



Nishida's *An Inquiry into the Good* and Japanese and German Thought in the Late Nineteenth Century

It is widely accepted that pure experience preceding the separation of subject and object in thought as it appears in Nishida Kitarō's first work, *An Inquiry into the Good*, refers to Zen Buddhist spiritual awakening. The philosophy he proposed is, therefore, Eastern in nature. At the same time, Nishida's thinking in this work shows strong affinities with Wundt's work at several points. At that time, the Japanese philosophical community was strongly influenced by trends in Germany, which drove Nishida's interest in ontology and scientific psychology. Accordingly, he tried to work out his philosophy in reliance on Wundt. As such, the defining characteristics of his philosophy should be sought not in something "Oriental" but in the understanding of pure experience as the self-development of a "peerless entity" in terms of which Nishida attempts to explain all things.

KEYWORDS: Nishida Kitarō—Wilhelm Wundt—*An Inquiry into the Good*—pure experience—direct experience.

Nishida Kitarō's philosophy in his first work, *An Inquiry into the Good*, is often considered to be based on spiritual awakening. Ueda Shizuteru is a typical example of this approach. He begins by citing various remarks of Nishida's indicating that the philosophy of *An Inquiry into the Good* derives from both Zen Buddhism and Western philosophy. On that basis, he sets up spiritual awakening as a disclosure to philosophy of the pre-reflective domain on which critical reflection depends. Finally, he interprets pure experience, which Nishida equates with true reality, as a dynamic connection between pre-reflective experience and reflective explanation. In this way, Ueda interprets pure experience as deriving jointly from Zen Buddhism and Western philosophy.¹

According to this interpretation, the pre-reflective part of pure experience, characterized as a state in which subjects and objects are not yet separated by thinking, is identified as Zen Buddhist spiritual awakening. Although it has been pointed out that the concept of pure experience derives from William James, it is often emphasized that Nishida's *An Inquiry into the Good* has an Eastern character that stands in contrast to classical European philosophy, which presupposes an antagonism between subject and object.

I find this way of reading Nishida questionable, however, since there is nothing in the work that suggests equating the pure experience that obtains before the separation of subject and object with Zen Buddhist spiritual awakening. On the contrary, Nishida describes pre-reflective pure experience as a normal everyday experience.

At the time Nishida was writing, several philosophers had already begun to pay attention to experiences in which subject and object were not yet

1. UEDA 1991, 219-44.

separated by thinking. Wilhelm Wundt was among them. His philosophy is neither exceptional nor unconventional, but rather part of a trend in European philosophy, under the influence of which the concept of pure experience in *An Inquiry into the Good* was established. Because the exploration of the pre-reflective domain can be found in both Western philosophy and Eastern traditions of thought, there is no basis for the claim that Nishida's notion of pure experience is merely Western or merely Eastern.

I will argue in this paper that Nishida's philosophy is strongly influenced by trends taking place in German philosophy, especially in the work of Wundt, and thereby offer an alternative to the widely accepted view that his conception of pure experience is somehow "Eastern" in character. Moreover, I will try to lay out the defining characteristics of Nishida's philosophy in *An Inquiry into the Good* to show how what has been considered merely Oriental has its basis in the thought of the time.

NISHIDA'S INTEREST IN ONTOLOGY AND ITS BACKGROUND

Nishida was born in 1870 and entered high school in 1887. According to his reminiscences, he was introduced to philosophy by Inoue Enryō's *Philosophy Told in a Night* at that time. In the first volume of Inoue's book, published that very year, a materialist who claims there is only matter in the world and no mind disputes with a spiritualist who argues that the world is in the mind and there is no matter outside of mind. Inoue rejects both positions as one-sided and proposes that neither matter nor mind is the origin of the world.

Ontological themes like this become increasingly central in philosophy in Japan after 1885. After the Meiji Restoration of 1868, there was a great interest in English and French philosophers such as J. S. Mill, Spencer, and Comte. There was a shift in the second half of the 1880s when German philosophy became the mainstream.

Symbolic of the fixation on German philosophy is the fact that teachers of philosophy at Tokyo University (which became the first Imperial University in 1886) were writing exclusively under the influence of German philosophy. In 1887 Ludwig Busse came from Germany to join the staff as a lecturer. In 1890 Inoue Tetsujirō returned from studies in Germany to be appointed a professor at the University. In 1893 Raphael von Koeber, who

was born in Russia and completed his doctoral work in Germany, began to teach philosophy there as well.

Under the influence of German philosophy, ontology or metaphysics was frequently discussed in Japan as “pure philosophy” (純正哲学). For example, in his *Introduction to Philosophy* of 1892, Busse described the goal of philosophy or ontology as aimed at a comprehensive view of the general structure of ultimate reality.² He understood ontology as a structural account of the antagonism between materialism, asserting that all reality lies in matter, and spiritualism, which considers all reality to be spiritual in nature, lending his own support to the latter.³

In 1900 Nakajima Rikizō introduced three ontological standpoints in his work *Recent Problems of Philosophy*. The first is materialism, which regards matter as the substance of all things and tries to explain everything in terms of matter. The second is spiritualism, which regards the mind as the substantive reality of all things and tries to explain everything in terms of mind. The third approach asserts that something neither matter nor mind is the substance of all things. Of these, Nakajima sided with spiritualism.⁴

In a 1902 book based on Friedrich Paulsen’s *Introduction to Philosophy* (1892) and entitled *Outlines of Philosophy*, Tomonaga Sanjūrō proposed four ontological standpoints: dualism, which claims that the world consists of matter and mind; materialism, which holds matter to be the ultimate reality; spiritualism, which claims that the mind is reality; and agnosticism, which asserts that we cannot know ultimate reality. He rejects dualism as popular and not properly philosophical. Materialism is discarded because it cannot explain everything, however useful it may be to the natural sciences. Reality as such cannot exist in the material world without the senses, which entails our inner life. Therefore, Tomonaga concludes, spiritualism is the proper standpoint.⁵

Another important philosopher of ontology was Inoue Tetsujirō, who wrote of what he called phenomena-as-reality theory (現象即実在論) in a series of papers beginning with “A Particle of My Worldview” in 1894.

