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Title	How Original is Nishida Kitarō's Philosophy in An Inquiry into the Good? A Critical Investigation of Japan's 'First' Philosophy
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Degree Grantor	北海道大学
Degree Name	博士(文学)
Dissertation Number	甲第14561号
Issue Date	2021-03-25
DOI	https://doi.org/10.14943/doctoral.k14561
Doc URL	https://hdl.handle.net/2115/96799
Type	doctoral thesis
File Information	Richard_Stone.pdf



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Philosophy

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Introduction

Nishida Kitarō and the Beginning of the Modern Japanese Philosophical Canon

0.1) Nishida Kitarō as Japan's First Philosopher

As the story goes, in 1911 Nishida Kitarō revolutionized the Japanese intellectual world by publishing its first original philosophical work of any merit, *An Inquiry into the Good*. During Japan's 40+ year modernization effort in the Meiji era (1868-1912) that was capped off by a military victory over Russia, the Japanese had largely approached Western theory from the standpoint of importing and interpreting foreign knowledge. Early social thinkers like Nishi Amane and Fukuzawa Yukichi highlighted utilitarian and positivistic trends in Western philosophy that could offer immediate benefits. Later on, even as academic philosophy developed in universities and scholars started seriously researching 'metaphysical' or 'pure' philosophy, Meiji efforts are often claimed to have stopped at strict interpretations of Western scholars or disappointingly simplistic efforts to synthesize traditional Japanese thought and Western philosophy. Indeed, such efforts are often taken to be little more than 'sketches' of a potential philosophical worldview, with little to no philosophical merit. Even by the beginning of the 20th century, renowned thinkers such as Nakae Chōmin famously argued on such grounds that there was no, nor had there ever been, any such thing as philosophy in Japan.¹ In comparison to these disappointing early efforts, however, it is taken as common-sense that Nishida's theory of pure experience offered a truly original and enlightening philosophical position. In *An Inquiry into the Good*, Nishida attempted to reconsider the very nature of reality outgoing from pure experience, i.e., experience that stands before any distinction between subject and object; relying only on what could be empirically verified, all the while struggling to differentiate his own original insights with traditional sources from his native Japan and Western philosophers.

In this way, it is said that Nishida – relying on both his experience with traditional Japanese Zen Buddhism and his reading of the newest Western philosophical literature – managed to articulate his own empirical analyses and metaphysical intuitions and was thus able to forge an irrefutably novel position.² This philosophy of pure experience in turn captured the

¹ Nakae more specifically stated that “from antiquity to the present day, there has never been any philosophy in Japan.” (Cited in Blocker and Starling 2001, 1)

² There are too many works that make this claim in some regard for me to even come close to listing all relevant examples. However, the industry standard seems to go thus and so: “In the Meiji period (1868–

imagination of his countrymen, and eventually led to the creation of the so-called Kyoto-school at the hands of those such as Tanabe Hajime and Miki Kiyoshi. For this reason, it is widely assumed that any serious scholar of modern Japanese philosophy must start with Nishida's earliest work, not only because of the merit and originality of his theory, but also because of the influence it held amongst Japanese youth who, for the first time, saw the potential to create a truly unique Japanese philosophy. Or, again, that is at least how the story has been told for quite some time.

If I seem to have been distancing myself from the narrative put forward above, it is not without good reason. Indeed, it is my hope that any reader of the above-written paragraph will have felt at least some modicum of discomfort toward the broad and brash narrative provided within it. Naturally, regardless of how little one knows about the history of Japan, one's first reaction will almost certainly be shock that, in spite of Japan's rich history of Buddhist and Confucian thought, 'original philosophy' is said to have started in the 20th century. On this point, we can follow the old distinction present in the Japanese language by distinguishing 'thought (*shisō*, 思想)' and 'philosophy (*tetsugaku*, 哲学)', and allay at least some concerns that come with anointing Nishida to this lofty position, given that we can think of plenty of novel pre-modern thinkers who did not write within the framework of Western philosophy. Thus, to amend the previous paragraph, Nishida is the first original philosopher in the strictest notion of the term philosophy, although there were plenty of worthwhile and original thinkers before him.

Yet, even assuming a definition of philosophy that can help us rule out classic thinkers like Dōgen and Kūkai from the Japanese 'philosophical' canon (more on that shortly), what it means for Nishida to be more 'original' or of 'greater-value' than his fellow Meiji philosophers is not actually as clear as we often make it out to be. If it were true that Meiji philosophers spent all of their time merely translating and paraphrasing their Western counterparts with no intention to make their own philosophical claims (as they are often implied to have done), then the matter would be quite simple. Nishida would be original because he thought for himself and made novel claims while the researchers of Western philosophy before him were too mired

1912), when Japan reopened itself to the world after more than two centuries of national isolation, a generation of scholars devoted themselves to importing Western academic fields of inquiry, including 'philosophy.' After many years of studying Western philosophy and Eastern classics, alongside a dedicated practice of Zen Buddhism, Nishida was the first major modern Japanese thinker to successfully go beyond learning from the West to construct his own original system of thought. This he began to do in his maiden work, *An Inquiry into the Good*, published in 1911 (Nishida 1990)." (Davis 2019)

in textual interpretations to do the same. However, we can easily ask: is this really an accurate representation of the Meiji philosophical world? If nothing else, Inoue Enryō, Kiyozawa Manshi, Onishi Hajime, and Tsunashima Ryōsen, amongst many others, likely had no intention to merely copy Western philosophy or to be led along by newly imported knowledge. Quite to the contrary, many authors – including those listed above, thoroughly believed themselves to have put forth a novel philosophical system of their own. Naturally, one may be tempted to assume that, regardless of their intent to pursue original philosophical inquiries, they simply failed to produce the worthwhile results that Nishida did. Yet, this is not something we should merely take for granted. Indeed, as we shall see in much greater detail as we go along, many of the most iconic claims in Nishida’s own philosophy were (at least partially) shaped by ideas put forward by his predecessors. The idea that Nishida – by all accounts the beginning of the modern Japanese philosophical canon – is the ‘first original philosopher’ in Japanese history, is by no means an obviously true statement.

If any of this is true, then, why has there been so much currency given to the idea that Nishida is the undisputed first philosopher of the modern Japanese era? On the one hand, it seems hard to swallow the idea that this reputation was borne out of sheer ignorance of previous philosophers. Yet, on the other hand, there seems to be little in the way of actually attempting to address what makes Nishida worthy of the first position in the Japanese canon. Naturally, there has been some amount of research recognizing how his work was influenced by his predecessors, but such efforts have often taken for granted the notion that Nishida was substantially different from earlier Meiji philosophers. Was Nishida different because he relied on ‘Eastern’ insights in addition to Western knowledge?³ Certainly not, considering that several philosophers going back to the beginning of the Meiji era attempted to do the same thing in an even more explicit tone. Is this because only Nishida wrote outgoing from the domain of his own experience – as opposed, presumably, to the repetition of information that can be found in Western texts? Again, it would be easier to answer in the negative here when we consider a variety of possible counter examples of Meiji philosophers relying on empirical or experiential analyses in their own philosophy. So, then, what is left? Is it simply a matter of convenience to start from Nishida? Or was it a matter of popularity to accept Nishida as the

³ The problem of the early Nishida’s relation to the Eastern, particularly in comparison with his contemporaries, will be a recurring theme in this thesis. Specifically, as we go along, we will see how in many cases, ironically enough, Nishida’s reluctance to rely on ‘East/West’ syntheses in order to motivate his philosophical theory was one of the most compelling points of his early work.

first original philosopher? Put bluntly, why precisely is it that the modern Japanese philosophical canon starts with *An Inquiry into the Good*?

Before continuing, it is absolutely essential to clarify one specific point: to question what it means to say that Nishida is Japan's first philosopher is not, in and of itself, a dismissal of the notion in its entirety. Naturally, upon realizing that a case could be made to start modern philosophy in Japan from Inoue Enryō, Onishi Hajime, or whoever else we may think of, it becomes all too easy to overreact and dismiss the widespread narrative that it starts with Nishida as meaningless. However, just because a narrative has been treated as true in an uncritical fashion does not necessarily mean that it is false. An investigation of Nishida's philosophy could easily reveal substantial differences between him and his predecessors that could further illuminate his position in Japanese philosophy. Yet, given that this narrative has taken on a life of its own and has significantly shaped the way we look at the history of philosophy in Japan over the past 100 years, it seems wise to properly assess what it means to say Nishida is Japan's first philosopher.

0.2 Japanese Philosophy as we know it (and Japanese philosophy as we do not know it)

Needless to say, a good deal of readers may wish to reject the problematic as it has been introduced up to this point. The solution to whatever problems that may seem to come along with claiming Nishida as Japan's first philosopher is simple: we must merely accept the plurality implicit in the word philosophy. Certainly, Nishida is the beginning of one particular understanding of the Japanese philosophical canon. However, there is no reason to look at this particular understanding of Japanese philosophy as the end-all-be-all of the entire nation's intellectual history. One understanding of the phrase might start us off with classic thinkers like Kūkai and Dōgen. Another understanding might start with Nishi Amane coining the phrase *Tetsugaku* back in the 1860's. The very notion of philosophy is so multifaceted that it would be absurd to limit ourselves to one fundamental understanding of the term. Thus, outgoing from this, we ought to recognize the fact that accepting the validity of one Japanese intellectual lineage does not in any way imply a dismissal of any other way of viewing the Japanese philosophical tradition.

Indeed, this is an important point to note. Putting aside the Herculean task of assessing what philosophy itself is, we can see that even defining smaller sub-genres, like Japanese philosophy, can provide us with various different models to look over. To wit, the most popular

attempt at providing an overview of these various models has been given by Heisig, Maraldo, and Kasulis in the *Japanese Philosophical Sourcebook*. The three editors make a distinction for four categories. While it is possible to understand Japanese philosophy as something exclusive to scholars working within a Western framework, something principally derived from Eastern thought, or something that only truly occurs when traditional Japanese modes of thought are re-written in modern philosophical languages, we only need to concern ourselves with the fourth definition. This fourth definition, which seems to be the driving force behind the Japanese philosophy industry as a whole, emphasizes the qualities of Japanese philosophy that set it apart from non-Japanese philosophy. Thus, according to this understanding, the inclusion of influence or insights from specifically ‘Japanese’ modes of thought into the act of pursuing Western philosophical studies creates something unique. While there are obvious concerns concerning Orientalism or Colonialism that come creeping into this definition (insofar as it endorses a dubious and uncritical acceptance of ‘Japanese’ values constructed during the colonial period), this does not change the fact that we can gain new insights by utilizing ideas that have flourished in one culture in order to stimulate a philosophical inquiry. The philosopher who is introduced as the poster child for this definition, and also as the apparent proof of its productive potential, is none other than our very own Nishida Kitarō.⁴

So how does this plurality of ways to understand Japanese philosophy relate to Nishida and why do we need to concern ourselves with the definitions set out in the *Sourcebook*? As we can assume by his inclusion as the paradigm for this understanding of Japanese philosophy, the fourth definition generally seems to be what scholars are assuming when they claim that Nishida is Japan’s first original philosopher. Insofar as this is the case, we may be entitled to think that we have solved any potential problems that come along as a result of calling Nishida the first original Japanese philosopher. Certainly, there is a sense of the word ‘philosophy’ in which the Japanese canon starts a thousand years before Nishida’s birth. But, so long as the fourth definition is a valid way of understanding Japanese philosophy, then can we not merely propose an alternative canon that starts in 1911 without causing any intellectual problems?⁵

⁴ More detailed information on the meaning of Japanese philosophy can be found in the Heisig et al. 1995, 19-21.

⁵ Keep in mind that the validity of the fourth definition is, in and of itself, not uncontested by any means. Certainly, it appears intuitive and obvious, as evidenced by the fact it has more or less become the implicit meaning we assume when someone uses the phrase ‘Japanese philosophy’. At worst, however, it can be construed as a self-serving and overly convenient attempt to delimit a much broader field to a very small and comparatively easy to appropriate section of Japanese thought as a whole. My hope is that, over the course of this thesis, the historical background for the comparative popularity of this definition will become clear, even without a total thematic assessment of the nature of Japanese philosophy.

In the face of this potential criticism, there are three particular points we ought to remember here. The first is that although we are, indeed, only dealing with one specific meaning of the word Japanese philosophy, it is hardly an insignificant understanding of the term. The second point is that – whether we accept plurality or not – the standards for any canon cannot be accepted as being merely arbitrary. In other words, in order for a canon to serve its purpose as a guide for a fruitful reading of a historical or intellectual tradition, it cannot blindly start from whichever point we choose to locate it at (e.g., regardless of how open we are to a multiplicity of traditions, there is no intelligible meaning of modern Japanese philosophy that starts with Richard Stone). The third, and possibly more important, point is that this plurality in the term Japanese philosophy *does not actually constitute a solution to our initial problem*. To accept that there are multiple perspectives we can take when observing the development of Japanese philosophy does not mean that we should accept the implicit canon that comes along with our usual definitions to be static or beyond questioning. Hence, the fact that there are multiple ways to understand the phrase Japanese philosophy does not mean that there is no room for re-assessing the validity of such understandings as an accurate depiction of one possible meaning of philosophy.

Outgoing from these considerations, we must admit that Nishida's reputation or privileged position in Japanese intellectual history cannot be written off as harmless or only one sense of the phrase Japanese philosophy without giving it a proper inspection. While it is true that ever since the initial publication of *An Inquiry into the Good*, Nishida's work was recognized as a landmark achievement in Japanese philosophy, what that achievement was and why it separates him from his predecessors has not been questioned in any serious capacity. Audiences in the early 20th century evidently felt something in Nishida's work that resonated with them in a way that few other indigenous philosophical works had. Perhaps, indeed, the early proponents of such an explanation were saying this within the broader context of Japanese thought and had reason for their claims.⁶ However, as time passed by, this intuitive feel was replaced only with the core of what such witnesses had felt at that time: Nishida is Japan's first modern philosopher. The result of this forgetfulness is the sedimentation of certain historical facts. It becomes 'obvious' that Nishida was original in comparison to those who stood before him. There becomes no sense in asking what makes Nishida more important to the development

⁶ As an example, consider the possibility that Nishida's students in Germany used this reputation as a means to introduce his importance in contemporary Japanese philosophy during a period where such information was not readily available. (See Maraldo 2017)

of Japanese thought than any other Meiji philosopher. There is thus no need for – or even possibility of – comparison, either. Nishida's work has been put on a pedestal, studied, and handed down and interpreted through generations. His predecessors, on the other hand, have become largely forgotten and mostly left to fade into obscurity.

Of course, this becomes problematic when we start to remember or uncover possible counter arguments for our unassailable or obvious statements. How can we reconcile this obviousness with the fact that there are, indeed, major similarities between Nishida and other mid-Meiji philosophers who have been long since forgotten? Why do we not more seriously engage in research on pre-Nishida philosophy? In short, what do we do once we come to grips with the fact that starting with Nishida as the obvious beginning of modern Japanese philosophy may not be as clear cut as we think?

0.3) Why Worry about a Canon?

There is one potential answer to the question posed above that we should seriously consider: some might say that we do not *need* to do anything in the face of this narrative crisis. For decades, research upon Nishida has been thriving. For the past 30 or 40 years, this has even been the case both domestically and abroad, i.e., both in Japan and other countries all over the world.⁷ Nishida has offered researchers countless insights about topics ranging from selfhood to solipsism, from free-will to feelings. And, as the old saying goes: *if it ain't broke, don't fix it*. In other words, why bother changing the way we talk about Japanese philosophy or Nishida's work if all we stand to gain are some similar perspectives from authors who write in (even more) difficult to understand Japanese? Is Nishida's reputation not a harmless rejoinder to help get new researchers interested in his work? What good could possibly come from seriously analyzing this simple motive to study his philosophy?

Such an attitude is not only understandable, in some cases it may very well be appropriate to avoid worrying too deeply about Nishida's historical background when analyzing his texts (lest we should otherwise reduce all of his ideas to his status as a Japanese man living in the 20th century). Yet, at the same time, this admission is by no means an argument against the usefulness of rethinking a philosophical canon in a more general sense.

⁷ And this has proven to be doubly true in the last decade or so, as evidenced by the increase in organizations developed to increase the output of Japanese philosophical research at an international level, such as the International Association of Japanese Philosophy (IAJP) and the European Network of Japanese Philosophy (ENOJP).

There are, in my view, at least five important reasons that can motivate us to reassess Nishida's location in the Japanese philosophical canon.

1) The first relates to how we capture the overarching narrative concerning the history of Japanese philosophy itself. It should go almost without saying that the publication (and, later, mass-circulation) of *An Inquiry into the Good* was a crucial moment in the history of Japanese philosophy in some way or another. As such, *An Inquiry into the Good* can be, and has been, understood as a turning point of sorts in Japan's relationship with Western philosophy. Yet, it is precisely because of this crucial role that *An Inquiry into the Good* played in the development of early modern Japanese intellectual trends that we must avoid looking only at it and ignoring the circumstances it was published in. The stereotype that Japan absorbed Western technologies and ways of thinking in the Meiji years before developing them after their victory in the Russo-Japanese War may be useful in some cases, but it is hardly absolute. For this reason, we should also at least remain skeptical toward the thesis that everything before Nishida was tantamount to the absorption of Western sources whereas Nishida himself was (almost magically) original. Failing to do so can only end in a skewed view of the development of Japanese philosophy.

This would, however, be a pity not only for philosophers interested in the history of Japanese thought, but also for anyone interested in the overarching modernization process of 19th and 20th century Japan. How did pre-Nishidian Japanese philosophers respond to Western philosophy? Was it truly only through hermeneutic analyses and cheap East/West fusions that they were able to contribute anything? Was there no one who managed to put together any original statements worthy of our attention? Was the struggle to adapt to Western philosophical ideas as tiresome as it has classically portrayed to be? Or were there authors who were capable of tapping into ideas in Western philosophy more naturally? These questions all relate to the ethos of Meiji philosophy and, as such, can give us a good look at one important way in which Japanese intellectuals wrestled with the many new resources and problems that seem to define the second half of the 19th century in Japan.

2) The second reason is closely related to the first. That is to say, the way we educate students and inform non-experts about the history of Japanese philosophy (or Nishida's philosophy) is largely dependent on the narratives we provide as a frame of reference. While it almost goes without saying, experts in the field of Japanese philosophy are, to some extent, responsible for helping guide and introduce those without prior philosophical/linguistic training into this often

untranslated and inaccessible field. Thus, it is up to experts to provide such non-experts with an accurate and helpful point of reference. What issues were being debated at a certain point in time? What struggles did Japanese philosophers face when tackling said issues? What were the dominant trends in a specific era and what problems came alongside it? Answering questions like this can help ease readers into the field and facilitate dialogue between experts of Japanese philosophy and those working in other fields.

When considered in this way, we can easily see the importance of providing accurate narratives as an expert and, moreover, understand the need to be careful to provide an accurate and reliable introduction to students and non-experts. One part of our efforts to fulfil this responsibility should be careful self-inventory and questioning of the narratives we employ when engaging with said students and non-experts. And the only way we accomplish these tasks is through thorough-going historical and historiographical investigations.

3) Continuing the logic found in the second point, we can note a third reason pertaining to how we constitute or establish the topics of our research and how we delineate between different cultures and traditions. What I mean by this, more specifically, is that carefully questioning the meaning and nature behind the various senses of the word Japanese philosophy is a crucial aspect of making academic comparison and inclusion possible. Was pre-Nishidian philosophy not commensurate with Western philosophy? Was it incomplete? How does it differ from other traditions? In order to answer these questions, once again, carefully questioning the meaning of the narratives we use is imperative.

On a similar note, it is also worth noting that John Maraldo has questioned the validity of the term ‘first modern philosopher’ on precisely these grounds. As Maraldo points out, this way of looking at Nishida’s philosophy seems to entail, to some degree, a “double bind” of sorts. The assertion that Nishida is Japan’s first philosopher, after all, carries with it the implication that (1) there is a distinctive cut between Nishida and his predecessors and (2) there is a similar cut between Japanese philosophy and contemporary Western philosophy. What these cuts serve to do, then, is to isolate Japanese philosophy as somehow inaccessible or incomparable with other traditions and philosophies, insofar as everything before Nishida is incommensurate to philosophy as it is understood in the Western tradition. While we will not assess whether or not this is actually the case at the moment, we should recognize that how we

respond to issues like those raised by Maraldo depends largely on what we mean by the claim that Nishida is worthy of such a cut.⁸

4) Having read through the first three reasons, a scholar of Nishida would be perfectly justified to reply that they are still not interested in questioning Nishida's status as modern Japan's first philosopher because they do not particularly care about 'Japanese philosophy' in general in the first place. Instead, one may say that he or she is only interested in Nishida himself (or, more broadly speaking, Kyoto-school philosophy). This is a perfectly understandable sentiment, given that supporting Nishida's philosophical program should not necessarily entail a commitment to anything inherently 'Japanese.'

Still, it is important to remember that calling into question Nishida's place in the canon can help us better understand his philosophy as well. This is true in two ways. First, positively speaking, we shall see throughout this thesis that the questions Nishida faces did not necessarily start with him. Looking at the aporias left by Inoue Enryō in his considerations on the unsustainability of materialism and idealism, for instance, can thus give us a more substantial understanding of what Nishida is trying to achieve in his philosophical project by highlighting the problems he inherited during his formative period. Additionally, in a negative sense, we can see that distinguishing Nishida from previous authors who appear similar to him on a superficial level can give us a deeper understanding of what has made his philosophy so enticing. In other words, asking why we are reading Nishida and not Kiyozawa or Miyake or Inoue can help us delve deeper into his writings.⁹

5) The fifth motive becomes apparent as an outcome of the other four and relates to how we understand the meaning of 'interesting' or 'original' philosophy. As I have implied above, the claim that Nishida is the 'first original' philosopher has indeed been taken for granted over the years, but it also has a certain intuitive appeal and research on his *An Inquiry into the Good* has proven to be particularly fruitful when compared with any other text written in the Meiji era. While many scholars unwittingly accept the fact that Nishida is the first original philosopher

⁸ See the third chapter of Maraldo (2017) for a more detailed analysis of this double bind.

⁹ A point of caution is in order here. The first being that one could easily misconstrue this attitude as one of mere confirmation bias. That is to say, one could accuse us of merely searching Nishida's work until we find something that 'demonstrates' his superiority. However, this would only be a valid critique if we assume that there is no possibility that we come out of comparisons between Nishida and his predecessors with the conclusion that we *should* be reading Kiyozawa or Miyake or Inoue which, in this thesis, we shall not do.

in Japanese history, and some others dogmatically deny any claim of his to originality, very few philosophers in either camp seems to have actually stopped to think about what it means for a work to be ‘original’.

This is, of course, a problem when we try to assess the historical narrative surrounding Japanese philosophy that I mentioned previously. Perhaps more importantly, though, not exploring Nishida’s intuitive position in the Japanese philosophical canon would be a wasted opportunity for us to actually think about what makes philosophy ‘original’ in the first place. That is to say, when we look at Nishida’s philosophy, we can easily see the potential for a case-study into the nature of originality and what makes philosophy valuable or interesting to us at all. Indeed, the very historical background that has fueled the narrative of his primacy in the Japanese canon is responsible for a rare case in which we are able to actually track the historical development of at least one definition of philosophy, starting from its importation to its more ‘original’ developments. Hopefully, a conscientious and unbiased exploration of the ‘original’ Nishida and his ‘unoriginal’ but notably similar predecessors will provide a window into what makes a philosophical argument valuable or worthwhile.

I hope that, in view of these five motives, the reader can have a more clearly defined sense of what we can gain from looking into the background of *An Inquiry into the Good*. With that said, however, these underlying goals and motives shall serve only as motivation to pursue the research presented in this thesis at its most basic level and will not be our direct object of question. My reasoning behind this is simple: before we can assess the ramifications of Nishida’s position in Japanese philosophy, it is crucial that we first clarify precisely what that position is, and what it is that has propelled his philosophy to legendary status in comparison with his contemporaries.

0.4) The Goal and Approach of this Thesis

So, then, up to this point, we have seen that Nishida has uncritically been accepted as the beginning of modern Japanese philosophy (in at least one largely accepted sense) and that we, as scholars of Japanese philosophy, have at least five very good reasons to engage in a thematic study concerning this issue. However, with that said, to engage with every facet of *An Inquiry into the Good* and its relationship with Meiji philosophy is just not possible. The Meiji period lasted for almost 50 years, after all, and no sane person would ever dream of documenting

every aspect of philosophy in this era, let alone how it developed with Nishida's complex work in mind. As this is the case, we must come up with a concrete goal that can drive us forward in this thesis as well as a method of achieving this goal.

Hence, for our goal in this thesis, we will choose a rather simple task. We will try to answer the following question: what do we mean when we say that Nishida Kitarō's *An Inquiry into the Good* is the first original philosophical work in modern Japan? I hope that the reader will note that I have been quite specific in the way that I have phrased this question. First, I would appreciate that the reader recognizes that I am not asking *if* Nishida was the first original philosopher or not. I have done this for two reasons. First, while I shall delve deeper into this point later on, I believe that the reception of *An Inquiry into the Good* gives us a hint that points us to the fact that Nishida's position was likely not fabricated decades later by philosophers who had merely forgotten about counter-examples. There is, at least, a sufficient historical tradition that has accepted Nishida's place in the Japanese canon for the time being. Second, I believe there are intuitive reasons to think of Nishida as being substantially different from his peers. That is to say, even without conducting any profound textual analysis, I think that most readers would be inclined to read *An Inquiry into the Good* over any other single work from the Meiji period.¹⁰ In this regard, I think it makes far more sense for us to (1) act on the premise that Nishida's position in the Japanese canon is, at the very least, not total nonsense and (2) explore exactly what it is that makes Nishida (as well any other philosopher) original in comparison with those who came before him.

The question is, though, how are we going to go about completing this task? The answer, of course, is a careful historical and historiographical investigation. However, as we have already established, there are far too many potential sources to look at and discuss in the course of one doctoral thesis. Naturally, one may be tempted here to limit this investigation to Nishida's relation with one other author or particular problem in Meiji philosophy. Yet, his chimeric capacity to transmute a variety of authors' works into resources for expressing his own worldview is an insurmountable barrier that prevents us from looking at only one

¹⁰ This second point is far more tenuous than the first. Naturally, one could accuse me of being biased on this point (to which I would respond by merely inviting them to read the texts themselves and draw their own conclusions). Perhaps more problematic is the potential claim that the linguistic issues that come with reading philosophical texts written before *An Inquiry into the Good* could be enough to make readers favor Nishida, regardless of the philosophical merit of other potential original philosophers. Particularly in cases in which the language employed is neither fully classical Japanese nor as modern as Nishida (such as in the work of Tsunashima Ryōsen, for instance) linguistic barriers can stop non-native readers from sufficiently enjoying a text. While such practical issues deserve more attention than we can give them at the moment, we will unfortunately have to set them aside in this thesis.

philosophical concept or line of questioning. Put differently, Nishida's relation to other philosophers in and outside of Japan is far too dispersed to point out only one potentially original predecessor and compare the two. Moreover, putting his philosophical alchemy aside, Nishida's relation with his preceding philosophers appears in different ways throughout the various parts of *An Inquiry into the Good*. Insofar as this is the case, it would also be hard to find one single question that binds him to only one particular predecessor in Meiji philosophy. As we shall see throughout the thesis, Nishida's intellectual debt to the problems of the Meiji period is not limited to one hint or key concern, but instead stretches out into debates in various different circles. Insofar as this is the case, looking at only one aspect of his work in relation to 19th century Japanese philosophy is not sufficient to convincingly highlight what makes him so allegedly unique. So, in light of this difficulty, how do we go about re-evaluating Nishida's place in the canon?

The only answer I have come up with is to embrace the multifaceted nature of Nishida's relationship with his predecessors, and thus look at Nishida's relation with various authors as they relate to the core topics he touches upon in *An Inquiry into the Good*. To be more specific, I believe that the most intelligent way of analyzing Nishida's relationship to other philosophers in the Meiji era is to break down his relationship with his predecessors as they correlate to the various sections of *An Inquiry into the Good*. As readers of Nishida will already likely know, the book is divided into four sections. Among these sections, the first and second sections provide an explication of the concept of pure experience as the one true reality, the third section introduces the ethical implications of this worldview, and the fourth section serves as Nishida's first major contribution to the philosophy of religion. In accord with these divisions, I will split this thesis up into three sections, showing a fragmentary glimpse of how each of these topics relates Nishida with specific predecessors who are relevant to those topics. Although the question I will approach for each of these particular topics will be different, the general method will remain the same. In each case, I will first demonstrate the historical context of the early Nishida's work before seeing how (or, in some cases, if) Nishida differs from his contemporaries' efforts to express similar ideas. A brief outline of each of these three chapters can be found below.

In Chapter 1, we will start with an analysis of the cornerstone of Nishida's early philosophy (and, possibly, his entire philosophical career): his theory of pure experience. Indeed, a look at the historicity of this theory will reveal the basic paradox that lies at the heart of Nishida's relationship to Meiji philosophy, as well as introduce the core themes in this

doctoral thesis. In this chapter, we will explore the basic issue in which Nishida's philosophy of pure experience is treated as both an unparalleled and unprompted start to original philosophy in Japan as well as the final incarnation of a staple in Meiji period philosophy: the theory of "phenomena-qua-reality." As the name implies, this theory looked to provide a view of reality in which conscious phenomena are immediately one with (*soku*) reality itself. In order to see how this theory – which has been associated with such authors as Inoue Tetsujirō, Kiyozawa Manshi, and Miyake Setsurei – relates to Nishida's philosophy of pure experience, we will conduct a minimal genealogical investigation focusing on the relation between Nishida and the alleged first proponent of this theory, Inoue Enryō. By means of evaluating the similarities and differences between how these two thinkers interpreted reality, two things will become clear. First, we will be able to clearly see that there are substantial overlapping claims in both of their theories. In this sense, I believe it will allow us to state quite distinctively that Nishida's philosophical originality ought not be pursued in the philosophical intuitions he portrays as much. However, at the same time, we will also be able to see a critical difference between the ways that both of these authors approach philosophy, and what they expect of philosophical argumentation. This will open the way for us to see one basic claim of this thesis: Nishida's philosophical originality can be found not only in the ideas he espouses, but rather we must look carefully at his methodology and his attitude toward philosophical argumentation.

In Chapter 2, we will move on to an exploration of the historicity of Nishida's ethics. As authors going back to Takahashi Satomi have claimed, Nishida's ethics appear to be the comparatively 'least' original or valuable aspect of his early philosophy.¹¹ In order to evaluate whether or not this common-sense understanding is accurate and cognitively valuable, we will take another look at Nishida's ethical theory as it is situated within the critical discourse concerning individualism in the Meiji period. In other words, in order to clarify the meaning and originality of Nishida's contribution to ethics within the Meiji period, we must accomplish the following two goals. First, we will have to establish the framework in which Nishida's ethics formed. That is to say, we must make clear what problems he faced and what matters were of considerable import to thinkers in his generation. Only after we have done so can we move on to our second goal: establishing what – if anything – Nishida could contribute to ethical discussions in the Meiji period. In response to these tasks, I will make the following two claims. The first will be that Nishida's ethical thought ought to be understood within the progression of thinkers starting from early efforts to assert the need for 'independent' and 'self-

¹¹ Takahashi 1912/2001, 336

sufficient' individuals such as Fukuzawa Yukichi, which later progressed to what was referred to as the theory of self-realization. The second will be that, although there are significant flaws with Nishida's ethics (due largely to their lack of capability to account for fairly obvious political questions related to the life of the individual), the consistency of his ethics with his ontological views manages to provide a theoretical background for many Meiji iterations of similar ideas that had – up to that point – been argued for with little to no substantiation.

In Chapter 3, we will finally approach the religious aspect of Nishida's thought as it relates to Meiji philosophy. In order to do so, we will focus on the concept that is perhaps the most appealing (and least understood) notion in his earliest work: The True Self (真の自己). In *An Inquiry into the Good*, Nishida often discusses our individual selves as though they were merely parts of a second, greater, 'true' self. In spite of the intuitive appeal such a reading may carry, I question whether or not it can be justified within the framework of his philosophical project (or if it is even an accurate depiction of what he is trying to express). Keeping this in mind, we will attempt to understand how Nishida uses this term, and what possible influence the historical background of his work could have had on this possibly misunderstood term. In order to accomplish this task, we will move in the following order. First, we will contextualize the spread of the phrase personality in the context of what Inoue Katsuhito (2016) has referred to as Organic Philosophy. Put better, we will see that frameworks employing a 'small self' and 'great self' were often treated as a bridge between the individual's consciousness and a larger consciousness (i.e., the nation, humanity). As our representative of this organic tradition, we will focus on the work of Miyake Setsurei in *The Cosmos* (1909). For Miyake, the universe was not just *comparable* to an organism – it *was* an organism. Our individual selves, as part of this organism, needed to find harmony with this larger consciousness. Although in many respects this appears commensurate with how Nishida describes the relation between individual and universe or self and God, I believe that reading him along these lines raises unanswerable questions and fails to get at the heart of what Nishida was hoping to achieve. Hence, in this chapter, we will attempt to provide a non-organic reading of Nishida's theory of self that cannot be spoken of in terms of the relation between part and whole or small self and big self and – in the process – rethink his related conceptions of religion and God. While doing so, we will consider how to understand the relationship between the potentially 'non-organic' Nishida and his openly organic predecessors like Miyake.

0.5) Methodology and Themes

In order to perform an academically permissible level of analysis in each of these three chapters, it is paramount that we find some footholds to help us along the way. As was mentioned previously, the Meiji era was a long stretch of time, and was the stage for a great deal of dynamic intellectual development. Identifying all lines of thought, how they fit in with the bigger picture of Japanese intellectual history, and what lessons can be learned from its study are all topics so huge that they are clearly impossible for us to achieve in the scope of a single doctoral thesis. In light of this fact, we will pursue our goal in this thesis under the following methodological principles and themes:

1) While the main goal of each chapter will be comparison, we will try to avoid only looking at textual differences between Nishida and his predecessors. In other words, we will not conduct philosophical comparisons between authors independently of their historical contexts and concerns. To the contrary, in order to make any such comparison conceivable, I believe it is necessary that we first start by articulating the framework that led up to the state of philosophy as it was in 1911. In order to provide the proper context for understanding what separates or connects Nishida to his predecessors, it is imperative that we sufficiently establish what problems were in place, where these problems came from, and what positions were being taken in response to their presence. This effort to highlight the framework of Meiji debates and the context they were held in will be our primary method of avoiding making arbitrary comparisons between Nishida and the large number of possible candidates that his philosophy could be grouped together with.

