

NISHIDA KITARŌ

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Nishida Kitarō

The Man and His Thought

NISHITANI KEIJI

Translated by

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Translators' Note

The present volume is based on a work published in 1985 under the title 『西田幾多郎：その人と思想』 by Chikuma Shobō of Tokyo. As indicated in an author's preface written especially for this collection, the essays gathered together here span the period from 1936 to 1968. The work is presented here in its entirety save for one chapter on Nishida's diaries. This latter, composed as an afterword to the diaries themselves, was felt to break the unity of the work and to require too great a familiarity with the contents of the diaries. It has been omitted with the consent of the author.

Together with two essays on the philosophy of Tanabe Hajime (also omitted from this translation), the entire work was reprinted in volume 9 of the *Collected Writings of Nishitani Keiji* (Tokyo, 1987). The original Japanese titles and relevant bibliographical information for each of the chapters translated here are as follows:

- “Nishida, My Teacher.” 「わが師西田幾多郎先生を語る」、社会思想研究会『わが師を語る』、1951.
- “Nishida's Personality and Thought.” 「西田先生の人格と思想」、西田幾多郎先生頌徳記念会『西田先生とその哲学』、1949.
- “Nishida's Diaries.” 「西田先生の日記について」『西田幾多郎全集』、vol. 15 「月報：東海人」、岩波書店、1948.
- “Rooting Philosophy in Japanese Soil.” 「哲学が日本に根を下すために」『西田幾多郎全集』、全集再販パンフレット、岩波書店、1965.
- “Nishida's Place in the History of Philosophy.” 「西田哲学」『哲学講座』、vol. 2, 筑摩書房、1950.
- “*An Inquiry into the Good: Pure Experience, Truth and the Self, God.*” 「『善の研究』について」、現代日本思想体系、vol. 2, 『西田幾多郎』、1968.

“The Philosophies of Nishida and Tanabe.” 「西田哲学と田辺哲学」『田辺哲学』、弘文堂、1951.

“Questioning Nishida: Reflections on Three Critics.” 「西田哲学をめぐる論点」『思想』、1936.

Footnotes have been kept to a minimum. The majority of them are additions of the translators. Only references to the Japanese original of *An Inquiry into the Good* have been inserted into the text itself. A draft of a much needed new translation of the book by Abe Masao and Christopher Ives was consulted, but at the time our own work was being completed, the final text had not appeared in print. In deference to the coordination of philosophical terms throughout this work, the translations of citations from this work are therefore our own.

Abbreviations used in the notes:

NKZ 『西田幾多郎全集』. *Complete Works of Nishida Kitarō*. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1978, 19 vols.

THZ 『田辺元全集』. *Complete Works of Tanabe Hajime*. Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1963–1964, 15 vols.

TSZ 『高橋里美全集』. *Complete Works of Takahashi Satomi*. Tokyo: Fukumura Shuppan, 1973.

Chinese characters for names and technical terms, when not given in the notes, can be found in the Index. The names of Japanese persons cited in the translation are given in their normal order, that is, family name followed by personal name. In the case of works published in the West in which the order has been reversed, the family name has been set in capital letters to avoid ambiguity.

The translators would like to acknowledge the painstaking assistance of Jan Van Bragt, a seasoned translator of Nishitani's work who has once again brought his skills to bear on our efforts.

Preface

The material brought together in this book represents a scattering of essays written in reply to requests from various quarters. As such they constitute less an academic elucidation of the system of thought of the great philosopher Nishida Kitarō than a collation of altogether personal and subjective impressions and reflections on the man who was my teacher. This is not to say, of course, that I have not wanted to examine his thought objectively and purely as thought. But so many factors have intervened to obstruct that intention, and meantime so many others have begun to take up this kind of research, that I have not had the opportunity to pursue this path myself. I can only hope that the articles included here may serve as some small compensation for my failure in this regard. If these pages can but mark a milestone on the difficult road to a proper study of Nishida's philosophy, I shall consider my modest labors to have been more than rewarded.

When these labors are set against the wider background of our times, however, it is clear that much more is involved than presenting the thought of one particular philosopher. A glance at the present world situation shows us that in the economic and political realms the world is already being transformed into "one world" in the true sense of the term. As international exchange between East and West grows deeper, exchange at the level of intellectual culture has increased dramatically. More than ever before, our age has seen the tides of history swell pregnant with great changes propelling us into a new future. The current diffusion of interest in Nishida's philosophy among Europeans and Americans seems to be in keeping with this general temper. A number of his works, beginning with *An Inquiry into the Good*, have

already been translated, and other translations are now in progress. The universal mood of interchange in the realm of intellectual culture—perhaps as yet little known in Japan—is so deeply rooted in historical necessity that it can only develop still more rapidly with the passage of time. And with it, interest in Nishida's philosophy will also advance. In this context, an intensification of serious work on his philosophy in Japan will be an important task for the future.