2. BUSSE 1892, 22, 58.

3. *Ibid.*, 58–66, 110.

4. NAKAJIMA 1900, 211–29.

5. TOMONAGA 1902, 64–72, 130.

In these essays, Inoue first describes phenomena as what is knowable and changeable and includes difference. Reality, in contrast, is neither knowable nor changeable and does not include difference.⁶ He then distinguishes between ontological standpoints in which the truth is inaccessible and those in which it is accessible. The latter include idealism, which regards objects as the result of subjective activity, and realism, which posits an objective world outside of the subject. Realism further distinguishes between phenomena in the objective world that are not real and those that are. This is what Inoue calls phenomena-as-reality theory, which in one view sees only phenomena as real, and in another sees reality as theoretically distinguishable but ultimately the same.⁷

In a paper published in 1915, “The Philosophical Value of Realism over Materialism and Spiritualism,” Inoue compared his phenomena-as-reality theory to the schematic opposition between materialism and spiritualism. He positioned his theory as a third standpoint that unifies matter and mind by means of a third principle of reality, whereas materialism considered only matter, and spiritualism only mind, as the fundamental principle.⁸

Discussions of ontology at the time were not without controversies. For example, in response to Inoue Enryō’s attacks on materialism in *Refuting Materialism* (1898), Katō Hiroyuki published an essay “Refuting *Refuting Materialism*” that same year. Or again, in a paper entitled “Reading *A Year and a Half, Continued* by Mr Nakae Tokusuke” (1902), Inoue Tetsujirō took up the cause against the materialism of Nakae Chōmin.

As a high school student, Nishida was exposed to this trend of thought through reading Inoue Enryō. According to Kōsaka Masaaki, Nishida states his thoughts on high school days as follows:

There was a man who we would now call a materialist or Marxist.... He tried to explain everything in terms of matter. I admit that there is a reasonableness to his position, but I cannot believe that matter is the ultimate reality. His explanation was not false; it just seemed to be abstract or derivative. One day as I happened to be walking around Kanazawa and viewed the city bathed in the setting sun, with the people going by and the sounds of things

6. INOUE Tetsujirō 1897A, 385.

7. INOUE Tetsujirō 1894, 491–4.

8. INOUE Tetsujirō 1915, 67.

at dusk, the idea came to me that *these* are reality and that so-called matter is rather an abstraction from it. I suppose this was the germ of *An Inquiry into the Good*.⁹

The view expressed here is spiritualistic and materialism is recognized as false on the grounds that what appears in the mind, like the town bathed in the setting sun, is real and matter is only an abstraction. Already in high school, Nishida had taken sides in the ontological conflict between materialism and spiritualism occasioned by the dominance of German philosophy.

Nishida entered the Imperial University in 1891 and graduated in 1894. He later taught foreign languages, logic, ethics, and psychology at various high schools and published several papers before becoming assistant professor at Kyoto Imperial University in 1910. In 1905, he wrote in a letter to his friend Yamamoto Ryōkichi (山本良吉):

I have read all usual famous books about ethics for my lectures, but I cannot be satisfied unless I start with metaphysics. I have recently begun to study the history of philosophy and epistemology. Such a study is not necessary for ethics, but I cannot shake myself free of metaphysical doubts.¹⁰

Nishida wrote of his desire to study metaphysics rather than ethics for his lectures. *The Dictionary of Philosophy*, published in 1905, declared that metaphysics was a systematic investigation into the ultimate problem of reality and that it was synonymous with philosophy if reality is understood in a broad sense and with ontology if reality was seen as opposed to thought.¹¹ On these grounds, we may say that Nishida's interests lay in ontology at the time.

In 1907 Nishida published a paper entitled "On Reality," which became the basis of a series of papers compiled in 1911 as *An Inquiry into the Good*. The current discussions of materialism and spiritualism, which German philosophy had introduced and which we summarized in the foregoing, stand clearly in the background.

9. KŌSAKA 1965, 45–6.

10. NISHIDA 2006, 74.

11. TOMONAGA 1905, 92.

THE RISE OF SCIENTIFIC PSYCHOLOGY IN GERMANY
AND JAPAN

The philosophical arguments of Nishida's *An Inquiry into the Good* are somewhat distantly related to the Industrial Revolution, which had a great impact on philosophy in the nineteenth century. Beginning in the latter half of the eighteenth century in Great Britain before spreading to other European countries, the United States, and Japan in the nineteenth century, the revolution not only radically changed people's lifestyles through railway factories but also changed the way they thought.