2) With that said, though, we will still not attempt to cover all possible lines of investigation. Philosophers and psychologists such as Mōtōra Yūjirō, Inoue Tetsujirō, and Kiyozawa Manshi (just to name a few examples) all deserve more space than they receive here. Indeed, one could convincingly draw lines between – just as an example – Mōtōra's notion of an 'Eastern theory of the ego' in its relation to Nishida's notion of a true self or Tetsujirō's ontology as an important aspect of Nishida's theory of pure experience. However, although they would be relevant to some of the chapters present in this thesis, we will refrain from introducing these authors in detail. The reasoning for these exclusions, though, are simple. As I have stated previously, we will focus only on the direct themes of each overarching section of Nishida's

An Inquiry into the Good. In each chapter, we will focus on a small number of philosophers in greater detail than other potential candidates. This is done for the sake of providing greater clarity and more detailed textual analysis of Nishida's predecessors (hence allowing us to get more familiar with one of them than we would be if we rushed to deal with three of them in a single chapter). While it is unfortunate that many great philosophers worthy of further investigation will fall to the wayside in this thesis, it is necessary that we save analyses of their work for a later occasion. Doing so will allow us to do justice to the writers appearing here in this thesis as well as save these unmentioned writers from oversimplification.

3) When making these comparisons, it will be important to not only see *if* there are differences between Meiji philosophers and Nishida, but also to see what the nature of such differences comprise. For instance, are there sufficient differences in content that make it impossible to even treat Nishida's work in the same light as other Meiji philosophers? Are the differences just a matter of Nishida discussing more topics than his predecessors, rather than a more 'substantial' or 'essential' difference in the world view both are trying to defend? In short, what is it that we mean when we say that Nishida is different?

As a running theme in this doctoral thesis, I will provide the following proposal: Nishida's alleged originality can be understood in terms of his *methodological* rigor in comparison to any other philosopher in the Meiji era. Put differently, while many 19th and early 20th century Japanese thinkers attempted to state similar claims to Nishida, I believe that none of them were as systematically thorough as what we find in *An Inquiry into the Good*. Indeed, as I shall explain over the course of this thesis, Nishida's capacity to establish a fundamentally sound and thorough basis for his thought allows him to substantiate his ideas in a way that exceeds the capacities of any other philosopher working in the Meiji period. That is to say, this act of thoroughly substantiating his thought and providing standards which one could use to expound upon and develop the theory of pure experience are, in and of themselves, a stride forward in modern Japanese philosophy that remains mostly missing in the work of his predecessors.

Additionally, one other running theme we will see is the importance of 'the problem of life (人生の問題)' as it related to the construction of Nishida's philosophical system. Although Nishida's interest in the existential capacities of philosophy is hardly a new conclusion, I believe that there are two aspects of this concern with the problem of life that have not been sufficiently documented. The first is possibly the more obvious: Nishida was hardly the only

young man educated in the mid-Meiji period interested in the problem of life. Certainly, some early Meiji writers were more dismissive of existential worries, but this was not the case when Nishida began his career (a point we will discuss as this thesis continues). To the contrary, as we shall discuss regularly over the course of this thesis, it is possible that Nishida was instead the poster child for a new generation of writers disconnected from the academic benefits of philosophy or literature and more interested in looking at how it could be related to his own life. The second, and likely more important, point is that this concern is not separate from Nishida's methodology. Once again, as we will discuss as the thesis progresses, I believe that Nishida's philosophical attitude called for a level of rigor that went beyond contemporary academic standards, and pushed him to develop his philosophy in tandem with the more formal methodological principles he adopted.

Now that we have covered the basic methodological and hermeneutical points necessary to proceed, we will begin our investigation of Nishida's relationship with Meiji philosophy while keeping these principles in mind (if not only in a loose sense). In doing so, we will hopefully grasp a novel picture not only of how we can understand Nishida's philosophical ventures, but also how to look at the development of philosophy in Japan in and of itself.

Chapter 1:
The Middle Path and Pure Experience:
A Re-Evaluation of the ‘Beginning’ of Modern Japanese Philosophy

1.0) Introduction

To recap our claims in the introduction to this thesis, almost all common-sense understandings of Japanese philosophy accept Nishida Kitarō’s theory of pure experience as the beginning of original thinking in modern Japan. As the story goes, in comparison with the largely translational or interpretive work being done by philosophers in Meiji Japan (1868-1912) before him, Nishida’s theory of pure experience in *An Inquiry into the Good* (1911) was a demonstration of his own independent and unique thought. While pure experience may have been partially influenced by William James’ concept that shares the same name, the result of Nishida’s description of this position in *An Inquiry into the Good* can only be taken as his own unique contribution to philosophy in Japan. More specifically, it is said that Nishida’s attempt to return to a level of pure or direct experience that stands prior to the subject-object distinction, and has thus yet to be tainted by the fabrications of our thought, gave him a unique and original view of reality. According to the early Nishida, insofar as philosophy must be conducted only outgoing from what can be justified by appealing to such pure experience, our presumed conceptions of an independent objective reality or a pre-individuated subject can never be taken as anything more than dogmatic fabrications made for the sake of easing our minds.¹² True reality could thus never be merely subjective or objective, nor could it be described in terms of ‘extreme’ positions such as idealism, materialism, or any form of dualism. Instead, as Nishida finds, such apparent dualities between internal and external, mind and matter, or self and other can arise only within the underlying unity of pure experience. No particular perspective or outlook on pure experience could ever be ‘more real’ than another (for instance, to borrow Nishida’s example the poet’s ‘subjective’ view of the night sky is every bit as real as the astronomer’s ‘objective’ scientific analysis).¹³ Hence, rather than attempting to do away with such oppositions by proclaiming one more real than the other, Nishida instead embraced them as a necessary aspect of an overarching unity.¹⁴ Thus, it is impossible to look at reality in terms

¹² Nishida 1911/1990, 38

¹³ Nishida 1911/1990, 49

¹⁴ “In the establishment of reality, then, both a unity at the base of reality and mutual opposition or contradiction are necessary. [...] When these contradictions disappear, reality disappears as well. On a

of the usual –ism’s and oppositions that we usually rely upon, given that they are all only representations of the interpenetrating and conflicting aspects of reality that actually exist as a more comprehensive unity. As one hundred years of scholarship on his work can report, it was this view of reality (and Nishida’s subsequent efforts to refine and rewrite these ideas in his later philosophy) that sparked the momentous occasion of Japanese thinkers finally overcoming the mere importation and translation of philosophical thought, allowing them to breakthrough and provide their own original contributions to world philosophy

However, an almost immediate threat to this common-sense narrative concerning the origins of original Japanese philosophy arises when we consider one other apparently uncontroversial claim: Nishida’s theory of pure experience can, and likely should, be situated within the critical continuity of what has come to be referred to as the concept of ‘phenomena-qua-reality (現象即実在論).’ This theory, which has been chiefly associated with Buddhist philosophers Inoue Enryō and Inoue Tetsujirō (and tangentially with those such as Miyake Setsurei and Kiyozawa Manshi), appears to share the core components of Nishida’s aforementioned view of reality as a non-dual and interpenetrating unity between mind and matter or subject and object in which neither of the two could ever be ‘more real’ than the other. What is more, it is clear that Nishida was influenced by (or at least familiar with) the teachings of all major proponents of this theory. Thus, in this first chapter, I would like to look at the author I find to be both most influential on Nishida and most likely to challenge the notion that he is the undisputed first philosopher in Japan, Inoue Enryō, as a potential forerunner to Nishida’s work and see how he set the stage for the philosophy of pure experience to take form.¹⁵

Founder of the first philosophical journal in Japan, member of the *Seikyōsha* publishing group, expert debunker of superstitions and ghost stories, noted Buddhist reformer, and critic of Christianity, Inoue Enryō played a central role in many Japanese intellectual circles in the 19th and 20th century.¹⁶ However, possibly due to sheer breadth of his thought, it would seem

fundamental level, contradiction and unity are simply two views of one and the same thing. Because there is unity there is contradiction, and because there is contradiction there is unity.” (Nishida 1911/1990, 56)

¹⁵ On this note, the following confession from Nishida is particularly worthy of our attention: “[...] in the beginning I wasn’t thinking about studying philosophy. Originally, I was thinking about going into science. However, at that time [when I was in high school] I read a thin pamphlet called *An Evening of Philosophical Conversation* written by a man named Inoue Enryō and found it to be very interesting, and this stimulated me to start moving toward [the study of] philosophy.” (NKZ 24: 80)

¹⁶ Information concerning Inoue’s connection to the *Seikyōsha* and the national preservation (*kokusui hozon*) movement can be found in Pyle (1969). Information related to his work on superstitions and ghost stories (more broadly speaking, his *yōkaigaku*) is available in sources like Josephson (2006). His role in reforming Buddhism is discussed from various perspectives in Snodgrass (2003), Okada (2005), and Kopf (2013), just

that his work as a philosopher in particular has still yet to receive its proper recognition in comparison with his role in other fields. Rather, in extreme cases, Inoue has even been accused of ‘deploying’ philosophy with the intent of using it as a mere tool to legitimize his claims in other practical debates (specifically those concerning Buddhism as a rational or scientific religion). Additionally, his philosophy has occasionally been treated as a form of mere syncretism. In other words, Inoue’s work has at times been treated as little more than a theoretically incomplete sketch, in which attempts to synthesize ideas he picked up in Buddhist thought with Western philosophy.¹⁷ With that said, a closer inspection of Inoue’s thought shows that the role he played in the development of philosophy in modern Japan cannot be so easily dismissed. This is true not only in terms of his work in introducing Western philosophers (or, indeed, the concept of philosophy itself) into Japanese society,¹⁸ but also in terms of providing novel arguments that stimulated later philosophers such as the alleged starting point of Japanese philosophy, Nishida. Indeed, in spite of the comparative lack of attention his metaphysical thought has received, I believe we can find in Inoue a worthy attempt to describe reality in its most raw form that resonates with many of Nishida’s goals. More specifically, I believe that Inoue’s attempt to do so by pursuing the ‘middle-path (中道)’ or ‘perfect path (円了)’ between extreme positions such as idealism and materialism offered several insights that played an important role in early modern Japanese philosophy and (to at least some degree) helped give shape to Nishida’s philosophy.

Keeping all of this in mind, we shall endeavor to reconsider the development of philosophy in modern Japan by engaging in the following two goals. First, we shall aim to provide a reconstruction of Inoue’s position while focusing largely on the argument provided in the first section of *An Evening of Philosophical Conversation*. Secondly, upon establishing the basic argument behind Inoue’s notion of the middle-path, we will aim to show both how his efforts link to Nishida’s early philosophy of pure experience. More specifically, we will

as examples. Additionally, discussions of his complicated relationship with Christianity can be found in Staggs (1983) and Paramore (2009). Finally, a comprehensive introduction to Inoue’s life and work in its historical context is available in Schultzer (2019).

¹⁷ To be more specific, pre-Nishida Buddhist philosophy in general has tended to receive such treatment. For example, Kosaka Kunitsugu (1995) specifically cites Inoue Enryō and Kiyozawa Manshi as being such cases of mere ‘syncretism’ between Western philosophy and Buddhist thought. Kosaka Masaaki (1959/1999, pp. 265-6), refers to the work of Inoue Enryō, Inoue Tetsujirō, and Miyake Setsurei as being more of a “metaphor (比喩)” or “sketch (描写)” of their respective systems than an evidence-based “demonstration (論証).”

¹⁸ Inoue provided some of the earliest introductions to the history of Western philosophy (and its relationship to Eastern philosophy) in texts such as *The Field of Philosophy*. Additionally, he discussed what philosophy means in the first place extensively in forums such as his lecture, *A Brief Introduction to Philosophy*

show that Inoue's struggle against materialism and idealism left Nishida with the crucial challenge of how one can possibly give a *positive* account of reality in its most concrete state without reducing it to abstract or biased positions. To do this, we will proceed as follows. First, we shall start with an introduction to Inoue as an original thinker and establish his philosophical concerns. We will follow this up in the second section by providing a brief explanation of the aforementioned *An Evening of Philosophical Conversation*. Subsequently, in the third section, we will look at the shared problems and similar intuitions between the two, before pointing to key methodological differences between them. Thus, in the fourth section, we will explore the methodology behind the philosophy of pure experience and demonstrate how it allowed Nishida to achieve a more thoroughgoing positive description of this non-dual conception of reality than Inoue had initially achieved. Finally, in the conclusion, we will explore the possibility that differing attitudes toward philosophy among Inoue's and Nishida's respective generations played a role in their philosophical methods.

1.1) The Pre-History of Inoue Enryō's Theory of the Middle Path – Inoue's Historical Background and Conception of Philosophy

Now, if we are going to properly evaluate Inoue's philosophy as something more than an unfinished sketch or uncritical syncretism, it would likely be worth our time to address the more serious concerns that critics might have with his philosophy. In particular, the proverbial elephant in the room we face when discussing Inoue's career as a thinker is the relationship between his metaphysics and his assertions concerning Buddhism as a modern religion for the Japanese people (and his subsequent denial that Christianity could play a similar role). The critic who most vocally criticized Inoue for mixing one with the other, Judith Snodgrass, levels the following charges against Inoue:

"[...] by denouncing it [i.e., Christianity] from the supposedly impartial stance of philosopher, Inoue enlisted the support of an audience beyond Buddhists. He did not simply dismiss it as evil but analyzed it as irrational, conceptually untenable, prescientific, deleterious to Japan. By taking the title 'philosopher' Inoue was able to promote Buddhism and undermine Christian influence from a pedestal of rationality and objectivity."¹⁹

¹⁹ Snodgrass 2003, 141

The allegations against Inoue pressed here are simple. In order to promote Buddhism and drive away Christian thinkers, it is claimed, Inoue used rigorous and logical Western Philosophy as a tool to dictate what is and is not rational. This deployment, as it has been referred to by a certain set of historians, would certainly make sense of the notion that Inoue is not a philosopher as critical or valuable as Nishida, given that his career would be little more than an attempt to legitimize Buddhism by showing how similar it is to Western Philosophy. Insofar as this is the case, it is likely worthy of our time to carefully evaluate the extent to which this reputation is true. Hence, in this section, we will briefly look at the historical background of Inoue's philosophy and, in doing so, show the following two points: First, we will see that the reduction of Inoue to a mere political figure is largely unfounded. Second in place, of the promotion of Buddhism, we will suggest that a more metaphysical goal exists at the heart of Inoue's philosophy.

Before going any further however, we should first take a step back and provide ample context for the aforementioned critique against Inoue. In particular, we should remember that the alliance between Buddhism and Western science was not a mere coincidence. Indeed, in light of the fact that Buddhism was struggling to stay afloat at the beginning of the Meiji period, many Buddhist thinkers attempted to respond to their dire situation by scientizing or rationalizing Buddhism. In other words, although Buddhism spent much of the 19th century facing criticism as a 'superstitious' and old-fashioned religion, the easiest way to solve this problem would be to demonstrate the possibility of a new Buddhism that was capable of co-existing with modern values and science. Or, rather, as some Meiji Buddhists (including Inoue himself) attempted to demonstrate, Buddhism – as a 'study of causes' – was just as capable of co-existing with modern science any other competing doctrine.²⁰ Crucially, it would appear that the very first thinker to label Buddhism as philosophy, Hara Tanzan, was relying precisely on this appeal to the rationality of philosophy in order to motivate his study of Buddhism. A physician and Buddhist monk by trade, Hara argued that Buddhism was a philosophy of the mind (心性哲学) that had to be distinguished from a mere set of superstitions or even religion in the Western sense.²¹ The use of philosophy as a means to rationalize Buddhist thought earned him the prize of lecturing on "Indian Philosophy" at the newly established University

²⁰ For more on the topic of science and Buddhism as it relates to Inoue, see chapters 4 and 5 in Schulzer (2019).

²¹ Watabe 1998, 94-8

of Tokyo from the first university president, Katō Hiroyuki, where he would teach students such as the young Inoue.²²

That these influences existed in the background of Inoue's work and that he was deeply interested in such issues himself is not debatable. Rather, after his graduation from the University of Tokyo in 1884, he became perhaps the leading figure in this attempt to pioneer a rational view of Buddhism as a philosophical religion (or, otherwise, as a religion capable of meeting the standards of philosophical scrutiny). This he did most clearly in *An Introduction to the Vitalization of Buddhism*. In this work, published in 1887, Inoue begins with his now famous formulation that one must love the truth to defend their country, and would certainly understand they must defend their country if they love the truth (put as a slogan, we can use Inoue's phrase *gokoku airi*, 護国愛理). To genuinely love the truth (and thus, become a learned and productive member of the nation), according to Inoue, included recognizing the spiritual truths of religion. Yet, it was not enough to merely find any religion. Rather, it was necessary to seek out a religion whose spiritual truths could mesh with the physical truths of science. That is to say, spiritual and material truths posed here should not conflict with each other, even if they cannot be reduced to their counterpart. Other religions (like Christianity) offered spiritual and emotional comfort, certainly, but conflicted with science in key ways.²³ Japanese Buddhism (as the pinnacle of Buddhist thought), was not only spiritually refined to the point that it was not inferior to any other religion, but was also free of any such conflicts. Thus, speaking from the fair and impartial (公平無私) standpoint of the philosopher, Inoue was able to claim the superiority of Buddhism as a religion for the Japanese people. It is on this note that previous critics have substantiated the claim that Inoue engaged in the strategic deployment of philosophy to promote a specific agenda.

While the connection made by critics like Snodgrass appears to be sound at first glance, I believe that a more careful recognition of two important points can lead us to a more fulfilling alternate conclusion. The first point seems obvious enough and has been largely accepted by

²² While space constraints stop us from fully surveying Hara's work, we should note that his classes – which often compared Buddhist thought with German Idealism and may have served as a prototype to the theory of 'phenomena-quas-reality' – were taken and appreciated by all authors associated with this tradition. While information on Hara's philosophy is scarce, Inoue Katsuhito (2011) has shed some light on Hara's lectures and how they fit into the genealogical progression leading up to Nishida's philosophy.

²³ Examples given by Inoue include Jesus' role as the son of God and the creation of the world (IES 3: 350; 358-60). This point was given much more attention in *The Golden Needle of Truth* (1887), in which he gave a more focused refutation of Christianity, based largely on the scientific impossibility of its doctrines. More information on Inoue's complicated relation with Christianity can be found in Paramore (2009, 134-41) and Staggs (1983, 265-270).

many interpreters: philosophy is taken by Inoue as the fair and impartial pursuit of truth and, as such, is capable of serving as the measuring stick that judges the scientific rationality of various specific doctrines. As one can glean from the previous discussion alone, such a description of Inoue's outlook on philosophy is not by any means a mistake. Importantly, such an interpretation highlights how Inoue believed philosophers or academics could reconcile their pursuit of the truth with the necessary drive to give back to the nation, as Inoue insisted they be able to do in *An Introduction to the Vitalization of Buddhism*:

“To love the truth is, in other words, to defend the nation. I may be unlearned, lacking in potential, and not deserving of the position of scholar, but a part of me silently expects that I can merely pursue the truth and somehow [still] do my best for the nation. Thus, I am putting my love of the truth first and defending the nation second. Nevertheless, this love of the truth is, in all actuality, none other than one way of defending the nation.”²⁴

In addition to this particular passage, the entirety of *An Introduction to the Vitalization of Buddhism* is rife with such descriptions of how scholars' and philosophers' scientific quests for truth are inherently tied up with their status as citizens who must work to defend their nation. In other words, by shining light on more academic or metaphysical questions that come with a pursuit of the truth, academics are able to cause a trickle-down effect into practical disciplines. The practical benefits derived from these insights offer invaluable technological, moral, and political benefits to the nation-state. In light of this stance, it would appear hard to deny the fact that Inoue's conception of philosophy was, indeed, shaped by practical concerns and his desire to produce a stronger Japanese nation by accepting Buddhism as a religion aligned with the truth.

With that said, though, we must not ignore that Inoue also mentions in the previous quote that – in doing philosophy – he is prioritizing the truth. Doing so can help us avoid the common, problematic tendency to assume that Inoue believed philosophy's pursuit of the truth to be defined *only* in terms of its practical capacity to contribute to building a stronger nation (or that its practical capacities somehow weighed more heavily than its inherent desire for

²⁴ IES 3: 332

truth).²⁵ Inoue clearly stated in multiple lectures and works that philosophizing was a fundamental aspect of our humanity.²⁶ The argument is thus not that philosophy's only value is in the construction of a strong state. As far as Inoue was concerned, the philosopher's inherent desire to pursue the truth and his or her need to give back to the state ought to be considered as the "front and back" sides of the same entity.²⁷ Thus, to be more precise, Inoue seemed to believe that – perhaps problematically – there were no conflicts between philosophy's pursuit of the truth and its role as arbiter in practical disputes. To the contrary, for Inoue, the theoretical and practical moments of philosophy fed into one another.²⁸ While this point does not negate the previous paragraph's conclusion that Inoue's philosophy was at least partially shaped by practical concerns, it should lead us to accept the fact that Inoue simultaneously believed in the value of philosophical pursuit *in and of its own right*.

This recognition leads us to the second point: that Inoue's apparent usage of theoretical philosophy to make practical arguments can likely be flipped on its head, i.e., we can likely look at the practical arguments made here as a window into his metaphysical interests. To be more specific, Inoue's practical claims concerning the importance of Buddhism as a philosophical religion in *An Introduction to the Vitalization of Buddhism* hint at a deeper concern with the relation between *mind and matter*. Buddhism was interesting not only because of the practical benefits of reconciling the physical or material sciences and the spiritual truths of religion, but because it was capable of handling the metaphysical issues that stand at the core of these difficult questions. More generally speaking for Inoue – as one can glean from the fact that neither science nor religion could remain fully independent of or subsume the other – neither the spiritual nor the physical aspects of our lives be primitive to or more important to the other, much less could they be separated. Inoue's basic intuition concerning the relation between mind and matter is spelled out in rather dense language below:

²⁵ Snodgrass (2003) and Godart (2004) both define Inoue's view of philosophy only in terms of its capacity to act as a measuring stick of objectivity. Even Takemura's (2013) favorable discussion of Inoue's understanding of philosophy adopts the view that, in the end, theoretical philosophy existed for the sake of returning back to practical problems.

²⁶ Consider, for instance, in the public lecture "A Brief Review of Philosophy" Inoue seems to argue that philosophy is necessary for understanding the reason or purpose of one's existence. "Even if there is no pleasure (楽) to be gained from it, insofar as we have been born as humans, there is nothing less convenient than living in this world without knowing the purpose of one's life." (IES 2: 53)

²⁷ IES 3: 332

²⁸ Consider the oft-cited passage from one of his later works, *The Philosophy of Struggle*, in which Inoue readily compared the 'upward' movement of philosophy to the skillful means (方便) needed to achieve practical goals (IES 2: 416).

“To determine the substance of mind and matter, it is first necessary to take the standpoint of the rational form (理体) of neither matter nor mind. This ground is called Suchness. Suchness is matter but not matter. It is mind but not mind. In other words, it is neither matter nor mind, and at the same time it is mind and it is matter. This is called the middle path of 'neither existence nor emptiness as well as existence and emptiness.' [...] They are in a relation of neither one nor two.”²⁹

Here, one can see evidence of a more difficult metaphysical problem that cannot be reduced to Buddhist apologetics, i.e., the claim that mind and matter are not independent of, nor reducible to, one another. While Inoue himself does elect to connect this worldview to his praise of Mahayana Buddhism as a “philosophical religion” in *An Introduction to the Vitalization of Buddhism*, this seems to be more indicative of a reciprocal relationship between his philosophical conscience and his convictions about Buddhism as a religion for the modern Japanese people.³⁰ Indeed, it is not by accident that Inoue spent the back-half of the same text arguing for taking this ‘middle-path’ to philosophy that would not take ‘extreme’ or ‘biased’ positions such as idealism or materialism that unduly favor either subjective-mind or objective-material. In this sense, when Inoue makes claims to the effect that both Buddhism³¹ and Hegelian philosophy are the most ‘perfect’ forms of thought, he is doing so within the context of a specific intuition that only such positions have managed to avoid these naïve attempts to pigeon-hole reality into the kind of merely spiritual or merely physical worldviews we deemed insufficient in the previous paragraphs.

Thus, I would propose an alternative thesis to the notion that Inoue’s deployment of philosophy was conducted for the sake of his views on Buddhism and – in much truer fashion to Inoue’s own arguments on the nature of philosophy – claim that his interest in Buddhism fed into his metaphysical concern to avoid extreme or biased claims (and vice-versa, naturally). This alternative thesis is important for two reasons insofar as it provides grounds to explicitly deny the possibility that philosophy before Nishida was deployed or imported purely for the

²⁹ IES 3: 367, I have consulted Takemura (2013, 12) while translating this passage.

³⁰ Of course, this does not make it politically innocent either. While it is hard to say precisely how much one informed the other without falling into empty speculation about Inoue’s intentions, it is – at the very least – worth nothing that Inoue’s arguments about Buddhism’s capacity to co-exist with the physical sciences is complemented by his claims that mind and matter are both dependent on, while being irreducible to, one another.

³¹ While we will avoid getting into the specifics of Inoue’s views on Buddhism, we would be remiss to note that this praise was reserved solely for Mahayana Buddhism and – more specifically – the Kegon and Tendai traditions.

sake of substantiating arguments about practical issues (and that Inoue specifically never developed any significant philosophical insights in virtue of his attachment to the propagation of Buddhism). Hence, an investigation of this philosophical intuition could likely provide a useful foothold with which to look over the development of philosophy in Japan. Now, even if we say as much, what exactly Inoue means by a middle-path that sees mind and matter as “neither one nor two” (or how he could justify this insight beyond vague appeals to Western philosophy and Buddhist dogma) is still far from clear. Keeping this in mind, we will attempt to get a closer look at what Inoue was attempting to do philosophically irrespective of his relation to Buddhism in the next section by looking at one of his most creative texts, *An Evening of Philosophical Conversation*.

1.2) Inoue’s Philosophy of the Middle Path – Focusing on *An Evening of Philosophical Conversation*

An Evening of Philosophical Conversation was written in three pamphlets released between 1886 and 1889. In addition to being a favorite book of the young Nishida, this work has been taken by some historians as the first full-fledged instantiation of the broader tendency towards theories that have been referred to under the umbrella of “phenomena-qua-reality.”³² Perhaps more importantly, however, the work presents a crucial counter-example to general assumptions that pre-Nishidian Meiji philosophical efforts were universally translational or limited to interpretations of Western texts. The central premise of the work is that it presents a dialogue between discussants representing logical extremes, only to fall into unsolvable aporias. The various parties face off in three different sections, respectively covering the topics of ontology, God, and truth. In the first section, which is both the basis for Inoue’s work in the remainder of the dialogues and likely the foundation of his philosophy, a ‘materialist’ and an ‘idealist’ find themselves determined to show that reality is entirely reducible to physical

³² Here I am using ‘phenomena-qua-reality (現象即実在)’ to refer to the broader tendency in Meiji philosophy to provide an ontology that does not presuppose any ‘thing-in-itself’ or mind-independent world behind conscious phenomena. Funayama Shinichi (1959/1965) in particular claimed Inoue’s *An Evening of Philosophical Conversation* to be the first substantial contribution to this movement. While I would largely agree with Funayama here, two points require caution. First, Inoue Enryō himself did not use this term to refer to his own philosophy. The term phenomena-soku-reality properly belongs to his contemporary, Inoue Tetsujirō. As such, we cannot easily assume Enryō and Tetsujirō are endorsing the same theory. Second, in line with the spirit of this paper, it is important not to assume that Enryō appeared out of nowhere. Indeed, Enryō, as well as all other authors commonly associated with phenomena-soku-reality took classes from Hara Tanzan at Tokyo University, whose reading of the *Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana* has been understood as a proto-typical version of trends in Meiji philosophy (See Watabe 1998).

material and conscious phenomena respectively.³³ The two combatants take turns rigorously pushing forward their own agenda, only to ultimately end with unanswerable questions (and thus fail to justify their positions). Considering not only the fact that the first section of *An Evening of Philosophical Conversation* is the basis of Inoue's ontology, but also the fact that it offers us the key to understanding the problem he left for later philosophers in Japan, I would like to start with a brief introduction to this dialogue.

The dialogue starts innocently enough. The idealist, Ryōchū, remarks that no matter how vast the universe may be, it can only be as vast as we grasp it to be in our minds. Everything we perceive, no matter what it is, is only available to us in the human mind. Certainly, one may assume that there is a world far beyond what we perceive in our individual minds. Yet, to speak of anything outside of the human mind that we cannot have a mental experience of would be far too speculative, given that we have no way of perceiving any such mind-independent objects. Even when his materialist opponent, Enyū, fires back that it is equally speculative to assume that there is nothing beyond the mind, Ryōchū is prepared to answer. That is, for Ryōchū, the very act of distinguishing between any object (including whether something is 'in' or 'outside' of the mind) is a mental act. To be more precise, not knowing is every bit as mental of an action as knowing is. In this sense, both that which we do know and that which we do not know (that which is assumed to exist outside of our heads) must share the same space in the mind. Ryōchū's theory here goes up in scale, revealing itself to be an indiscriminate monism based on a singular mind, which then articulates itself through discriminatory mental acts. However, just as soon as Ryōchū attempts to expound upon this theory, Enyū points out that this notion makes a mockery of the fact that they are two distinct persons who are having a conversation precisely because they do not share the same mind and that, at any rate, Ryōchū has failed to account for how this discriminatory process of individuation occurs. Ryōchū gives up, stating that he still needs to study this point.

Ryōchū's defeat is followed by Enyū's own attempt to describe his materialist (or, in some sense, dualist) position. As far as Enyū is concerned, the world is made up of physically discrete and separate individual objects. Regarding how to account for the mind, Enyū chooses to make a sharp distinction between spatially discrete individual material objects and consciousness. What is more, after Ryōchū presses him on the topic of death and the possibility

³³ Here we should take their respective allegiances with a grain of salt. In particular, the 'materialism' in this dialogue is, as Shirai Masato has argued, perhaps something closer to a dualist position than what we typically refer to as materialism. (Shirai 2012, 102)

that spatial differences between individuals are only a temporary state, Enyū attempts to evade this by claiming that the annihilation of physical distinctions does not imply the total loss of distinctions between object (and, curiously enough, seems to imply the immortality of the soul as the reason that these distinctions are still possible). Although Ryōchū points out that this is an unjustified assumption, Enyū once again avoids this by saying that – even if some individuals are annihilated – there will always be physical differences left between material objects. Yet, in the end, when Ryōchū further asks him what will happen when the universe itself meets its inevitable end and there is no longer any possibility to account for physically distinct individuals, Enyū is unable to come up with a means to keep his worldview from collapsing in on itself. Enyū thus repeats Ryōchū's line, insisting that he needs to study this point further.

It is here, once both idealism and materialism have reached an impasse in trying to describe the true nature of reality that both students attempt to appeal to the authority of their teacher: Enryō. As one can surmise by looking at the names of all participants, Enryō serves to unite the fragmentary truths provided by Enyū and Ryōchū.³⁴ Upon being provided with a summary of their debate, Enryō does not side with either of the two students. Rather, he chides the two of them, stating that:

“Ryōchū knows non-discrimination but knows nothing of discrimination. Enyū knows discrimination but knows nothing of non-discrimination. Neither of you have escaped from being biased toward one side or the other. This is the reason that both of you are able to [so easily] doubt the other's explanation. You are both convinced that non-discrimination and discrimination and the entity [body; 体] they make up are entirely different. Ryōchū's so-called non-discriminatory mind is the same thing as Enyū's discriminatory mind, and Enyū's discriminatory mind is the same thing as Ryōchū's non-discriminatory mind. They both make up one part of the same entity. Thus, we have what Buddhist logic calls the *soku* relation.”³⁵

In this quote, we find the core premise of Enryō's philosophy. Neither materialism nor idealism

³⁴ This play on words forms on two levels. As one can see even in English, Ryōchū and Enyū both make up half of 'Enryō' (both in terms of writing the name out and in terms of his system of thought). Additionally, we must also remember that the characters for Enryō's very name means 'completion'. Thus, the teacher Enryō-sensei, who has gone past one-sided or overly simplified extremes, was able to reach a more total or complete view of reality.

³⁵ IES 1: 43

are entirely wrong. Materialism – as a world view in which the world is composed of physically distinct individuals – must exist in a relation of immediate interdependence (expressed here as the logic of ‘*soku*’) with idealism – as a worldview in which individuals emerge from a non-discriminate whole through mental acts. Indeed, according to Enryō (and thus Inoue), they both represent one fundamental moment inherent to reality in its most complete state. When we try to reduce reality to either extreme or take one as fundamental to the other, we end in absurdity. This declaration on the part of Enryō-*sensei* (as well as some more or less helpful metaphorical explanations to help the reader grasp the middle or perfect path) marks the end of the first section of *An Evening of Philosophical Conversation*.

Now, before moving on, there are two salient points about Inoue’s middle path that deserve attention. First, Inoue’s middle path is not a static entity that houses both mind and matter as two separate entities. To the contrary, mind and matter cannot be treated as being entirely separate from one another, for they are both part of the same dynamically changing complex. Or rather, as Inoue emphasizes, “Non-discrimination develops itself into discrimination, while discrimination merges into non-discrimination.”³⁶ For Inoue, non-discrimination (expressed initially by idealism) and discrimination (represented by materialism) exist in a relation of ebb and flow, feeding into one another. While attempting to express this interplay in words is bound for failure or contradiction, it is a fact of reality that the myriad of things around us is at once interconnected despite the fact that we can undoubtedly distinguish between them and demarcate them as individuals. In this regard, we should recognize that Inoue’s middle path is not a completely different alternative to materialism or idealism, but instead as the *originary* activity that stands at the basis of this interplay between these two seemingly different perspectives and makes such distinctions possible in the first place.

The second point we must recognize is that, although the arguments the discussants provide are often shrewd, the structure of this pamphlet is likely of even greater interest to us than its content. When reading this text, it is important that we avoid a crucial mistake and *do not* look at Enryō’s lectures as an immediate or mystic revelation of the truth of the middle path to his hapless students. To do so would be to ignore the dialectical development in which both combatants systematically negate each other and gradually become indistinguishable over the course of their own dialogues. It is only once these individual positions have collapsed into one another that Enryō-*sensei*, as the representative of the middle path, can point out to his students

³⁶ IES 1: 45

a fact that should have already become clear from their own discussion: any attempt to reduce reality to one particular entity (and thus do away with other positions) was bound to be nothing more than a hollow abstraction. Given this fact, any such attempt to pigeon-hole reality as being precisely this, that, or the other, will necessarily reveal itself to be entirely incomplete when taken to its extreme.

