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From Epistemology to the Standpoint of “Love”: Nishida Kitarō’s Experience Theory and the Zen Logic of Prajñāpāramitā

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Abstract: In this paper, I will explain the characteristics of “pure experience” in Nishida Kitarō’s philosophy. This pure experience was a very fundamental concept in Nishida’s philosophy, and was an important thought that was consistently at the core of his philosophy from the beginning through his later years. In his important work, *An Inquiry into the Good*, Nishida uses “the moment of seeing the color or hearing a sound ...” as the initial perception to explain the only reality that developed into many categories by the self-developing characteristics of pure experience. Thus, he discusses “knowing” and “love.” At the very same time, Suzuki Daisetz (D.T. Suzuki) explains the same topic by using the “logic of Prajñāpāramitā.” The “logic of Prajñāpāramitā” states that everything that is affirmative is negative at the same time. It is generally believed that this “logic of Prajñāpāramitā” is very similar to the characteristics of the pure experience mentioned above. The reason for comparing these thoughts was that Kitarō Nishida and D. T. Suzuki were close friends and exchanged ideas with each other. Therefore, to understand Nishida’s “pure experience” and early philosophy thoroughly, the author has also examined the “logic of Prajñāpāramitā.”

Keywords: Nishida Kitarō; Suzuki Daisetz (D. T. Suzuki); pure experience; logic of Prajñāpāramitā; Zen

1 Introduction

In Nishida Kitarō’s *An Inquiry into the Good*, he explains that reality can only exist through experience and emphasizes that nothing exists outside of this experience. A core concept of his philosophy is that initially, one must understand pure experience as direct experience, which means the first moment of the experience. However,

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Kosaga (2022) indicates that the term “pure experience” was created by Ernst Mach (1838–1916) and William James (1842–1910) (p. 20), which indicates that Nishida’s philosophy comes originally from Western thought and was then modified using Eastern thought, mostly Zen Buddhism. Pure experience as the basis of human cognition transcends dualism, which objectifies everything as subject and object, and becomes a moment of knowing as it is. From this point, he elevated this pure experience theory to ontology and, lastly, to the realm of religion.

In contrast, his life-long friend, Suzuki Daisetz, created the logic of Prajñāpāramitā, a logic advocating that affirmative is negative, and vice versa. He cites and adapts from The Diamond Sutra, chapter 13, saying that “Prajñāpāramitā is spoken of by the Buddha as no Prajñāpāramitā, therefore it is called Prajñāpāramitā,” which means it transcends the concepts of dualism and monism at the same time. In other words, they are neither identical nor different from each other. Some elements in the logic of Prajñāpāramitā relate to Nishida’s pure experience and might provide an important insight for understanding his concepts. This paper will focus on the characteristics of pure experience by using the logic of Prajñāpāramitā and at the same time will explain why it is connected to reality.

2 The Characteristics of Pure Experience

Firstly, pure experience is described as below.

To experience means to know facts just as they are, to know in accordance with facts by completely relinquishing one’s own fabrications. What we usually refer to as experience is adulterated with some sort of thought, so by pure I am referring to the state of experience just as it is without the least addition of deliberative discrimination. The moment of seeing a color or hearing a sound, for example, is prior not only to the thought that the color or sound is the activity of an external object or that one is sensing it, but also to the judgment of what the color or sound might be. In this regard, pure experience is identical with direct experience. (Nishida, 1990, p. 3)

Pure experience is fundamental to human cognition and has no meaning (Nishida, 1990, p. 4). It indicates that an experience is as it is when one senses it at the very first moment and still is not separate from the self, which means the concepts of subjectivity and objectivity are not considered at this point. Rather than being separate from the concept of dualism, it returns to the initial cognition that does not involve problems relating to dualism. One might believe that Nishida’s pure experience is nothing but an ephemeral moment that we cannot control, but on the next page in *An Inquiry into the Good*, Nishida explains what he means by this term.

Let us now consider briefly the characteristics of this direct, pure experience that is the cause of all mental phenomena. The first issue is whether pure experience is simple or complex. Given that direct, pure experience is constructed out of past experience and can be analyzed later into its single elements, we can consider it complex. Yet no matter how complex it might be, at the moment it occurs, pure experience is always a simple fact. When a reappearing past consciousness has been unified within present consciousness as a single element and has obtained a new meaning, it is of course no longer identical with the original past consciousness. (Nishida, 1990, p. 5)

This indicates that pure experience is not just a short period in one's cognition, since it can be either plainly simple or complex. It depends on the point at which it is interpreted. When trying to grasp a moment as a passing experience, one discovers that pure experience has many elements, such as knowledge, feelings, or will, etc. On the other hand, those elements are in a sphere of experience counting as one moment when it occurs. Both aspects in consciousness play a part in relation to each other. Past consciousness has various elements and functions within the experience, and current consciousness receives the previous experience and continues forward as a unity. At this point, pure experience is not just a short silent moment, but becomes a unity of activity that Nishida (1990) affirms can shift from moment to moment without adding subjective-objective concepts (p. 6). For example, he discusses a musician playing a song or an artist drawing a picture. Neither activity needs to separate subjective and objective. Rather, these are outcomes of pure experience in which people who do the activity merge with the activity itself. The pure experience, the before self-existing moment, is a starting point and gradually transforms itself into various activities. Nevertheless, the question about these two concepts in pure experience regarding the aspects of why one can contain many and many can be contained in one is an apparent contradiction. In other words, how can one be many and many be one? This contradictory method to explain the ontology in Nishida's philosophy is most significant. Nishitani Keiji, Nishida's pupil, explained this clearly in "*On An Inquiry into the Good*" by expressing the characteristic of pure experience in one word and showing how it can be contradicted.