I have said that the pieces included in this volume reflect merely my own impressions, but there is another element here on which I will touch from time to time in these pages. Simply put, my chance encounter with certain of Nishida's writings affected the entire course of my later life. I cannot imagine what my life would have been like, or even what I myself would be like now, had it not been for *An Inquiry into the Good* and the man who wrote it. When I say the entire course of my life was altered, I am not referring to the posts I would hold or the work I would do to earn a living. I mean that I was shown a way I could make my own to face the problem of whether my life had any meaning. I was given the basic strength to live life. Here again, to say that Nishida's writings pointed the way does not mean that they inspired me to a lifelong interest in the philosophical disciplines, let alone to a career in philosophy. Mine was the prior problem of personal survival itself: it was a question of "to be or not to be." The locus of my doubts was pre-philosophical. In this sense, it was through the encounter with Nishida the person, prior to the encounter with Nishida's thought, that I was shown the way.

Given the circumstances under which I became his student, even when I read Nishida's writings, I had the sense that in understanding his thought I was coming in touch with the man. Instead of falling into the common heresy of blending one's own feelings into what one is understanding, I believe that this recognition helped me better to appreciate the ideas of my teacher. This may be part of the reason why what I have to say about Nishida naturally turns into personal memories and reflections.

Understanding thought of any kind, and philosophical thought in particular, has its own sorts of problems. Among them is the problem we just noted: in the course of struggling to understand a philosopher, one's own views are often mixed in. It is only natural to try to be objective in grasping the meaning of another's ideas, but the attempt is no guarantee that problems will not arise. The very attempt to conform to another's thought in a purely objective fashion easily turns it into what we in our contemporary world call information, the mere transfer of cumulative knowledge. Where this happens, the person of the philosopher out of which ideas are born falls away like a cicada's shell. This is a difficulty inherent in the objective approach. In the case of philosophical thought, the person of the philosopher, the basic formative dynamism, houses the very spirit and life of the ideas. In this way philosophical thought and ideas are communicated from person to person (or from mind to mind). From the start the matter of philosophical thought is inseparably bound up with the person of the philosopher.

This approach has problems of its own. Granted that in some broad sense philosophical ideas entail as their formative dynamism the person of the thinker and that the two are inseparable for understanding a philosophy, nevertheless the idea that there is a spirit or life to thought seems too vague and ambiguous. Philosophy is already a discipline, and philosophical knowledge needs to be seen as a kind of scientific knowledge. The idea that philosophy contains as its basic dynamism something less than transparent, something dark and impenetrable to the eye, seems to run counter to its very nature.

Such objections have already been raised in the discussion of whether the essence of philosophy is to be sought in philosophy as science or in philosophy as life. Without wishing to enter into this difficult question here, I would only note that from a perspective that sees philosophy as an academic discipline, the question of the person that arises in philosophy as life probably falls outside the philosophical frame of reference, left over from an objective comprehension of the content of the thought. Even so, we cannot fail to see the person of one

who philosophizes expressing itself as a basic dynamism. Obviously the person can be understood through its self-expression in thought, but at the same time an understanding of thought emerges from an understanding of the person behind it.

For those who see philosophy as a science, the reciprocal relation of person to thought and thought to thinker is a post-philosophical afterthought, something outside the pale of the primary task of the student of philosophy. The person's relationship to the thought surfaces only in hazy ideas of a sense of "life" or an indwelling "spirit" floating about in the ideas. In the end, the matter of the thinker as a person has no place in the elucidation of ideas.

From the opposite perspective that sees thought and person as inseparable, it is precisely spirit or life that permeates the two and binds them to one another. One gets a good sense of the soul and vitality of ideas through the person of the thinker. What is *post-philosophical* from the standpoint of philosophy as science becomes *post-philosophical* from the standpoint of philosophy as life; what lies outside the framework of philosophy becomes the very cornerstone of philosophy. It is present in the philosophizing person and also in thought, where it appears as the basic dynamism of thought and as fundamental subjectivity. The self as subject is an important part of the content of thought. It may be likened to the halo with which holy figures are depicted in religious art. Insofar as the ambiguity referred to above points to something essentially ambiguous, resistant to any final clear and distinct analysis or quantification, inexhaustibly open to discrimination of any sort, we can only accept it from the outset just as it is. The way to clear understanding can only begin in this mode of ambiguity. This is the starting point for a proper understanding of philosophical thought.