Considering what we have mentioned above, it seems fair to say that Inoue's argument in *An Evening of Philosophical Conversation* is hardly reducible to the mere creatively bankrupt syncretism that less generous interpretations have saddled upon him. Indeed, insofar as I can tell, these dialogues are best looked at as a kind of internal struggle to do philosophy without resorting to the seemingly inevitable fate of extreme or biased positions.³⁷ While we do not have time to look at the matter in detail, it is worth noting that the development between discussants presented here matches his unique view on the development of the history of philosophy as an oscillation between – and attempt to escape from – such extreme or biased positions.³⁸ Perhaps more than any form of historical speculation, though, the performative nature of Inoue's dialogues in *An Evening of Philosophical Conversation* can help the reader catch a glimpse of reality that cannot be reduced to any one particular position. In this way, Inoue's work presents (and poses a negative solution to) the question of how it is possible to describe reality without falling victim to bias and abstraction. In the next section, we will briefly review how these questions connect him to Nishida's attempt at a philosophy of pure experience.

³⁷ This may be visible in Inoue's response to critics claiming that the seemingly all-knowing teacher being named Enryō is a sign of hubris. According to Inoue himself, these dialogues are marked by his attempt to describe this middle path without endorsing any of the old or biased positions of yore. I would thus argue that Inoue's struggle was an internal one, in which he allowed these positions to combat one another until there was nothing left but the middle path. (IES 1: 48-9)

³⁸ Inoue explains this view on the development of the history of philosophy by using modern Western philosophy as an example in *An Introduction to the Vitalization of Buddhism* (1887): "What are the theories that comprise modern philosophy? We could say they are materialism, idealism, or logicism (唯理). [...] In the beginning, Locke advocated empiricism. Then Leibniz advocated substantialism (本体論) before Kant came to synthesize these positions. Those like Hume tended to be biased toward materialism while those like Berkeley tended to be biased toward idealism. This led to [Thomas] Reid syncretizing the two positions with his mind-body dualism. While Fichte took the subject and Schelling the object [as primary], Hegel harmonized their positions. The German school thus became biased toward speculation (空理) while the Scottish school was biased toward common-sense. He who synthesized these two positions was Cousin in France. Spencer feared becoming biased toward either the knowable or the unknowable and thus tried to make a divide between them. Modern philosophy has thus been unable to escape from these [biased] theories. Hence, [modern philosophers] all run toward one extreme theory, and while they may desire to find a balance (中正を保持せんと欲して), they have been unable to achieve this goal." (IES 3: 361) A more detailed account about how Inoue understood the history of philosophy is available in Godart (2004).

1.3) From Inoue to Nishida: Similar Ideas and Unanswered Questions

To begin, although our introduction of Inoue's philosophy has been exceedingly brief, readers of Nishida's philosophy have likely seen enough to identify how some of the core themes in his work overlap with many of the crucial themes in *An Inquiry into the Good*.³⁹ First, Inoue's decision to take the middle path to show that subjective consciousness and objective materiality form 'true reality' as two interpenetrating aspects of one encompassing whole resonates clearly with central ideas in Nishida's philosophy. Indeed, similarly to our outline of Inoue's philosophy, even a cursory analysis of pure experience shows that Nishida also claims that such oppositions or contradictory moments exist as necessary aspects of an overarching unity. Or, to be more precise, in both systems, the constant dynamism of this unity, i.e., Inoue's middle path or Nishida's pure experience, is taken as the *originary* source of the various differences in perspectives and contexts that allow us to designate one aspect of this underlying unity as being either the individual's subjective consciousness or objective material. To this extent, to imply that one is 'more real' or fundamental than the other is arbitrary at best, and the source of needless theoretical conflict at worst. As Nishida states, these distinctions are no more than differing perspectives on pure experience.⁴⁰

Rather than focusing solely on particular similarities in content, however, I believe it is more important to note that Inoue helped point later philosophers like Nishida to an important formal problem. That is to say, as the previous section likely made clear, Inoue's philosophy offered a glimpse into what Robert J. J. Wargo has referred to as the "problem of standpoints."⁴¹ Indeed, the dialogues in *An Evening of Philosophical Conversation* serve as an efficacious reminder that all attempts to pigeon-hole reality into one *-ism* or another, or otherwise to attempt to do away with other perspectives by accounting for a purely materialist/idealist world separated from its counterpart, were bound for failure. Considering this fact, Inoue attempted to show a way toward accounting for both the underlying (and not directly describable) unity between the various perspectives presented in these debates without absolutizing any of them.

³⁹ Shirai (2012) and Wargo (2005) have likely given the most detailed analyses of the similarities between the two. Here, we will only briefly review their specific similarities in order to focus more on the root of their shared philosophical intuition.

⁴⁰ "It is usually thought that subject and object are realities that can exist independently of each other and that phenomena of consciousness arise through their activity, which leads to the idea that there are two realities: mind and matter. This is a total mistake. The notions of subject and object derive from two different ways of looking at a single fact, as does the distinction between mind and matter." (Nishida 1911/1990, 49)

⁴¹ Wargo 2005, 11

Indeed, as we have ascertained in the last section, for Inoue both mind and matter were admitted as valid perspectives that comprise a more comprehensive unity. This attempt to describe reality in its most concrete state by capturing the difficult relation between the multiplicity of relative perspectives and the unity between them, then, is a crucial project left by Inoue and likely inherited and developed by Nishida.

With that said, however, there are crucial differences between the two in how they approach this problem. In this sense, it is important that we remain aware of the fact that Inoue did not exactly ‘solve’ the issue at hand. More specifically, as several authors have pointed out, the matter of *how* one can provide a non-dual account of reality raises important questions that remain unanswered (or, perhaps better, unanswerable by design) in Inoue’s dialogue. Consistent with what we have seen in the dialogue in *An Evening of Philosophical Conversation*, Inoue seemed to prefer a negative approach to accounting for the middle path. In other words, for Inoue, the middle path can only be glimpsed in the negation of extreme positions and metaphorical images to help one grasp a concept of reality that is otherwise ungraspable. Yet, although the arguments designed to show that extreme positions cannot be absolutized or cut-off from other perspectives are enlightening, Inoue’s dialectic never provides a clear or systematic account of what the middle path is or how it should be characterized. Or, to be more precise, the skeptical claim that reality can only be approached negatively denies the possibility of doing so. Still, while Inoue’s reasons for avoiding a positive description of the middle path may be clear, this point still opened him to various criticisms going back to the initial publication of the pamphlet. Indeed, Inoue’s attempt to explain through Enryō how mind and matter are at once the same and not the same was decried as an unjustified acceptance of contradictions (as one of his earliest critics, Onishi Hajime put it, Inoue seems to have merely mixed oil and water).⁴² Even as Inoue’s career progressed, it would appear as though he never developed a serviceable account of how mind and matter or subject and object go about distinguishing themselves from one another.⁴³ In the end, as Wargo correctly states in regard to Inoue’s ontological theory, the claim that reality was non-dual was seemingly posed as the solution to all of philosophy’s problems. However, as he also points out – insofar as there is no

⁴² “While I’m sure readers will be impressed with his clever hybrid-theory, I cannot help but personally wonder: has not Enryō-sensei [merely] attempted to mix oil and water here?” (OHS 2: 27)

⁴³ Even Nitta Yoshihiro, in his admirable attempt to push Inoue’s later philosophy in *A Proposal for a New Philosophy* to its upper limits, concedes in that Inoue’s work was ‘underdeveloped’ and that, insofar as it gave no practical account of how reality differentiated itself as such, it stops at being a “contemplative” philosophy of merely looking at material reality or conscious phenomena from different perspectives. (Nitta 1989, pp. 97-8)

substantial attempt to provide a theoretical foundation for this non-dual ontology – this assumption is incorrect.⁴⁴

Several authors have used such potential criticism as evidence to state that there is a gap in philosophical rigor between Inoue and Nishida.⁴⁵ More specifically, although we have just seen that Inoue's metaphysics has been criticized for not providing a systematic foundation to accept his non-dual ontology, such criticism hardly seems applicable to Nishida's philosophy of pure experience. To the contrary, one could likely go so far as to say that the matter of how a fundamentally unified reality is capable of constantly changing, developing, and differentiating itself into apparent dualities was the core of Nishida's early thought (and, possibly, the driving force of his career as a philosopher).⁴⁶ While we do not have space here to give a total explanation of the dynamic of Nishida's system, even the briefest look at his philosophy shows how his analysis of how the structures of thought and the will unite the gaps that open in pure experience as it constantly changes.⁴⁷ In this sense, there appears to be a fundamental difference between Nishida and Inoue.

Naturally, we should not look at this distinction as devaluing Inoue's philosophical project in any way. After all, one could hardly say that Inoue failed in *An Evening of Philosophical Conversation*. To the contrary, insofar as he led his readers to the point at which only the middle path remained, one could look at his endeavour as a success with respect to his philosophical goal. Additionally, in response to the critics we have referred to above, one could

⁴⁴ Wargo 2005, 31; note that this critique is also applied to the other major author associated with the broader notion of phenomena-soku-reality, Inoue Tetsujirō.

⁴⁵ Examples of scholars who refer to this possibility: Funayama (1959/1965), Nitta (1989), and Wargo (2005). Maraldo (2017) mentions in passing a difference in critical method between those like Inoue and those like Nishida and Onishi Hajime. Moreover, as we shall mention again later, Itabashi (2004) also makes similar arguments for difference in methodological rigor in his discussion of Nishida and Inoue Tetsujirō.

⁴⁶ This is indicated by the oft-cited reminder from Nishida himself at the beginning of *An Inquiry into the Good*'s new edition in which he states "[t]hat which I called in the present book the world of direct or pure experience I have now come to think of as the world of historical reality. The world of action-intuition – the world of poesis – is none other than the world of pure experience." (Nishida 1911/1990, xxxiii).

⁴⁷ A slightly more thorough summary of this structure could be given as follows: Pure experience is defined as being equivalent to direct experience *before* any distinctions have been made (such as those between subject and object or mind and matter). This claim refers not only to a psychological state of being unaware of such differences, but rather to the ontological fact that dualities are not given as pre-formed in our experiences. Yet, as change inevitably occurs within experience, rifts open up within this underlying unity. In other words, pure experience is constantly changing, and as these shifts continue to pile up, 'gaps' will occur in this initial unity. This can be in the form of conflicting or contradictory information arising, thus necessitating an act of reflection, or a lack felt due to metabolic disturbances causing a break between the volitional subject and its object of desire. These gaps provide an opportunity to clarify what has happened in pure experience in reflective judgment. Hence, although it is not inherent to individual experiences, one becomes able in these cases to abstract a 'material' or 'spiritual' perspective out of the initial unity of pure experience.

argue that his negative approach was the only viable conclusion to his investigation (or, more poignantly, one could argue that any attempt to put reality into non-metaphoric words is ultimately doomed to fail). More importantly than his theoretical insights, though, Inoue pointed to a crucial methodological problem for later philosophers in modern Japan: *how* could one provide an account of the reality we live in given that any attempt to grasp it in its entirety would be doomed to failure as an externalized abstraction that takes into view only one part of the bigger picture? I believe that this question helped set the stage for Nishida's more systematic endeavor to describe pure experience. Keeping this in mind, in the next section, we will briefly look at how Nishida attempted to positively and systematically describe pure experience without falling prey to abstractions.

1.4) Nishida's Early Methodology: Changing the Starting Point of Philosophy

As readers of *An Inquiry into the Good* will be aware, pure experience is taken to be reality in its most concrete state as it is given to us in our most direct or obvious experiences. As Nishida explains from the outset of this work, such direct experience reveals that there is no intrinsic distinction between subject and object or mind and matter.⁴⁸ Yet, as we have seen in the previous section, recognizing the fact that reality cannot be reduced to one or the other does not constitute a systematic philosophical understanding of it. Paradoxically, then, while pure experience was that which is given to us in our most obvious and direct experiences, it is also that which we need to clarify and structuralize. Using Nishida's own words, it is the 'alpha and omega' of thought.⁴⁹ Put differently, for Nishida, pure experience was both the *point of departure* and the *final goal* of philosophical contemplation. While this may seem like a banal fact, this difference in starting point is evidence of a crucial *methodological* difference between Nishida and Inoue insofar as it allowed for the possibility of claiming that positive descriptions of pure experience were possible without abstracting what was concretely given. Here, we will briefly review Nishida's notion of pure experience as a critical methodology and, in the process, show how it contributed to facing the problems set-forth in the previous section.

So, what does it mean to talk about the philosophical methodology of pure experience? Borrowing from Nishida, we can see a succinct explanation of how the philosophy of pure

⁴⁸ "When one directly experiences one's own state of consciousness, there is not yet a subject or an object, and knowing and its object are completely unified. This is the most refined type of experience." (Nishida 1911/1990, 3-4)

⁴⁹ Nishida 1911/1990, 16

experience can be understood in the following quotation:

“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.”⁵⁰

In regard to what he means by direct knowledge, Nishida then specifies as follows.

“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.”⁵¹

The idea is, at a glance, simple enough. To do philosophy is to doubt all that can be doubted, discard all our assumptions, and return to pre-reflective, lived experience. Through this practice, we can come to grips with reality in its most raw form before subject and object have been split apart and allowed themselves to be manipulated by inferences, linguistic infidelities, and fabrications of reflection. Yet, in spite of the superficial simplicity of this quasi-Cartesian outlook, a more careful look reveals that this change in starting point entails two crucial differences in how we approach philosophical argumentation.

The main difference we must account for in Nishida’s methodology is obvious enough (and indeed, previous studies like Itabashi Yūjin’s exploration of Nishida’s relation to Inoue Tetsujirō have highlighted its importance in separating Nishida from his predecessors).⁵² In addition to establishing pure experience as what is given to us – our new starting point, as it were – we also gain a methodological foundation of sorts with which to both make observations about pure experience as well as corroborate said observations. In this sense, although Nishida’s view of pure experience may indeed be discussed in similar terms as Inoue’s middle path, the metaphorical explanations provided by Enryō-*sensei* are certainly nowhere to be found in Nishida’s early philosophy. In their place, Nishida provides a structural account of the

⁵⁰ Nishida 1911/1990, 38

⁵¹ Nishida 1911/1990, 39

⁵² Itabashi (2004) highlights in particular the struggles that Tetsujirō had in grounding any objective claim to philosophical knowledge in comparison with Nishida and his use of pure experience as a standard for truth.

workings of thought and the will and how they allow for us to develop the meaning or context necessary to distinguish varying perspectives within pure experience. Thus, while Inoue's support for his notion of the middle path was based on the mutual negation of relative positions (and thus lacked any positive elucidation), Nishida's arguments in his early philosophy aimed to illuminate the structures of reality based on what could be corroborated by direct or pure experience. The goal of pure experience as a methodology, then, was to start from direct experience and provide a faithful account of it without devolving into the kind of abstract or external standpoints that Inoue had already deftly shown to be insufficient.

Of course, one may doubt whether (1) Nishida's conception of pure experience itself is not a mere fabrication of reflection or (2) whether such a direct attempt to put pure experience into words itself presents his non-dual ontology in a merely abstract form. Indeed, the question of if and how Nishida managed to avoid the 'myth of the given' is one that is still raised by modern interpreters.⁵³ Otherwise, more generally speaking, one could ask how it is possible to make any kind of faithful judgment about pure experience when (by definition) it stands prior to the distinction between a reflecting subject and her object of reflection. In response to these problems, it is important to recognize how Nishida attempted to develop a theory of meaning that is 'internal' to pure experience. Although at times (in many respects similar to Inoue's sceptical outlook) Nishida states during *An Inquiry into the Good* that pure experience itself is not immediately or fully graspable by language,⁵⁴ this is only true insofar as individual conscious experiences are mute without their proper context. Thus, crucial to Nishida's *attempted* solution is his explanation of how experiences can be bestowed with meaning by their relations with other experiences.

“Assuming that pure experience is endowed with discriminations, what are the meanings or judgments added to it and how do they relate to pure experience? People usually argue that when pure experience is connected to objective reality it generates meaning and takes the form of judgments, but from the perspective of my theory of pure experience, we cannot leave the sphere of pure experience. Meanings or judgments derive from the connection of a present consciousness to past consciousnesses;

⁵³ See, for instance, Nagai (2018), who raises the issue by comparing Nishida and Wittgenstein.

⁵⁴ Consider, for instance, Nishida's statement that “True reality, like the true meaning of art, is not something that can be transmitted from one person to another. All we can transmit is an abstract shell. We may think that by means of the same language we understand the same thing, but to some extent the content necessarily differs.” (Nishida 1911/1990, 51-2)

meanings and judgments are based on the unifying activity in the great network of consciousness. They indicate the relation between present consciousness and other consciousnesses, and therefore merely express the position of present consciousness within the network of consciousness. For example, when one interprets an auditory sensation to be the sound of a bell, one has merely established the sensation's position relative to past experiences."⁵⁵

To paraphrase, meaning is generated in pure experience by allowing one experience to connect with other experiences (in this case, one's present experience of hearing a bell is made possible by having heard bells before in the past). Once conflicting or contradictory information enters our stream of consciousness, the initial unity between subject and object is lost. This gap between them allows for the implicit relations between such experiences to be made explicit in judgment.⁵⁶ In this case, the question "what was that noise" is answered by referencing our previous experiences of hearing similar sounds, resulting in the answer, "it was just a bell."⁵⁷

Hence, we can see that meanings and judgment do not derive from the mental act of an epistemic subject that stands outside of pure experience, but rather from the act of making the implicit connections between one conscious experience and another explicit. Yet, how could

⁵⁵ Nishida 1911/1990, 9

⁵⁶ Naturally, the word implicit may appear out of place or not sufficiently justified here. However, a brief reminder that the early Nishida's understood universals as 'seeds' implicit in experience that are drawn out as consciousness develops itself. As this is a point that I will return to in Chapter 3, I will not go into great detail here. All I will say here is this: the development of meaning in pure experience is not a mere nominalism, which does away with any sense of universals beyond names assigned to things that appear similar, nor does it assume any (in Berkeley's understanding) Lockean abstract universals independent of experience. Nishida instead espouses the notion of a concrete universal (universal patterns that can only exist insofar as they are developed in individual objects). Essences and universals can connect 'by themselves' to a certain degree. For example, several experiences of individual red objects draw out the underlying pattern we refer to as red. Yet, crucially, doing so presupposes that these red objects have been put in touch with each other in what Nishida refers to as the network of consciousness.

⁵⁷ Here I am forced to skip over what may be the most interesting and least appreciated aspect of early Nishidian philosophy: the relation between facts and meaning in pure experience. The notion that they are two different states is both popular and easy to understand, but I highly doubt the matter is so simple. Rather, Nishida appears to be aiming for something much more acrobatic. Consider Nishida's conclusion that "[...] pure experience and the meanings or judgments it generates manifest the two sides of consciousness: they are different facets of one and the same thing." (Nishida 1911/1990, 10) Thought and reflection are not an escape from pure experience. To the contrary, they are merely the act of making explicit the hidden relations between experiences as they begin to form a system. In this way, we find a strange duality to pure experience that cannot be so easily explained: all experiences are at once constantly being integrated into a system with other experiences, in which similar consciousnesses work to give context and meaning to one another while – at the same time – these individual experiences themselves are entirely devoid of any inherent meaning and lack any secondary or external subject to provide it for them. While I myself cannot exhaustively discuss the implications that this worldview may have, all we need to know at the present moment is that, when I reply that the sound we are hearing is a bell, we have not left the realm of pure experience in the slightest.

one possibly determine whether or not these judgments were true or not without presupposing an external entity with which this internal position is correlative to? Along similar lines, Nishida solves this by claiming that whether judgments were true or false was also determined by the systematic relation between experiences:

“Which ideas are true and which false? We always believe that what is most powerful, greatest, and deepest in a system of consciousness is objective reality. Whatever fits with it we consider true, and whatever conflicts with it we consider false.”⁵⁸

In this way, judgments, meanings, and truth could only be corroborated by their conformation with the systematic progression of what was given in the stream of consciousness. Extending these principles, we can extrapolate that the philosopher’s job – in their quest to describe pure experience as the sole reality – was to make explicit the structures of this network of consciousnesses from an internal position, without abstracting only one aspect of it or relying on empirically unverifiable suppositions of a mind-independent material world or pre-individuated conscious subject.

It was this methodological principle that allowed Nishida to provide an internally consistent and thoroughgoing account of both the standard for admitting evidence in his non-dual conception of reality as well as how the judgments needed to establish that standard could be made in the first place. In this way, Nishida attempted to make judgments concerning the structure of reality without ever departing from it or abstracting only one extreme aspect of experience from another (as would be the case in extreme positions such as idealism and materialism). By following this plan of attack, Nishida presented an alternative to Inoue’s view and – in doing so – offered a path for further positive philosophical reflection on a non-dual ontological framework that, by nature, defies external characterization. Naturally, this does not mean that Nishida’s early methodology was entirely sound. Indeed, the notion that Nishida’s early philosophy fell prey to psychologism is one widely accepted testament to this point.⁵⁹ Yet,

⁵⁸ Nishida 1911/1990, 15

⁵⁹ From what I can gather, the upshot of this critique would be that – like everything else in his early philosophy – logical laws could only be found within the originary activity of pure experience (in other words, logical laws could only form through systematically developing in pure experience). In this sense, logic and mathematics would only hold insofar as they developed in a certain way within a certain system of experiences and, due to this, be put at risk of losing their normative force. A useful reconstruction of precisely how and why Nishida succumbed to psychologism within the context of the late 19th/early 20th century (and the problems that this presented his philosophy) is available in Mitsuhashi (2018).

whether or not he succeeded is not the point. In spite of his own potential shortcomings, we find in Nishida's early philosophy a key change in directions from Inoue (and likely any of his predecessors) that contributed greatly to later trends in 20th century Japanese philosophy: a path to logicizing a conception of reality that cannot be reduced to one position and can accommodate the dynamic interplay between the various conflicting, relative positions that all constitute one aspect of our lived experience.

1.5) Concluding Remarks – A Shift in Attitudes as the Basis for a Shift in Methodology?

Over the course of this chapter, we have aimed to challenge typical narratives stating that Nishida Kitarō is unmistakably Japan's first philosopher by assessing the continuity and difference between his work and that of Inoue Enryō. As we have seen, although it may perhaps sound trivial at first glance, the difference in starting points between Inoue and Nishida proved to be an important step in providing a more systematic account for exploring this conception of reality. Indeed, while Inoue's dialectic stops once it reaches a non-dual account of reality referred to as the middle-path, Nishida instead attempts to provide a systematic and detailed analysis of the structures of his similar ontological worldview. Naturally, this difference between the two does not indicate a flaw or failure on Inoue's part. However, it is still noteworthy that Nishida's use of pure experience as a thoroughgoing methodological principle to provide a comprehensive and systematic account for these ideas did provide an alternative method to describe similar ideas in a more direct and detailed way. If we were to return to the central concern of this thesis, we could quite clearly state that Nishida's originality consists not in having entirely 'new' or 'unique' intuitions, but in the rigorous steps he took to provide well-founded descriptions to develop ideas present in Meiji philosophy.

As one final idea to consider before departing from our comparison between Nishida and Inoue, I would like to suggest that the adoption of these seemingly radical methodological principles may have been – in large part – urged on by different expectations for philosophical argumentation between Inoue's and Nishida's respective generations. While, as we have seen in the first section, Inoue demanded that the pure or theoretical sides of philosophy be returnable to society, things seem slightly different in Nishida's case. Take, for instance, the following quotation from his notes:

“Philosophy is not necessary for those who have never met with suffering in life, or otherwise those who do not look for something deeper in life even after meeting with adversity. However, anyone who has ever met adversity or wondered about life in its entirety will surely have felt some kind of anguish. They will certainly try to find a new meaning in life, or to be reborn into a new one.”⁶⁰

An Inquiry into the Good, as Nishida himself stated, may have taken up metaphysical issues in the first half of the book but was, as a whole, centrally concerned with the problem of human-life.⁶¹ Naturally, as one may have grasped from the quotation above, this does not mean that there were two separate themes, but rather that even seemingly purely metaphysical questions stem from the existential suffering Nishida mentions above. What’s more, such existential worries could never be solved satisfactorily if reduced to their practical aspect. I believe this difference in attitude may be crucial for understanding the methodological differences between them for the following two reasons.

Now, while at first blush this change in attitude may appear unrelated to Nishida’s ‘technical’ success in articulating a non-dual view of reality, I do not think this to be the case. To the contrary, as we have stated, such a thirst for existential or religious peace of mind could never be quenched by purely academic or uncritical philosophy by Nishida’s standards. Metaphysical doubt concerning one’s life and one’s place in the universe could not be solved by common-sense explanations, proverbial wisdom, or the mere repetition of what previous philosophers have already stated.⁶² It had to be so thorough that it did not permit any unexamined dogmas to fester in the background of our thought and haunt us. In this sense, we can see that it is not by coincidence that philosophy is described above in the language of rebirth or obtaining a new life in the quotation given above. What these two changes offer us, in the end, is a simultaneous change in what is expected of a philosophical argument and the philosopher making said argument between Inoue and Nishida. Regardless of whether or not Inoue’s worldview was actually driven solely by his views on Buddhism (however debatable the claim may be), what is important is that such confusion between dogmatic political claims

⁶⁰ Cited in Stone (2018, 48).

⁶¹ Nishida 1911/1990, xxx

⁶² Consider only one example of this conviction that we find in his letters: “Partly because my teaching demands it, I’ve read almost all the well-known books on ethics; but unless I start out with metaphysics, I don’t seem to get a satisfactory answer. Recently, I began my studies on the history of philosophy and epistemology, not because they are needed for a study of ethics, but *because I cannot escape my metaphysical doubt*.” (Cited in Yusa 2002, 78; italics added by author of this thesis)

and philosophical arguments we addressed in the first section was *not possible* in Nishida's case. What is more, Nishida's attitude towards philosophy precluded him from stopping even once he had provided convincing motivation for his theory of pure experience. Indeed, an honest exercise in the philosophy of pure experience assumed that the author would leave any predisposed worldview behind and provide an empirically founded and thorough-going account of reality in its most concrete state. Naturally, one could conceivably twist what they have found in their analysis, but to do so would be tantamount to missing the very point of doing philosophy. The transformative potential of pure experience, as a radical opportunity to totally evaluate one's life within the vast expanse of the universe, was an integral aspect of Nishida's earliest philosophy and likely that which made his methodological advancements possible in the first place.

The second point worth mentioning in regard to Nishida's attitude toward philosophy is that it can potentially offer us a means to situate his work in the broader flow of the development of Meiji philosophy. Indeed, while much has been made of Nishida's existential interests from a biographical standpoint, it would be unfortunate to overlook the fact that this shift in interests (from looking at pure philosophy as a 'skillful means' to contribute to practical issues to looking at philosophy purely in terms of its existential capacities) was very much in line with popular trends around the beginning of the 20th century. While the earliest uses of Western philosophy were in many cases – as one can see when looking at the roots of the notion of a 'Buddhist philosophy' – politically charged attempts to use rational Western knowledge to justify or legitimize certain opinions or schools of thought during the modernization movement, by the end of the Meiji period, we can see that philosophy had found a new calling as a means to evaluate the problem of human life. While Nishida's *An Inquiry into the Good* may have been the most important example of such an effort, he was hardly the only member of his generation who started to look at philosophy as an endeavour in exploring the existential problems left for his generation. To the contrary, the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century ushered in a wave of troubled young men who looked for something more from philosophy than an academic exercise capable of serving Japan during her time of need.⁶³ As some scholars have already shown on a biographical level when looking at Nishida's

⁶³ Consider, for instance, Miyake Setsurei's testimony that, by the end of the 19th century, young men in Japanese universities had split into two types. There were, as before, success-oriented young men looking for practical knowledge from Western learning. However, according to Miyake, at the end of the 19th century, there were now also 'literary' students, whose sole purpose for studying was to find answers to problems related to the "life (人生)" and "suffering (煩悶)" of the individual. For a summary of Miyake's writings on this topic, see Hiraishi (2012, 24-8)

philosophy,⁶⁴ and as we have seen when looking at its crucial importance in motivating his more fully-fleshed out philosophical system, this shift in attitude helped dictate what was expected of a successful philosophical argument.

Still, although this historical background gives some credence to the common idea that Nishida's notion of pure experience was the first original Japanese philosophical theory, it would be unfortunate to overlook the contributions made by the previous generation of early Meiji philosophers in making this shift possible by completely ignoring the positive contributions to philosophical argumentation in Japan. If we were to put this idea in more Nishidian terms, we should not only stress the discontinuity that has allowed us to identify Nishida as the beginning of Japanese philosophy without also recognizing the continuity between generations that made Nishida's early philosophy possible. Although one may be able to create a meaningful distinction between the two authors in terms of rigor, we have seen that Inoue's philosophical enterprise was not necessarily the much maligned syncretism that it has often been painted as. To the contrary, a look at texts such *An Evening of Philosophical Conversation* reveal that, even as early as 1886, clever, original, and easily accessible philosophical works were present in Japan. It is, indeed, not without reason that young philosophers like Nishida were evidently charmed by the work of those like Inoue and the potential for independent thought that it showed them. Speaking broadly, this continuity of discontinuities can alert us to a flaw in our understanding of the development of the nature of Nishida's philosophy of pure experience. We cannot merely accept Nishida's supremacy as a cut that signalled the beginning of original thought where there had been nothing similar before that point. It was, instead, likely the final step of a process in which philosophy moved away from its original mission to legitimize certain standpoints during Meiji debates.

⁶⁴ Miyagawa Tōru (1962), for instance, made the case that not only was Nishida's experiences of discrimination and introversion a key factor in driving his need for a thorough-going philosophical investigation, but that it was a key point in allowing for young men in the Taisho period to connect to his work and allow him to be recognized as Japan's first philosopher.

Chapter 2
Independence and Self-Realization:
The Historical Background of the Early Nishida's Individualism⁶⁵

2.0) Introduction

Among the various points touched upon in the last chapter, perhaps the most intriguing is just how important the existential aspect of pure experience is for ascertaining a correct understanding of Nishida's philosophical project. Indeed, to briefly summarize one of the key points we have found in the conclusion of our previous chapter, the philosophy of pure experience was not a merely academic or disinterested analysis of reality. To the contrary, for Nishida, philosophy was only valuable insofar as it entailed a thorough, radical reappraisal of the nature of one's very life as a self and place within the universe. Put bluntly, an honest exercise in the philosophy of pure experience is not separable from the life of the individual conducting the investigation.

To put the matter differently, the philosophy of pure experience relates fundamentally to the concrete life of the self and its *development*. From the standpoint of pure experience, there was no pre-given and individuated subjectivity or otherwise the 'possessor' of experience that we could call the self. After all, such a conception of selfhood would assume a pre-given distinction between the subject of experience and the world they see, which, as we have noted in the previous chapter, is entirely unforgivable according to Nishida's radical empiricist worldview. Instead, for Nishida, what is referred to as the self is instead the unifying force of pure experience. In other words, it is the primal activity that binds otherwise 'mute' experiences into a coherent and meaning-endowed system. That is to say, as the dynamic activity of constant change in pure experience described in the previous chapter continues, subject and object are inevitably torn asunder. At this point, it is the activity known as 'self' that seeks to restore their unity through either reflective judgment (i.e., unifying gaps between subject and object by identifying the nature of an unknown object that has forced an act of reflection) or the will (i.e., unifying gaps between subject and object by consuming or taking in the desired entity). Perhaps most importantly, though, is that this constant process of obtaining new knowledge through reflection and realizing one's volition through action was the key to the

⁶⁵ This chapter is based on my 2018 article in the *European Journal of Japanese Philosophy* under the same title.

cultivation of the individual person and their respective skills (including their speech, conduct, etc.). Looked at in this way, Nishida's theory is not an abstract or academic description of the universe in a vague sense, but is instead a description of how the self - in its most concrete state – can be developed, cultivated, and ultimately achieve a good life. In other words, Nishida's ethics is a theory that emphasizes *self-realization* above all else.⁶⁶

Even outgoing only from the exceedingly brief description given above, it is not surprising to see that Nishida's articulation of self-realization throughout the third part of *An Inquiry into the Good* - the part dedicated specifically to ethics – constitutes a major aspect of this book. While the title alone can quickly show us that ethics were of central concern to Nishida's earliest major work, of particular import is that this titular Good consisted precisely in a glorified account of the Good of the self. From a historical perspective, it is furthermore worth noting that Nishida's attempt to describe the life of self and the cultivation of the individual person in *An Inquiry into the Good* had a noticeable impact on many early 20th century Japanese youths. As we shall discuss in greater detail at the end of this chapter, future thinkers like Nishitani Keiji and Kurata Hyakuzō were quickly enchanted with the way that Nishida approached such issues and saw within his philosophy a path to tackling their own actual problems. In addition to both these existential and practical concerns of his younger readers, one can also find in Nishida's early philosophy the seeds of the Kyoto School's multifaceted attempt to deal with matters concerning the nature of the individual.⁶⁷

Yet, in spite of this apparent historical significance associated with Nishida's early ethics, it has often been dismissed as the weakest and least original aspect of his concept of pure experience. Indeed, one commentator has even gone so far as to describe his ethics as a mere summary of what ethicists like Aristotle, H. Hoffding, T. H. Green, and Onishi Hajime have already said and claim that it has little to do with his overarching theory of pure experience.⁶⁸ There are formal reasons for treating Nishida's ethics in this way, of course. There are undoubtedly important similarities between Nishida and other philosophers in his

⁶⁶ A simple summary is as follows: "In our consciousness, an internal unity always functions at the base of thinking, imagination, will, perception, feeling, and impulse; and all phenomena of consciousness are the development and completion of this unity. The deepest power unifying this whole is our so-called self, and the will is that which most completely expresses this power. Thus the development and completion of the will is none other than the development and completion of the self, and the good is the development and completion – the self-realization – of the self. The highest good, in other words, is for our spirit to develop its various abilities and to achieve a perfect development." (Nishida 1911/1990, 125)

⁶⁷ An introduction to the more formal and logical aspects of Nishida's struggle to deal with the individual after *An Inquiry into the Good* can be found in Altobrando (2016).

