

**Robert Wilkinson**

*Nishida and Western Philosophy.*

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Given the broad range of topics and issues it addresses, this is a surprisingly compact book. In a little more than 160 pages, Wilkinson not only unfolds the essentials of Nishida's complex philosophy but also delves into a series of analyses of how his philosophy developed in response to western philosophy. Nishida's relation to Aristotle, Leibniz, Kant, Fichte, Hegel, James, and Bergson, are particularly well studied, a notable accomplishment for a book of this size.

Except for the introductory chapter on Zen, the book follows the chronological development of Nishida's philosophy as exhibited in his early, middle, and later writings. Most of Nishida's texts cited by Wilkinson are available in standard English translation, so that interested readers can always go back to them and examine Wilkinson's interpretation in the original (albeit translated) context. Nishida's style of writing is not easy, but strands of his thought are intelligibly presented throughout the chapters.

Chapter 1 sketches out the fundamentals of Zen, since 'it is Zen that forms the starting point from which he [Nishida] begins, and remains the absolutely constant point of reference throughout his life.' This single perspective in fact guides the entire study. 'It is beyond question,' Wilkinson writes, 'that the *fons et origo* of Nishida's view of experience was furnished to him by Zen, and that this was a centre which held throughout his life' (149).

If the purpose of this first chapter is to make preparations for subsequent considerations of Nishida's Zen-oriented philosophy, it serves the reader decently well. Within limited space, such concepts as *satori* (enlightenment), *koan*, seating meditation, non-cognitive or subjectless awareness, the non-dualism of *samsara* and *nirvana* in the Zen tradition, and so forth, are neatly discussed. Greater weight is given to the concept of *mu*, nothingness or emptiness, which underlies the concept of *absolute nothingness* in Nishida's later philosophy.

It is worth noting in this first chapter that Wilkinson takes such fundamental ideas of Zen as 'remote' from 'anything in the mainstream of western thought.' A remark like this foreshadows Wilkinson's overall interpretation of Nishida in this book, whose philosophy, formed under the influence of Zen, also turns out to be radically different from western philosophy. Indeed, 'the main oriental tradition,' Wilkinson stresses, 'is incommensurable with the western tradition' (129).

Proceeding to Chapter 2, the doctrine of 'pure experience' in Nishida's early monumental work, *Inquiry into the Good*, is studied. Since Nishida's technical term *junsuikiken* is a direct Japanese translation of William James' famous notion of 'pure

experience', Wilkinson focuses on the similarities and differences between Nishida and James.

The similarities are easier to identify. Just say that there is no differentiation between subject and object, hence no dichotomy or dualism, and add a few remarks on the pre-cognitive nature of immediate experience. But the main difference Wilkinson wishes to underscore may strike the reader. 'Nishida was,' writes Wilkinson, 'most definitely among those who are deeply impressed with the unity of all things,' and this conviction was 'derived from his Zen experience' (2). However, '[t]here is nothing in James's thought corresponding to the stress Nishida places on the unity of consciousness,' and 'this is no doubt due to the absence of a religious impulse in James's radical empiricism' (59). The point is reinforced when Wilkinson argues:

Radical empiricism is a secular philosophy designed to solve technical, philosophical problems. There is no religious impulse behind it. (37)

As readers may recall, however, James opens his renowned essay on pure experience with a remark on the 'inadequacy of the extant school-solutions' to solve technical problems in philosophy. Such solutions are 'abstract and academic' on James' account, and 'what the younger generation appears to crave is more of the temperament of life in its philosophy' (*Essays in Radical Empiricism*, University of Nebraska Press 1996, [hereafter, 'ERE'] p. 39). James also suggests that whether 'the universe of human experience' enjoys 'some still more absolute grade of union does not appear upon the surface' (ERE, 46).

In so far as James' radical empiricism inclines toward pluralism, as it actually does, Wilkinson is correct to say that Nishida stresses the unity of experience far more than James does. But it is not clear why Wilkinson wishes to characterize James' radical empiricism as designed to solve technical problems and empty of religious impulse, which is a rather unusual interpretation of James' philosophical works. The argument is not very convincing here.