The eighth century Chinese Zen master Shitou Xiqian writes in his *Tsan Tung Chi*: "The darkness is in the middle of the light—you cannot find it in its darkness."¹ The point is that one does not need to

1. Shitou Xiqian (700–791) was father of one of the two main lines of Chinese Zen.

shun clear and distinct places and deliberately grope around for inscrutable mysteries. From a standpoint that is all light, the darkness may only look like ambiguity, but in fact the truly mysterious and mystical is there. At the same time, the encounter with the mystical cannot take place in mere darkness, cut off from all light. Just as a merely surface rationalism is lacking in true reason, the arationality of a deep mysticism prevents us from encountering what is truly mystical. Shitou Xiqian adds later in the same work: “The light is in the middle of the darkness—you cannot see it in its brightness.” What is the light in the very middle of the truly mystical? To see it, he says, we cannot look only at its bright side, turning the light of reason on it.

Without our going into too much detail here, a first reading of these two short lines of an ancient writer suffices to reveal a complex structural relation between the elements, here given as light and darkness, that rule the interiority of things themselves. There is a dialectical logic at work in the development of this idea that includes contradictions like affirmation and negation and the negation of negation. The problems of the person of the thinker referred to above and of the transmission of thought are also woven into the working of this logic. In addition, different readers find different meanings in these lines. The passage winds up in a sort of conclusion with these words: “Light and darkness face each other—like footsteps following one after the other.” Light and darkness are relative and yet move as one body, as when we shift our weight from the back foot to the front in walking. In the words of the Zen saying, “Light and darkness, at bottom a pair.”² All of this may help in some way to understand the method and content of Nishida’s philosophy.

The foregoing is all related to the fact that although I am one of Nishida’s disciples, the essays that make up this book do not in the main represent the results of an objective study based on the subject

2. These words appear in the opening commentary to case 51 of the classic Zen text of Sung China, 碧巖錄 *Biyān lu* (*Blue Cliff Record*).

matter of his thought so much as my own experiences and impressions of Nishida as a person as well as my own feelings. At my first meeting with Nishida I came into contact not with the discipline of philosophy but only with the “person.” The pre-philosophical locus of this meeting becomes a kind of post-philosophical locus in the present book, written as one who has engaged with Nishida’s thought as a student of philosophy. And yet even in my pre-philosophical contact with him there was an orientation towards the discipline of philosophy. The *pre-philosophical* was at the same time *pre-philosophical*.

In the same way, I consider what is *post-philosophical* in these essays to be *post-philosophical*. Insofar as I speak as one of Nishida’s disciples about his person, I am dealing with something outside the framework of philosophy, something left over after the study of his ideas. And yet at the same time, insofar as the person of the philosopher belongs inseparably to the matter of his or her ideas, what pertains to the person reverts to our understanding of the thought. This is why I speak of it as *post-philosophical*. For myself, it is possible also to relate this *post-philosophical* personal question to the personal aspect of what I called my *pre-philosophical* period. In other words, my relationship to Nishida is part of the total horizon of my life.

This book represents a record of personal sentiments covering a period of nearly three decades, from 1936 to 1968. The period of personal confusion that forms a backdrop to these years has been detailed in two essays entitled “My Youth” and “My Philosophical Starting Point,” both of which are contained in *The Mind of the Wind*.³

I owe the preparation of this volume entirely to the labors of Sasaki Tōru, who edited and arranged the material here, as he had with

3. 『風のこころ』(Tokyo, 1980). For English translations of these essays, see “The Days of My Youth: An Autobiographical Sketch,” *FASS Society Journal* (Winter 1985–1986): 25–30; “The Starting Point of My Philosophy,” *FASS Society Journal* (Spring 1986): 24–9. Concerning the latter, see also the opening pages of Jan Van Bragt, “Nishitani on Japanese Religiosity,” *Japanese Religiosity*, ed. J. Spac (Tokyo, 1971), 271–84.

The Mind of the Wind, and to Ōnishi Atsushi, one of the editors of Chikuma Shobō. To both of them I wish to express my deepest appreciation.

Nishitani Keiji

Kyoto

1 May 1985