The German *Zeitgeist* at the time is illustrated in Ludwig Büchner's best-selling book *Force and Matter*.¹² Büchner asserted that philosophers of nature who support idealism should be outcast, since philosophy is the arrogant delusion of those who spin incomprehensible and empty speculations. Inquiry into the world based on thinking had already failed and lost the respect and trust of the public. Our efforts are better spent, he argued, by investigating nature through observation and experience.¹³ The revolution had made the results of the natural sciences apparent to everyone. Many had begun to consider philosophy unreliable because it is too ethereal and idealistic, whereas the empirical sciences were reliable in that they were based on verifiable observation and experience.

German philosophers at the time had to reckon with this hostile atmosphere to champion the need for and importance of philosophy. According to Schnädelbach, we may classify four emerging groups. The first was modeled on the natural sciences and viewed philosophy as a science of the mind (*Geisteswissenschaft*). Representatives of this group were Eduard Zeller and Kuno Fischer, who treated philosophy as an object of historical study. Other members of this group included figures such as Friedrich Adolf Trendelenburg and Bernard Bolzano, who based their theories on philosophies of the past.

A second group consisted of philosophers who accepted the science of the day as a form of philosophy. Ludwig Büchner and Wilhelm Ostwald were representative of this group, which included thinkers such as Wilhelm

12. UEBERWEG 1923, 285–6.

13. BÜCHNER 1855, 1–2.

Wundt, Wilhelm Dilthey, and Georg Simmel, who claimed psychology and philosophy as the basis of the science of the mind; Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, who tried to base philosophy on sociology; and Richard Avenarius and Ernst Mach, whose philosophy was based on biology.

Hegelians such as David Strauß and Bruno Bauer belong to the third group, which viewed philosophy as criticism. For them, philosophy had come to an end with Hegel, and its only remaining task was to adopt his ideas to criticize elements of the current situation which his philosophy had not yet reached.

Members of the fourth and final group sought to provide a new foundation for philosophy by reshaping it into a field of investigation independent from other individual sciences. A typical example here were the approaches to epistemology of Hermann Cohen, Wilhelm Windelband, Heinrich Rickert, and others. Another example is the value philosophy developed by Hermann Lotze, which centered attention on values like the true, the good, and the beautiful.¹⁴

Wundt, as we said, belonged to the second group. He typified scientific psychology, which partly accounts for his strong influence on Nishida's *An Inquiry into the Good*.

In the nineteenth century, certain psychologists in Germany began to quantify mental states in the attempt to isolate the laws that governed them. For example, Max Weber and Gustav Fechner conducted research on psychophysics and came up with a law now known as the Weber-Fechner law, which demonstrated the relationship between physical stimuli and the strength of perceptions. Wundt, who founded the first Institute of Experimental Psychology at Leipzig University, was drawn to this kind of quantified and experimental psychology, which was gaining increased recognition as a science.

The institute founded by Wundt was introduced to Japan in 1888 in a short essay, probably written by Inoue Tetsujirō, entitled "The Laboratory for Psychology in Leipzig." Psychophysics was also introduced into Japan that year when Motora Yūjirō, who had received his doctoral degree under Stanley Hall, began to lecture on the subject at the Imperial University. As Sawayanagi Seitarō described the situation in Japan in 1888, "It is scientific

14. SCHNÄDELBACH 2009, 130–53.

or new psychology that appears most frequently in philosophical works and journals, attracts the greatest attention, and is most active.”¹⁵

Nishida, who entered the Imperial University in 1891 and graduated in 1894, wrote a letter to Suzuki Daisetsu in 1907, the same year that he published his essay “On Reality”:

What I just sent you is scientific.... I would like to refine my thoughts further and make them into a book if possible. Most of philosophy so far is founded on logic, but I hope to base my philosophy on psychology. Recently I discovered a very interesting theory of pure experience by W. James, etc....¹⁶

Considering the time this letter was written, it is clear that Nishida’s expressed desire to establish his own philosophy scientifically and to base it on psychology was realized in his first work, *An Inquiry into the Good*, where psychologists like James, Wundt, and Stout are referred to. One of the reasons for this reliance on psychologists is that he was living and writing under the influence of trends spurred by the Industrial Revolution.

AFFINITY BETWEEN NISHIDA’S ONTOLOGICAL VIEW AT HIS HIGH SCHOOL DAYS AND WUNDT’S ONTOLOGY

As mentioned above, Nishida told Kōsaka that when he was walking in Kanazawa and wrapped in the glow of the setting sun, the movements of the people and the sounds of dusk made him think that these things are reality and that “matter” is no more than an abstraction from it. This spiritualistic tendency overlaps with ideas in Wundt’s ontology.

Wundt’s philosophy is closely tied to his understanding of psychology. In his view, the two dominant strains of psychology in his day were misguided. The first understood psychology as the science of the soul, which he found unacceptable in the light of developments in the empirical sciences and their need to maintain independence from metaphysical theory. The second saw psychology as the study of inner experience, which he considered to be based on an inadequate understanding of inner and outer experiences—an “inner” mind as opposed to an “outer” world. For Wundt, the difference was not one of objects but of standpoints. Inner experiences are rather experi-

15. SAWAYANAGI 1888, 640.

16. NISHIDA 2006, 107.

ences observed in relation to the subject, and outer experience are those observed independently from the subject. Psychology opts for the former, which Wundt called the standpoint of direct experience, from which subjective elements are not abstracted from experience. In contrast, the natural sciences opt for the latter, which he called the standpoint of mediate experience, from which such subjective elements are abstracted.¹⁷