Chapter 3, on the other hand, is devoted to the study of Nishida's second major book, *Intuition and Reflection in Self-Consciousness*, a work that marks the next stage of Nishida's philosophical development. In the opening pages of this chapter, Wilkinson examines Nishida's term *jikaku*, often translated as 'self-consciousness' in English, but which Wilkinson aptly contrasts with the term 'self-consciousness' in western philosophy, suggesting that *jikaku* is more like pure experience awakened to itself.

Much of Chapter 3 is concerned with the historical background of neo-Kantianism, which had not only gained currency around the time (late 19<sup>th</sup> century) but had substantial influence on Nishida. Reflecting the neo-Kantian programme, Wilkinson's consideration begins with Nishida's understanding of logic and mathematics, proceeds to space and time, then considers sensation and judgment, subject and object, universals, mind and body, and absolute free will. Fichte is treated in some detail, but Josiah Royce, apparently another significant source of influence on Nishida throughout

this period, is unmentioned.

Wilkinson's comparative analysis of Nishida and Bergson is worthwhile. Nishida considers that the self in Bergson's 'pure duration' finds itself in the presence of intuited images, whereby there is a sense of the self being a spectator of the images, as it were. His own view, by contrast, was that deeper reflection would reveal the mutual forming of the self and such images. In Wilkinson's words, this means that a minimal degree of objectification or conceptualization is already involved in Bergson's notion of 'pure duration'. The argument is balanced well as Wilkinson also considers Bergsonian counter-arguments to Nishida.

A number of insightful observations follow in Chapter 4, the last chapter, which explores Nishida's famous 'logic of place'. An orderly exposition of the 'place of being', the 'place of relative nothingness', and the 'place of absolute nothingness', is presented. Brief as it is, Wilkinson's discussion of Plato's *Timaeus* proves instructive, for it offers a rough but useful approximation to the notoriously difficult concept of *basho*, namely 'place', which characterizes Nishida's mature philosophy.

Wilkinson forcefully returns to Zen in this chapter. 'I see no reason to doubt,' he writes, 'that the *mu* [nothingness] to which he [Nishida] refers is that experienced in *kenshō* [enlightening experience in Zen], and that the idea of the place of absolute nothingness arises directly from his Zen experience' (114). Hence it is unsurprising that a number of disparities between Nishida, on the one hand, and Aristotle, Descartes, Leibniz, and Kant, on the other, are brought forward.

There is also a promising combination of textual exegesis and philosophical engagement in this fourth chapter. The difference between Nishida's logic of place and the traditional Aristotelian subject-predicate logic is explained well. The contrast between Nishida's mature philosophy, which incorporates irrational or 'trans-rational' states of experience, on the one hand, and the 'unshakable' rationalism of Kant, on the other, is drawn nicely.

Wilkinson is right to observe that 'a Leibnizian monad' is a 'non-interactive substance,' whereas 'Nishida's selves are fully interactive with the world' (133). Readers may note, however, that substance-interactionism is denied by both Leibniz and Nishida, and for different reasons. For Leibniz, it amounts to rejecting Cartesian interactionism. For Nishida, the self is not *substance* in the first place. This point is blurred in Wilkinson's account.

The conclusion of the book appears less inviting than it could have been. A good number of times we are told: 'ideas dear to Nishida have no western analogue'; the philosophy Nishida pursues is 'not commensurable with western models'; the late Nishida 'no longer hopes to find a western model'; 'Nishida's significance,' it is concluded, 'is that he demonstrated a conceptual incommensurability of central importance at a level of great philosophical depth' (160).

But showing that two or more traditions are very different does not prove that they are incommensurable. Admittedly, Nishida is not a western thinker, but that is taken for granted. In this regard, a leap from differences to incommensurability seems to have been made in this book, for not much argument can be found to prove the incommensurability thesis to which Wilkinson is so strongly committed.

Nevertheless there is undeniable wealth of information and insight in the individual chapters of this book. Wilkinson believes that even Nishida's late philosophy was 'not an account of a mystical world-view beyond the reach of logic' (102). Not betraying this assessment, for the most part Wilkinson's expositions are fleshed out clearly—a mark of competence and genuine philosophical spirit. The broad range of topics, together with the various challenges Wilkinson poses to common interpretations, renders this book a very welcome addition to the literature.

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