same author, *Denki: Nishida Kitarō* 伝記—西田幾多郎 (Kyoto: Tōeisha, 1998), presents a wealth of material and new insights into the life of Nishida. Yusa’s 335-page biography, which contains pictures and heretofore untranslated essays, letters, and notes from Nishida’s diary, is supplemented with extensive glossaries, indices, and lists of source material. More importantly, the text combines an eminently readable narrative account of Nishida’s life with original investigative work that corrects mistakes, such as the dating of some of Nishida’s correspondence, philosophical essays that introduce the more central and complex of Nishida’s ideas with surprising lucidity, and an impassioned argument that Nishida resisted rather than supported the fascist outlook and militaristic project of the Japanese government prior to and during World War II. The image of Nishida Kitarō that emerges from the text is that of a man of integrity driven by an existential-spiritual quest who struggled with a string of personal tragedies, a family man who achieved highest success and admiration but by Yusa’s account was willing to trade it all for the welfare of his family and his own peace of mind, a man of acute insight who failed to grasp the “irrationalities” that drove his country to the brink of disaster.

While Yusa professes to “have been under the spell of the ‘Nishidan mystique’” since she first read his essay “Place” (xxii), this did not prevent her from remaining faithful to her sources and, as James HEISIG (2002) has already pointed out in his review of Yusa’s book, from writing in a style that is descriptive rather than axiological. The perspective she chooses deliberately is Nishida’s insofar as she relies, for the most part, on his letters, diary entries, and notes, even though she supplements them generously with archival material as well as notes and letters from his friends; her focus is on reconstructing Nishida’s inner journey and bringing to life his struggles and concerns. However, there are always two—or, if we follow Takahashi Satomi’s critique of Nishida’s “I and Thou,” an infinite amount of—sides to each story. In this spirit, Yusa does attempt to include a plethora of anecdotes to illustrate various aspects of Nishida’s life recounting, for example, the time when Nishida’s first wife, Kotomi, left him for four days during the early years of their marriage and their subsequent separation of three months; Nishitani’s account of a seemingly oblivious student who suffered the temper of Nishida; and the suffering of Nishida’s daughter Shizuko who was tied to her parents’ house due to a long and debilitating sickness. Yet, due to the focus of her book Yusa, almost inadvertently, falls back on Nishida’s interpretation of these events and adopts his stance.

A similar observation can be made with regards to Yusa's discussion of TAKAHASHI Satomi's critique of Nishida's *Inquiry Into the Good* (1973) and Nishida's political attitude towards the nationalism and militarism of the Japanese government during World War II. In short, in his essay "Facts and Meanings of the Phenomena of Consciousness: Reading an *Inquiry into the Good* by Mr. Nishida," Takahashi makes the claim that Nishida's standpoint is monistic. While I agree with Yusa that Nishida's notion of "pure experience" (*junsui keiken* 純粹經驗) cannot be called monistic insofar as Nishida explicitly rejects pantheism for its monistic tendencies and includes the principle of "differentiation" (*bunka* 分化) within "pure experience," I cannot share her disbelief that some (if not many) philosophers refuse to accept Nishida's non-dualism and rather follow Takahashi in asking how the notion of "pure experience" as "unifying activity" (*tōitsu sayō* 統一作用) allows "one [to] distinguish between truth and falsehood" (129). Nishida's emphasis on "unity" and his rejection of the difference between "unity" and "non-unity," which appears in an *Inquiry into the Good* but is stressed even more so in NISHIDA's lectures on "pure experience," where he declares the "identity...of the pure and the impure, the unity and the non-unity" (1988a, p. 191), make the questions of "how does one distinguish between truth and falsehood?" and, more poignantly, how does one distinguish between a true and a false interpretation of Nishida's philosophy, rather pressing ones. While I am convinced that there is an answer to this question—Nishida's suggestion that the difference between truth and falsehood lies in the varying standpoints philosophers choose seems to provide some clues to that effect—I also believe that non-dualism requires thorough elaboration beyond a mere collapse of the opposites; otherwise Nishida's non-dualism is, as Nobechi Tōyō remarks sarcastically, bound to become a "mishmash" rather than a dialectic of the "one-qua-many" (*ichi soku ta* 一即多). In his response to Takahashi, Nishida himself not only implied that his thought in *Inquiry into the Good* was "immature" and "not above criticism" in his response to Takahashi, but soon afterwards replaced the concept "pure experience" with a terminology he deemed more appropriate.