Wundt argued that as a standpoint of direct experience, psychology provides a foundation and preparation for the science of the mind, including philosophy, insofar as its content is determined by the interactions of subject and object. He further insisted that psychology is useful for ethics as a philosophical discipline insofar as it investigates the conditions of cognition and action.¹⁸

Wundt's philosophy was based on his view of direct experience as the object of psychological research. He defined direct experience as an experience that occurs prior to the changes effected by the act of thinking, whereas mediate experience is an experience that has been changed by it. He saw this distinction as necessary because he considered the act of thinking to be one that separates subjective elements like emotions and mental acts from objective elements like physical phenomena. For him, the separation of mind as subjective and matter as objective does not yet arise in direct experience.¹⁹

Wundt classified ontological standpoints into materialism, idealism, and realism, concluding that it is idealism that must be supported. Realism, which regards both matter and mind as the ultimate grounding, is rejected because it is impossible to posit a third grounding apart from matter and mind. Materialism, which identifies the ultimate ground of everything and the principle of natural events as matter, cannot explain the mind as a subjective element, since matter is only the objective element of direct experience. In contrast to these two positions, idealism, which overlaps the foundational unity of the mental with the mind, can explain both elements. Physical phenomena are contained in direct experience as objects and are experienced as subjective representations. These subjective representations are mental phenomena because they are contained in direct experience; yet they are

17. WUNDT 1896, 1–3.

18. *Ibid.*, 4, 19–20.

19. WUNDT 1897, 85.

considered physical phenomena when abstracted from the direct experience. He based his idealism on this view that mental phenomena are subjective and physical phenomena are objective elements of direct experience.

Wundt further asserted that direct experience implies cognition in which the subjective representation is the objective reality (*Wirklichkeit*) to which the subjective act corresponds. In most cases, epistemology begins with the antagonism of the subject toward the object and asks how the two can mutually correspond. Wundt insisted, however, that epistemology should begin with direct experience, because the opposition between subject and object arises only after a separation of the two through the act of thinking.

These two claims have affinities with Nishida's thinking during his high school days. Wundt insisted that matter is abstracted from direct experience when the act of thinking separates out objective and subjective elements of experience. Nishida also considered matter to be an abstraction from reality. Moreover, both philosophers agreed that direct experience, prior to being separated out by the act of thinking, is cognition. Nishida argued this position in *An Inquiry into the Good*, where he referred to reality as pure experience and claimed that such experience is the proper starting point of philosophy.

In a word, the spiritualistic standpoint that Nishida adopted during his high school days shows clear affinities with Wundt's philosophy, which was representative of scientific psychology at the time and popular among Japanese philosophers. In a sense, it was only natural that Nishida would follow this trend and seek out clues for his own nascent philosophy from Wundt's philosophy.

NISHIDA'S ONTOLOGY IN *AN INQUIRY INTO THE GOOD* AND WUNDT'S ONTOLOGY

Insofar as *An Inquiry into the Good* developed ideas that had their origins in his high school days and developed further under the influence of Wundt's philosophy, similarities in that work to Wundt's philosophy are hardly to be wondered at.

As we saw, in looking back over his time in high school, Nishida expressed a spiritualistic view in which what appears in the mind, like a city bathed in the setting sun, is ultimate reality, while matter is no more than an abstrac-

tion from that reality. In *An Inquiry into the Good*, reality is referred to as pure or direct experience. In the second part of the work, however, Nishida expressed the need for philosophical doubt when it comes to grasping reality: “To understand true reality and to know the true nature of the universe and human life, we must discard all artificial assumptions, doubt whatever can be doubted, and proceed on the basis of direct and indubitable knowledge.”²⁰ He goes on to express the result of pursuing such doubt:

What is direct knowledge that we cannot even begin to doubt? It is knowledge of facts in our intuitive experience, knowledge of phenomena of consciousness. A present phenomenon of consciousness and our being conscious of it are identical; they cannot be divided into subject and object. Since facts are not separated even a hair’s breadth from knowing, we cannot doubt this knowledge.²¹

Nishida contends that the only indubitable knowledge is the knowledge of phenomena of consciousness, because when we are conscious of the presence of conscious phenomena, they cannot be divided into subject and object; knowing is not separated from facts. Declaring the state of consciousness prior to any distinction between subject and object one of “pure” or “direct” experience, Nishida submits that “from the perspective of direct knowledge that is free from all assumptions, reality consists only of phenomena of our consciousness, namely, the facts of direct experience.”²² The phenomena of consciousness and direct or pure experience must be considered reality precisely because they belong to a state prior to the separation of subject and object, which means they precede doubt.

Nishida offers a more detailed explanation of why reality can be seen as pure or direct experience: “At the time of pure experience, there is still no opposition between subject and object and no separation of knowledge, feeling, and volition; there is only an independent, self-sufficient, pure activity.” The object does not exist independently of the subject. Rather, “the notions of subject and object derive from two different ways of looking at a single fact.”²³

20. NISHIDA 1990, 38; 2003A, 40.

21. NISHIDA 1990, 39; 2003A, 41.

22. NISHIDA 1990, 42; 2003A, 43.

23. NISHIDA 1990; 47, 49; 2003A, 48, 50.

Likewise, matter does not exist independently of the mind. As Nishida states, “Only when we separate the subjective activity from the concrete reality can we think of the grass and trees as purely objective nature.” Later he add that “So-called mental phenomena are simply the unifying or active aspect of reality considered abstractly.”²⁴ Matter and nature as objects are extracted when the subjective elements are abstracted from reality as pure or direct experience, and unifying acts as subjects are extracted when the objective elements are abstracted.