⁶⁸ Hirayama 1997, 91

time period. Additionally, there are certain weaknesses (for instance, as we will discuss later on in the thesis, issues relating to the problem of evil) that would discourage one from wanting to delve deep enough into his early ethics to find what could be original about it. Yet, at the same time, it also is important for us to remember our previous point that – out of all of Nishida’s varying attempts to make a comprehensive philosophy of pure experience – it is his ethics that has been treated as the least original aspect of his work. Put more specifically, Nishida’s philosophy has often been associated with what has been referred to as the theory of self-realization (自己実現説). In other words, Nishida’s ethical arguments are – on occasion – treated as little more than a reformulation of a popular Meiji position that started with the importation of T. H. Green’s ethics and continued throughout the late 19th and early 20th century.⁶⁹ In this sense, then, Nishida’s work has often been looked at one instantiation of a particularly popular theory in the Meiji period that provided only minor tweaks to this formula. Here, we face a similar (albeit slightly less perplexing) question to that of the previous chapter.

Namely, why is it that Nishida has been hailed as an important source of development for the Japanese tradition even though it is – possibly – little more than a mild tweak on one popular theory among his contemporaries? Additionally, as an extension of this main question, it seems to me also necessary to clarify the nature of this position so as to identify the extent to which Nishida can be identified with this tradition and, moreover, contextualize the importance of the ‘tweaks’ he provided to one dominant line within Japanese thought. Hence, my concern in this chapter is twofold. My first concern in this chapter is to highlight what problems Nishida was facing in the mid-to-late Meiji era and what influences shaped his theory. In other words, my goal is to sketch the debates in the background of *An Inquiry into the Good* in order to become better informed of both the goals of Nishida’s ethical agenda, as well as the parameters within which he tackled problems concerning the individual (insofar as there was a certain atmosphere that conditioned the way that any author of the time would address these problems). Upon finishing this sketch of the framework that Nishida wrote in, we will move on to see if (and how) Nishida renovated these debates. As we will see over the course of this chapter, Nishida’s basic claims – that an individual achieves self-realization by joining with a more universal ideal – is notably similar to many of his predecessors. Yet, at the same time, I believe

⁶⁹ Hirai (1979) in particular seems to value Green’s influence on Nishida’s thought to almost extreme levels. Takeuchi (1970) also stresses the decisive impact of Green’s ethics on Nishida’s formation as a philosopher. Inoue (2011) provides a more sober diagnosis showing that, while Green was unquestionably in the background of his thought, Nishida eventually came to find his work rather insubstantial. A more solid, schematic comparison between Nishida and Green regarding self-realization in particular can be found in Mizuno (2001).

that Nishida's structural rigor concerning the nature of the self and pure experience opened the door for a level of detail not previously provided by any other Meiji authors was a noticeable difference between the two sides. Keeping this two-pronged enterprise in mind, we shall look over Nishida's texts for signs of possible new or unique developments in the greater scheme of modern Japanese ethics.

My method for accomplishing these goals will be to work in the following order. First, I will discuss the importation of individualism by enlightenment thinkers like Fukuzawa Yukichi. By doing so, I will show that early debates on the topic largely centered on how to reconcile the need for independent and educated individuals with the need to create an independent and modern Japanese state. I will use this background as a springboard to discuss the position that had the greatest influence on the early Nishida's ethics: the aforementioned theory of self-realization. Specifically, I shall discuss how competing interpretations of the British philosopher T. H. Green attempted to solve the problems put forth in the previous section, while also discussing new problems concerning what individual cultivation meant. I shall then move on to a largely biographical account of Nishida's connection to these debates, placed alongside some textual evidence of their impact. Finally, we will engage in a more comprehensive re-reading of Nishida's early texts in order to identify precisely what – if any – Nishida's contribution to Japanese ethics happened to be. To state my conclusion for this chapter here, I believe that this exercise will show us two things. First, I believe that we will see that Nishida's early ethical claims remain largely within the realm of expectations for Meiji ethics, and that many of the weaker points of his ethical theory are indicative of precisely this point. Secondly, however, I believe that we will see that the ontological underpinning of his theory of pure experience offered readers a hint at an experience of what it means to be an individual, and that this look into the nature of the individual's life had a great impact on many young intellectuals in the early 20th century.

2.1) Early Meiji Individualism: Fukuzawa Yukichi and Independence

To begin, we should recognize that public discourse regarding what we could call 'individualism' (in the narrow sense of the word) was quite limited before the Meiji period. Indeed, if one were to refer to individualism as a position that argues for the necessity of recognizing the (1) equality among individuals, (2) independence and autonomy of these individuals, as well as (3) the innate importance of individuals, then it would be rather difficult

to find something quite the same in pre-Meiji Japanese intellectual discourse who fulfills these criteria. To be more specific, as authors like Nakamura Hajime claim, the Japanese emphasis on the individual's embedding in various vertical relationships acted as a barrier to recognizing inherent equality amongst individuals.⁷⁰ By that same token, George Sansom notes that pre-Meiji Japanese ethics lacked what he calls a "liberal tradition," insofar as there were seemingly no systematic efforts to fight for equal tolerance amongst individuals with different preferences.⁷¹ Obviously, exceptions to these blanket statements exist, even if we do not have time to give them the time they deserve.⁷² Moreover, we should not dismiss the possibility that individuality may have been conceived of in a way different than it did in the European or American traditions.⁷³ With that said, however, it is likely a fact that the debates that sprang forth in the Meiji period were new to the Japanese intellectual canon.

At any rate, the earliest motive to tackle the problems of individual autonomy and equality in the framework mentioned above was exceedingly practical. After Matthew Perry opened the ports of Japan to the Americans in 1853 (which was soon followed by an onslaught of other unfair treaties with the dominant Western powers of the day), plans to reconstruct Japan as a modern and centralized nation-state capable of surviving in the 19th century (that had been stewing in the background since at least the Opium Wars) hit the ground running.⁷⁴ After the establishment of the Meiji government and the restoration of the emperor in 1868, these efforts took on an even greater importance. This is evidenced by the creation of mass railways and postal service, changes in tax policies and many other large-scale reforms. It was in this context that theorists began to debate what was to be expected of each individual in a modern nation-state, with great help from the newly imported Western literature. In addition to the legal and economic queries concerning the limits of individual autonomy in a country shifting to a capitalist economy, closely related questions of what it meant to have a population

⁷⁰ Nakamura 1964, 333-5.

⁷¹ Sansom 1984, 59-76

⁷² Exceptions in the history of Japanese political thought can be found in Hane (1969). Literary examples are given in Walker (1979).

⁷³ Take, for example, Ikegami (1995), who makes a detailed analysis of samurai culture to argue that individuality existed in the form of honor amongst individuality in a social setting. What this analysis can point us to is, specifically, the possibility that varying social structures provided a different kind of individualism in Japan in comparison with the West at large.

⁷⁴ Due to a lack of space for sufficient detail, I am simplifying this gradual movement towards modernization. Keene (1969) has already shown that some Japanese scholars knew more of the West than we typically think. Jansen (1992) has also shown that other options (such as the foreign expulsion movements and proposals for a unified Asian bloc) were also presented as alternatives to Western learning – in spite of a lack of success.

of educated, self-sufficient and morally sound individuals took center stage for early Meiji intellectuals.

It was in this context that the so-called enlightenment thinkers of the Meiji era, represented by groups like the Meiji Six (明六社, named to reflect the fact that the group formed in the sixth year of the Meiji period) publishing group made important new strides in the field of Japanese ethical thought. By drawing largely on British and French liberal or positivist philosophers (J. S. Mill and Herbert Spencer were particularly popular in the early-to-mid Meiji period),⁷⁵ these authors attempted to tackle the moral and ethical quandaries facing the newly centralizing nation-state. This included a large scale of issues, ranging from those as broad as equality between men and women to questions as specific as which form of writing (be it alphabetic Japanese or English) could best encourage public literacy.⁷⁶

Out of all these early Meiji enlightenment authors, the most radical, influential, and hence important for our interests, is none other than Fukuzawa Yukichi. Fukuzawa was a leading scholar of Western literature, having first achieved notoriety with his work *Conditions in the West*, published in 1867. Fukuzawa adopted a radically individualist view of how the Japanese nation should proceed in the new era. The preamble to *An Encouragement of Learning* effectively demonstrates Fukuzawa's thought at its highest level:

“Heaven, it is said, does not create one person above or below another. This signifies that when we are born from heaven we are all equal and there is no innate distinction between high and low ... Nevertheless, as we broadly survey the human scene, there are the wise and the stupid, the rich and the poor, the noble and lowly, whose conditions seem to differ as greatly as the clouds and the mud. Why is this? The reason is clear. In the *Jitsugo-kyō* we read that if a man does not learn he will be ignorant, and such an ignorant man is stupid. Therefore the difference between the wise and the stupid is traceable to the degree of learning.”⁷⁷

What followed from this conclusion was an illustration of the pragmatic consequences of this truth, articulated both in *An Encouragement of Learning* and the later *An Outline of a Theory of Civilization*. For Fukuzawa, the individualism present in Western liberalism offered far more

⁷⁵ Nagai 1954, 55.

⁷⁶ Shikano 1991, 40-7.

⁷⁷ Fukuzawa 1872/2013, 3.

utility to the preservation of the Japanese state than did any efforts to cling to outdated and impractical customs. If anything, Fukuzawa attempted to show that Japanese politics up to this point had given far too much authority to a small group of persons at the top, who in turn deprived individuals of the autonomy which they needed to become self-sufficient. At the very least, individuals needed to be *independent*. This entailed, if nothing else, becoming responsible for oneself and being ready to defend one's nation.⁷⁸ Yet, this was not possible in an environment in which individuals remained uneducated and restrained due to class-based inequality. For Fukuzawa, it was thus time to put an end to Japan's history of stifling individual thought and interests. Instead, it was time to allow individuals the right to pursue their various interests as equals while encouraging their education and cultivation.

Keep in mind that, insofar as the very problem that early Meiji thinkers sought to solve was that of dealing with newly encroaching Western powers, individualism was not discussed as merely a moral problem. Individualism was almost always discussed insofar as it was a necessity for Japan to become a modern state. Fukuzawa himself proclaimed that "the only duty of the Japanese people at present is to preserve Japan's national polity."⁷⁹ Put differently, in order to maintain and protect an independent and free Japanese state, it was necessary to encourage and educate independent and self-sufficient individuals. Individuals had to be able to act freely and responsibly and needed to be able to take up arms at a moment's notice – a feat not possible if individuals are entrenched in vertical relationships that prohibit them from taking self-responsibility. Thus, Fukuzawa's main goal was to demonstrate that the independence of the nation hinged upon the independence of individuals, in both the sense of protecting the country from external threats as well as in the sense of maintaining public morals domestically. Fukuzawa's individualism was, seen this way, motivated largely by its relationship to the realization of a stronger Japanese state.⁸⁰

In opposition to this pragmatic argument, opponents of Fukuzawa largely focused on two related points when assessing his position. The first point was whether or not such an inherently 'Western' outlook could possibly be applied to Japan at all. Indeed, even the earliest comparative sociological research in Japan made it a strong point to emphasize the underlying notion that there was a key difference between the West – which took individuals to be the

⁷⁸ Fukuzawa 1872/2013, 19-27, 59-67.

⁷⁹ Fukuzawa 1875/2008, 36.

⁸⁰ As Inoue Katsuhito notes, Fukuzawa was not alone on this point. It seems as though almost all *early* enlightenment writers seem to have motivated individualism by appealing to the needs of the state. (2011, 61, 73)

most basic unit of society – and Japan – which was centered on hierarchical family structures.⁸¹ Moreover, many disenfranchised writers and artists expressed their frustration at those like Fukuzawa for their unseemly and un-Japanese preference for everything Western.⁸² As we have seen, Fukuzawa himself seemed to be unimpressed with those clinging to the ways of the past, and did not hide the fact that he found such efforts counter-productive. The second point was whether or not individualism could coincide with the new government's project of centralization. While Fukuzawa was, above all else, interested in the independence of the nation, he was openly critical of government invasion into the lives of individuals and claimed that it was counter-productive to their independence. However, this call for smaller government led to questions of whether or not individualism did not entail a break in national unity in favor of selfish interests. Indeed, conservative writers for the entirety of the Meiji period often emphasized terms like 'loyalty' in order to stress that the needs of the state came first.⁸³ Needless to say, the Meiji government itself also seemed to be wary of giving up too much control over to individuals, and thus viewed liberal or individualist enlightenment writings with suspicion.⁸⁴

Although this introduction is far too brief to provide any new knowledge concerning the problem of individualism during the early enlightenment years of the Meiji period, I believe it is still possible to say that we have at least seen the basic questions and positions that were present at the start of the era. For our purposes, we must merely recognize that Fukuzawa outlined the way in which the new Japanese state could benefit from the emphasis of individual empowerment while using Western liberal sources as a guide while his opposition questioned whether such sources were detrimental to Japan's situation. Crucially, this back and forth created the general framework for how to debate the topic of individualism. Was individualism beneficial to the state of Japan as a means of self-strengthening? Or was it destructive to national unity and Japanese culture? Was an emphasis on the individual key to survival in the 19th century or a betrayal of the government? The shape of this debate itself influenced Meiji debates throughout the era, well beyond just Fukuzawa and the other early enlightenment

⁸¹ Nagai 1954, 62.

⁸² Brecher 2012, 808-10.

⁸³ Paramore 2009, 141-2.

⁸⁴ The most blatant evidence of this would be increasingly strict censorship laws which even led to a shutdown of the *Meiji Six* magazine in 1875. However, one more interesting anecdote from Blocker and Starling points out the fact that in order to combat early enlightenment tendencies towards liberalism, the Meiji government commissioned the translation of more government-friendly texts, such as Edward Burke's *Reflections on the French Revolution* and *Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs*, as well as part of Hobbes's *Leviathan* (2001, 122).

thinkers. While we do not have time to discuss the various different movements which spawned from Fukuzawa's work, we ought to note that the general framework of emphasizing individual cultivation for national independence remained highly influential throughout the era.

2.2) Moral Idealism and Self-Realization in the Late Meiji Period

Of course, major changes did occur between the importation of individualism in the late 1860's and early 1870's and the shift towards the mid-to-late Meiji era. As the Meiji government began to stabilize from the 1880s onward, the intellectual demands of the Japanese population began to change as well. More specifically, as Japanese domestic policy began to settle and it became clear that Japan would finally have a constitution of her own, there was a growing sense that Japan had finally become a "first-tier country (一等国)."⁸⁵ As a result, a wave of national pride swept over the country. At the same time, this awareness that Japan was getting ready to sit at the same table as the imperial powers of the day also brought about a growing conviction that the Japanese needed to organize their collective psyche. Early Meiji liberalism was replaced with notions of national morality (国民道德). In this way, calls for increased tolerance towards individual preferences were often substituted with reminders that morality would crumble unless all Japanese had a common rubric for evaluating one another's actions.⁸⁶ The infamous imperial rescript on education, which announced that the two pillars of the Japanese empire were people's loyalty to the emperor and filial piety, was implemented in 1890, and numerous discussions on education in the late Meiji period affirmed that these two virtues were the ground of all morality.⁸⁷ However, in spite of all this emphasis on conformity, Fukuzawa's words still buzzed in the background of the era, reminding authors that if Japan were to be truly modern, she needed sufficiently modernized individuals in her ranks. How were these two seemingly conflicting sides to be reconciled?

⁸⁵ Gluck 1985, 21.

⁸⁶ Nishimura Shigeki – whose "Theory of Japanese Morality" (written in 1887) is often credited with being the beginning of the national morality movement, provides a good example of this when he claims that in the previous Edo period, Confucianism served as a unified standard in opposition to the contemporary moral uncertainty of Meiji times. Indeed, as Nishimura would put it, until one standard for morality could be adopted by all, the very survival of the Japanese nation was in question.

⁸⁷ Gluck 1985, 120-7.

It is on this note that the position which had a more direct influence on Nishida's ethics entered the stage: the theory of self-realization.⁸⁸ Starting with Nakajima Rikizō's (1858-1918) introduction of Thomas Hill Green's philosophy⁸⁹ into Japan (beginning in 1892), advocates of self-realization would utilize Green's claim that self-realization necessarily benefits the 'common good' as a means to champion individual moral cultivation without sacrificing the needs of society or the state. In this sense, we can agree with Hirai Atsuko's claim that proponents of the theory of self-realization were something of spiritual successors to Fukuzawa Yukichi, trying to find space for the individual self in a society dominated by conformity.⁹⁰ Looking at how this notion of self-realization developed, as well as how it was interpreted, will give us a better look at Nishida's intellectual environment. In turn, this will also show us the shape of the argument used by some authors to justify increasing attention to individual cultivation as the Meiji period progressed.

So, what are the basic tenets of the theory of self-realization? As the name may suggest, Meiji ethicists formed various ideas about the value of self-development based on Green's claim that the goal of humanity is the *realization* of each individual self's character and moral capacities in such a way that they furthermore contribute to the realization of other persons, i.e., contribute to the *common good*. While a full-fledged explanation of Green's theory (or a detailed treatment of how Meiji authors may have misunderstood, betrayed or ignored certain aspects of his work) is not possible within the confines of this paper, we should try to highlight the main ideas of his concept of self-realization before we discuss its reception in Japan. Now, the first point that we ought to account for is what Green means by self-realization. Green attempted to justify his theory of self-realization by claiming that there is an *a priori* determined ideal form of being, to which all individuals aspire.⁹¹ The act of realizing one's own capacities and aiming to achieve a better state is, for Green, equivalent to moving closer to a more accurate reproduction of this ideal human form.

“Through certain *media*, and under certain consequent limitations, but with the constant characteristic of self-consciousness and self-objectification, the one divine

⁸⁸ The common parlance during the Meiji era was either *jiko jitsugen setsu* 自己実現説 or *jiga jitsugen setsu* 自我実現説, which both mean roughly ‘Theory of Self-Realization’.

⁸⁹ Thomas Hill Green was a British philosopher and politician. A detailed account of Green's ideas on self-realization can be found in Tyler (2010). The political and practical implications of Green's theories are well documented in Nicholson (1990).

⁹⁰ Hirai 1979, 116.

⁹¹ Green 1883/1997, 179-81.

mind gradually reproduces itself in the human soul. In virtue of this principle in him man has definite capabilities, the realisation of which, since in it alone he can satisfy himself, forms his true good. They are not realised, however, in any life that can be observed, in any life that has been, or is, or (as it would seem) that can be lived by man as we know him; and for this reason we cannot say with any adequacy what the capabilities are. Yet, because the essence of man's spiritual endowment is the consciousness of having it, the idea of his having such capabilities, and of a possible better state of himself consisting in their further realisation, is a moving influence in him."⁹²

In order to paraphrase Green's rather thick-writing, we should start by noting that the divine mind referenced above (otherwise referred to as the eternal consciousness or, otherwise, 'God')⁹³ is itself precisely the *a priori* determined ideal human form alluded to above. Although, as Green points out, no one has ever truly achieved such an ideal form or fully realized all of their capacities as a human being, we can (at the least) imagine ourselves to be in a preferable state to the one we are in at the moment. Given that we understand this potential state as being better than current one, we can understand that it is leading us closer to how we ought to be, i.e., toward our ideal state of being. This consciousness thus drives us to continue to pursue this ideal and aim to fully realize all our capacities. This drive to achieve the ultimate form of humanity was the cornerstone of Green's ethics.

What is especially important to remember for our purposes is that, although the pursuit of one's ideal form is driven by one's own personal desire for self-improvement, it is not a merely individual task. As the individual reaches higher levels of self-realization, his or her desire to give back to society will strengthen thus that consciousness of one's ideal form "...must at least keep the man to the path in which human progress has so far been made. It must keep him loyal in the spirit to established morality, industrious in some work of recognised utility."⁹⁴ The individual's contribution to society, moreover, is not one-sided. For Green, the *a priori* determined ideal is only recognizable to the individual as it is reflected in

⁹² Green 1883/1997, 189.

⁹³ Although this eternal consciousness is often referred to as God, scholars like Colin Tyler have shown that it is not difficult to take his notion of an eternal consciousness as meaning something akin to a 'universal human spirit' without any serious misreading. What this means is that Green's interpreters had some freedom in terms of how they ought to deal with the religious aspects of generating moral ideals. (2010, 80–3)

⁹⁴ Green 1883/1997, 184.

the society in which he or she lives.⁹⁵ As humanity continues to progress, the greater social and ethical goals available manifest themselves to the individual and, hence, mediate his or her own quest for self-realization. In this sense, because society helped to form the individual into what it is – or otherwise helps the individual realize what it ought to be – self-realization is not possible outside of a social context. Hence, we can find a feedback loop in which humanity's progress helps individuals pursue their own self-realization, which in turn contributes to the common good of society.⁹⁶

Thus, we find in Green's philosophy a powerful tool for an era of writers facing a tension between the increasing need for individual autonomy and the possibility that such a notion of autonomy may be detrimental to society as a whole, or otherwise that it would end in a form of selfishness that no longer has anything to do with the good of society. Indeed, the fact that Green's thought offered a coherent way to affirm the individual self while emphasizing the necessity of a common good in its realization made him a popular philosopher in various corners of Japan. Possibly because of this, however, interest in Green's ideas on self-realization did not necessarily end at strict interpretations of his work. Rather, after the initial importation of Green in the early 1890s, a number of competing or original versions of the theory of self-realization began to spread throughout the Meiji intellectual landscape. One pattern which was particularly common in late 19th and early 20th century Japan was to produce simplified versions of Green's thought in order to more or less justify nationalist education policies. To be more specific, many nationalist writers started to emphasize the need for adjustments to Green's formula in order to make it more suitable to the local environment. Due to the general distrust towards religion (and Christianity in particular) in late Meiji Japan,⁹⁷ it was preferable for many authors to replace Green's notion of an eternal consciousness (and the Christian undertones it entails) with the loyalty and filial relations stipulated in the imperial rescript.⁹⁸ In this way, many writers essentially came to equate individual self-realization with being a good member of the Japanese state. This was furthermore compounded by a seeming neglect for

⁹⁵ Green 1883/1997, 192.

⁹⁶ Green 1883/1997, 198-202.

⁹⁷ We should keep in mind that the 1890s specifically saw fierce debates concerning what has been called the conflict between religion and state. In particular, Inoue Tetsujirō's harsh response to the Christian thinker Uchimura Kanzō's failure to bow properly before the emperor's image sparked a great deal of controversy. Inoue believed that (even if Shinto, Buddhism, and Confucianism were not troublesome) Christianity was a danger to national morality, and hence inherently conflicted with the state of Japan's needs to find mental consistency. This disagreement between thinkers like Inoue and Christian authors was a major background for all parties discussing self-realization. (Paramore 2009, 130-60)

⁹⁸ Hirai 1979, 118.

Green's more robust discussions of the political consequences of his own work, which provided a more nuanced picture of the dynamic between the individual's pursuit of self-realization and society. While Green himself took seriously the problem of what kind of rights, public property, and social resistance in texts such as "Different Senses of 'Freedom' as Applied to Will and the Moral Progress of Man" and "Lectures on the Principles of Political Obligation" many Meiji authors were content to accept the simple formula that the self-realization of the individual benefited the common good.⁹⁹ Because this formulation was so easy to understand, these nationalist readings would spread so far as to be circulated among lower-level educators (village scholars, to borrow Hirai's terminology), and thus flood late Meiji Japanese moral education with a watered-down version of Green's moral theory in which the individual's self-realization was to be found by becoming an upstanding member of one's family and country.¹⁰⁰ The end result was something akin to a misreading of Fukuzawa: More cultivated individuals helped the state, so certainly helping the state was the fastest way to individual self-realization as well.

While these nationalist re-iterations of Green may have (for better or worse) left the most significant mark on Japanese history out of any form of the theory of self-realization, it is likely that the interpretations which used this concept of self-realization as a means to criticize late Meiji education policies are of more interest to us. Although there is some debate concerning the extent of his connection to Green's philosophy in particular, it seems to me that Ōnishi Hajime's (1864–1900) theories on moral idealism and self-realization can be considered particularly important for outlining the discursive framework in the background of Nishida's early philosophy.¹⁰¹ Ōnishi's basic philosophical position, outlined in his masterwork *The*

⁹⁹ This seeming lack of awareness of Green's political philosophy may be at least partially due to the fact that only the *Prolegomena to Ethics* was translated into Japanese, although it is also possible to imagine that this potentially inconvenient aspect of his thought was ignored, or at least sidestepped, to avoid potential backlash from the public or government. Moreover, we ought to note that common good seems to have been taken to be something equivalent with the needs of the community or state in most cases, with very few bothering to consider what it might actually mean. (Hirai 1979, 122-3)

¹⁰⁰ The relation between self-realization and the family-state is discussed in Hirai 1979 (pp. 116-125). One example of this, though, is the Tokyo University scholar Yoshida Seiichi, who argued that (even if other morals are valuable as well), the base of all morality is in loyalty and filial piety, Yoshida states the following: "The true self is a self that is a member of society. Thus, those who cannot do anything for themselves cannot do anything for society...In other words, perfect individual morals match with perfect family morals, and moreover perfect social and national morals are in harmony with them as well." (Yoshida 1907, 377)

¹⁰¹ Some scholars have pointed out that the period in which Ōnishi's writings were written and the small number of direct references to Green ought to make us question whether or not Green was actually in the background of his work. Thus, although Ōnishi's compatriot Tsubouchi Shōyō stated clearly that Green was the base for Ōnishi's theories about self-realization, there is still some doubt as to the level of Green's influence on Ōnishi. We shall forego trying to solve this problem at the moment on the grounds that we are

Origin of Conscience (良心起源論), emphasized the fact that morality and self-realization could not be reduced to loyalty to one's nation, Darwinian/Spencerian theories of evolutionary developments in human civilization, or rational self-interest.¹⁰² Ōnishi instead emphasized the importance of the conscience, the internal desire to pursue one's ideal self, in creating moral individuals.¹⁰³

The clearest application of these principles came in Ōnishi's essays on education. As a direct response to the idea that religion (Christianity, specifically) was dangerous to a unified Japanese national morality and should thus be left out of education, Ōnishi counter-attacked by claiming that loyalty to the state could never suffice as the basis for self-realization and moral cultivation when educating young individuals.¹⁰⁴ Theories that only aim to create loyal citizens of the state cannot give individuals the resources they need to pursue their ideal self. For Ōnishi, if education were to be meaningful, it had to reach the level at which the individual could have the space needed to explore philosophical or religious problems. Just as we have stated above, there needed to be something more for these ideals to be met, and education needed to allow the individual to come into contact with the deeper questions of life, and not merely urge on their development as citizens.¹⁰⁵

In this aspect of looking for something that goes beyond the state, we can find a new feature of Japanese considerations on the problem of the individual that (as we shall see soon) was highly important for Nishida. Of course, scholars like Ōnishi who pursued a form of self-realization which went beyond loyalty to the state still justified the individual's position by operating within the framework of self-realization benefitting society as a whole. Moreover, if looked at on a surface level, it may even appear as though Ōnishi does not differ substantially from his opponents aside from the fact that he believes that allowing space for philosophical or existential questions is more conducive to educating well-cultivated citizens.¹⁰⁶ Although we will not defend Ōnishi (or any other advocates of such notions of self-realization)¹⁰⁷ from

more interested in the topics of self-realization and moral idealism than we are in the historical process of scholarship on Green in Japan. (Katayama 2013, 125-6)

¹⁰² OHS I.

¹⁰³ OHS I: 151-4.

¹⁰⁴ OHS II: 219-32.

¹⁰⁵ OHS II: 71-9; 331-8.

¹⁰⁶ Hirayama 1989 provides a summary and answer to such critiques.

¹⁰⁷ With that said, however, we should note that it would be far more difficult to criticize Green himself on this point. In his previously mentioned political philosophy, Green asked questions concerning the limits of individual freedoms, rights, and social resistance that would require far more time to criticize than the less nuanced statement of many Japanese scholars that the self-realization of the individual benefits the whole of society.

such criticism here, we should note that merely improving statist educational theories was at least not Ōnishi's goal. For scholars of Nishida, it is important to note that authors like Ōnishi attempted to see self-realization as something which has a value in itself that cannot be reduced to its usefulness to Japanese society.

Perhaps the most important difference we should keep in mind is that thinkers like Ōnishi were more willing to accept the religious or spiritual aspects of moral idealism as a *ground* for the correlation between individual self-realization and society. Although Ōnishi claimed specifically in *The Origin of Conscience* that his philosophy of moral ideals and conscience do not require one to assume the existence of God,¹⁰⁸ he did leave open a path for a religious ground of society based on a larger human spirit (to which each individual is connected).¹⁰⁹ Even without relying on a specific theology, Ōnishi seems to imply that self-realization is important insofar as it implies a meeting point with the most ideal form of the human spirit and thus cannot be reduced only to the value it has for the state of Japan.

As a final note, I would like to point out that Ōnishi was not at all alone in utilizing a sort of macro-personality as a means to reconcile the relationship between individual self-realization and the benefit for society (to the contrary, he seems to have been careful not to align his ethics with any specific conception of God). While Ōnishi was cautious in discussing any possible theological aspects of self-realization, many philosophers of the time embraced this notion of a macro-personal human spirit much more actively.¹¹⁰ Although there are plenty of philosophers to choose from, perhaps the best example of utilizing a macro-personality to unify individual self-realization and society comes from Ōnishi's disciple, Tsunashima Ryōsen (1873–1907). Tsunashima argued that having a religious consciousness of being one with this greater human spirit was a *necessary* component of self-realization. In his earlier years, Tsunashima seems closer to Green, even utilizing the term “eternal consciousness” in order to assert his understanding of God as a macro-consciousness, which he then affirms as the basis for the coincidence of individual self-realization and society. In his later years, Tsunashima developed a unique (and more radical) position based on “seeing God” to become conscious of oneself as a part of this macro-personality. To be more specific, Tsunashima argued in favor

¹⁰⁸ OHS I: 150.

¹⁰⁹ Sako 1995, 87.

¹¹⁰ As we will discuss in much further detail in the next chapter, Inoue Katsuhito mentions several examples of this phenomenon from various perspectives and with various goals. He lists Inoue Tetsujirō, Inoue Enryō, Kiyozawa Manshi, and Miyake Setsurei as other examples of this phenomenon. We will focus on Tsunashima Ryōsen here because his connections to both Nishida and Green's conception of self-realization are most readily discernible. (2011, 64-8)

of a mystic consciousness of seeing oneself as one of God's children, which in turn allowed one to simultaneously achieve his or her own individual self-realization, while also directly witnessing something more universally human.¹¹¹ Although the terminology changed during his early and later years, the critical point we should remember is that the grounds for self-realization and its importance did not come from the state. Although it was beneficial to the state, it was in meeting with this more universal human spirit that grounded both the social value of self-realization and its worth for the individual.

When we look at the way Meiji authors utilized this concept of self-realization on a superficial level, we find that the most basic framework in which debates concerning individualism took place had not changed from early times. Insofar as all proponents of the theory of self-realization believed that the pursuit of individual cultivation was necessary for the benefit of society, their work can very much be considered as a revamped attempt to solve the same problem which their early Meiji counterparts had already tried to solve, but this time by using new ideas on moral ideals. However, it is of crucial importance for us to recognize that there were now new layers to these debates which would have allowed asking the deeper question of what it might *mean* for the individual to achieve self-realization. Now, in addition to an emphasis on how stronger individuals would be necessary for a stronger society, there was furthermore a burgeoning sense that individuals required something *beyond* the state or society. Specifically, in cases like Ōnishi and Tsunashima, there were debates on whether or not the quasi-religious, existential aspects of individuality were necessary for individual self-realization (and thus necessary for a stronger society). As we shall confirm in the next section, it was in the context of just such a movement that Nishida himself attempted to carve out space for his unique ideas on self-cultivation. Hence, looking at both his connection to this position as well as how he attempted to go beyond shall be our next task.

2.3) Self-Realization and Contributions to Individualism in *An Inquiry into the Good*

Now, it is finally time for us to draw our attention to the philosopher whose work is the very motive of this investigation, Nishida Kitarō and, in doing so, see how these debates shaped his work and how he may have contributed to their development. Nishida himself was born in 1870, at the beginning of the Meiji era. It should thus not be a surprise to anyone that even

¹¹¹ See Mushiaki and Yukiyasu (1981, 94-5) for a more extensive explanation of Tsunashima's religious thought and its place in Japanese history.

though it did not seem to be in his nature to care deeply about politics, growing up in the dynamic early Meiji era did have an effect on him. Despite the fact that his early philosophical writings were markedly unpolitical in nature,¹¹² Nishida did demonstrate an affinity toward individualism from a young age, and seemed to harbor a great deal of respect toward the aforementioned Fukuzawa Yukichi.¹¹³ What's more, Nishida was one of the students who took Nakajima Rikizō's earliest classes available on Green and initially intended to write out a manuscript interpreting his philosophy upon graduation (before eventually becoming disillusioned with his work, that is).¹¹⁴ References to Green can still be found plentifully in his work published before *An Inquiry into the Good*. As a final note, his respect for authors such as Onishi and Tsunashima can be found easily by perusing his diary and writings. Keeping all of this in mind, Nishida's biographical interest in these topics as well as exposure to these topics is borderline undeniable. To be certain, then, the question posed here is not whether Nishida can be connected to this particular genealogical strand – the question to that is clearly affirmative. Instead, our goal in this section is to evaluate how this framework shapes Nishida's text and what new twists he provided in *An Inquiry into the Good* in order to find possible contributions his early work may have made to ethics in Japan. In light of this, my claim here is simple: Nishida's capacity to tie his ethical arguments together with his philosophy of pure experience offered both a philosophical backbone for his work as well as a window into the aesthetic or existential aspects of the life of the individual.

Before going too far ahead of ourselves, however, it would be beneficial to take a step back and give a brief, schematic presentation of Nishida's theory of self-realization before discussing what makes it important to Japanese intellectual history. While the following list is hardly an extensive discussion of his early ethics, we should note at least the following points when discussing Nishida's notion of self-realization:

- 1) As mentioned in the previous paragraph, Nishida's theory of self-realization is based on (and works in tandem with) his ontological and epistemological discussions of pure

¹¹² Importantly, those like Goto-Jones (2005) would likely disagree with this statement, arguing that there are concrete and important political ramifications to Nishida's philosophy. At the same time, though, in his early philosophy, at least, analyses of actual events occurring in Japan or attempts to apply his philosophy to them are absent. This is a definitive and marked difference from those like Inoue Tetsujirō for instance, who lectured on topics such as the colonization of Korea. Whether or not the same can be said of his later life and work is perhaps a more difficult question. Luckily, it is not our job to consider the matter here.