By the same token, while I find Yusa's argument that Nishida resented and resisted the nationalistic and militaristic ideologies that squashed academic freedom in the Japan of the 1930s and 1940s and led to violent colonial escapades and war rather compelling, I do not think it gives us permission to disregard the postwar Marxist criticism of Nishida too easily. First of all, while Nishida's private comments seem to clearly indicate his resistance to militaristic and nationalist policies, his public speeches and articles, though "carefully worded," were rather ambiguous. *Rude Awakenings* (HEISIG and MARALDO 1995) provides a good discussion of the issues involved in this debate. Second, there is always the possibility that, seen from a different perspective, Nishida's participation in government and military-sponsored events could be interpreted to indicate his support thereof, even though his intention was to make his voice of resistance heard. Third, it seems to be important to assert, as Kosaka Kunitsugu does, that one can find a variety of responses to nation-

alism and militarism among the representatives of the Kyoto school, ranging from the support of the war effort presented in the document “Japan and the Standpoint of World History” signed by Nishitani and others to Miki Kiyoshi’s defiance that resulted in his imprisonment and death. Fourth, and most important, even though retrospective armchair criticism is always easier than real-life choices that effect the present and future life one’s family as well as one’s former students and colleagues, as in Nishida’s case, the question as to when resistance becomes morally necessary is one that has to be at least considered, not in order to judge past decisions and philosophers, but, to beat a worn-out drum, so that we can learn from the past for present and future situations. The question of moral accountability, that is, “at what point does my silence (and my tax money) make me accountable for the actions of my government?” has to be asked not only by every citizen but especially by every philosopher who claims to lead an “examined life.” However, there is no doubt in my mind that Nishida’s philosophical system is incompatible with nationalism and militarism, as non-dualism generally is, and, as Yusa argues, neither were his intentions, his actions, and his private correspondence.

A last issue is evoked by the title of the book, *Zen and Philosophy*. There has been much discussion on whether or not Nishida philosophy can be interpreted as a Buddhist or a Zen Buddhist philosophy. This question is important since Nishida, but more so some of his students and commentators, claim a direct influence of Zen Buddhism on his philosophy. While NISHIDA’s later work, especially Volume 10 of his *Philosophical Essays* in his *Collected Works* (1988b) does contain echoes of, as well as quotations and references to, classical Buddhist thought, the question of whether Zen Buddhism held a stronger influence on Nishida’s thought than, for example, continental philosophy, Jōdo Shin Buddhism, or even Christian theology seems to be rather difficult to answer. Yusa stays clear of this discussion and limits her argument to the effect Zen practice, which Nishida quit after a long and frustrating struggle with the initial kōans, had on his spiritual well-being and his general outlook on life. However, the direct links between the textual and intellectual tradition of Zen Buddhism remain unexplored.

In conclusion, Yusa has done an outstanding job bringing to life the inner struggles and journey of Nishida Kitarō and the profound effect they had on the formation of a philosophical system which, without a doubt, has influenced the discourses of comparative philosophy, philosophy of religion, and interreligious dialogue. Thus, *Zen and Philosophy* provides an invaluable source for everyone—lay people and scholars alike—interested in Nishida philosophy and, broadly speaking, Japanese and comparative philosophy of the first half of the twentieth century. Since it locates Nishida’s key concepts and the key developments of his philosophy in the narrative of his life, *Zen and Philosophy* is highly accessible and thus highly useful as a textbook for courses in Japanese and comparative philosophy.

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