Reality as a pure or direct experience that contains mental and physical phenomena is “neither a phenomenon of consciousness nor a material phenomenon,” but, as the title of chapter six, “Phenomena of Consciousness Are the Sole Reality”²⁵ demonstrates, Nishida thinks of reality as simultaneously a phenomenon of consciousness. As a phenomenon of consciousness, reality is not understood in terms of a substantial dualism that assumes the independence of matter from mind but as including nature and matter within it.

The first connection of Nishida’s ontology in *An Inquiry into the Good* to Wundt’s ontology is that he adopt a spiritualistic or idealistic view in which mental phenomena are subjective and physical phenomena are objective elements of pure or direct experience.

The second is voluntarism. In Wundt’s *System of Philosophy*, four types of idealism are distinguished: Herbart’s individual intellectualism, Kant’s individual voluntarism, Spinoza’s universal intellectualism, and Schopenhauer’s universal voluntarism. The first two are named individual because they consider mind to be the defining ground of individuality. The last two are referred to as universal because they consider mind to be universal. Intellectualism is the position that regards representation as the essence of mental phenomena, and voluntarism thinks of will as their basis.²⁶ Of the two, Wundt adopted the position of individual voluntarism.

Wundt argued that universal intellectualism has difficulty dealing with the contradiction between the invariability of an absolute substance and the variability of the individual. From such a position, the ultimate ground is the

24. NISHIDA 1990, 68, 74; 2003A, 67, 72.

25. NISHIDA 1990, 44, 42; 2003A; 45, 43.

26. WUNDT 1897, 200-1.

idea of the infinite unification of all thinkable representations or the idea of an infinite intellect that embraces the totality of thinkable representations and actualizes individual representations in individual consciousness. The idea that representations emerge and change in an unending process of unification is inconsistent with the concept of an infinite intellect. Therefore, infinite unification must be regarded as stationary, and all activities must be brought about in individual consciousness by an infinite intellect. However, this means that while the infinite intellect gives rise to all thought in finite minds, it cannot think because it is itself invariable. This means that we can no longer speak of intellect. An infinite intellect would have to be variable and an active principle of thinking.²⁷

Wundt went on to point out three problems with universal voluntarism. First, it is impossible to derive representations from the idea of a universal will. Second, we cannot justify naming the principle preceding all phenomena, because the connection between individual will and representations is inseparable. Lastly, the concept of a world will as opposed to individual will is merely an idea and not the result of research carried out as a supplement to experience.

After he dismissed the above-mentioned two positions in this way, he considered individual intellectualism and voluntarism. In the process, he argues that will cannot exist without representations of its object but will be the only component of consciousness because it remains homogeneous and is always unifying our experience. Meanwhile, representations form groups, but they are often separated from each other. They will retain the unity of our experience, which is constantly developing.²⁸

Wundt assigned the function of unification to the will because he identified it with apperception. Whereas perception refers to the appearance of a representation in consciousness, apperception, in Wundt's definition, refers to the appearance of the representation to which one is attentive in the field of consciousness. Inasmuch as apperception points at a representation with the aim of selecting one representation from among others, he looked on apperception as the original activity of the will. Furthermore, since the rep-

27. *Ibid.*, 384–6.

28. *Ibid.*, 374–8.

resentation appears as unified, he believed that it is will qua apperception that is responsible for the unification.²⁹

The unifying will makes experience possible by unifying various representations that appear one after the other. Hence, Wundt described will as transcendental and adopted voluntarism in consideration of that point.³⁰

For his part, Nishida argued that reality develops through the repeated separation and unification of the contents of consciousness. For example, when we unify blue representations through the concept of blue, the separation of blue things from non-blue things arises simultaneously. By unifying what is separate, new separations appear. In this way, reality continues to be separated without forfeiting its unity as the one and only reality. Because unity is formed by a unifying act, it is the act that makes it possible for there to be only one reality.

Nishida points out that various acts like thinking and recollecting take on the function of unification as a kind of apperception, but the act that unifies the whole of reality is will. The acts of thinking and recollecting only unify ideas, whereas will unifies ideas as well as actions. When we take action with our will to achieve a purpose, the idea that expresses that purpose, as well as the action carried out in its name, are unified by will.³¹ Although Nishida's view amounts to a kind of voluntarism that considers will as apperception, his reasons differ from Wundt's.

A final point of contact between the two philosophers lies in their rejection of an unchangeable substratum at the basis of mental phenomena. For Wundt, as a voluntarist, the condition of developing experience was not an unchangeable being but an activity of the will as transcendental apperception which continually unifies the representations of the conscious mind.

For Nishida, reality as direct or pure experience changes through repeated unification and separation. While the basis of this reality is the unifying act of a kind of apperception, he insisted that "the noumenon of a truly active thing must be the unifying power that is the fundamental activity in the establishment of reality." For Nishida, experience unfolds not as the con-

29. WUNDT 1880, 206–12, 304–5.

30. WUNDT 1897, 377–9.

31. NISHIDA 1990, 89–91; 2003A, 85–7.

ditioning of an unchangeable substratum of being, but as an activity of the will. To say that “the noumenon refers to the unifying power of reality”³² does not mean that will is a stationary substance. On the contrary, it is constantly active.

WUNDT’S EPISTEMOLOGY

It is not only in its ontology that *An Inquiry into the Good* was written under Wundt’s influence but also in its epistemology. The concept of direct experience plays a defining role here.