¹¹³ Yusa 2002 64; Goto-Jones 2005, 52

¹¹⁴ Nishida's writings on Green are recorded in his complete works (NKZ 11: 3-22).

experience. Given that this is the case, Nishida does not assume a pre-given individual person who then achieves the realization of their self. To the contrary, although it is more typical for us to define individual things and persons in spatio-temporal terms (i.e., as being spatially distinct from other individual persons and things), Nishida denies this understanding on the grounds that time and space are secondary to pure experience and, thus, should not be taken for granted.¹¹⁵ Instead, Nishida asserts that the individual is formed over the course of the development of pure experience. In other words, the individual is not given, it is made.

- 2) What does it mean for the individual to be developed? Insofar as I can tell, Nishida is referring to the process we discussed in the introduction of this chapter in which meaning is developed through the process of unification and disruption in pure experience. That is to say, when we come across conflicting information and need to make a judgment or find ourselves lacking the object of our desire or need, we reflect in ways that make the implicit relations between experiences explicit or otherwise perform an act to bring us closer to what is lacking in experience. These connections manifest themselves as the knowledge available to us and the actions and habits we are able to perform. It is likely for this reason that Nishida claims the individual to be one ‘system’ in pure experience. The results of this system manifest themselves as the habits, speech patterns, and behavior of the individual who has amassed these experiences.¹¹⁶ Given this fact, the act of developing the individual can be considered to have an ethical value in and of itself as the path toward the ‘perfect development’ of the self and its faculties.
- 3) Note that the ethical value of the self is not one ethical value among many but is rather taken as the good itself. Although Nishida’s systematic dismantling of the other alternatives is too long for us to delve into here, the upshot of this claim is that there is no other possible basis for ethics than what is given in pure experience.¹¹⁷ As one might

¹¹⁵ See Nishida 1911/1990, 19.

¹¹⁶ [P]ersonality, which is both the unifying power of consciousness and the unifying power of reality, is first actualized in individuals. At the base of one’s consciousness exists unanalyzable individuality. All activities of consciousness are an expression of this individuality: each person’s knowledge, feeling, and volition possess qualities unique to the person. This individuality does not manifest itself only in phenomena of consciousness; it also emerges in each person’s appearance, speech, and behavior. (Nishida 1911/1990, 137)]

¹¹⁷ Nishida begins his discussion of ethics by first critiquing other alternatives, referred to by him as the “intuitive theory”, “authority theory”, “the rational or intellectual theory”, and the “hedonistic theory”. Because these critiques are not necessarily central to our concerns in this chapter, we will leave them alone for the time being. However, it is worth noting that the categories that Nishida made (and many of the

expect of Nishida's brand of radical empiricism, any theories of ethics that assume moral laws from without are immediately doomed to failure, given that we could never have any experience of any moral forces external to experience and, thus, would be left entirely unable to justify any ethical claims we make based on them.

- 4) Hence, as far as Nishida is concerned, reclaiming a state of consciousness in which there is no gap between subject and object has a supreme ethical value. In the developmental process mentioned above, there is a gap between how things ought to be (unified) and how things are (disjointed). As an example, if I am hungry, there is a gap between how I am (unfed) and how I would ideally be if I reunite with the object of my desire (in this case, a sandwich or anything else that will sate my hunger). To give a potentially more artistic example, a basketball player who has to still think about her jump shot and remains focused on how her form ought to be in comparison with the actual act of shooting can be said to have experienced a gap between how things *are* and how things *ought* to be. However, a more skilled player, or a player who has entered the colloquial 'zone', has no such distinction. In other words, there is no distinction between how they *are* shooting and how they *should* be shooting. In this way, the disruption of consciousness provides a distinction between *is* and *ought*. This distinction is then rectified in the achievement of pre-reflective pure experience. Put differently, the formations of the ideals that we strive for and the development of the self is based in the movement of pure experience as a disjunction between how things ought to be before the subsequent reclamation of this state in the reunification of subject and object.
- 5) Keeping the points made above in mind, one may be tempted to accuse Nishida of selfishness, in that he seems to overly value the self, its faculties, and the completion of the gaps that halt its development over the needs of society, deliberation, the law, or other external forces that would typically keep us from doing as we please. However, as far as Nishida is concerned, this is a false dichotomy, given that the movement of pure experience does not limit itself to only one individual person. Indeed, as we have discussed before, one of the basic principles of pure experience is that it does not presuppose that experiences be held by the individual, but rather takes the individual to be something formed within experience. Because of this observation, Nishida chooses

critiques he levelled against them) were derived from Onishi's lectures on ethics. For a detailed synopsis, see Hirayama (1997).

not to limit the developmental movement of pure experience solely to the individual person. Rather, the development of pure experience occurs at the societal, national, and even cosmic level. In other words, the development of pure experience (the self) can only occur at a ‘trans-individual’ level. As such, the development of pure experience is simultaneously the realization of the individual self and the realization of a trans-individual personal consciousness understood in its ultimate form by Nishida as ‘God’. This concept of a trans-individual consciousness as God thus offers a connection between the Good of the individual and the Good of the community, thus providing a ground for Nishida’s ethics to avoid charges of mere selfishness.

Looking over this abbreviated explanation, we can easily see that there are more than a few similarities between Nishida and the position described in the previous section. Naturally, Nishida’s metaphysical assertions relating to the nature of the individual as something that cannot be merely spatially, temporally, or legally defined add several new wrinkles to the equation. Yet, on at least a superficial level, the theoretical connection to be made between Nishida and his predecessors seem to bring them to roughly the same theoretical destination. First, we can see that in either case, the realization of the self requires the pursuit of the self’s completion of its ideal form. At the same time, though, this is not possible as a solitary or selfish assertion of how one wants to behave independently from the state or the rest of society. Much to the contrary, the realization of the individual person and the ideal they pursue in either case seems to be taken as the key to a healthy society (as Nishida mentions, any society that fails to raise the individual is anything but healthy).¹¹⁸ Additionally, such claims are grounded by its relation to some notion of a larger, trans-individual self or personality.

I would reckon additionally that some of the weaker points of Nishida’s ethics find their roots in Meiji period moral idealism as well. For instance, as we shall discuss in much greater detail in the next chapter, attempting to illustrate a personality in terms of a ‘greater’ unity seems difficult to permit from a methodological standpoint and may not even be an accurate reflection of what Nishida was ‘actually’ trying to say. Additionally, our previous allusion to the fact that Green’s very serious and concrete discussions of what legal and property rights an individual requires to be able to pursue the ideal form of their self were lost on his Japanese

¹¹⁸ Nishida 1911/1990, 137-8

interpreters proves to be true in Nishida's case as well.¹¹⁹ Hence, although one could certainly try to make a political theory out of Nishida's theory of pure experience (or at the very least explain why politics matter on Nishida's worldview), such a view would not come directly from the text itself.¹²⁰

With that said – putting Green himself aside – I do not think that any of Nishida's predecessors were able to introduce any comparable level of systematic *grounding* for their claims that Nishida had made about self-realization.¹²¹ Although it may be easy to look at the relation between Nishida's ethics and his ontology as coincidental or secondary (as we mentioned in the introduction), I do not believe this to be the case. To the contrary, as we briefly outlined at the outset of this paper, the argument for self-realization Nishida makes is hinged entirely upon the structures in which pure experience develops through the process of disruption and unification. The following quote is rather long, but I believe it provides a window into the connection between pure experience and ethics.

“As discussed earlier, the development and completion of a thing is the fundamental mode of the establishment of all reality, and spirit, nature, and the universe come to exist by this mode. The good, conceived of as the development and completion of the self, amounts to our obeying the laws of the reality called the self. That is, to unite with the true reality of the self is the highest good. The laws of morality thus come to be included in the laws of reality, and we are able to explain the good in terms of the true nature of the reality called the self. Internal demands, which are the basis of value judgments, and the unifying power of reality are one, not two.”¹²²

While there is quite a bit that deserves to be unpacked here, I will try to brief and only point out a few things that are necessary for being able to decipher Nishida's ethics and their

¹¹⁹ The fact that Nishida and his contemporaries did not engage in any works of Green's works aside from the *Prolegomena to Ethics* notwithstanding, I find it surprising that no prior literature comparing Nishida and Green has (to the best of my knowledge) even so much as recognized any of Green's political writings and the level of detail they offer for practical questions relating to rights, property and social policy that are not immediately answerable on Nishida's philosophy. In this sense, revisiting self-realization in Green and Nishida while keeping texts other than just the *Prolegomena to Ethics* could be a worthwhile endeavor.

¹²⁰ Goto-Jones (2005), for instance, argues that Nishida is essentially pointing us toward a form of pacifism. Interesting as this conclusion is, Nishida himself never explicitly states that his ethics are pacifistic.

¹²¹ Even the most thorough predecessor of Nishida, Onishi Hajime, recognized the incomplete nature of his philosophy, stating that accounting for the ontological status of this ideal form of human-beings and the difference between the ideal and reality was still an unsolved 'great problem' that required further contemplation. (See Hirayama 1981, 196-202)

¹²² Nishida 1911/1990, 126

contribution to the development of individualism in Japan. The first – and most important – point is that the connection between the developmental process of pure experience and ethics is not negligible. This is the case insofar as the movement of pure experience, i.e., the development of the self, is the only possible source of any grounds for non-abstract ethical values. In this way, Nishida's ethics are hinged on their basis in the development of reality/the self and – as we have stated previously – thus have a logical basis to support them.

Now, in regard to our initial question of how Nishida contributed to the advancement of ethical thought in Japan, we can start first by pointing out how this logical formulation provides more suitable technical solutions to questions left unanswered by the popular discourse on the topic. The first of which is why the fulfilment of demands or ideals leads to positive or praiseworthy development in moral character. Here, we must remember Nishida believes that the development of pure experience is not arbitrary but is instead rational. Upon claiming that his own ethics can be considered a form of energetism, Nishida makes the following claim:

“Assuming that our consciousness is constituted by a synthesis of various faculties and constructed such that one faculty controls the others, then in energetism to follow reason and on that basis control other faculties is the good. Originally, however, our consciousness is one activity, and a single, unique power always functions at its base. This power manifests itself in such momentary activities of consciousness as perception and impulse; in conscious activities like thinking, imagining, and willing, it assumes a more profound form. To follow reason means to follow this profound unifying power.”¹²³

What this quotation demonstrates is something Nishida states clearly throughout the book – reason is none other than one aspect of pure experience's quest for unity. In other words, by seeking unity, pure experience seeks to put the different elements present in experience into a harmony (as opposed to leaving them in disjointed chaos). By extension of this, Nishida can argue that pure experience is rational by nature. From what I can gather, Nishida is able to make such claims in virtue of the fact that entailed in pure experience's tendency toward unity is an implied tendency towards harmony. As we mentioned previously, although conflict and contradiction are produced naturally throughout the dynamic changes that occur throughout

¹²³ Nishida 1911/1990, 130. Emphasis added by the author of this thesis.

our lives, pure experience always functions in such a manner that it integrates more information into a system where they can co-exist with one another.

The second point that we ought to consider in more detail here is that this dynamic pursuit is – in and of itself – the process that gives birth to the ideals that we strive for and, in this sense, allows Nishida to attempt to provide a philosophical foundation for his moral idealism. Given that the state in which the gaps between subject and object (i.e., the conflicts and contradictions in experience) have been resolved is equivalent to reason, we summarily understand that such a state could be equivalent to the ‘ideal’ state of experience.

“Consciousness is not an assemblage of sequential actions but a single unified system. [...] Granting this, what is the order that is distinct in each of the various activities of our spirit? At lower levels, our spirit, like the spirit of animals, is simply an instinctual activity – that is, because it functions impulsively in response to objects before us, it is moved entirely by physical desire. But no matter how simple, phenomena of consciousness necessarily possess ideational demands; however instinctual the activity of consciousness might be, the activity of ideas is hidden behind it.”¹²⁴

Putting these two points together, then, can help provide a foundation for Nishida’s ethics of self-realization. As Nishida himself mentioned when stating that the laws of morality are one with the laws of reality, *self-realization is integrated into the very structure of pure experience as the pursuit of a more rational, ideal harmony*. The reunification of subject and object is – thus – inherently capable of serving as the logical basis for a theory of self-realization. Conversely, prolonged gaps between subject and object and the discord they present run contrary to this harmony and are thus understood as evil by Nishida in his early philosophy.¹²⁵ It is here – in the logical grounding of self-realization in the structure of reality – that Nishida likely made his most substantial contribution to ethics in Japan.

Of course, I do not think that the only notable feature of his ethics in comparison to his predecessors. Perhaps just as interesting as the logical foundation for his ethical ideas in the structure of reality is the aesthetic streak in Nishida’s early philosophy. By this I mean that

¹²⁴ Nishida 1911/1990, 128-9

¹²⁵ “Fundamentally, then, things themselves contain nothing evil. Evil arises from the contradictions and conflicts of the system of reality. If someone asks about the origin of these conflicts, we can answer that they are based on the differentiating activity of reality and are a necessary condition for the development of reality.” (Nishida 1911/1990, 171, emphasis added by the author of this thesis)

Nishida has a tendency to romanticize ethics, valuing a beautifully led life over one of reflective contemplation or deliberation. Consider the following claims:

“Although they resemble each other, pleasure and happiness are different. We can achieve happiness through satisfaction, and satisfaction arises in the realization of demands for ideals. ‘Eating course food, drinking water, and bending one’s elbow to make a pillow – pleasure also resides therein,’ said Confucius.”¹²⁶

“From this perspective, the concept of good approaches that of beauty. Beauty is felt when things are realized like ideals are realized, which means for things to display their original nature. Just as flowers are most beautiful when they manifest their original nature, humans attain the pinnacle of beauty when they express their original nature. In this regard the good is beauty. No matter how valueless conduct might appear when seen in light of the great demands of human nature, when it is truly natural conduct emerging from the innate talents of the person, it evokes a sense of beauty.”¹²⁷

Quotations like this hint at one overriding and – in some respects – problematic tendency in *An Inquiry into the Good* to glorify non-reflective skillful performances for their ethical or religious value over acts based on careful deliberation. Naturally, this claim can make sense, given that repeatedly performing an activity until it can be executed without deliberation can be considered a sign that one has maximized their potential (insofar as there is no gap between how things *ought* to be versus how they *are*). Additionally, as Nishida explains using the old concept of sincerity (至誠) or phrases like the most solemn demands of the self, this state reduces any conflicts between what one *wants* and what *needs to be done*.¹²⁸ Yet, I do not believe that it is controversial to say that this line of thinking leads Nishida to some difficult questions. For instance, we could easily come up with activities in which mastering one’s full potential leads to a skillful or elegant performance that is not morally ‘good’ in any usual sense.¹²⁹ In this context, the conflagration of skillful performance and ethical values leads

¹²⁶ Nishida 1911/1990, 124

¹²⁷ Nishida 1911/1990, 125

¹²⁸ See Nishida 1911/1990, 133-4

¹²⁹ Consider the possibility that there is an assassin who has been trained for years to become what is essentially a real-life version of the Terminator. This assassin may achieve a state of pure experience (understood as consciousness that has no distinction between subject and object) as he mows down one target after another, but this would hardly make his behavior morally acceptable.

Nishida to a potentially ‘trans-ethical’ dimension of thought, wherein such aesthetic pursuits (for lack of a better term) triumph over our usual concern with social norms. Hence, although Nishida provides a logical formulation for how self-realization occurs, he does open himself to potential critiques. After all, it is not without reason that Green himself insists that self-realization can only be achieved by reflection, insofar as it is necessary for thinking about all of one’s self, others, and society.¹³⁰ Hence, without any fleshed out discussion of what happens when conflicts between (long-term, well-practiced) desires and laws/rules/norms based in discursive language, one is left with the impression that Nishida’s ethics are restricted to dealing with the level of our lives that has nothing to do with social or political issues.

Now, with all of that said, my goal in pointing this out is *not* to disparage Nishida’s ethics. To the contrary, I think that pairing this aesthetic inclination with the aforementioned logical formulation is the most fascinating aspect of Nishida’s early ethical work. This is particularly poignant when we look at Nishida in comparison to the burgeoning tendencies in the work of those like Onishi to move away from looking at the individual as merely one constituent of a nation-state. That is to say, Nishida’s theory of pure experience is interesting precisely in virtue of its inseparability from the life of the individual, not as a member of the state or as a moral agent or as the bearer of rights, but as a lived individual facing *inescapable existential qualms*. More precisely, Nishida’s ethics provide a logical formulation for how we can understand the development of each individual in its most concrete way of being.

Naturally, as was also partially alluded to at the end of the last chapter, Nishida was not the only one with a renewed interest in the ‘internal life’ of the individual. Takeuchi Yoshinori’s association of Nishida’s philosophy with late Meiji romantic literature is useful, given that we find romantic authors of the same generation expressing a similar interest in leading a beautiful life.¹³¹ Yet, Nishida did not only account for this concrete aspect of our self-

¹³⁰ Although previous literature on Nishida and Green has typically looked at all the ways that Green could learn from Nishida, we would do well to note that Green seems to have anticipated a position like Nishida’s and already has a critique in place: “It may come to be thought that the only freedom is to be found in a life of absolute detachment from all interests; a life in which the pure ego converses solely with itself or with a God, who is the same abstraction under another name. This is a view in which both saints and philosophers have been apt to fall. It means practically, so far as it means anything, absorption in some one interest with which the man identifies himself in exclusion of all other interests, which he sets over against himself as an influence to be kept aloof.” (Green 1886/1997, 310) To reiterate, Green himself takes religious freedom found in unity with Self or God apart from society to be a form of aloofness, giving the individual an excuse to avoid engaging in social issues that would otherwise inconvenience him or her.

¹³¹ See Takeuchi (1970) for a defense of the claim that Nishida created a ‘romantic’ notion of ethics. Now, it is worth noting that Nishida does not often mention any romantic authors directly in his notes and that any connections between him and the “romantic” tradition seem to be found purely in the zeitgeist of his era and proximity to writers like Takayama Chogyū in Tokyo University. In this sense, it is important to clarify that

realization or aesthetic fulfilment. Instead, he provided a full-fledged account of its centrality to our lives and offered a path to logicizing post-Russo-Japanese War interest in the life of the individual. Keeping this in mind, I would like to hint at the role this mysterious combination may have played in Japanese intellectual history by looking at two important examples of authors who were inspired by Nishida's capacity to complete the separation of the individual's inner-life and its political life: Nishitani Keiji and Kurata Hyakuzō.

2.4) Concluding Remarks – Self-Realization in *An Inquiry into the Good* and the troubled young men of the Taishō period

As we have seen in this chapter, Nishida's early ethics can be better understood if considered within the framework of Meiji individualism. Starting from the earliest Meiji individualists, the need to juggle conflicting goals was immediately apparent. At once, self-sufficient, and responsible individuals (as well as the rights and freedoms needed to ensure their existence) were perceived of as a necessity for becoming a 'modern' country. Simultaneously, though, the need to create a centralized nation-state with common beliefs was equally apparent. One popular response to this conundrum was the theory of self-realization, which emphasized that the actualization of individual goods was only possible insofar as it contributed to the common-good. Nishida, who received his education in philosophy during the height of these efforts, likely inherited many of the same concerns when attempting to formulate his own individualism. At the same time, we have shown here two developments Nishida provided to this particular line of thought in early modern Japanese ethics: a systematic foundation for his ethical claims and an interest in the existential or aesthetic aspects of the self.

Considering that we have made significant efforts to highlight the technical contributions that Nishida's work offered, I would like to once again emphasize that these two aspects of Nishida's philosophy were not separate from each other. The notion that Nishida's *An Inquiry into the Good* has been counted among the triumvirate of important titles for soul-searching young men in the Taisho period is a widely accepted claim. Indeed, alongside titles such as Abe Jirō's *Santarō's Diary* and Kurata Hyakuzō's *Departing with Love and Knowledge*, *An Inquiry into the Good* was a favorite among young men seeking to make sense of their lives in a turbulent time period that featured an influx of Western literature and an upturn of students

Nishida was not a romantic author himself, there seems to have been enough common sources between the two to enable research like Takeuchi's to take place.

leaving their homes to study in larger schools. Naturally, this was not by accident. To the contrary, Nishida's more rigorous philosophical assessments of the life and good of the individual seem to have been what ensured his position in the collective psyche of young Japanese men. Among these young men who were influenced by Nishida's work we find the aforementioned Kurata and Nishitani Keiji, both of whom provide excellent examples for highlighting what specifically it was about Nishida's individualistic streak that made him so popular for different reasons. In order to close this chapter, I would like to take a short look at both of their relationships to Nishida's putative individualism.

First, in Kurata's case, Nishida's *phenomenological* formulation of how the self is able to pursue its desires without merely prioritizing itself over the good of others proved to be the decisive reason for his interest in Nishida. Indeed, as Kurata himself describes, before meeting Nishida, a mixture of familial tensions bred a solipsist epistemology, focused entirely on the certainty of his interiority in contrast with the dubitable nature of other minds. According to his recollection, this created a vicious circle in which Kurata used his solipsist worldview to justify a crude rational egoism, devoid of any friendship or compassion for others. Even amidst the turmoil that this caused in his personal life, though, Kurata found in Nishida's philosophy a savior of sorts:

“I never doubted that the notion that the individual consciousness of my [own] self was the most fundamental and absolute reality. I believed that, first, my self existed and only after that could various experiences take place after this. Yet, this epistemology was utterly mistaken. All of my turmoil, anguish, and the pathologies borne from them were contained in this mistake. The most primitive state of reality was not individual consciousness. That is one independent and complete natural phenomena. It is a unitary *Sein* with no such consciousness of self or other. It is the only reality. It is the only background. It is the spontaneous self-development of a singular experience. It is neither subjective nor objective, but is rather one absolute. Individual consciousness is not only something which is developed outgoing from the most primitive state of reality, its existence presupposes other selves to stand opposed to it as a necessary condition. For there is no subject that exists on its own without an object.”¹³²

¹³² Kurata 1912/2020, 272

As Kurata would have it, it was this realization that helped him overcome his existential dread. Indeed, recognizing that individuated subjectivity is actually a secondary state to the life of the individual was what reminded him of the virtues of pursuing a greater unity beyond reflective consciousness: namely, love. This realization was so moving to Kurata that, according to him, his first meeting with Nishida's epistemology caused tears to come to his eyes.¹³³ Putting aside (for the moment, at least) the matter of whether or not this is an appropriate reading of *An Inquiry into the Good*, Kurata's assessment shows an interesting facet of Nishida's contribution to early modern Japanese thought. The epistemological foundation for Nishida's ethics and his denial of the primacy of individuated consciousness gave weight to claims of love and unity between humans in ways that appeared otherwise arbitrary to the young writer.

Insofar as I can see, a more refined statement of the same feelings can be found in Nishitani's work as well. As a high-school student struggling with interpersonal relations during the same era as Kurata, Nishitani describes a slip into nihilism. While those around him fawned over the work of Abe Jirō and his explanation of the interiority, Nishitani seemed to feel the opposite: the more he reflected upon an interiority cut off from the rest of the world, the more he felt isolated and prone to further nihilistic tendencies. Once again, it was Nishida's epistemological foundations for his emphasis on the individual that proved appealing for the young Nishitani. Asserting Natsume Soseki to be similar, we find that what appealed to Nishitani about Nishida's thought was its logical framework.

“The pursuit of the self we see in thinkers like Soseki and Nishida differed from that of the generation that followed them. Theirs was a quest for the self that began from itself as center and reached outwards instead of simply turning further inwards in search of itself. For them, the more one probes the interior of the self, the more one fails to understand the self. It is something like a road that begins wide but branches off in all directions the further one advances on it and finally ends up in a swamp or disappears into underbrush.”¹³⁴

Contrary to the popular tendency of his time to contemplate the life of the individual self from a purely inward perspective, Nishida and Natsume offered a differing framework and – Nishida in particular – gave a thorough structural account of what this entails and why it ought to be

¹³³ Kurata 1912/2020, 271

¹³⁴ Nishitani 1991, 8

accepted. The very philosophical underpinnings of *An Inquiry into the Good* gave voice to what Nishitani describes in his synopsis as an experience similar to coming out into a great clearing, free of any obstructions or hidden paths that obstruct the nature of the individual's life. Once again, then, we find that the epistemological basis for Nishida's claims about individuality prove to be the decisive factor in spreading his thought in the Taisho period.

Naturally, these are only two specific examples. Yet, at the same time, both of them seem to point to a common conclusion about Nishida's place in the history of Japanese individualism: the simultaneous shift toward the concrete, existential or aesthetic aspects of individuality and the schematic foundation of his theory of self-realization through pure experience worked in tandem to provide a fresh take on the life of the individual in the modern Japanese canon. Of course, this new take was very much a response to the pre-existing framework for discussing the realization of the individual person starting with early Meiji authors like Fukuzawa and, in this sense, keeping this background in mind can lead to a more fulfilling reading of his early ethics. Put otherwise, as we can see in the testimonies of those like Nishitani and Kurata, it was precisely the continuity with pre-existing Meiji intellectual concerns that made Nishida's new and 'original' contribution to discussions of the life of the individual self in modern Japan all the more compelling.

Chapter 3

Re-visiting the ‘True’ Self in *An Inquiry into the Good*: As Seen from the Perspective of Meiji Organicism

3.0) Introduction

Once again, the conclusion to the previous chapter brings us back to the possibly the most pressing issue at stake in *An Inquiry into the Good*: the life of the self. As was the case for both Nishitani and Kurata, there seems to be an intuitive appeal to the concept of the ‘true’ self in Nishida’s early work. Indeed, the notion that thematic self-consciousness of one’s self as an individuated subjectivity is a secondary state of being in contrast with our greater or true self has long been one of the most appealing aspects of Nishida’s early philosophy and an important reason for his prominence in 20th century Japanese philosophy. Indeed, although many early 20th century writers and philosophers in Japan stressed the importance of the ‘interiority’ with regard to selfhood, Nishida set himself apart by instead seeking a ‘greater’ sense of self. Just as was the case for Nishitani in particular in the conclusion of the last chapter, we can see that Nishida offered an escape from the claustrophobia of being ‘stuck in one’s own head’ with a carefully weaved philosophical argument. To say that Nishida’s notion of a true self was a crucial aspect of earning his reputation as modern Japan’s first philosopher would not be an overstatement.

Beyond the fact that Nishida’s theory of selfhood was an important factor in setting the tone for his popularity in 20th century Japan, though, this concept of a true self played an important ontological, epistemological, ethical, and religious role in Nishida’s philosophy. Of course, even if we understand the importance of Nishida’s theory of selfhood, the pressing question of what this true self amounts to still remains unanswered.¹³⁵ In response to this question, it is important to note something mentioned by Nishitani himself that should likely be obvious to readers of this thesis: part of the reason for Nishida’s popularity in the early 20th century was thanks to his background with philosophy in late 19th century Japan.¹³⁶ Indeed, as we have seen to a certain extent in the previous chapter, the concept that individual selves were

¹³⁵ Keep in mind that this is by no means to say that the notion of the true self in *An Inquiry into the Good* has been ignored. Just to name a few important contributions, we can find considerations on this topic from Nishitani Keiji (1991), Hisamatsu Shinichi (1971), and many others.

¹³⁶ “This attitude [...] probably arose from the fact that those who embraced it still had the tradition of the spirit of the East as their base.” (Nishitani 1991, 8) Of course, we need to remember that Nishitani did not mention specific names or go into detail when making this reference.

somehow only a small part of something greater was not uncommon. Insofar as many Meiji authors argued that individuals were connected to their community via a macro-personality, we can borrow Inoue Katsuhito's (2016) terminology in noting similarities between Nishida's work and the 'organic' view of selfhood and personality in late 19th century Japan. As we shall discuss in greater detail as we proceed in this chapter, this position was largely defined by tendency to look at individual persons as part of a "living totality" that "unifies the parts with their various functions."¹³⁷ In other words, the organic position which took individuals to be 'cells' of something larger than themselves. If we connect Nishida to this tradition, then our previous question can be answered easily: the true self would be this trans-individual, living totality in contrast with our usual, smaller selves. Additionally, for reasons that will become apparent as we proceed, such an argument could easily help one grasp the relation between Nishida's theory of selfhood and the religious import that he places upon it. Hence, given both Nishida's familiarity with late 19th century philosophy in Japan as well as his own tendencies to contrast the 'small' self with our 'true' self, it is not unreasonable to think that an investigation into the relation between Nishida and Meiji organic philosophy could be an important hint for better understanding his conception of self.

Keeping this in mind, we will strive to achieve the two following, simple goals. First, we will attempt to clarify the nature of this organic view of selfhood, as well as its religious consequences. Second, we will use this as a springboard to assess whether Nishida's notion of the true self (as well as the intrinsically related notions of personality and God) ought to be understood within the continuity of this organic worldview. In order to accomplish this task, we will proceed in the following order. First, we will start by introducing the circumstances in which the concept of personality developed in the Japanese philosophical world. Specifically, we will highlight both the fact that this understanding of the self was spread significantly throughout the Meiji period in a large variety of authors, due in part to the popularity of the previously mentioned philosophy of T. H. Green. In the second section, we shall see how this notion of a trans-individual consciousness or self connected to what has been deemed as the organic strand of philosophy present in mid to late Meiji philosophy. In order to better understand this trend, we will look at how the relationship between a living and personal conception of reality and the individual persons that compose it as this theory was taken up by the most extreme proponent of this view, Miyake Setsurei. In doing so, we shall see Miyake's argument in favor of taking the universe as a greater consciousness, of our individual selves

¹³⁷ Inoue 2016, 17

are a part of and analogous to. With this background knowledge in place, we will finally be able to look at how this tradition related to Nishida's own concept of self in *An Inquiry into the Good*. As I shall contend, while the vital aspect of reality was an important contribution from such organic philosophy, it is not entirely necessary to read Nishida's theory of self as being a mere statement of the relation between part (individual self) and whole (true self). Indeed, although it is almost beyond doubt that Nishida did endorse a greater unity with reality as a whole to some extent in his early philosophy, this schema of 'big self' and 'little self' carries with it a variety of aporias and runs contrary to Nishida's own methodology. In response to this fact, we shall unfold an alternative reading of the interrelated terms of self and God in Nishida that seems to me more in line with the methodology and spirit of *An Inquiry into the Good*. Finally, in the conclusion, we will discuss how tendencies among his contemporary philosophers may have led Nishida to express certain ideas in ill-fitting ways and reference how these issues may have pushed him to develop as a philosopher. However, as we shall note, although this conclusion will mark an important step away from those like Miyake, there are still likely two ways in which we find undeniable influence from his predecessors on his work. First, in a negative sense, it provided Nishida with the challenge of how to describe a non-individuated consciousness without introducing a macro-consciousness, hence motivating the developments of some of his most important terms. Second, I believe that a more positive impact can be found from this 'organic' tradition on Nishida's thought when we consider the importance of the lived or vital nature of his conception of self as it carried into his following works, such as *Intuition and Reflection in Self-Awareness*.

3.1) Organic Philosophy in the Late Meiji Period: Self-Realization and the Virtue of Losing One's Self

Over the course of the previous chapter, we came across one of the more striking trends in Meiji ethical discourse: the notion that the individual and her community are connected by a trans-individual personal consciousness. In many cases, in no small part thanks to the prevalence of a very specific interpretation of the work of T. H. Green, this macro-personality was equated with the ideal form of our being; an ultimate endpoint for human consciousness. Regardless of the nature of this macro-personality (whether it be understood as 'God', 'the universe', 'Japan' or anything else), the goal of the individual was to pursue their ideal form by attempting to achieve this ideal by unifying with this personality.

Given that we have already talked about the philosophy of T. H. Green in the mid-to-late Meiji period in significant detail the previous chapter, we will forego any further in-depth analysis of this notion of self-realization. However, in lieu of that, I would like to point attention to the quasi-mystical formulation here between a bigger ‘person’ or ‘self’ and the individuals that compose it. Indeed, going back to the end of the Meiji period, it had already become apparent to observers that this formula for moral idealism had been co-opted with specific movements in the Japanese case. The writer Tomonaga Saburō notes in his observations on the popularity of personalism among his contemporaries:

“A philosophy centered on the Buddhist of no-self continues to exercise a broad and deep control over people’s minds, while customs focusing on the universal retains its strength among people as a vestigial influence from the feudal era.”¹³⁸

This was soon followed by the prediction below:

“Personal idealism will be trans-personalized or non-personalized as it enters our country.”¹³⁹

Tomonaga’s observations bring us to two important points. First, it has been often pointed out that – with some admitted exceptions – personalism in Japan shied away from emphasizing the importance of the individual proper.¹⁴⁰ Second, regardless of whether or not “customs focusing on the universal” can be so univocally applied to Japanese thought, there certainly was a tendency to link this unity between individual self and a greater macro-personal consciousness with the notion of losing or forgetting the self in traditional Japanese religious texts.