Wundt described direct experience in these terms:

The experience preceding every influence of the functions of thinking, i.e., the concept of cognizing completely detached from the characteristics of thinking, we also call immediate experience and contrast it with mediate experience, which is somehow changed by the effectiveness of the functions of thinking, namely by the formation of concepts obtained through them.³³

The kind of thinking Wundt has in mind here is classified as a subjective element that is conscious when it is engaged, when it connects and shapes representations and concepts. This last is the most important function of thinking, as, for example, when the concept of wolf is connected with the concept of carnivore and leads to the judgment that wolves are carnivores; or when a particular blue sky is broken up into the two concepts of blue and sky.³⁴ To name the experience preceding every influence of the functions of thinking direct experience means that the experience preceding every connection and resolution of thought qualifies as direct experience. Hence feeling, willing, perceived objects, and the relations between them all belong to direct experience when they are given without one’s having to be conscious of the thought at work. In contrast, when the functions of thinking are employed and relations are formed or resolved in experience, the experience is called mediate experience.³⁵

Wundt’s understanding of direct experience as “the concept of cognition

32. NISHIDA 1990, 67, 66; 2003A, 67, 66.

33. WUNDT 1897, 85.

34. *Ibid.*, 41–3.

35. *Ibid.*, 85–6.

completely detached from the characteristics of thinking” means that correct cognition is always the result of direct experience. While its representation may be in discord with the object of thinking, representation always corresponds to its object in direct experience. Therefore, as mentioned above, Wundt insisted that direct experience is the correct cognition in subjective representation of objective reality.

Wundt’s epistemology sought to explain the genesis of knowledge with direct experience as a starting point.³⁶ His first reason for doing so was that he considered the opposition, separation, and disconnection between the subjective and the objective found in traditional epistemology a poor place to begin a discussion of how to bring the two into harmony. What is given in direct experience is neither a subjective representation nor an objective fact, but a representational object (*Vorstellungsobjekt*) in which the subject is not separated from the object but corresponds to it.

Second, he felt that when we inquire into the correspondence between the subjective and objective, we secure a guarantee of that correspondence which traditional epistemology had not been able to supply. This problem is overcome if we begin with direct experience and agree that the subject already corresponds to the object insofar as there is no need of a third element to guarantee their correspondence.³⁷

Wundt observed that representational objects given in direct experience may sometimes appear contradictory. We have then to correct the discrepancy in line with the objective requirements of thinking, finding an object as the basis of the subject, and resolving the contradiction at hand. Although he did not give an example of this process at work, we may consider hallucinations and illusions a case in point. If we heard a sound but no one is around, the initial experience of hearing a sound contradicts the later experience of an absence of a source for that sound. We may therefore conclude that the sound is not a representational object but merely a subjective representation, namely a hallucination.

In other words, wherever there is a contradiction in direct experience, there is a subjective representation to be distinguished from the object of the experience. That said, Wundt maintained that the negation of objectiv-

36. *Ibid.*, 30–1.

37. *Ibid.*, 89–90.

ity and the reality of representation based on such exceptional cases is the wrong place to begin epistemology. As in the natural sciences, Wundt's preferred method was first to approve of the reality and certainty of the representational object and only then correct errors as they arise.³⁸

Having established direct experience as the starting point for the emergence of knowledge, Wundt went on to distinguish three stages in cognition. The cognition of representational objects in direct experience and the transformation of the representational object without the aid of conceptualization are located at the stage of perception cognition. The next step is to understand the process of cognition that takes place when a representational object is corrected. Cognition in this stage is gained when the content and connection of representations are improved or supplemented by logical analysis based on perception-cognition. In the last stage, the connections gained through understanding are brought together into a single whole. The cognition of the whole into a worldview is a function of reason-cognition.³⁹

Wundt explained the genesis of cognition in his epistemology in terms of stages. The origin of the distinction between various things is described as a process of perception-cognition. First, sensory content as perceptual matter is distinguished from space and time as perceptual form of perception, based on the variability and independence of matter from form and the invariability of form. Next, space is distinguished from time where changes in properties are thought to be purely temporal events, whereas movement is considered to be change in time and space. Furthermore, subjects and objects are distinguished by reason of the fact that various things have value specifications based on feeling and that only the movement of the perceiving subject connects feelings that precede, accompany, and resonate with the movement.⁴⁰

Once the genesis of the distinction between subject and object has been taken into account, imaginary objects produced by the subject need to be distinguished from things produced by influence from the object on the subject. The question naturally arises as to what belongs to the subjective dimension in our representations and what to the objective. Wundt's

38. *Ibid.*, 98, 102–3.

39. *Ibid.*, 104.

40. *Ibid.*, 111–13, 124–30.

response was that a representation is initially a representation of an object, and that if a contradiction arises in perception or representation as a result of thought, the representational object may be corrected, with a part of the representational object being regarded as subjective and detached at the stage of understanding-cognition. After the detachment, the representational object remains objective insofar as the part that was not corrected corresponds to objective reality, while the part that was regarded as subjective loses its objectivity.⁴¹

For thinking to function, it must follow the laws of thinking. But these laws only mark the range of the possible; they do not tell us what reality is. Accordingly, Wundt argued that it is necessary to design hypotheses to uncover and resolve contradictions in perception or representation. In this way, the linking of the entire contents of experience at the stage of understanding-cognition is made possible by a principle of sufficient reason linking multiple things through relationships of cause and effect. We are thereby able to rise above the contents of experience at the stage of reason-cognition, where we cognize what is beyond the actual contents of experience.⁴²

As shown above, Wundt's epistemology is a three-staged process whereby first we gain representational objects in direct experience at the stage of perception-cognition, then correct the representational object at the stage of understanding-cognition, and then move beyond experience at the stage of reason-cognition.

NISHIDA'S EPISTEMOLOGY IN *AN INQUIRY INTO THE GOOD*

Let us return to a passage cited earlier from Nishida:

What is direct knowledge that we cannot even begin to doubt? It is knowledge of facts in our intuitive experience, knowledge of phenomena of consciousness. A present phenomenon of consciousness and our being conscious of it are identical; they cannot be divided into subject and object. Since facts are not separated even a hair's breadth from knowing, we cannot doubt this knowledge.⁴³

41. *Ibid.*, 132–6.

42. *Ibid.*, 133, 168–9, 180–1.

43. NISHIDA 1990, 39; 2003A, 41.

Nishida, like Wundt, argues here that correct cognition is grounded in an “intuitive experience” in which the subject and object are not yet separated. The mistaken cognition associated with hallucinations or illusions seems to argue against such a view. Nishida counters that “at that time, not intuition but judgment based on it makes a mistake,”⁴⁴ giving as an example the way a stick inserted into the water appears to be bent. The illusion itself is not a mistake but an indubitable fact. It is the judgment that the stick is bent that is in error.

At the beginning of *An Inquiry into the Good*, Nishida says, “to experience means to know facts just as they are.” He calls such an experience direct or pure experience and determines it as one that precedes the act of judgment and in which “there is not yet a subject or an object, and knowing and its object are completely unified.”⁴⁵ As the example of the bent stick illustrates, we are always able to carry out correct cognition and gain indisputable knowledge in such direct or pure experience.

Nishida observes that

the purpose of my discussion in the first section ‘Pure Experience’ is not to distinguish pure experience from mediate and non-pure experience but to argue rather that perception, thinking, will and intuition have the same form.⁴⁶

This indicates that it is not correct to define pure experience as “to know facts as they are” or as experiences in which “there is not yet a subject or an object, and knowing and its object are completely unified.”

The most important character of pure experience lies in its “independent, self-sufficient, pure activity” in the form of “the self-development of a peerless entity.”⁴⁷ Pure experience develops through the unification and separation of its content. Although unified as a whole, pure experience contains separation and does not stipulate a unified consciousness. As Nishida states, not only does “the directness and purity of pure experience derive... from the strict unity of concrete consciousness,” but “we see that even these uni-

44. NISHIDA 2008, 40.

45. NISHIDA 1990, 3–4; 2003A, 9.

46. NISHIDA 2003B, 241.

47. NISHIDA 1990, 47, 53; 2003A, 48, 54.

ties and disunities differ only in degree”⁴⁸ and that “there is neither absolutely pure nor absolutely non-pure experience. Every experience is pure, depending on how we look at.”⁴⁹ The degree of unity of pure experience is different, and the experience with a greater degree of unity is purer than an experience with less unity.

Hence, in addition to arguing that the criterion of truth lies in pure experience,⁵⁰ Nishida remarks:

There are various classes of experiences.... If various direct experiences exist in this way, then one may wonder how we can determine their truth or falsehood. When two experiences are enveloped by a third, we can judge the two according to the third.⁵¹

As a pure activity that marks the self-development of a “peerless entity,” pure experience displays various classes of development. Of these, pure experience as the criterion of truth is the greatest and displays the highest degree of unity, one which envelops other less pure experiences.

Although Nishida does not provide an example of pure experience with such a highest degree of unity, the stick in the water may serve the purpose. If a child who is unaware of the phenomenon of light refraction were to notice that the same stick looks straight when placed on the ground, they would not be able to determine which judgment is correct: “the stick is bent” or “the stick is straight.” In Nishida’s words, the two experiences are contradictory and in a state of separation.

However, once the child learns about light refraction, the contradictory experiences are resolved in a third insight, namely that a straight stick looks bent when inserted into water, and they are then able to make a corrected judgment on the matter. Nishida’s remark that “in the course of its [conscious] development various conflicts and contradictions crop up in the system, and out of this emerges reflective thinking” speaks to the contradiction between the child’s first two experiences and their ensuing reflection on it. Only then are they able to proceed to a third experience with a higher degree of unity. As Nishida continues, “when viewed from a different angle,

48. NISHIDA 1990, 6, 9; 2003A, 11, 14.

49. NISHIDA 1990, 6, 9; 2003A, 11, 14.

50. NISHIDA 1990, 26, 2003A, 30.

51. NISHIDA 1990, 26–27, 2003A, 31.

that which is contradictory and conflicted is the beginning of a still greater systematic development; it is the incomplete state of a greater unity.”⁵²

Pure experiences with a greater degree of unity arise by thinking about and judging different experiences that at first appear to be contradictory. Accordingly, it is not correct simply to claim that the criterion of truth lies in pure experience “without the least addition of deliberative discrimination” and “prior... to thought.”⁵³ The criterion of truth lies in the greatest pure experience, that is, the one that attains the highest degree of unity after thinking and judgment.

Understood in this way, Nishida’s epistemology in *An Inquiry into the Good* shows remarkable affinities with Wundt’s. In fact, he himself states that “pure experience is identical with direct experience.”⁵⁴ Pure or direct experience in Nishida and direct experience in Wundt are identical in character in the sense that both precede thinking and the separation of subject and object. Just as Wundt maintains that correct cognition is established in direct experience, Nishida claims that knowing facts as they are is established in pure experience.