Here I would argue that this second point applies to almost every important late Meiji metaphysician to some degree (although there were exceptions like the previously mentioned Onishi Hajime, who never seemed particularly interested in ‘losing’ the self). Importantly, though, this trend manifested itself in the work of various authors with a surprisingly wide array of justifications. Kiyozawa Manshi, for instance, seems to describe in *Spiritual Activism*

¹³⁸ Cited in Inoue 2016, 14

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ An interesting note from authors like Inoue Katsuhito (2016) and Sako (1995) is that the matter of emphasizing the individual proper or a universal personality became divided among national lines. Those who emphasized the individual tended to insist upon the importance of English philosophy, while those who prioritized the universal side with German personalists.

how the logic of co-dependent arising could act as the basis for a worldview in which introspection helps us realize that individual (part) and absolute spirit (whole) are immediately one with each other.¹⁴¹ Tsunashima Ryōsen, on the other hand, provided a more phenomenological description of the three ‘visions’ he had of God that stood at the basis of his religious philosophy.¹⁴² Certainly, there were technical differences in how to describe this ‘greater self,’ with one pertinent example being that – while most major authors declared this macro-consciousness to be personal in some degree – critics like Inoue Tetsujirō split hairs over whether or not the ‘greater’ self of the universe could be conceived of in this matter. However, even in cases like this, we see that such arguments appear to be more a matter of vocabulary than genuine differences in content.¹⁴³

In the case of any of these authors, though, we see that at the center of this trend lies a distinct mereological claim: individual persons all serve to comprise one part of a greater, living

¹⁴¹ Kiyozawa is far too complex to have his philosophy labelled outright as organic in spirit and even denies that his philosophy of spiritual activism can be reduced to an Idealist relation between small and great self (Kiyozawa 1901/2015, 33-4). However, this does not mean that tendencies to describe the relation between the individual and the whole universe as part and whole of an absolute spirit/great self were not present in his philosophy. The basis for this claim lies in the basic ‘truth’ that things (or our individual self) do not exist out of relation to one another: “As the truth of the universe, even when we are not aware of it (それを覚知しない間も), this [fact] is always operating above us. We likely think of the air, the sunlight, mountains and streams, trees, birds and beasts, and [even] other persons as things that exist separately of us as external things (外物). However, we cannot survive without air, nor can we survive without sunlight. While mountains, streams, trees, birds, beasts, and other persons may not be in relation [to us] directly in the same way as air and sunlight, they all provide necessary materials for us. One thing might provide us with materials for food and drink. Another might provide us with materials for shelter. It goes without saying that we would not be able to survive without such things. Furthermore, speaking on our ‘spiritual world’, much of the knowledge and thoughts we have within our spiritual world come from persons other than ourselves, and would not exist if it had not been for that person. In this way, the truth of the world is always active above us.” (Kiyozawa 1901/2015, 7-8)

¹⁴² More specifically, Tsunashima relies on the language of finding a union between himself and God in the moment (刹那) of religious ecstasy, as evidenced by the fact that all three of his examples in “My Experience of Seeing God” seem to explore the notion of having lost himself in the moment or in the background that he happens to be seeing. More information is available in (Mushiaki and Yukiyasu, 1981)

¹⁴³ Indeed, Tsunashima Ryōsen’s response to Inoue’s denial of a personal God serves to elucidate what many writers were aiming for by using the word ‘personality’ (that we cannot get into in detail here). To provide a brief summary, Inoue attempted to question the Christian notion of a personal God, assuming it to be both unscientific and harboring the assumption that God ‘is’ somewhere. In place of this unfulfilling notion of a personal God, Inoue attempted to offer his notion of a ‘moral religion’ as a substitute. On this view, the ‘smaller self (小我)’ of the individual would find religious fulfilment in their agreement with the ‘great self (大我)’ of society. In response to this, Tsunashima did not actually question the formulation of a smaller self and a greater self. Instead, he pointed out that Inoue’s own conception was just as personal as the Christian position he aimed to critique. More specifically, Tsunashima states that he agrees with the line of reasoning that Inoue takes, but wonders how Inoue’s notion of a Great Self is any more scientific than a personal God, asking “[i]s not the professor’s so-called voice of Great Self (大我) – the voice of apriori content (先天的内容) – something that enacts its own laws [...] beyond the causal laws of natural phenomena?” From this standpoint, Tsunashima asks if – in the end – Inoue’s replacement of the personal Christian God with a Great Self does not instead end up precisely as “a concept we should see in religion.” (Tsunashima 1922, 63)

whole (be it the national consciousness, humanity in general, or reality itself). Although it would be a stretch to imply that all the authors mentioned above shared the same view, it is not without reason that Inoue Katsuhito has included authors like Kiyozawa and Tsunashima as representatives of the movement we referred to as the philosophy of organism in the introduction. The rationale behind the name is simple: if the universe/nation/humanity consisted of a living macro-consciousness that is composed of/gives birth to our smaller selves, then the two can be thought of in the same terms as an organism and the cells that compose it. Although, needless to say, not all authors employed this comparison, it appears to be an apt metaphor for many popular Meiji ideas. What is more – as we shall get into later on – it is undoubtedly present in Nishida’s philosophy. Given all of this, a more in-depth look into this line of thinking is in order. In order to do so, in the next section we will cover the thinker who most literally and extensively argued in favor of an organic worldview: Miyake Setsurei.

3.2) The Philosophy of the Organism in the Late Meiji Period – Focusing on the Philosophical Worldview of Miyake Setsurei

Miyake Setsurei (born Miyake Yujirō) is perhaps better known as a journalist than a philosopher. In particular, his central position with the (very briefly mentioned in Chapter 1) *Seikyōsha* publishing house is likely his most noteworthy contribution to Japanese intellectual history. In line with the overall goals of this publishing group, Miyake was most well recognized for his efforts to search for a Japanese essence that should not be uncritically abandoned in favor of Western habits.¹⁴⁴ Yet, even if he is not frequently mentioned as a philosopher in modern times, we would do well to remember that he was among the first to expressly state his desire to articulate his personal philosophical worldview. His effort to do so in *The Cosmos* (1909),¹⁴⁵ even earned him a particular reference from Takahashi Satomi as a ‘runner-up’ of sorts in the race to become modern Japan’s first original philosopher. In this

¹⁴⁴ While his efforts to argue that the many positive traits of the Japanese people were directly a result of their environment is as peculiar as it was influential on Japanese philosophy, we cannot afford the space to give it any substantial space here. Some explications of his thoughts on Japanese essence and the environment can be found in Pyle (1969, 61-3; 151-6).

¹⁴⁵ A note on translation: here, we will refer to Miyake’s *Uchū* (宇宙) as *The Cosmos*. This is not entirely in line with Miyake’s own wishes. As Miyake explains, his conception of *Uchū* includes both the notion of the ‘Universe’ as the expanse of space our planet is floating in as well as the notion of the ‘Cosmos’ as the underlying order and regularity that dictates how everything moves. In this sense, my translation is imperfect. However, given a lack of a better option and Miyake’s tendency to stress the cosmic order of things, I have decided to translate the title as *The Cosmos* with the addendum that this title also includes additional nuances lost in English.

section, we will look at this highly praised philosophy as a thorough-going example of organic philosophy, thus that we have a concrete example with which to compare Nishida as this chapter proceeds.

Of course, even before *The Cosmos*, Miyake had already introduced the basic principles of his thought in an earlier essay, “A Brief Introduction to my Worldview” (1892). In this article, Miyake starts with two parallel processes between the individual’s mind and body and the universe. These intuitions likely lie at the core of his philosophy, so we will review them here:

- 1) First, the dreaming (or delusional) mind is taken as the most direct form of consciousness and relates only to itself, cut off from the rest of the world and – hence – does not need to be logically consistent or do away with contradictions. It is a world of ideas only. The awakened (or otherwise enlightened) mind conflicts with this in a relative sense, insofar as it recognizes itself to only exist in relation to the objects about which it thinks and perceives. However, even if we say as much, the awakened mind as well consists of ideas. Moreover, although it appears to be relatively more consistent, we are often faced with contradictory information when we are awake as well. Thus, the two are analogous with one another.
- 2) Second, our corporeal body similarly appears as if it were an independent and distinct physical entity. And, insofar as it is capable of moving and acting on its own, we can agree with this notion. Yet, at the same time, something similar could be said of the universe, which is similarly a moving and changing entity of which our body is a mere part. While it may be common to think of the universe as a lifeless entity, Miyake believes this to be a mistake, instead claiming that there is a ‘force’ pervading throughout the universe, in which its parts (planets, stars, etc.) consistently change and develop, just as the cells grow in our own body. Once again, body and cosmos prove to be two analogous entities.
- 3) However, in both the ‘death’ of the mind and the ‘destruction’ of the body, all these relative distinctions are reduced to naught. Death is presented by Miyake as a lack of consciousness of discrimination and non-discrimination; as a state of freedom and release from the tensions that occur between mind and world, body and cosmos, or even mind and matter. The True, The Good, and The Beautiful were all to be found, for Miyake, in the slip into unconsciousness and the annihilation of such distinctions

between small and great.

The (less of an argument and more of a) worldview being presented by Miyake in this initial article is actually not too different from the dialectic presented by Inoue Enryō in the first chapter. There is an individual mind and body, which can at once be distinguished as individual while also being analogous to the whole in which it belongs (the universe).¹⁴⁶ Hence, the individual body and mind of our self is at once a *distinct* individual entity while also remaining part of a greater, *indiscriminate* whole (the ‘mind’ and ‘body’ of the universe, in this case). Yet, amidst these two contradictory directions, we see that ‘death’ presents a quasi-mystical experience of doing away with this tension and bringing out a deeper unity between them (which is likely comparable to Inoue’s middle path). This release from the distinction between the individual as an independent entity and as a part of something larger brings us freedom in its truest sense, as well as a view of what is True, Good, and Beautiful. While the lack of a rigorous defense of his ideas and methodology earned his early work criticism, these intuitions can ultimately be taken as the backbone of Miyake’s organic worldview in *The Cosmos*.¹⁴⁷

To begin with, a brief look at *The Cosmos* shows a defense of the two immediate assumptions about the universe present in Miyake’s philosophy needed for his worldview to work. The first is that the cosmos itself is active (and that this cosmic activity is orderly). In other words, Miyake’s conception of the cosmos houses a vital power (compared by Miyake himself to Schopenhauer’s will) that permeates throughout all of existence and causes the constant change and activity we see in the universe ranging from the degradation of atoms to the birth and destruction of planets. However, in contrast with Schopenhauer’s blind will, Miyake’s vital force is “rational” and “orderly.”¹⁴⁸ Given that “it would be quite difficult to

¹⁴⁶ It is noteworthy that, starting from the early stages of his career, this ‘analogy’ was not just an observation for Miyake so much as it was as a methodology of sorts. To use a familiar phrase from chapter 1, it was Miyake’s “starting point.” (Miyake 1892/1961, 245-8)

¹⁴⁷ As the ever-present critic of Meiji philosophy, Onishi Hajime, publicly displayed, there are severe issues with this line of reasoning. Is the ‘death’ of the body actually analogous to the ‘death’ of the universe? Can the universe ‘die’ at all? Why does Miyake start from dreaming consciousness when dreams utilize resources from our wakeful perceptions? (OHS 2: 233-62) We will leave these early methodological issues alone for the time being on the grounds that we are merely interested in reading Miyake’s philosophy at its full-strength in *The Cosmos* for the sake of comparison with Nishida.

¹⁴⁸ Likely in the background of this orderly view of the universe is interest and familiarity with the Wang Yangming school of Confucian thought (陽明学). In particular, Miyake seemed to have an affinity for Ito Jinsai and Oshio Heihachirō. While I have no time to justify myself here, my suspicion is that when Miyake refers to either a ‘will’ or the ‘order’ of the cosmos, he has in mind Confucian concepts of the Way as a pervading rational force in the universe which we ought to follow. An introduction to Miyake’s writings on Japanese Neo-Confucianism is available in Morita (2015).

interpret the almost infinite amount of stars in infinite space all moving in a strict and orderly fashion as being meaningless,”¹⁴⁹ Miyake surmises that the cosmos is not something that merely houses entirely disparate parts moving independently of each other, but rather has an internal order to it. This seemingly indubitable orderliness of the cosmos was proof enough for Miyake of two things. First, it shows that we need to rid ourselves of the notion of a purely material, inorganic notion of the universe, which moves without any purpose or rationale (given that we would be hard-pressed to explain why its components avoid devolving into chaos without any underlying purpose behind them).¹⁵⁰ Second, the fact that these components were not capable of living outside of their relation to other components/the universe as a whole can motivate us to accept the fact that we as individuals are ‘cells’ living within this orderly whole.

The second premise that Miyake acts on is that the universe is a determinate whole that can be compared with other organisms. While Miyake does accept the notion that the universe is an infinite expanse and constantly changing, he rejects Herbert Spencer’s split between the knowable and unknowable aspects of the universe. Instead, Miyake argues that the structural similarities between the individual selves and the universe as organisms makes it possible for us to study this infinite expanse of space in the same way we would any other organism:

“That which we call the natural sciences is still far from being able to investigate the great organism known as the Cosmos. Yet, although at our current level of knowledge we are still not able to know the Cosmos, in the future we should proceed in a direction similar to how physiology and anatomy investigate the human body; we must research the formation and structure of this great organism. [...] The Cosmos itself is a great organism, a great living creature, and thus should be researched through cosmological physiology, cosmological anatomical studies, cosmological organ studies, and cosmological evolutionary studies.”¹⁵¹

As one can glean from this quotation, for Miyake, studying the structure of the universe by looking at its constituent parts is no different than studying the anatomy of animals by dissecting them and looking at their organs; although one may not be observing the organism in its entirety, taking a sample of cells can clarify the general functions of the organism.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁹ Miyake 1909, 105

¹⁵⁰ Miyake 1909, 103

¹⁵¹ Miyake 1909, 107-8

¹⁵² Miyake 1909, 105

Naturally, Miyake was not shortsighted enough to believe that his contemporary scientists were capable of this feat or that using Earth alone as a representative of the entire universe would be good science, but on principle ‘cosmic-biology’ was theoretically possible for structural reasons.

The upshot of this is that we now have the basis for a more refined version of the worldview proposed in the beginning of this section. Yet, in *The Cosmos*, Miyake also clarifies that this analogy does not work *only* between self and universe. The universe can not only be looked at in terms of a macro-organism analogous to our human bodies, but it can also be broken up and looked at in terms of different levels. Our human bodies are composed of various cells, certainly, but these bodies cannot exist independently. Rather, our individual selves are what come together to form a nation, and their cooperation is necessary for the state to function properly.¹⁵³ Similarly, one nation cannot exist in a vacuum, but can only truly find its purpose when it plays its role in the development of world history. This goes on, from the Earth playing its part as one planet in our solar system to the milky way being one cog in the cosmic order of our universe. Our individual selves, then, do not exist on their own. To the contrary, they are part of an “infinite continuity” that gradually increases in levels of consciousness leading up to the personal consciousness of the universe.

Crucially, in Miyake’s case, this continuity from individual to cosmic consciousness is given a paramount ethical (in the broadest sense of the term possible) value insofar as it calls for the various individuals within the universe to preserve the order of things and to realize their own good life in the process. As we established in the previous paragraph, each level of reality feeds into the next and helps continuously greater levels of activity flourish. Yet, in reaching a greater level of unity with the universe, individuals are able to in turn flourish themselves. For instance, actively contributing to the healthy development of the whole for humans in their current form, this whole would typically be the state) is taken as the key to creating strong, independent, and healthy individual selves. In other words, serving their purpose within a greater society is the purpose and the Good of the individual self. Moreover,

¹⁵³ Here it is once again interesting to note the relation between Miyake’s ontology and his politics. In lockstep with the trend discussed in the previous chapter, Miyake utilized this inter-connectedness between individual and community to argue that individual cultivation should be pursued for the sake of common interests (see Nagatsuma 2012, 37-41). Now, what is perhaps more interesting here, though, is that this ‘organic’ conception of the universe was also crucial to Miyake’s claims that many of Japan’s better traditions and customs were clearly based on the relationship between the Japanese people and their climate, insofar as the two were part of one inseparable organism. We will not enter into the matter here, but we will note that further research on how this particular line of metaphysical reasoning may have influenced later Japanese thinkers like Watsuji Tetsurō is certainly worthy of consideration.

our connection to the universe is the only standard for which science and philosophy can judge the Truth of any statements they make, and scientific progress can only be made by continually learning more about its great expanses. Additionally, not only are its components (flowers, trees, mountains, etc.) stunning, but the Beauty of the vast expanse of space itself is likely a source of aesthetic captivation for those of us with the cognitive capacity to understand it. Keeping all of this mind, it is with confidence that Miyake is able to declare that the individual self is not only born from the larger activity of the universe, but that its capacity to actualize any ethical, epistemological, or aesthetic needs is dependent upon its connection to said larger activity. Here is where we return to what in his earlier work seemed an insufficiently justified implication: the notion that “[t]he cosmos as an organism should be taken as the True, as the Beautiful, and as the Good.”¹⁵⁴

If there seems to be a mystical component smuggled into Miyake’s thought, then this is not at all by accident. To be more specific, Miyake discusses the mystical notion of forgetting one’s smaller self (小我) to gain the greater self (大我) as the “subjective component” of organic philosophy.¹⁵⁵ While perhaps unsurprising, this quasi-mystical aspect between the various needs of the individual and the universe it lives in can clue us in to broader religious trends and conceptions of what we (up to this point in human history) have referred to as God. Although Miyake is critical of what is usually entailed by the term religion, he does seem to wax poetic about the possibility of becoming able to join with the universe in its entirety someday.¹⁵⁶ Instead of insisting upon a notion of God as a creator or an abstract entity, Miyake instead highlights a dream for the future in which all conscious organisms¹⁵⁷ achieve total harmony with the greater consciousness of the universe:

¹⁵⁴ Miyake 1909, 617-8

¹⁵⁵ Miyake 1909, 109

¹⁵⁶ It has been argued that Miyake did not properly have any sense of religion in his philosophy and this difference in attitudes does *seem to* separate his philosophical project apart from Nishida in important ways. Indeed, while Nishida discussed religion as a fundamental demand inherent in pure experience, Miyake took it as a necessary step in developing a more complete view of the universe (see, Miyake 1909, 452). However, keeping in mind that Miyake seems to use the religion to refer to a set of doctrines and dogmas. What Nishida describes as religion would probably fall under the category of “religion that is closer to philosophy” for Miyake’s purposes and – keeping this in mind – I would like to leave open the possibility that they are more interested in a difference in terminology than anything.

¹⁵⁷ This insistence upon all conscious organisms in the universe leads us to one crucial difference between Miyake and Nishida that we cannot analyze here fully. That is to say, in contrast to Nishida’s tendencies to glorify human life, Miyake was a fierce critic of anthropocentrism, almost to the point of diminishing human consciousness as ‘valueless’ in opposition to the greatness of the universe and potential different forms of consciousness that are more advanced than our own. (Miyake 1909, 506-7)

“[J]ust as consciousness surpasses unconsciousness, [there will be] a macro-consciousness that surpasses [individual] consciousness. This macro-consciousness will connect the consciousness of the human species on this planet and that of equivalent beings on other planets. In this way, the supermen (超人) of this planet and the supermen of other planets will become able to clearly know the relation between the slightest movements of the self and the great activity of the cosmos”¹⁵⁸

Hence, in Miyake’s vision for the future, the smaller, partial consciousnesses of individual “supermen”¹⁵⁹ will be entirely in tune with the greater consciousness of the universe, thus to the point that they will be able to understand even the smallest changes occurring within this greater self. There will thus be a total harmony in the infinite continuity leading from sub-atomic particles and the great organism we understand as the cosmos. As we will dwell on a bit later on, it is worth noting that in *The Cosmos* Miyake does not stress the annihilation of the relation between self and universe in the same way he did in his 1892 article, instead preferring to emphasize the unity between the two. Still, the point remains clear: our individual self is none other than precisely one cell in a larger, common organism (i.e., the cosmos) as it constantly changes and develops itself and constantly seeks to find a greater degree of unity with this universal consciousness. This, I believe, is the most explicit and thoroughgoing example of one trend that – as we established previously – lurked in the background of a great deal of different Meiji thinkers.

3.3) Self and Religion in Nishida’s *An Inquiry into the Good* – The Easy Interpretation (and the Hard Problems It Presents)

In the previous section, we looked through Miyake Setsurei’s philosophy as an example of an organic view of the universe as a lived and conscious entity, of which our smaller individual selves are but one part. Following this theory, by means of abandoning our individual selves and joining with the infinitely great universe, we are able to come into contact with a greater, more profound sense of life, epitomized by Miyake in our meeting with the Good, the True, and the Beautiful. Such a view of self, person, and religion has often been – for good reason –

¹⁵⁸ Miyake 1909 295; Reference made to Godart (2017, 145) when translating this quotation.

¹⁵⁹ For clarity’s sake, I believe it would be best to note here that I have found no explicit reference to Nietzsche in his use of this word. Rather, the word superman in Miyake’s context seems to be closer to a ‘great person’ or someone who has surpassed the limits of their current era.

attributed to Nishida's early philosophy. Given the prevalence of this view of Nishida's philosophy, it should not come as a surprise that plenty of textual evidence is available to support this notion. Naturally, direct comparisons could be made outgoing solely from the fact that Nishida also compares individual person to cells in an organism in several passages (albeit possibly only in a metaphorical context).¹⁶⁰ But even if we choose to overlook these passages as mere metaphors, it is quite easy to see the influence of those like Miyake in the background of *An Inquiry into the Good*. Indeed, reading Nishida in lines with these organic principles is likely the easiest way to form a coherent reading of his early philosophy. With that said, however, I believe that a careful inspection of Nishida's early philosophy can hint at the possibility that he was not – or at least should not have been – an organic philosopher (or, at the very least, that we will find substantial methodological inconsistencies if we follow along such an organic reading). In this section, we will clarify the nature of these issues and explain how Nishida's conflagration of his philosophy of pure experience with the organic philosophy espoused by his contemporaries jeopardizes his philosophical endeavor.

Before highlighting these inconsistencies, however, I think that we should first start by looking at what this organic reading of Nishida entails. One immediately recognizable similarity can be found in Nishida's denial of any atomistic or primitively given individual self. Such an abstract distinction between the internal mental subject and the external world was – as we have covered in previous chapters – not tenable on Nishida's view. Seemingly tied up with this fact, though, is the assertion that the individual person is a 'small' or inauthentic self:

“Pure experience can, as discussed earlier, transcend the individual person. Although it may sound strange, experience knows time, space, and the individual person and so it is beyond them. It is not that there is an experience because there is an individual, but

¹⁶⁰ The most direct evidence to this point comes in part 2, where Nishida states “Expressed metaphorically, each person's spirit is simply one cell of the social spirit.” As this is, as Nishida clearly states, a metaphor, it is hard to use it as definitive evidence that Nishida would sympathize with a literal organic theory in the way we have described Miyake's philosophy. Additionally, while not direct enough to comprise strong evidence for an organic reading of Nishida's philosophy in its own right, the following passage is at least worthy of recognition: “Individual consciousness of course has a foundation called the body, and in this respect it diverges from social consciousness. But the brain is not a simple material object – it is a collection of cells. This is no different from the fact that society is made up of cells called individuals.” (Nishida 1911/1990, 139) While naturally this is flimsy as evidence that Nishida was actually an organic thinker, the grander context of this passage's relation to Nishida's discussion of the unity among members of communities like the nation-state could easily lead one to believe that he is full-heartedly taking a view in which individual consciousnesses make up the 'cells' of a bigger personality.

that there is an individual because there is experience. The individual's experience is simply a small, distinctive sphere of limited experience within true experience."¹⁶¹

This quotation seems to provide a clear image of pure experience as being 'greater' than our typical 'small' individual consciousness. Additionally, frequent references to the notion that we can find our 'true' self by letting go of this 'smaller' domain of experience serve to provide more explicit evidence that pure experience can be conceived of as a macro-consciousness, or the 'whole' of experience of which we individuals are but a 'part.'

Equally important to this organic reading of Nishida is the central theme that the true self is not just an ontological fact of our self, but that the union with a universal consciousness (or otherwise, with the consciousness of the universe) carries with it a supreme ethical value. Similar to Miyake, Nishida argues that the various ethical goods of the individual were found in seeking a greater unity with the universe:

"Our true self is the ultimate reality of the universe, and if we know the true self we not only unite with the good of humankind in general but also fuse with the essence of the universe and unite with the will of God – and in this religion and morality are culminated."¹⁶²

"The most profound religion is thus established upon the unity of God and humans, and the true meaning of religion is found in grasping the significance of this unity, in breaking beyond one's own consciousness and experiencing the lofty universal spirit that functions at the base of consciousness."¹⁶³

To continue with our metaphor of an organism and its cells from previous sections, the individual finds their true self by shedding off the barriers separating her from the whole of the universe as it is constituted by other personal consciousnesses. In doing so, she loses the delusions of grandeur that confined her as a separate and distinct entity, artificially cut off from reality. This allows her to awaken to the true nature of her self as something which is

¹⁶¹ Nishida 1911/1990, 19. Emphasis added by the author of this thesis.

¹⁶² Nishida 1911/1990, 145

¹⁶³ Nishida 1911/1990, 156. Emphasis by the author of this thesis

fundamentally one with the universe. It is in this harmony with the universe that the individual discovers a Good not otherwise accessible to ordinary consciousness.

Keeping the previous paragraph in mind, we can easily surmise that Nishida's notion of God could be understood as the universe itself. To summarize, we see that the universe itself appears to be a greater and lived conscious being (self) that embraces all individual consciousnesses. As Nishida states:

“Because our infinite spirit is never fundamentally satisfied by the unity constituted by an individual self, it inevitably seeks a larger unity, a great self that envelops both oneself and others. [...] God, the unity of the universe, is the base of this unifying activity, the foundation of our love, the source of our joy.”¹⁶⁴

“From natural phenomena to the historical development of humankind, there is nothing that does not assume the form of great thought and great will. The universe is an expression of God's personality.”¹⁶⁵

Read within the context of the previous section, these seemingly obtuse quotations become almost immediately intelligible. God, as the universe itself, gives birth to (yet is not separable from) all of the individual selves that constitute it. It is in this sense of embracing all living individual persons that we can view reality itself as an organism of sorts and is likely the reason that Nishida almost seems to endorse such an organicist worldview in the previously cited passages of *An Inquiry into the Good*.

The above-presented (in a certain sense) vulgar reading of Nishida's early philosophy of self is quite clearly structurally similar to previous trends in Meiji philosophy as seen in works like that of the above-analyzed Miyake Setsurei. Of course, there are differences we have not touched upon. Nishida's more explicit references to religion contrast with Miyake's tendency to avoid referring to mystical experiences in religious terms. Additionally, there is an implicit anthropocentric streak running throughout Nishida's philosophy that is (at least superficially) antithetical to Miyake's interest in non-human lifeforms. However, at its core, the ample amount of passages in Nishida's early work describing the 'true self' as a consciousness of the universe – and supplementary implication that the consciousness of the

¹⁶⁴ Nishida 1911/1990, 82-3

¹⁶⁵ Nishida 1911/1990, 161

individual is a ‘small’ part of this greater self – provide sufficient textual support for adopting such an organic reading. Insofar as this is the case, it is likely possible to shift our conclusion from the previous section concerning Miyake’s philosophy and apply it directly to Nishida’s notions of self and God. Following this line of thought, pure experience is a living consciousness and any conception that we may have of our true self is nothing more than the activity of this ‘organism.’ This is, without doubt, one possible way of interpreting Nishida’s theory of selfhood in *An Inquiry into the Good* and has likely served to encourage a great deal of scholarship on his work.

Given the frequency of these passages throughout the text, it appears almost obvious that Nishida seems to view his own philosophy as being (at the very least) compatible with the kind of organic worldview espoused by those like Miyake. Yet, as I mentioned at the outset of this section, looking at pure experience in these terms may not be the foothold we need to get a fruitful vision of Nishida’s conception of self in his early philosophy. If nothing else, even if it may be the easiest reading, such a view of self and God (i.e., the universe) is almost certainly *not* the most profitable way to read *An Inquiry into the Good*. That is to say, I do not see how such a mereological claim could possibly be reconciled with Nishida’s (up to this point in my thesis, much-lauded) methodological principles. To reiterate a crucial point, pure experience should not allow for empirically unverifiable or dogmatic assumptions. If the assumption that consciousness is individuated is considered empirically unverifiable, then why would the assumption that consciousness belongs to the universe be any more aligned with empirical reflections than the notion that it is inherently individuated? Miyake is able to make these claims about – for lack of a better term – small and great self based on his possibly tenuous assumption that the individual and the cosmos are somehow analogous to one another. However, any argument in favor of this analogy seems absent from Nishida’s perspective.¹⁶⁶ Thus, we are left with the question: how could one ever ground claims about unity between the individual (part) and a universal human-consciousness (whole) without taking an external perspective to see their relationship? This is a question that I see no hope for answering within the confines of Nishida’s methodology in *An Inquiry into the Good*, insofar as looking at the

¹⁶⁶ I say this both keeping in mind the fact that Nishida does not delve into this matter in *An Inquiry into the Good* and also explicitly denies any relation between his method and analogy in his research notes, noting that analogical reasoning is a matter related to reflective reasoning and that the facts of pure experience stand prior to such acts of reflective reasoning (NKZ 20: 94). Put otherwise, an act of analogy can only be made outgoing from – and thus presupposes – a direct intuition of the facts of experience. This means that analogies cannot be made to justify pure experience because these analogies can only be made insofar as they can be corroborated by what is given in pure experience in the first place.

definitive ‘whole’ of reality (as being structurally similar to the individual self) is not possibly available from one’s direct and perspectival experience. This raises several troubling possibilities. Did Nishida not take his own methodological claims seriously? Otherwise, did he employ them only when convenient for continuing his own argument (i.e., as a means to deny a mind-independent world and pre-individuated conscious subject)? Or were his ethical/religious notions developed under separate rules from his ontological/epistemological theories? In this case, how do the two sets of theories relate to one another?

This understanding of our true self as being found in a unity with a greater self, i.e., with the universe, brings with it an additional theoretical risk that Nishida himself tried to avoid: the issue that we will call here the ‘double-unity’ problem. That is to say, if we look at the individual as a smaller unity (i.e., the unity of the individual’s memories, perceptions, thoughts, etc.) and reality itself as a larger unity (i.e., the universal human consciousness we have referred to), then we naturally run into the question of how one relates to the other and how the individual self emerges from the larger self.¹⁶⁷ Putting the fact that Nishida insisted that there are no two such unities to be found in pure experience aside, I am not confident that a satisfactory manner of accounting for such a dual unity is even desirable. The easiest way to account for these two selves, I suppose, would be to take Nishida to be endorsing the notion that the universe’s consciousness gives birth to the individual consciousness, as Miyake had. Yet, doing so would likely bring Nishida uncomfortably close to the emanative approach that Tanabe would later accuse Nishida of (and stringently criticize) in 1930.¹⁶⁸ Moreover, it was precisely this reading of Nishida as advocating a smaller self appearing from, and desiring to return to, a larger self – as well as the political connections that this view had to authors like Miyake – that led post-war Marxist historians to accuse him of advocating an Idealism that

¹⁶⁷ Consider the fact that even those who adopt this view often end up unable to answer these questions. One such critic, Robert Wilkinson, starts by lauding Nishida’s discovery of the true self in the loss of the individual self, but is forced to admit that “[p]recisely how the individual self arises from the non-dual – if not undifferentiated – state of pure experience is not made clear in this book,” claiming that it was left as a problem Nishida only dealt with as his career went on. Indeed, assuming that such a dual unity is actually in play, then this seems to be the only correct conclusion one could draw about the nature of the individual person in pure experience. (See Wilkinson 2009, 57)

¹⁶⁸ Tanabe explains his doubts in the following way: “Is this not precisely the same as how Plotinus conceives of three hypostases coming successively from the One? They differ from one another only in that there is a strong noematic tendency present in the whole of Plotinus’ philosophy, while in Professor Nishida’s work, the transcendence of noesis, which is his unique and profound thought, acts as its basis. [...] What I doubt is only whether or not philosophy as a religious philosophy (in the sense that Plotinus’ philosophy was religious philosophy) might lead us to abandon philosophy, insofar as we are constructing a final inaccessible universal and interpreting actual existence through its own self-determination.” (Tanabe 1930/2020, 286-7)

subjugates individual freedom to the needs of a larger national spirit.¹⁶⁹ Even if we assume that these political critiques miss their mark (whether it be because they be too abstract or too eager to draw certain conclusions), this dual-self reading still leaves us with an empirically unfounded access to the whole of the universe and Tanabe's questions of whether Nishida merely attempted to sneak religious quietism into what should be a critical philosophical project.

All things considered, I believe that these two issues prove themselves to be substantial problems when looking for a convincing reading of the notions of self and God presented in *An Inquiry into the Good*. However easy it may be to understand these terms in the context of organic views of reality, a pseudo-mystic reading of Nishida's early philosophy is not likely to provide any substantial philosophical insights for modern debates on selfhood, at the very least. Naturally, as we have highlighted in this section, there is ample textual evidence to connect Nishida with those like Miyake and their distinction of a larger self in comparison with the smaller individual person, and I do not think that this is accidental on Nishida's part. Even accepting this, though, I think there is an alternative reading of Nishida's concept of the self that is hidden within *An Inquiry into the Good* and it that can be gained by tweaking this easy reading so as to avoid problematic mereological claims about our small-self (part) and big-self (whole). Keeping this in mind, in the next two sections, I will highlight some passages that seem to me to point to another *possible* interpretation of Nishida before assessing how it became entangled with the reading we have outlined here.

3.4) An Alternative Reading – Interpreting Nishida's Concept of Self as a Function of Experience

Our first order of business in presenting this alternative reading is to accept the following disclaimer: a non-organic reading of Nishida's philosophy does not entail a denial of the quotations we have already looked at (for the most part, at least). My contention is rather that a more careful look at some of the keywords in the quotes given above (specifically, 'universal' and 'base') will be enough to point us toward a more productive reading of *An Inquiry into the Good* that can also abate the potential issues that arise in an organic reading of his philosophy and the questions of a second self it presents. To be clear, I do not believe that my reading

¹⁶⁹ Ex., Funayama 1959/1965, See Wargo 2005 as well

requires any leap of faith or introduction of elements that were not present already in *An Inquiry into the Good* to begin with. With that said, however, before beginning, we do need to recognize that Nishida himself appears to conflate a more methodologically consistent view of self and individual person with the organic view that we have attributed to his predecessors like Miyake Setsurei, and that the non-organic reading here is closer to a distillation of an alternative view of the self in Nishida's earliest philosophy than it is a revelation of what Nishida 'actually meant' to say.