Or again, Wundt asserted that in the attempt to connect and unify the contents of multiple direct experiences through thinking, the subject is distinguished from the object in order to resolve contradictions that arise in thought, a hypothesis is formed, and the contents of the experience are corrected. This claim is similar to Nishida’s argument that “with the development of consciousness, because of conflict among various systems—which is an advance toward a still greater unity—one can distinguish between ideals and facts; the subjective and the objective worlds diverge.”⁵⁵ Like Wundt, Nishida proposes that the dichotomy of subject from object emerges out of conflicts in pure experiences.

Nishida goes on to say that “the fulfillment of the will or the culmination of truth thus means that from a state of disunity one has arrived at the state of pure experience” and that “just as one’s scientific conjectures are proven through experimentation, what becomes manifest when the will has been

52. NISHIDA 1990, 16, 2003A, 21.

53. NISHIDA 1990, 3, 2003A, 9.

54. NISHIDA 1990, 3, 2003A, 9.

55. NISHIDA 1990, 26, 2003A, 30.

fulfilled in the external world is the most unified, direct experience, which has broken through the subject-object distinction.”⁵⁶ When our conjectures are proven through experimentation, the subject and object that were separated and in a state of distunity become unified again and we are able to attain truth. Here again, Nishida shares Wundt’s view that we can know the truth by forming hypotheses and correcting our experience through the provisional separation of subject and object.

CHARACTERISTICS OF NISHIDA’S PHILOSOPHY

As we can see from the above, Nishida’s philosophy shows remarkable affinities with Wundt’s ontology and epistemology. Still, there are important characteristics of Nishida’s thought that stand in contrast to Wundt’s.

Nishida claims that the division of subject and object emerges out of internal conflicts among experiences but can be reunified, and that we can come to know the truth through such things as testing and proving conjectures. In contrast, Wundt does not think that subject and object can be reunified, even though he agrees that we can reach truth by forming hypotheses and correcting our experiences despite the separation of subject from object.

This tells us that one feature of Nishida’s view is that pure experience can be reunified, or that it develops and differentiates by itself in the form of “the self-development of a peerless entity” and is pure because it is unified.⁵⁷ This idea was originally presented in the context of ontology. In *An Inquiry into the Good*, after asserting that the phenomenon of consciousness is the ultimate reality in chapter six, Nishida attempts to explain what he means by reality. It is in this context that pure experience is characterized as an activity in the form of the self-development of a peerless entity.

Nishida also adopts the same characterization for epistemology, arguing that development and differentiation are processes aimed at reaching the truth. Of the many pure experiences that develop and differentiate with various degrees of unity, the criterion of truth is to be sought in the greatest

56. NISHIDA 1990, 26–7; 2003a, 30–1.

57. NISHIDA 1990, 53, 6; 2003A, 54, 11.

pure experience with the highest degree of unity that can be attained after thinking and judgment. In short, to attain the greatest form of pure experience is equivalent to attaining the truth.

I will not go into further detail here but would only add that Nishida contends that the criterion of goodness is also to be found in pure experience. We feel satisfaction and happiness when our actions realize an ideal, thus bringing about a unity of action, ideal, and reality. The happiness generated through this unity is the criterion of goodness. He further states that the deepest form of religion is based on experiences in which God and human beings are unified. And inasmuch as God is the power unifying the universe, pure experience evidences unity with that power.⁵⁸

In the preface to *An Inquiry into the Good*, Nishida admits, “for many years I wanted to explain all things on the basis of pure experience as the sole reality.”⁵⁹ Clearly his aim was to resolve problems in ontology, epistemology, ethics, and religion by means of the idea of pure experience as the self-development of a peerless entity. This, above all, is what sets his thought off from Wundt’s philosophy.

CONCLUSION

When Nishida was first introduced to philosophy, the Japanese philosophical community was strongly influenced by trends in contemporary German thought. Their central concern was with ontology and the dispute between materialism on the one hand and idealism and spiritualism on the other. Nishida tried to work out an original response to this problem with the aid of psychology, which had drawn increasing attention in both the Japanese and German philosophical communities.

Nishida attraction to Wundt’s philosophy was based on the popularity of scientific psychology among German and Japanese philosophers, but ideas germinating in his high school days already showed affinities to Wundt in terms of matter being an abstraction from reality and in the insight into direct or pure experience as a state prior to the separation of subject and object in thought. For these reasons, he was persuaded to take elements of

58. NISHIDA 1990, 122–5, 151–7; 2003A, 114–17, 137–41.

59. NISHIDA 1990, xxx; 2003A, 6.

Wundt's ontology over into the philosophical position he developed in *An Inquiry into the Good*.

From the above it should be clear that the widely accepted views that identifies pure experience prior to the subject-object dichotomy with spiritual awakening in Zen Buddhism, and that therefore the philosophical position espoused in *An Inquiry into the Good* should be classified as Eastern philosophy are not sustainable. Rather, what Nishida called pure experience and Wundt referred to as direct experience must be identified with everyday experience. Insofar as *An Inquiry into the Good* was composed under the strong influence of trends in nineteenth-century German philosophy, one of the most important characteristics of Nishida's philosophy in his maiden work is his insight into pure experience as an activity that takes the form of the self-development of a peerless entity and that he adopts in the attempt to explain all things.

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