Now, the first and most important task for achieving this goal is to take Nishida's use of the words great or true self in unity to contrast with our limited, individuated self-consciousness as either a metaphor or a conflagration of ideas in the background of his thought with more worthwhile intuitions unique to Nishida. While it is certainly the case that Nishida asserts that there is a greater self in many passages (particularly those related to religion), his actual arguments on selfhood do not require us to introduce the entirety of the cosmos or any other secondary self:

“That consciousness must be someone's consciousness simply means that consciousness must have a unity. The idea that there must be a possessor of consciousness above and beyond this unity is an arbitrary assumption. The activity of this unity – apperception – is a matter of similar ideas and feelings constituting a central hub and as such unifying consciousness.”¹⁷⁰

What Nishida has done in this passage is provide a simple and effective argument against the typical assumption that we need to be aware of our own awareness (or, more poignantly, that there needs to be 'someone' who is aware of the experiences being had). As Nishida correctly argues, such an assumption is both empirically unfounded and entirely unnecessary to explain the concept of self. Yet, as we have mentioned in passing at the end of the previous section, to argue that there is a macro-self from which all of our individual selves arise would fall prey to the same line of critique. The lack of an individual owner of experience does not mean that we need to replace our typical notions of self with a 'bigger' one. All we need, to use Nishida's phrase, is a 'hub' capable of uniting our conscious experiences into a system and – in the process – establish the necessary context needed to identify myself as the subject of the current experience. In this sense, to assume that the denial of a pre-formed individual self entails the

¹⁷⁰ Nishida 1911/1990, 44, underline added by the author of this thesis.

espousal of a greater self-qua-universe is to fundamentally miss the point of Nishida's critical assessment of selfhood. In other words, this hub does not need to be declared as either great, small, diachronically enduring, or momentary; it need only serve as the basis for tying experiences together and contextualizing our current situation.¹⁷¹

Yet, if all Nishida has done here is show that consciousness is not individuated, how can we understand his argument that our self is universal? As we have seen in the previous section, Nishida refers largely to God as the unifying power at the base of our individual consciousness and equates this unifying power with a universal human spirit. While one may naturally be inclined to read this as an endorsement that there is a larger, macro-consciousness from which our individual selves are born, we should remember that Nishida's usage of the term universal is very specific. Nishida explains:

“We ordinarily think we know the universal through thinking and the individual through experience. But apart from the individual there is no universal. That which is truly universal is the concealed power behind the actualization of the individual; the universal is located within the individual as the power that causes the individual to develop. [...] The true universal at the base of the unity that is found in the activity of thinking therefore must be the concealed power that takes as its content the individual actuality. The universal and the individual differ only in that one is implicit and the other explicit; the individual is that which is determined by the universal.”¹⁷²

To briefly summarize this quotation, the universal is *not* an abstract category nor is it a set that contains various instantiations of individuals. Instead, the universal itself is described as a ‘concealed power’ that is inseparable from – and can only be actualized through – its concrete realization in individual instantiations. To put the matter in a more basic way, the universal exists as a pattern of sorts, which can only exist when given concrete shape through the determinations of the individual over the course of our experiences.

¹⁷¹ Of course, one is more than entitled to speculate that there is actually an individuated soul-like substance or a greater macro-self in the background of pure experience. Indeed, I invite anyone with such convictions to speculate on this matter to his or her heart's content, so long as they concede that these assumptions are neither empirically verifiable nor necessary for explaining the functions of the self. In this sense, we can follow Taguchi's (2019, 29-33) arguments for a ‘zero-person perspective’ and claim ‘metaphysical neutrality’ for pure experience in regard to whether there actually exist an individuated self or macro-self.

¹⁷² Nishida 1911/1990, 17-8

Looking at the notion of self in Nishida's early philosophy while keeping these points in mind opens the door for what I believe to be a more fulfilling (albeit more difficult to articulate) interpretation of his work. That is to say, conceived of in this way, what lies at the base of consciousness is not an abstract world-soul that contains all the individual selves throughout the world. On this reading, the 'universal' aspect of the self would likely be something closer to the *structural framework* of experience itself; it is the universal features in experience that allows for the hub between individual experiences to form. Otherwise, to borrow a useful metaphor for this, I think that one could look at Nishida's conception of the self here as a universal 'function' for experience that, once the values for each 'variable' have been properly inserted, is capable of manifesting itself into particular experiences. In other words, the self (as we have established at the beginning of the preceding chapter) refers to various activities in pure experience that serve to unite the gaps that open up between subject and object (namely, thought and will) and – in this process – organize the stream of our conscious experiences into a meaning-laden system (insofar as it is, after all, this 'function' which gives structure to content and allows for comparisons with other experiences). Along this reading, I believe that the *individual person* would best be understood as the product of this function – i.e., the product of a systematically unified system of meanings and experiences and – thus – does not 'emerge' from pure experience or change in form.¹⁷³ Rather, all we need to admit is that the aggregation of past experiences gathered in a particular stream give shape and context to present consciousness. This view can help us to better understand the claim made in chapter 2 that the behavior, tendencies, and speech-patterns of an individual person are a reflection of the knowledge they gain and the habits they form over the course of the systematic development of pure experience.¹⁷⁴

If this interpretation is valid, then, I believe it is possible to distill a view of selfhood in *An Inquiry into the Good* that cannot be reduced to a quasi-mystic account of small-unity and big-unity. To the contrary, it is a mere hub that helps tie together experiences that happen to enter the same stream. This hub need not belong to one diachronically persistent individual or the entirety of the cosmos or anyone at all. In other words, for Nishida, there is a hub which brings experiences together, and only then does it become possible to contextualize an experience as being 'mine' (quite literally, we see 'that it is not that there is experience because

¹⁷³ This is what I think he is getting at when he states that "[t]he life of an individual is the development of consciousness that constitutes such a single system." (Nishida 1911/1990, 61)

¹⁷⁴ Additionally, Kopf (2001) seems to me to have a more or less similar view of personhood in Nishida's philosophy, as demonstrated by his comparison of it with Merleau-Ponty and Sartre.

there is a self”, but instead that even identifying the notion of a self presupposes context has formed in the stream of consciousness thus that one is able to distinguish ‘her’ experience from ‘your’ experience). Naturally, being able to identify oneself as one individual with a perspective does not change the structure of the self or imply that it has emerged from a larger range of experience. Instead, it merely means that – even though distinctions between subject/object or self/other are not inherently given in direct experience – the stream of consciousness has picked up enough information in past experiences to make such distinctions. Looked at in this way, instead of solely arguing for a mystical union with a greater self, there seems to be a significant attempt in Nishida’s work to follow William James in rigorously advancing what those like Hume had already argued for as personal identity in the 18th century.¹⁷⁵

Hence, by focusing stringently on how experiences within a stream of consciousness are able to coincide with one another to give form to an individual person (expressed through their actions, speech, etc.), Nishida, on our reading, can offer a coherent view of selfhood in his philosophy without betraying his methodology or taking a standpoint external to the sole reality of pure experience. Yet, although this view is successful in leading us away from a methodological suspicions that come with the organic view of self in Nishida’s work, it also brings us back to square one for this particular chapter: why is Nishida able to (or at least, why does he claim to be able to) talk about the ‘trans-individual’ aspects of pure experience? Additionally, why does he seem to allow for ‘trans-individual’ conceptions of personality such as God or the state? Do such statements not force us to recognize a mystical element of Nishida’s philosophy? If not, on what grounds is Nishida able to talk about the relation between individual humans and God as the basis for religious experience?

In regard to the first question, we can answer doubts concerning what Nishida means when he refers to the trans-individual elements of pure experience by recognizing that a system

¹⁷⁵ To provide more context, I think there are two points that deserve attention. First, Nishida’s earliest writings – i.e., his graduation paper at the University of Tokyo – was indeed on Hume, meaning that it is not too out of place to assume that some latent influence remained in the background. Second, I make this comparison insofar as the notion that one’s self is nothing more than the hub which accumulates experiences into a coherent system is not too distant from Hume’s assertion that we need no concept of self aside from the ‘bundle’ of perceptions we happen to have aggregated up to this point (See Hume 1739/2000, 1.4.6.3). However, the fact that Nishida separates himself from those like Hume in that he views a Humean Bundle Theory of selfhood as a gradual and *passive* collection of thoughts is instructive for our purposes. As we have established here, Nishida’s conception of self *actively* pursues the systematic organization of experiences: “According to one school of psychology, the self is simply a union of ideas and feelings apart from which there is no self. This view neglects the side of unity and entails consideration of the self from the side of analytical distinctions only. [...] Things are established by a unity, and ideas and feelings are made into concrete reality through the power of a unifying self.” (Nishida 1911/1990, 76)

of conscious experiences need not be limited to the individual insofar as the same universal structures (discussed in the previous paragraph) are functioning at their base. Nishida explicitly states this to be the case in the following passages:

“I have outlined the activity of consciousness as established within a certain sphere by virtue of a unity. Yet many people do not believe that such a unity exists outside that particular sphere – for instance, some think that yesterday’s and today’s consciousness are totally independent and cannot be regarded as one consciousness. From the standpoint of direct experience, however, this distinction is relative, not ultimate. [...] If we draw fine distinctions between the successive ideas, we can think of them as separate consciousnesses; but if we view them not as separate, individual realities but as one activity of consciousness, then we can regard yesterday’s and today’s consciousnesses as a single activity of consciousness.”¹⁷⁶

“In the same way that an individual’s consciousness constitutes a single reality in which yesterday’s and today’s consciousnesses are united, consciousness that spans a lifetime can likewise be regarded as singular. Taking this farther, we see that this is not limited to the scope of just one individual, for a person can likewise link his or her own consciousness with that of another person and regard them as a single consciousness. Just as a principle is the same no matter who thinks about it, at the base of our consciousness is something universal. By means of it we are able to communicate with and understand one another.”¹⁷⁷

My reason for citing these two long quotations is because they both hint at what I believe to be the most viable way to read Nishida’s early philosophy. As Nishida argues in the above quotations, the systematization of *our lived and perspectival conscious experiences* certainly seems to start with the individual’s present consciousness, but it by no means stops there. The fact that past bodily sensations, perceptions, and feelings provide meaning to our present consciousness and help shape us as a person can be gleaned even from the example of the bell mentioned in chapter 1. Yet, beyond only this relation to our experiences as ‘individuals’, the lessons we learn after being scolded by our parents, the new information we gain from talking

¹⁷⁶ Nishida 1911/1990, 60

¹⁷⁷ Nishida 1911/1990, 62

to other people, and the cringe we feel when we see another person in pain are all equally likely to provide meaning to our experiences and shape us as a person. The reason this is possible in either the case of past experiences or experiences of other minds is because all experiences share the same structures (referred to by Nishida as principles) and, thus, can be integrated into the same system.¹⁷⁸ This explanation that experiences are all commensurate in virtue of the fact that they share the same principles, then, gives Nishida a coherent path explaining both (1) how different individuals are able to aggregate knowledge beyond what is immediately designated to them as being strictly one's own experience (without leaving one's own perspective!) as well as (2) how communities and societies could seem to have common-knowledge (a quasi-‘personality’ that stands in virtue of the fact that it is largely shared with other inhabitants).

In either of these two cases, our explanation does *not* presuppose that Nishida needed to introduce a macro-consciousness from which we are all born. Rather, all we see is merely that Nishida's notion of personality does not need to restrict itself to the individual person because the organization of conscious experiences does not require that experiences be had by the ‘same’ subject of experience in order to be integrated into a system. Naturally, one could profitably employ purely metaphorical discussions of a trans-individual organism that gathers a variety of experiences into a unified system. But, given that there is no need to suppose any particular entity in possession of said system, such talk would indeed be nothing more than a metaphor. Thus, in spite of Nishida's own tendencies to utilize such language, we can see that references to finding a ‘greater’ or ‘true’ self, then, may actually be detrimental to unearthing the more novel view of selfhood in *An Inquiry into the Good*. Instead, a more fruitful reading

¹⁷⁸ One issue that the early Nishida seems to shy away from addressing explicitly in his early years is the notion that there are potentially multiple systems that count as their own reality that *cannot* be reconciled with each other. Nishida avoids such a conclusion by introducing the universal principles at the base of experience that theoretically make it possible to reconcile any differing set of beliefs. Thus, Nishida assumes that while differing experiences may present contradictions, they will ultimately be resolvable by appealing to an underlying unity between conscious experiences. Yet, this strikes me as potentially unsound insofar as it too easily dismisses the following two possibilities. First, Nishida does not account for the possibility that different systems operate on entirely irreconcilable premises or principles. Insofar as Nishida explicitly states that the standards for truth are internal to their system, it appears difficult to explain how a claim from one system could be conceived of as favorable to the other without adding another criterion for truth. Additionally, there is no consideration of the possibility that two different systems never meet with one another. One could argue that it is enough that they be reconcilable with one another *in theory*, even though there are likely multiple fragmentary systems *in practice*. However, this raises questions as to what it means to call pure experience the sole reality. Is it referring to an ideal state of unity necessary to discuss pure experience? If that is the case, how do we overcome the previous problem of irreconcilable differences? Would it perhaps not be better to consider a multi-world theory like that proposed by Nelson Goodman in his later years? Although these questions would need to be answered in order to actively argue in favor of my reading of *An Inquiry into the Good*, we do not have time to tackle them here and – more importantly – they are not necessary to accomplish our main goal at the moment.

can be found by focusing on Nishida's claim that pure experience tends, by nature, to integrate differing experiences together to form increasingly more comprehensive systematic networks between them.

Yet, what of the third question? This non-organic reading of Nishida's claims that pure experience goes beyond the individual should be able to help us respond to the first and second questions we have posed in regard to the matter of how we can understand his religious philosophy without resorting to the mystical tendencies that appear to be present throughout the book. However, it is without doubt that uniting with a communal human consciousness or the universe itself offers a clear view of religious purpose while explaining how individual experiences share universal structures likely does not. Additionally, Nishida's frequent references to the union of man and God signal that he did – to at least some degree – intended to express something similar to early Meiji authors' focus on the great and small self. Still, although addressing the religious aspect of his thought is possibly the hardest aspect of Nishida's early philosophy to rewrite in a non-organic fashion, it is not impossible to explain religious consciousness in *An Inquiry into the Good* without smuggling in a second self. To the contrary, I believe that it may be the aspect of his theory of selfhood that would benefit the most from doing so. Hence, in the next section, we will attempt to sketch a non-mystical reading of Nishida's early religious philosophy.

3.5) An Alternative Reading – Re-considering Nishida's Notion of Religious Consciousness

Now, to revisit the problem at hand, we have seen in section 3.3 that many of Nishida's explanations of religious consciousness mention unity between oneself and the universe itself, i.e., God. These claims – in addition to tendencies to talk about a 'greater' or 'true' self that we humans aspire to join with – substantiate a popular view that Nishida's theory of religion is the story of the individual joining with a greater world spirit that goes beyond their smaller self. This view can furthermore help us situate Nishida in the context of popular trends in Meiji philosophy, as we have seen that many of his predecessors (represented in this paper by Miyake Setsurei) seem to espouse this view. And yet, the problems this presented Nishida's philosophy – both in terms of internal consistency and methodological foundation – pushed us toward an alternative reading of his philosophy, which shows that a careful look of how Nishida used the term 'universal' suggests not a greater self of which we are all but one part, but rather

underlying structures of experience that make individual perspectives commensurate and capable of being organized into the same network of meanings. While this reading of self and individual person in *An Inquiry into the Good* can save us the headache of trying to justify a second self – or other secondary questions, such as how this greater self could be verified within the confines of Nishida’s methodology or where our ‘small’ self emerges from – it does bring with it the question: what do we make of Nishida’s insistence on the union between self and his notion of a personal God? How could our proposed alternative possibly point us in the direction of any inkling of religious experience?

As was the case in the previous section as well, an alternative reading of religious consciousness in *An Inquiry into the Good* requires that we look back over the basic terms causing problems. First, we need to re-address what exactly is being *asked* of religion in Nishida’s worldview:

“The religious demand concerns the self as a whole, the life of the self. It is a demand in which the self, while perceiving its relativity and finitude, yearns to attain eternal, true life by uniting with an absolutely infinite power. Paul expressed it when he wrote, ‘It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.’ [...] True religion seeks the transformation of the self and the reformation of life.”¹⁷⁹

Two points jump out almost immediately in this quotation: (1) the fact that religion is a matter of transforming the life of the self and (2) the juxtaposition between the relative and limited individual and the infinite, greater life of God. Putting these two features together provides intuitive evidence for returning to what we have referred to as the organic reading of Nishida. Indeed, the ‘death’ of the individual self is simultaneously posed as its ‘rebirth’ in a greater consciousness. Our challenge, then, is how to describe this act of rebirth without recourse to an account of a second self.

The first point that we should take into account is that, once again, a more careful reading of Nishida leads us away from any kind of mystic union between a smaller self and ‘God’ as a bigger self. Certainly, Nishida does emphasize the union between man and God, insisting that the true self is found in God. Yet, a careful reading of many of these passages (including those quoted in 3.3) points to a key point about Nishida’s conception of religious consciousness: when Nishida refers to God, he does so as the unifying *power* or *activity* at the

¹⁷⁹ Nishida 1911/1990, 149

base of consciousness, and not as an *entity* that can be measured in terms of size or in terms of part and whole. Reading Nishida in this way while keeping in mind the discussion of ‘principles’ in the previous section can likely help us make sense of otherwise awkward passages like the following:

“Construed in terms of the self-awareness in God’s personality, each of the unities in the phenomena of the universe are none other than God’s self-awareness. For example, the fact that the sum of the angles of a triangle is equal to the sum of two right angles is necessarily regarded in the same way by each person in each era. This, too, is one instance of the self-awareness of God.”¹⁸⁰

What does this mean? It means – as Nishida himself specifies – that God is not a greater spirit, the totality of the cosmos, or anything at all, really.¹⁸¹ What Nishida refers to as God is, as far as I can tell, none other than the possibility for the ‘function’ described in the previous section to exist in any experience, in any era, in any place. God – as presented in the quotation above – is little more than the universal principles underlying experiences that ensure they are able to remain unified and commensurate with one another in an orderly system (presumably in opposition to random and unintelligible chaos). Hence, when Nishida argues that the true self is found in the act of becoming aware of one’s unity with God, he is arguing for something far more boring than becoming one with the totality of the universe: becoming aware of the ‘true’ self is becoming aware of the activity found in any experience.

In this sense, once again, the notion that religious consciousness in *An Inquiry into the Good* is dependent on a ‘greater’ or ‘true’ self could be something closer to a byproduct of his connection to his predecessors than an accurate representation of his theory of the self. The notion of the union between humans and God refers to joining with an activity, not an entity. Of course, one may be tempted to introduce a ‘bigger’ activity which we join in religious experiences. Still, this would once again raise the same questions we faced during section 3.3 of how these two unifying activities relate to one another. Additionally, if the unifying activity we are referring to here is ‘merely’ the experiential structures that make it possible for the sum of angles of any triangle to be 180 degrees (as it was presented in the quotation above), then any talk of a second self would raise the question of whether or not the inauthentic experiences

¹⁸⁰ Nishida 1911/1990, 162

¹⁸¹ See Nishida 1911/1990, 82

of a smaller self are ever lacking in such structures. While it certainly may be possible to distinguish this interpretation of a ‘true self’ from a *misidentification* of it with an abstract notion of an individuated subject-qua-substance, this would indicate an epistemological error on the philosopher’s part and not the existence of a greater activity.¹⁸²

Yet, the question remains: how can we possibly discuss Nishida’s early religious philosophy without slipping back into the same bad habits? My answer is thus and so: joining with the activity of pure experience itself does not require the introduction of any greater entity (such as the universe), but it does entail a form of harmony in pure experience that is not dissimilar to what Miyake described. Indeed, as we have seen throughout this thesis, the basic form of pure experience is activity, constantly seeking to fill the gaps that open up as pure experience changes. In this sense, it is likely that the default mode of our daily life is actually a rather hectic activity, filled with constant attempts to quell the discomforts and conflicts in our lives (whether they be something as small as picking up a banana to deal with our hunger or something as grand as mediating a debate between two contradicting opponents). It is almost certainly for this reason that Nishida explicitly equates the subject and object divide with suffering, and the religious demand with the reclamation of unity:

“As consciousness differentiates and develops, subject and object oppose each other and the self and other things go against each other. In this process, life brings us demands and anguish; we are separated from God, and the Garden is forever closed to Adam’s descendants. But no matter how far consciousness differentiates and develops, it cannot separate from the unity seen in the union of subject and object; in our knowledge and volition, we are always seeking this unity.”¹⁸³

As Nishida explains in the above quotation, the constant demand upon us to reclaim unity and work through these contradictions causes discomfort and suffering once we have left the metaphorical paradise of conflict-free consciousness. Extrapolating a bit from this conclusion

¹⁸² Once again, looking at the difficult questions that arise when following the alternative reading is instructive. Shimomura Toratarō (1990) interestingly claims – not without reason – that primordial consciousness (before the subject-object split) and religious consciousness (regaining unity after the subject-object split) should be considered “dialectically identical,” but chides his teacher Nishida for not elaborating on this relationship or explaining what such a dialectical entity would entail. We will avoid this question entirely by claiming that any use for the term true self should be limited to the epistemological realm and not to any real changes to the structure of the self.

¹⁸³ Nishida 1911/1990, 151

and considering it alongside what we have seen thus far, I believe that religious consciousness can be better looked at as a rare state of peace amidst this constant dynamism. While Nishida gives plenty of examples throughout the book, the common thread running through the states in which one ‘achieves’ pure experience throughout the book (mountain climbers, painters, and appreciators of fine music, just to name a few) is that there is a lack of resistance internal to the progression of their experiences. The mountain climber no longer needs to think about which foothold to choose next, the violinist does not need to focus her attention on getting her timing right, and one listening to fine music can relax as the melodies flow into his ears. These moments, in which the dynamism of pure experience is carried out without any internal discord, then, is not only a brief respite from the constant conflict and contradiction found in our day to day lives, it is also an unobstructed window into the endless activity that allows for all of our experiences to take place: precisely the self in its purest, unaltered form.

As a final suggestion for reading Nishida profitably, I would like to argue that we ought to depart from Nishida’s tendency to discuss a greater unity and instead view his theory of religion in a more negative sense. That is to say, I believe that the best way to look at Nishida’s religious theory is to consider more seriously the *death* of the individual. To be a bit more specific about the matter, I would here like to suggest that Nishida’s conception of religious consciousness is best read as a total *negation* of the conflicts and contradictions that accompany pure experience in our day to day lives.¹⁸⁴ While the early Nishida preferred to discuss such conflicts in positive terms of overcoming divisions between subject and object and achieving further unity, I feel here that Nishida could stand to learn from Miyake’s early philosophy: the ‘death’ of the individual is not merely an overcoming of individual consciousness – it is better conceived of as an annihilation of the very categories of unity and disunity. It is – paradoxically – a respite from our typical tendency to endlessly reunify the gaps that appear in our experience and, instead, merely enjoy their flow as they pass us by. It is the achievement of a rare sense of calm and peace among the utter dynamism of the world we live in, the constant disruptive activity it features, and our usual tendency to try to achieve unity once again amidst this hectic flow.

¹⁸⁴ “When our spirit is in a state of completion, a state of unity, we experience pleasure, and when it is in an incomplete state, a state of disunion, we experience pain. As I said, spirit is the unifying activity of reality, and contradictions and conflicts necessarily accompany this unity. We always experience pain when these contradictions and conflicts occur, and the infinite unifying activity immediately attempts to rid itself of them and to achieve an even greater unity.” (Nishida 1911/1990, 78)

3.6) Conclusion – Separating from Meiji Philosophy and the Refinement of Nishida’s Theory of Selfhood

Over the course of this chapter, we have shown the path to a non-mystical, methodologically sound interpretation of *An Inquiry into the Good*. By paying careful attention to how Nishida uses key terms (universal, in particular), it is possible to avoid getting caught up in a relation between a ‘small’ self and a ‘big’ self without losing anything of note. Even his religious philosophy, which appears most vulnerable to being understood in mystic terms, can be re-read instead as profitably as a release from the constant oppositions and conflicts that haunt all living beings. In this sense, we ought to acknowledge that distinguishing Nishida’s theory of selfhood from popular theories at the time may not only lead to a more profitable reading of *An Inquiry into the Good*, but could also provide a more accurate reconstruction of what he was trying to describe in his philosophy of pure experience.

Particularly, the fact that Nishida (as we will mention briefly in the conclusion of this work) later decried the mystical tendencies of his early philosophy as missing his intended point is not without some merit. I say this insofar as this fact points us to an as-of-yet underappreciated aspect of Nishida’s relation to his philosophical predecessors: the importance that his attempts to distance himself from such pre-existing frameworks had on his capacity to refine his philosophical arguments. Indeed, it was only in his very next text, *Intuition and Reflection in Self-Awareness*, that Nishida would give up both the terms pure experience as well as frequent references to a ‘true’ or ‘greater’ self in favor of more technical descriptions of the structures of self-awareness. This would culminate, as we shall discuss in the conclusion in greater detail, in altogether rethinking the structure of the self in *From the Actor to the Seer* as that which “mirrors the self within itself.” Entailed by this shift is an acrobatic attempt to describe the self as something that is neither an individuated substance nor a piece of the universe, but instead that which can be seen as the reflection of the reflections of the various events that happen in the world. As I see it, this was not a wholesale abandonment of his notion of self in *An Inquiry into the Good*, but instead a removal of the obstructive elements that had mixed into his worldview. That is to say, Nishida’s philosophical growth was – at least partially – thanks to his capacity to shed unnecessary influence from his Meiji predecessors and their use of the language of ‘small’ and ‘great’ selves.

Yet, even if we say as much, it is without question that Nishida also resorts to explanations of pure experience in terms that are immediately comparable to Miyake’s work.

Even writing off most of these discussions as a poor choice of explaining the concept that we seek to integrate further information into our systems beyond merely what is immediately perceived by individual subjects, there are still instances in which Nishida describes the individual and God in terms of part and whole.¹⁸⁵ Beyond this, it is clear enough from the passages that we have already mentioned that Nishida himself seemed to consider pure experience as an organism in some capacity. If a reader dissatisfied with my reading of Nishida were so inclined, I have no doubt in my mind that they could find sufficient textual support to argue that (for better or worse) Nishida genuinely believed we find our true self by breaking through our usual subjectivity and experiencing the activity of the universe in its entirety.¹⁸⁶ Insofar as this is the case, it is not so easy to entirely separate Nishida from his predecessors in the Meiji era.

Additionally, it is not necessarily the case that his organic predecessors' influence was necessarily a destructive force in all cases. While there are important differences between himself and Miyake Setsurei, the fact that reality itself is somehow alive and orderly was a crucial insight that would manifest itself in various ways throughout Nishida's career. Naturally, Nishida's early understanding of/inclination toward Schopenhauer was largely influenced by those like Miyake, who had a similar tendency to stress the primacy of the will without falling into the same pessimism that Schopenhauer had. As is well known, these tendencies were amplified by the appearance of an absolute will at the base of reality in his next work, *Intuition and Reflection in Self-Awareness*. Yet, even as the more immediate relations receded into the background after Nishida moved past this text, his pursuit of a living conception of reality persisted. His later philosophy was indeed defined by Nishida himself as an attempt to come to grips with the concrete historical world in which we are born into, labor within, and eventually perish from. Hence, although the mereological claims about small and big self that were espoused by those we have inserted into the organic tradition may not be present in Nishida's own philosophy, this does not mean that the organic tradition had no influence on him whatsoever, nor does it mean that it was a bad influence that poisoned his good ideas. For this reason, although we seem to have a crucial distinction between Nishida and the representative of one chief trend in Meiji philosophy, it is still not so easy to absolutize this difference between them or use it to simply justify the notion that Nishida was modern Japan's

¹⁸⁵ Example: "God is the greatest and final unifier of our consciousness; our consciousness is one part of God's consciousness and its unity comes from God's unity." (Nishida 1911/1990, 161)

¹⁸⁶ A thorough and text-based demonstration of Nishida's mystical tendencies can be found in Leonardi (2011).

first philosopher. Considering what to make of this vague oscillation between a continuous line of influence in Meiji thought and a hard mark that separates Nishida and his predecessor will be our final task in the conclusion of this thesis.

Conclusion

Refined Ideas and Separation from Meiji Philosophy in the Work of Nishida Kitarō

Now that we have covered a vast landscape of similarities and differences between Nishida and several of his more important predecessors in modern Japanese philosophy, we are finally in a position to revisit some of the more pressing questions raised in the introduction of this thesis. What influences can be found in the background of *An Inquiry into the Good*? How pervasive are they in his work? What, if anything, set this work of Nishida's apart from earlier philosophers, i.e., what makes Nishida more original than his predecessors? In this conclusion, I would like to offer some simple suggestions for how to view these questions.

However, in spite of the copious data we have accumulated over the past three chapters, we seem to have gained little in the way of direct answers to the questions presented above. At no point in our thesis did we ever find an entirely clear cut between Nishida and any of the philosophers featured or, conversely, any evidence that Nishida's reputation is in any way fraudulent. To the contrary, all of the conclusions that we have posited in our work up to this point seem to be almost contradictory. As we have seen, Nishida is indeed remarkably similar to Inoue Enryō and likely shared the same desire to account for reality without devolving into mere abstraction, yet Nishida's methodological principles still offered a further push toward advancing this quest for concreteness. Furthermore, while Nishida's ethics are best read within the framework of Meiji debates about the merits of individualism (and specifically the theory of self-realization), his philosophy offers stronger theoretical underpinnings for claims that were otherwise prevalent throughout the period. Finally, even though we made an important distinction between Nishida and 'organic' theories which claimed that individual consciousness were merely part of the bigger self of the universe, we only managed to do so with the caveat that the vitalist tendencies running between them was an important source of inspiration for the young Nishida. In all of these cases, we have come to the same (apparently) conflicting conclusion: Nishida is both undeniably one standout philosopher among his peers but also entirely inseparable from his historical background.

Yet, I believe that this conclusion is – oddly enough – perhaps more in line with the spirit of Nishida's philosophy than many of the current narratives that specialists of his philosophy use to describe his work. Or, rather, Nishida's relationship with philosophers in the mid-to-late Meiji period is the perfect example to demonstrate Nishida's outlook on history as a *continuity of discontinuities*. Put simply, from this outlook, philosophy can only be

understood as a paradoxical framework of being equal parts a continuous progression of ideas and clean cut between generations with different methodologies and intellectual concerns. Naturally, merely pointing out that history is neither entirely continuous nor entirely discontinuous is not particularly helpful for understanding the concrete progression of Japanese intellectual history. As such, in the concluding section of this thesis, we will provide concrete discussions of the meaning behind the (1) continuity between Nishida and 19th century Japanese philosophy, (2) discontinuity and the establishment of more robust philosophical studies in the early 20th century, and (3) what this seemingly conflicting state of affairs could possibly hint at when we try to understand the nature of ‘original’ philosophy.

4.1) Continuity – Nishida’s Philosophy as the Final Stage in Meiji Thought

Perhaps the most concrete conclusion that we can take away from the past three chapters is that there are very real benefits to taking a substantial look at Nishida in light of his place in the continuity of Meiji philosophy. In that sense (even if it may be a staple to mention that Nishida’s philosophy was forged at the meeting point of Western philosophical methodology and Japanese intellectual traditions), there is very likely a need for re-assessing the manner that we introduce Nishida’s philosophy to non-experts. Even with the groundwork laid out in this thesis, plenty of work remains to be done as well; whether it be the relation between the first part of *An Inquiry into the Good* and Motora Yūjirō’s psychology (and his emphasis on direct and indirect experience), Nishida’s discussion of a systematic relation between consciousnesses and Inoue Tetsujirō’s views on truth, or even the similarities between pure experience and Kiyozawa Manshi’s *naikanshugi*, many connections untouched in this thesis could help elucidate Nishida’s philosophical project further. Yet, before learning more about such individual cases, I feel that the most pressing need is a change in the narratives of how we discuss philosophy in Japan.

Put simply, it seems to me that it is finally time to put to rest the old belief that Nishida appeared out of nowhere as a miraculous blend between ancient Japanese traditions and as of yet untapped Western philosophical potential. On a macro-scale, this conclusion seems to match the current tendency to emphasize that all stages of Japanese (or other forms of ‘non-Western’) thought ought to be considered as philosophy, regardless of whether or not it had

any relation to Western thought.¹⁸⁷ Yet, while there may perhaps be an affinity between these two claims, I would like to merely point out here that, even aside from the claim that there was always some form of original philosophy in Japan before the importation of Western sources, there were philosophers making important strides within a Western framework before Nishida wrote *An Inquiry into the Good*. Insofar as this is the case, it is crucial that we communicate this information to non-specialists interested in the development of philosophy in Japan; both those who are initially interested in Nishida (and would benefit from accurately grasping the context in which he wrote) as well as to offer a look at debates that could be of more philosophical interest than they have been given recognition for (granted that the debates between authors like either of the Inoue's, Onishi Hajime, Kiyozawa Manshi, and more could – if probed further – offer unique perspectives and dialogues on contemporary issues).

Perhaps almost needless to say at this point, I believe that these efforts to investigate the problems and concerns of Meiji's philosophy can offer a more substantial look at what Nishida was attempting to do in his philosophical career. If nothing else, I believe that it offers a more concrete window into the oft-cited claim that Nishida was attempting to pioneer a Western philosophy of Zen Buddhist intuitions as a result of his time studying Zazen in particular.¹⁸⁸ Additionally, the possible counter-claim that Nishida should be read irrespective of his time performing Zazen itself can also be augmented by providing a more sober look at his historicity. No matter what the case may be, looking at Nishida as one philosopher among

¹⁸⁷ Consider, for instance, those like Garfield and Van Norden (2016), who argue that general tendencies to focus on Western philosophy in universities as normal is problematic, insofar as it provides an implicit affirmation of the notion that Western philosophy is somehow more inherently academically worthy than the thought of other traditions (and, they argue, in response to this it is necessary that we at least 'call it what it is' and rename 'Philosophy' departments to 'Western Philosophy' to highlight how much is being cut from the curriculum). The driving force for accepting this claim would be that Western philosophy is normalized and the default form of philosophy we study, while other traditions are marginalized. Now, in response to this, one could claim that calling something philosophy generally requires explicit, logical, and critical claims to be made (thus ruling out many important thinkers like Dōgen from being philosophers in the strict sense) and that – even if a thinker is not his or herself a philosopher in the strict sense – this does not mean that they do not have philosophical value or cannot be the object of philosophical reflection. Because of the important academic and intercultural issues at stake here, I will avoid sticking my neck into debates on this topic too far. However, I will do so with the disclaimer that actually exploring Meiji debates about whether there was philosophy in Japan (or to what extent 'Eastern' philosophy exists) could go a long way in clarifying the problems at stake in these debates.

¹⁸⁸ While I do not deny the possibility that the matter of how to discuss Zen ideas in tandem with Western philosophy may have impacted Nishida's thought, I believe it would be much more concrete and less speculative to discuss that impact with reference to the pre-existing efforts of those like Inoue Enryō, Inoue Tetsujirō or Kiyozawa Manshi. Do to otherwise, insofar as I can see, would risk distancing oneself from the actual debates that Nishida inherited from his teachers.

many within his time period offers concrete context that can help point researchers in the right direction to better analyze his thought.

To this end, I think we can outline the aspect of his philosophy that stands out most when Nishida's work is put into relation with his contemporaries: the relation between stringent philosophical methodology and accounting for the lived reality of the self. As we have noted over the course of all three chapters, both of these problems were concealed in the background of the Meiji modernization process. First, as was evident when looking at the progression from Hara Tanzan to Inoue Enryō to Nishida himself, the language of how one could describe reality in its most concrete state was a shared goal that became increasingly more sophisticated as the Meiji period went on. Second, as was highlighted in the second and third chapters, how one can understand the life of the individual lost in a society still trying to deal with a large-scale modernization effort was a task tackled by many authors from varying perspectives. What strikes me as particularly relevant about Nishida's philosophy was its capacity to tackle these problems together as a set. In other words, as we have noted throughout this thesis, Nishida tied these two goals together with a radical re-evaluation of the life of the philosopher in rigorous terms that could not be reduced to mere practical wisdom. This effort to find a philosophical language capable of facing the existential qualms of the individual without returning to uncritical speculation or abstraction not only connects the early Nishida to philosophy in the Meiji era, but provides a continuous line of development throughout his own career.¹⁸⁹

Additionally, speaking in broader strokes beyond only Nishida's career, I believe that this conclusion can also provide us with a clearer overall picture of modernization in Meiji Japan. More specifically, the notion that Japanese people struggled with Western philosophy or did nothing more than attempt to come to grips with it is likely overstated. Of course, the common notion that Japanese philosophy took a turbulent path through modernity is not entirely without merit. But perhaps it is worth considering that we may have missed the actual importance that this turbulent beginning had on the capacity of individuals in modern Japan to accurately grasp and develop these ideas. The 'beginnings' of Western philosophy in modern Japan were not necessarily fruitless or creatively bankrupt or (as we saw some claim to be the

¹⁸⁹ Krummel (2015) tackles precisely this problem while dealing with the problem of 'logic' in Nishida's later philosophy. In any case, as Krummel himself points out, the effort started with pure experience and likely lasted until his final essay. From the 'logic of the predicate' to 'logic of place' to the logic behind absolute contradictory self-identity, how one could provide a thorough-going and logically sound account of reality while remaining faithful to our experience as subjects who are born, act in, and – eventually – die in this world.

case for Inoue Enryō) mere deployment. Looking at the way that debates progressed and were refined as a gradual process can likely help provide a more fruitful and accurate depiction of Meiji Japan's relation to not only philosophy – but likely Western learning as a whole.

4.2) Discontinuity – Important Differences between Nishida and Meiji Philosophers

Although perhaps it came at a surprisingly late stage in this thesis, the end of the third chapter has brought us face to face with an absolutely crucial aspect of the relation between Nishida's philosophy and his predecessors: how the move away from some of the ideas proposed in *An Inquiry into the Good* helped form him as a philosopher. Indeed, although *An Inquiry into the Good* is often posited as the beginning of modern philosophy in Japan, this is likely stated with the implicit context that Nishida provided more detailed attempts to articulate his worldview, shedding his proverbial skin along the way and doing away with ideas and phrasings that could not successfully help him articulate his worldview with sufficient clarity. Indeed, as Nishida himself explained, his philosophical attitude was something akin to a miner sifting for gold, letting less useful ideas pass through his grasp almost instantaneously. Of course, this does not mean that he merely changed worldviews at every chance available. To the contrary, as we have mentioned previously, his philosophy of a 'historical reality' was claimed by Nishida to be aiming at the same goal as his philosophy of pure experience. Insofar as this progress essentially defined Nishida's career as a philosopher, then, it seems instructive to look at how developing the kernels of new ideas found in *An Inquiry into the Good* helped contribute to his privileged place in Japanese philosophical history.

In this sense, while it may seem unfair to evaluate *An Inquiry into the Good* based on how the ideas presented were developed in Nishida's later philosophy, such a practice would not necessarily be unreasonable. Rather, insofar as Nishida's later philosophy can be reasonably understood as a more thorough articulation of what he was trying to say from the beginning, it may very well be the case that completely understanding *An Inquiry into the Good* requires us to look at how the ideas presented therein were changed. Here, I would like to point to two particular issues (namely, those relating to self, meaning, and reflection and those referring to good and evil) in *An Inquiry into the Good* that seem to have grown into something substantially different from the arguments made by the Meiji philosophers highlighted in this thesis:

4.2.1) Self and Reflection:

As we have witnessed in the previous chapter, Nishida's efforts to describe the self in *An Inquiry into the Good* provides his philosophy with an intuitive appeal that has drawn readers to his work. At the same time, however, it also presented several methodological issues that have caused confusion among his interpreters. While here we have interpreted the true self as the universal 'function' or 'activity' present in any experience that arranges them into a meaning-laden network of consciousness – and thus the individual person as identifiable only by the context created within this system – the evidence for this reading can easily be countered with various passages that instead hint at our true self as a 'bigger' self which gives birth to our 'small' or inauthentic self (or, otherwise, with a 'true' sense of pre-linguistic reality which is spoiled by reflection). It is on this note that we find a problem that Nishida grappled with for decades that would distinctly separate him from any of his predecessors in the Meiji era: how does one account for the self in its most concrete state as it is *directly* experienced while also being able to explain how they could account for this notion of selfhood through *reflective* philosophical discourse.

To start, I would like to instead diagnose the problem by asking: why are both of these readings possible and how did Nishida face them? To be as brief as possible in regard to this difficult problem, I believe the answer lies in the fact that there are at least two different meanings of pure experience: pure experience as an *originary* or *unifying activity* and pure experience as *the achievement of a unified state of consciousness*.¹⁹⁰ Indeed, this distinction has likely already made itself implicitly present throughout this thesis. On the one hand, when Nishida discusses the experience of painters, musicians, or other skilled performers finding a unity between subject and object, he clearly distinguishes their state of mind as an achievement of sorts. This dimension of pure experience seems to have a substantial affinity with late 19th and early 20th century trends in philosophy in Japan, as evidenced by our discussion of the notion of 'organic' theories of self. On the other hand, however, it is clear that pure experience cannot be reduced to *only* a mystical union of small and great self in pre-reflective or non-linguistic experience. More specifically, as we saw in the first chapter in particular, pure

¹⁹⁰ I am not the first to notice this distinction. Hirayama (1997) gives a detailed basis for holding this suspicion by highlighting all the different features of pure experience and when they were added to the equation. In particular, Hirayama contributes by noting that the introduction of pure experience as an activity seems to have been added into his lectures around 1907/8, while the notion of pure experience as a state of consciousness seems to precede that.

experience is described clearly in terms of the functions of reality that give birth to concepts, meaning, distinctions and reflection in our daily lives and ties our various experiences together into an overarching system. While we have side-stepped any questions that may come with recognizing this distinction by focusing primarily on the second notion of pure experience as an activity (and recognizing that pure experience is only prior to meaning insofar as individual experiences are mute before they have been contextualized in a stream of consciousness) and thus claiming that it is only possible to identify an experience as mine or yours through this process of contextualization, we should still recognize that both of these dimensions of pure experience are present in the work and at times (at least appear to be) at odds with each other.

Indeed, while the *pieces* for a satisfactory reconciliation between these possibly competing notions of pure experience are almost certainly already in place in *An Inquiry into the Good* (as several authors have shown in much greater detail than we have time for here),¹⁹¹ I do not think that issues regarding how thematic reflection, judgment and meaning are formed through the activity of the self are ever actually solved in a *consistent* manner by Nishida in this work. First, we can ask, is reflection a ‘break’ or ‘rupture’ in pure experience or just a different mode of pure experience? In this thesis, we have done our best to follow Nishida’s lead in the first section of *An Inquiry into the Good* by taking reflective consciousness as one function or activity of pure experience, i.e., taking them as two sides of the same coin. Yet, there are notable passages that seem to contrast the two as being entirely different things. Inconsistencies in regard to this point open Nishida up for further lines of questioning as well. Is reflection a bastardization of pure experience or is it (as we have emphasized here) merely the act of allowing implicit connections between different experiences to connect to one another? If reflective judgment is – as I have taken it to be in the first chapter of this thesis – merely the thematization of implicit connections between patterns that can already be found in pre-reflective experience, how is Nishida able to substantiate this claim on a phenomenological level?¹⁹²

¹⁹¹ Hidaka (2011) has likely given the most fleshed out articulation of how to reconcile the two. Specifically, Hidaka clarifies how thinking is an *active process* which can be – upon becoming ‘refined’ – accomplished without requiring pure experience to abstract a subject from within itself. While I believe there is still more left to say on the topic, we will avoid going into any more detail here.

¹⁹² From what I gather, Nishida’s immediate attempt to salvage his theory of pure experience from such questions in *Thought and Experience* (a collection of essays published soon after *An Inquiry into the Good*) appears to be largely based on appeals to the theoretical need for such universal structures in pure experience in order to reconcile the absurdities between mere psychologism and extreme logicism. After comparing Kant favorably with his own position, Nishida opines as follows: “Yet, what do we see when we look at experience itself, separately from all our assumptions and dogmas? Originally, truly direct experience is not a collection of complex elements. It is a spontaneous and self-developing unity (自発自展の統一). Our

Given that these problems lurked in the background, it should not come as surprising that his next major work was titled *Intuition and Reflection in Self-Awareness* (1917). Indeed, as the title of the book aptly suggests, Nishida doubled down on his efforts to reconcile direct experience (intuition) and thought (reflection) by locating them within the overarching experience of the self (self-awareness). Here, Nishida abandoned the notion of pure experience (both in name and as a philosophical tendency to glorify the unity of subject and object). As a replacement, Nishida instead attempted to show that meanings and values and our intuition were both part of the fundamental mirroring structure of experience known as self-awareness. That is to say, as was the case in *An Inquiry into the Good*, Nishida attempts here to reconcile how it is possible that what is given directly in immediate consciousness (i.e., in intuition) matches with what is found in the act of explicitly contextualizing said experience (i.e., via reflection) by appealing to the inherently reflexive nature of consciousness. Now, at this stage in his career, Nishida attempts to tie this reflective structure in experience to his notion of an absolute will that holds together the constant splitting of subject and object in reflection away from their initial unity in intuition. Doing so, Nishida seemed to reason, would provide a pervading force throughout experience that could tie disparate experiences together.¹⁹³ While I believe all of these themes were already present in *An Inquiry into the Good* and Nishida himself largely dismissed *Intuition and Reflection in Self-Awareness* (and its tendency to talk about uniting with the Absolute Will) as an unfortunate surrender to “the enemy camp of mysticism”,¹⁹⁴ it does signify an important hint for discussing the structures of self and reflection that would be further refined in the work that is typically considered the beginning of his more mature philosophy, *From the Actor to the Seer* (1927).

Specifically, we see that instead of trying to distinguish between inauthentic or small reflective self and the true, intuiting self, Nishida more carefully explicates how the

desires and conscious unities in pure experience are such a unity. In other words, [this unity] is the *sine qua non* needed for experiences to form.” (NKZ 1: 182, If one espouses this quasi-transcendental appeal, then Nishida’s theory remains phenomenologically unmotivated. Now, there are quotations in his notes that point to a potential solution in taking such systematization of meaning to be the “nature of consciousness” (NKZ 20: 85), but these ideas were never fully fleshed out to the best of my knowledge.

¹⁹³ As to why Nishida chose the will in particular, my understanding seems to be that any and all forms of contemplation, reflection, or any other form of understanding experience fundamentally required some form of primal activity at their base. As Nishida reminds us in “On What is Directly Given” (toward the end of his period of fascination with the notion of an Absolute Will), “true self-awareness must be our experience of the will itself. [...] The true I is not the knowing I but the acting [This is because] knowing is a forming of acting. Seeing, listening, and thinking, are all acts of the I. The I is the unity of these acts [作用].” (NKZ 3: 267)

¹⁹⁴ NKZ 2: 9; As for what made this book so mystical, the answer seems to be the aforementioned notion of An Absolute Will as a vital force pervading experience with which we join when possible.

fundamental activity referred to initially as pure experience takes place as a mirroring function that ties together pre-reflective and reflective consciousness. The brilliant move that Nishida makes to reflect this in his more mature philosophy is to refer to the self as the *place* that houses the various mirror-ings of our experiences. Nishida explains the modifications he has made while hinting at a contrast with his prior position in the essay “On Internal Perception”:

“In our self-awareness, before the self knows the self there is no self. Before the self acts, there is no self. [...] Yet, in what kind of realm of objects (対象界) does the content of self-awareness develop? The self reflects itself within itself. The mirror that reflects the content of the self must be the self-itself. The shadow of the self is not reflected upon things. [...] Normally the term self-awareness is merely thought to mean that the knower and the known have become one, but I believe that true self-awareness is knowing yourself within yourself. If one merely talks about the unity of subject and object, then this could be considered something we refer to as pre-reflective intuition. But for self-awareness to be possible, we must add that this happens within oneself. Self-awareness is found when the knowing I, the known I, and the place that the I knows itself are one [with each other].”¹⁹⁵

Here, I believe we see a much more careful manner of explaining what Nishida was attempting to say already in *An Inquiry into the Good*. That is to say, Nishida is not claiming that the individual self is a secondary state that arises from primordial experience, nor is he merely arguing for a pre-reflective unity between subject and object as true self-awareness. Instead, Nishida is arguing that the self is the place in which various experiences are all tied together and reflect upon one another. It is the overarching unity underlying distinction between subject and object in reflective judgment and the unity between them in bare intuition. Importantly, this self is not an object to be found in the world (as a shadow reflected upon things) but can rather only know itself as it is reflected within the amalgamation of these various experiences. What we had referred to previously as a hub in chapter 3 now becomes the place or mirror upon which experiences are reflected, making itself present only as it finds itself mirroring its own actions in other moments.¹⁹⁶ Thus, while the seeds for this more mature insight were likely

¹⁹⁵ NKZ 3: 151

¹⁹⁶ Maraldo (2018) provides a useful account of the meaning of this act of reflection as it pertains to Nishida’s philosophy. Crucially, Maraldo clarifies that reflecting does not imply the total deletion of any

already present in *An Inquiry into the Good*, Nishida's attempt to fully flesh out these ideas brought him a great distance from earlier talk of small and great self or mystical unities with the universe.¹⁹⁷

4.2.2) Good, Evil, and Religion throughout Nishida's Philosophy

In the second chapter of this thesis, we provided an in-depth account of the ways that Nishida's notion of self-realization was conditioned by the constraints of his era. In this sense, it may seem strange to highlight the topics of free-will and the good as points that signal a divide between him and his predecessors. Indeed, if we were to limit ourselves merely to *An Inquiry into the Good*, this distinction would border on nonsensical. However, the progression centering along Nishida's depiction of our free will and its ethical implications is interesting to us insofar as it shows a drastic and rapid attempt to separate from intuitions that – by 1911 – were already outdated.

The source of this frustration is quite easy to identify. As we have hinted at already in the second chapter, there is a thinly veiled naivete in the ethics of *An Inquiry into the Good*. As we have pointed out, the process of reunifying subject and object, i.e., overcoming the gaps that occur in experience, is taken as the Good. In contrast to this, evil is understood as a momentary disruption that serves to provide a deeper meaning to experience once it is overcome. Thus, in the end, evil is reduced to a mere steppingstone in the inherently good development of the universe. At the stage of *An Inquiry into the Good*, Nishida thus insists that nothing is inherently evil in and of itself.¹⁹⁸ The understandable frustration that many had in response to this claim is that it seems to make light of the concept of evil and the human-

'phenomenological' or 'pre-reflexive' self-awareness. Instead, it means that this primitive self-awareness is only capable of (in our words) contextualizing itself vis-à-vis its experience of the world.

¹⁹⁷ In the name of academic honesty, however, I feel it would be best to ask if this long toiling path toward the notion of self as place necessarily presents a better option than a reworking/rewording of the notion of pure experience. To my mind, I do not think any aspect of Nishida's early theory of selfhood is beyond saving, nor that phrasing his ideas in terms of a 'place' makes his philosophy any easier to understand. To the contrary, it seems to me that some phenomenological grounding for his notion of the concrete universal and a more detailed account of pre-reflexive consciousness would likely have been enough to salvage whatever issues his early philosophy of self may have had without requiring any additional explanations as to qualifies as a place or why experiences need a place or any other potential misunderstandings that can come with this new philosophical vocabulary. Still, for our purposes, this is not necessarily what is important. What is crucial at this point is the struggle that Nishida underwent to distill the initial ideas found in pure experience and – in doing so – separate himself from the major trends present in Japanese philosophy during his education.

¹⁹⁸ Nishida 1911/1990, 171

suffering it seeks to explain. While the arguments are external to Nishida's own philosophical framework, questions about whether or not all suffering could reasonably be expected to always have some kind of silver lining may be able to impart a not-insignificant amount of damage to Nishida's ethics. Certainly, falling down and scraping one's knee as a child hurts, but it can teach you prudence in response. But what about becoming paraplegic? Perhaps one could say that such an injury gives you a new outlook on life, but what about animals who suffer similar fates without the cognitive capacities to reflect on life? Does a deer caught in a hunting trap slowly dying from the excruciating pain ever bring about a greater good or profound meaning?

Perhaps equally frustrating to anyone who wants to take Nishida seriously on the ethical level is the 'trans-ethical' dimension this theory brings with it. In *An Inquiry into the Good*, as we have already discussed, there is a direct relation drawn between the state of consciousness in which one does not distinguish between subject and object and ethical practice. As we have established in the previous section, this can make sense in the context of religious consciousness, given that such a state of consciousness can be considered a 'release' from the usual conflicts and contradictions that underpin our experiences and a reveal of a deeper harmony in experience. Indeed, Nishida makes it very clear that he looks at religious consciousness as a sort of reformation; an escape from the chaos of sinfulness and reunification in God's salvation.¹⁹⁹ From the standpoint of finding a certain spiritual comfort after committing evil acts, this emphasis on one's union with God can make intuitive sense. Ethically and politically speaking, however, questions linger. While such a state of consciousness can make sense as religious salvation, does such religious salvation absolve one of their more daily or practical ethical duties? Additionally, while Nishida seems to stress removing oneself fromthetic judgment and returning to a more basic state of consciousness, we must ask: are there not cases in which being ethical is defined strictly in terms of deliberation? What of politics and deliberation on social issues? At times during *An Inquiry into the Good*, Nishida seems to resort to the old adage that whether life is heaven or hell depends on what you make of it, so one could write such concerns off as secondary to finding a more profound harmony in experience itself.²⁰⁰ Yet, this disregard for political or deliberative ethical praxis would be precisely the problem – genuine ethical concerns should almost certainly not be replaced

¹⁹⁹ Nishida 1911/1990, 172

²⁰⁰ "Depending on one's feeling at the moment, the same scenery can appear resplendently beautiful or depressingly gloomy. Buddhist thought holds that according to one's mood the world becomes either heaven or hell. Thus our world is constructed upon our feeling and volition." (Nishida 1911/1990, 49)

(entirely) by searching for something ‘beyond’ them or seeking a sense of religious salvation that extirpates one from the difficulties they present.

Perhaps it is because of this naïve streak running through Nishida’s earliest work, though, that we can better appreciate just how intriguing his view of good and evil is in his final paper, “The Logic of Place and the Religious Worldview” (1945). In contrast to his early attempt to somehow unify the aesthetic, ethical, and religious dimensions of our lives in pre-reflective pure experience, Nishida takes a much more difficult approach to the topics of evil and religious salvation. No longer was Nishida’s notion of god posited as the good underlying all of reality. Instead, his notion of God became a Janus-faced, contradiction laden mystery. The later Nishida’s notion of reality would, rather than merely serve as the final ideal of unity (i.e., God) we aspire to, serve also as the very ‘devil’ that gives us the free will needed to commit the evil actions that bring us to search for salvation.

“It is another paradox, but God as the true absolute must be Satan too. Only then can God be said to be truly omniscient and omnipotent. [...] This is the God who has required the negation of the person itself. A God who merely opposes, and struggles with, evil is a relative God, even if he conquers over evil. And a God who is only a transcendent supreme God is a mere abstraction.”²⁰¹

As a disclaimer we should note that, in this quotation, Nishida is likely not arguing for God’s salvation as only a reclamation of unity or the good, as he had in *An Inquiry into the Good*. Just as God has a devilish aspect, even as the sinner finds a greater sense of salvation after being forgiven for despicable actions, they must still hold that inherent and fundamental evil within them. Good and evil, as Nishida saw them, were no longer part of a monistic relationship, but as a contradictory identity; constantly informing one another without ever being reducible in the same way that they were in his early ethics.²⁰²

²⁰¹ Nishida 1945/1987, 74

²⁰² This notion of absolute contradictory self-identity (絶対矛盾的自己同一) refers in principle to the correlative and often contradictory relation between opposing concepts that rely on each other to exist (here understood as good and evil). While we will forego a full-blooded explanation of this notion of absolute contradictory self-identity, but a basic synopsis of the plurivocal nature of (and difficulties that come with explaining) this term is given by James Heisig: “what Nishida calls ‘contradictories’ are often closer to what we might call ‘contraries’ or ‘correlatives.’ Affirmation-in-negation, continuity-in-discontinuity, being-in-nothingness, and subjective-in-objective are, rightly speaking, copulations of contradictories. They cannot co-exist in the same thing at the same time without offending the rules of logical discourse. Self-in-other, death-in-life, past-in-future, one-in-many, on the other hand, are not so obviously contradictory since they

Yet, not too dissimilarly from what we saw happen in his theory regarding selfhood, there seems to be a consistent message being developed over the course of the development of Nishida's ethical and religious theories. To be more specific, as Oda Nobuhiro has worked out in more detail than we can get into here, there seems to be a consistent attempt to explain how ethical demands spring up from the depths of reality itself.²⁰³ This is an important point and a recurring theme throughout Nishida's entire career, but it is also indicative of something that is potentially even deeper: there is, throughout Nishida's career, an attempt to describe one's concrete existence as a relative finite being (that is thus unable to avoid committing evil acts entirely) within an infinite world and it is none other than this awareness that gives birth to good and evil. In the early stages of his work, Nishida tends to almost trivialize his own concern by reconciling finite and evil human behavior and the divine or infinite in a mystical union with God. Yet, in his later work, he refuses such an easy solution, instead claiming that the human heart is an irreconcilable battleground between God and Satan.²⁰⁴ However, whether it be in *An Inquiry into the Good*, his final essay, or any of the works in between, Nishida is clear that our ethical and religious demands are fueled by none other than the concrete life and death of the self.

In this sense, albeit perhaps less clearly than was the case in his theory of selfhood, I believe it is possible to look at Nishida's ethics in *An Inquiry into the Good* as an awkward first step toward analyzing concrete religious consciousness from the standpoint of a free and finite sinner within an infinite world. As a result, this development took him far away from the notions of self-realization or self-completion espoused by his predecessors. Hence, it would seem that the kernel for these later ideas was likely already present in *An Inquiry into the Good*. Yet, in order to allow these ideas to flourish, Nishida needed to separate himself from the theories espoused by his predecessors.

4.3) Continuity and Discontinuity – A Nishidian Take on Nishida and its Implications for the Field of Japanese Philosophy

are readily understood to share a common basis—human encounter, creativity, will, totality, or what have you.” (Heisig 2001, 66)

²⁰³ See Ota (2011) for a more detailed account of the changes that happened between Nishida's early and later philosophy in regard to working out these intuitions.

²⁰⁴ Nishida 1945/1987, 75

Now that we have looked through both the undeniable continuity ranging from Meiji philosophy to Nishida's work as well as the strong evidence that Nishida signals a notable cut in the development of Japanese philosophy, we come to a seemingly undeniable truth and apparent contradiction. First, we see that Nishida is best looked at as a discontinuous cut in the still coherent continuity of Japanese philosophy – almost as if he were a 'cut with no width' in the fabric of time. This is a conclusion that has been supported in the conclusion of every chapter in this thesis. And yet, this brings us to an obvious contradiction. How can we possibly reconcile this apparently banal conclusion that Nishida is both a continuation of the Meiji era and a clear distinction between eras? Curiously enough, the philosopher who is best well-equipped to explain this apparent contradictory fact is likely none other than Nishida. While I am well-aware of the irony involved in doing so, I would like to end this thesis by invoking Nishida's later philosophy as a means to articulate this apparently contradictory fact of history before discussing its importance as relates to the way we look at Japanese philosophy (or, otherwise, philosophy in Japan).

My reasoning for utilizing Nishida here is that the notion of a continuity of discontinuities is precisely the basis for his philosophy of history. Or, more precisely, Nishida's understanding of time in itself forces us to face an apparent paradox. Nishida explains as follows below in the beginning of a later essay, "The Standpoint of Active-Intuition" (1935):

"What is called 'time' is usually thought of as a straight line; the instant, conceived of as an infinite linear progression stretching from past to future in which it is impossible to return to a previous instant, is thought to be ungraspable. Of course, one aspect of what is called time must possess such characteristics; were that not the case, it would be impossible to speak of 'time.' But if it were nothing more than that, we could not conceive of 'time.' The before and after of time must in some sense be linked. If it merely continuously passes instant by instant, what is called 'time' could not come into being. Time must, in one aspect, be circular. But to say that time is circular, linking past and future, is to negate time."²⁰⁵

The wording is difficult, and the image of circularity and straight lines likely adds more confusion than it clears up, but the message is important. The only way we can make sense of time is if we accommodate both the fact that it is continuously flowing and that it can be cut

²⁰⁵ Nishida 1935/2012, 64

up into different moments. Or, rather, the two would devolve into nonsense without the other. Obvious as it may seem, it is worth noting that a series of entirely discontinuous, random moments with no continuity between one another cannot be understood intelligibly as time in any meaningful sense. Yet, at the same time, looking at time as being entirely continuous with no distinctions between moments is equally absurd, given that there would be no grounds for distinguishing a previous or future moment from the current one. What Nishida is trying to teach us is that this contradiction is fundamental to time: the progression of time requires us to postulate a ‘cut with no width’ between moments.

Interestingly enough, this formal premise to understand time opens the door for a view of generations and epochs that best reflect the results we have found in this very thesis. Applied on a wider historical scale, what Nishida teaches us is that progress between eras and traditions is neither a composition of entirely distinct moments, merely cut off from one another, nor is it a univocal continuity with no breaks. The two overlap with one another, creating a situation in which one distinct co-exists together with its preceding era:

“I do not believe that one era emerges with no relation to the previous era; it does not emerge discontinuously. The previous era always contains the next era within it as a synchronous existence (同時存在的). That which changes A must be contained within A. Better yet, that which breaks through A and becomes B must be contained within A. This does not mean that A is subordinate to B or that B is subordinate to A. A and B must be independent existences. Thus, strictly speaking, A does not exist because of A itself, nor does B exist because of B itself. Furthermore, A and B do not exist with no relation to each other. A exists by facing B and B exists by facing A. This is what I mean when I say that individuals are individuals by facing [other] individuals. This is what I mean by the continuity of discontinuities. This is the true meaning of dialectics. [...] Each individual era contains its own telos as an independent existence and must be [something that is] thoroughly individual that determines itself. [...] Yet, the fact that each era determines itself must [also] mean that each era faces its end (滅び行<).”²⁰⁶

²⁰⁶ NKZ 7: 68

There is too much for us to completely unpack here, but, put simply, we can see that the progress of history is continuous only insofar as it allows for 'synchronously existing' eras to loop into one another. In other words, even if one era can be distinguished from another, it can only exist insofar as it opposes or distinguishes itself from what happened in the previous era. Yet, at the same time, history is discontinuous only insofar as we recognize that the cuts between independent and self-determining eras have no width between them and do not isolate one era from the next. Crucially, this indicates that even great persons or geniuses do not signify a thorough cut or separation from the flow of history (to the contrary, they are portrayed by Nishida as an extreme example of the zeitgeist of their era).

If we were to apply this in our current terms, *An Inquiry into the Good* is a cut from the early stages of dealing with Western philosophy in the Meiji era. Yet, this cut not only has no width separating it from those like Inoue Enryō or Onishi Hajime or anyone else, the two overlapped and fed into one another, existing as two different eras at the same time. Or, to put Nishida's talking of synchronous existence in a more palatable form, the work of these authors can almost be found within *An Inquiry into the Good*, and what makes *An Inquiry into the Good* (and Nishida himself) so significant in a historical context is none other than its status as a 'disposition' of history as a reflection of the burgeoning trends within early modern Japanese philosophy. In short, Nishida succeeded in establishing a new standard for what could be considered original philosophy that is substantially different from anything that came before him, but he only did so in virtue of the developmental process that raised issues concerning methodology and the scope of philosophy. To this end, Nishida's later philosophy of history provides a clear backdrop for understanding his place in the intellectual history of modern Japan.

Now, to be clear, this is likely an oversimplification of Nishida's theory of time and I have likely not done enough to support it from even casual metaphysical critique. However, doing so is not my goal. More pressing for us, I believe, is recognizing the way that this view of history can help us reorganize our understanding of the Japanese philosophical canon. As we have referenced briefly in the introduction to this thesis, a recent increase in interest in Japanese philosophy has muddied the waters as to what researchers in this field should be investigating. As we have noted previously, the general tendency among researchers of Japanese philosophy up to the present was to start from Nishida and write off everything prior as 'Japanese thought'. As some critics have argued, this presents both a skewed view of not only how philosophy developed in Japanese, but also of what precisely philosophy is in the

first place. As our efforts in this thesis can show, it is likely never the case that any form of philosophy just *appears* out of nowhere. Yet, at the same time, I get the feeling that some of these critics are too quick to throw the baby out with the bath water, as it were. Although it is indeed likely true that the Japanese philosophical tradition did not just start in the 20th century irrespective of how intellectual discourse was conducted beforehand, there is a certain weight that comes with the word philosophy that should not be ignored. Most particularly, philosophy usually includes – as we have implied throughout this thesis – critical and explicit discourse and, for this reason, it would be rather problematic to include a thinker like Dōgen as a philosopher proper.²⁰⁷ Thus, looking at the Japanese philosophical tradition as a pure continuity lasting from Kūkai to Nishida loses sight of the important methodological differences that occurred over centuries of progress while taking it as starting at a mere moment in 1911 would leave us ignorant of all the context leading up to what happened before *An Inquiry into the Good*. What we need, then, is to recognize the overlapping of distinct eras as they inform one another.

Here, I believe we can find a concrete principle for looking over the modern Japanese philosophical canon. Specifically, I think we ought to embrace the way that different moments in this canon overlap and exist with each other co-synchronously. As we have already established before, recognizing the plurality inherent in the notion of Japanese (or any other notion of) philosophy is a crucial step toward getting a grasp on the development of philosophy in Japan. However, as we have also noted, this plurality should not be mistaken for a series of random or discontinuous strands with arbitrary meanings. Here, I would suggest that we instead look at the dominant traditions and eras as being meaningfully separable from one another while still overlapping. For Nishida's case, we can see in the plethora of shared intuitions between his philosophy and that of his predecessors a common basis. Yet, at the same time, we see a level of methodological and critical rigor that makes it difficult to assume that his philosophy is genuinely of that time, so to speak. Thus, the solution is simple, we should accept that Nishida is the beginning of one important meaning of original philosophy in Japan while

²⁰⁷ The constant counter argument to this claim is that the Western philosophical tradition also includes mystics and those writing in a magical language. However, I am still skeptical to this response, given that these authors could be claimed to be shoehorned into the tradition due to their proximity to it rather than their philosophical nature. The second counter argument would be to point out just how philosophically intriguing such sources are, regardless of how they are written. Yet, to say that authors who wrote in surreal or magical language, like Dōgen, for instance, is not the same as saying that such authors have no philosophical value. From what I can tell, it seems more important that we admit that 'non-philosophical' thinkers can be of philosophical interest when interpreted in a critical and explicit way.

recognizing that this beginning carries with it a degree of context that should not be written off as a mere footnote.

Once again, readers are almost certainly likely to question whether or not this apparently contradictory conclusion means anything. My response to this would be that the immediate practical gains from adopting this attitude likely are enough to discourage such a reader from dismissing my claim. In other words, recognizing the overlap between Nishida and the preceding era can have a noticeable impact on how we teach and discuss Japanese philosophy. Instead of introducing Nishida as the inheritor of some kind of abstract notion of Zen that just happens to have persisted in Japan throughout time immemorial, discussing how the Buddhist inspired philosophy of Inoue Enryō may have helped Nishida in his critique of abstract positions would likely be more profitable for even non-experts. This is true insofar as it both presents a tangible problem (how reality could ever be described in its full richness) and offers a foothold into Japanese intellectual history without portraying it as an inaccessible manifestation of the ‘Japanese mind’ (whatever that would entail). Given that this is the case, I would say that a greater emphasis on the overlapping between what happened in Nishida’s philosophy and what happened in Japan prior to (or contemporaneously with) his work – beyond the more immediate and well-documented connections found in the Kyoto-school – can have a concrete value that cannot be immediately dismissed. Engaging further with Nishida’s historicity and adjusting the way we discuss his philosophy, however, will have to wait until another occasion.

Acknowledgements

To be perfectly honest, the amount of people who I should thank for their help with the completion of this thesis is far too long to complete realistically. Thus, although it pains me to do so, I have resorted to writing an inventoried list to help me include as many people as possible and make the most out of the brief space I have allotted for acknowledgements on this page:

-First and foremost, I must thank my advisory professor, Taguchi Shigeru. Professor Taguchi not only refused to give up on teaching me how to be a philosopher during my 7-year long struggle in graduate school, but also offered crucial insights about both Nishida and philosophy in general that made this thesis possible. While no phenomenologist's name came up in the course of this thesis, I like to think that the phenomenological attitude that I witnessed in Professor Taguchi's work is apparent in my attempt to read Nishida.

-Additionally, I would like to offer my gratitude to Andrea Altobrando (University of Padua), who consistently gave excellent advice about how to conduct research as well as many insightful comments about my writing.

-I must thank all of the faculty in the Hokkaido University philosophy department, whose classes and critical comments on my papers helped me learn how to write this thesis.

-I am also grateful for the help I received from all of my fellow graduate students at Hokkaido University who I spent the last 7 years working with. I offer special thanks to my close friends Sawasaki Takahiro, Hara Kenichi, Kobayashi Kazuya, Inohara Jirō, Kobayashi Chie, Yoshioka Yūhei (University of Tokyo) and the many others who presented me with many great philosophical insights (and tolerate my constant requests to teach me how to read kanji, decipher old texts, and otherwise understand the Japanese language).

-Finally, I would like to thank my family. In particular, I am grateful for my younger brother, Jesse Stone, and my mother, Corrine Stone, for constantly checking in on me and making sure that I have yet to lose my mind in Hokkaido.

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IES 『井上円了選集』 [Selected Works of Inoue Enryō]. Tokyo, Toyo University Press, 1987.

OHS 『大西祝選集』 [Selected works of Onishi Hajime]. Tokyo, Iwanami bunko, 2013, 3 vols.

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