A function of pure experience is to be "infinite," as Nishitani mentions in Chapter 4, and has the characteristic of "independence and self-sufficiency"¹ (Nishitani, 1968, p. 16). This means that it can literally stand alone and can be understood as encompassing everything, including pure experience itself. To explain in order, independence is defined as "a unity that is not unity, which has not simply opposition

¹ Nishitani separates the wording as "independence," "self," and "sufficiency," but in this paper, the author explains them as "Independence" and "self-sufficiency." The original word contains four kanjis in total, 独立自全, which, depending on the interpretation, can be grouped as 2-1-1 or 2-2. Yet, either interpretation leads to the identical result that the oppositions are a part of a unity, and vice versa.

without simply opposition” (Nishitani, 1968, p. 19). To interpret this phrase, one must understand that contradiction is a core characteristic within pure experience, so the concepts of unity and opposition are not divided, but rather should be understood as a part of each other. That is to say, unity is part of opposition and opposition is part of unity. Pure experience has indeed that characteristic, and in this regard, it goes beyond various oppositions, and functions as an absolute unifying force that should not be simply understood as a monism. The “independence” of pure experience, as Nishitani says, can be understood as encompassing all things as “the identity of self and other [being] neither one nor many” and as an “absolute one.” In other words, it is the “one in many, and many in one” as an “absolute oneness.”

Next, let’s discuss the concept of “self-sufficiency.” The self is not plainly the opposite of the other. Nishida’s concept of self refers to something that transcends dualistic aspects like the self and other. While the concept of the self and other as opposites exists within self-sufficiency, the opposition between self and other is not inherent in this self-sufficiency. Self-sufficiency is the process of completing oneself by oneself. Therefore, because it contains everything within itself, self-sufficiency possesses the characteristic of “infinity.” For example, the past consciousness can connect to the current consciousness directly within pure experience and so on. During a period of time, these countless connections make one sense a world in which all the elements are developed, which means that there is no need to use a divided subjective-objective concept but only to sense and collect all the elements within pure experience as one.

To answer the question above of how one can be many and many can be one, there are two supporting reasons related to Nishitani’s explanation. First, pure experience can contain many elements connected to each other while maintaining itself as one due to the function of development. Independence in the theory of pure experience encompasses all characteristics, and as pure experience develops, it reconciles the unity of one and multiplicity by incorporating these new characteristics. Nishida (1990) also argues that there is also a difference in degree of pure experience (p. 6). The transfer from the before self-existing moment to the step of pure experience happens in itself. Pure experience cannot be anything but the same pure experience with different degrees. Second, the characteristics he mentions transcend the issue of contradiction. “Nishida regarded the ‘pure activity of independence and self-sufficiency’ of pure experience as essential to the differentiation and development resulting from conflicts and opposition within the conscious system” (Akitomi, 2022, p. 39). Thus, pure experience does not ultimately discard these various aspects. Instead, it absorbs these aspects into its own development. On this point, one cannot say that Nishida’s philosophy is dualistic because of the unity of pure experience, or that it is monistic because of the various elements in it. It should

be understood as “The self and the other are not identical and not different,” or “neither plainly one nor plainly many.”

3 From the Standpoint of Dualism to the Standpoint of “Love”

In the final chapter of *An Inquiry into the Good*, the self-development of pure experience culminates in discussions of the concepts of knowledge and love within the construct of religion. In other words, the theory of pure experience develops from direct experience to the point where it unifies everything, whether living or non-living, through love. Its nature is “self-sufficiency,” encompassing universals such as truth, goodness, and beauty. Pure experience imparts even these self-transcendent universalities, known as truth, good, and beauty, to individuals.

Nishida’s interpretation of love is as follows.

And why is love the union of subject and object? To love something is to cast away the self and unite with that other. When self and other join with no gap between them, true feelings of love first arise. . . . The more we discard the self and become purely objective or selfless, the greater and deeper our love becomes. We advance from the love between parent and child or husband and wife to the love between friends, and from there to the love of humankind. The Buddha’s love extended even to birds, beasts, grasses, and trees. (Nishida, 1990, p. 174)

According to Nishida, the concept of love resembles the definition of pure experience mentioned above. This means that only the reflected past consciousness from the moment the directness is lost to the moment that one can reflect on it and divide it into many elements alone falls within the sphere of artificial assumptions and must be discarded in the fixed course of the spontaneity and self-development of pure experience. By discarding them all or returning to the deep spectrum of pure experience, one realizes the “true self.” The true self is another concept related to pure experience. As mentioned above, pure experience is a continuously connected moment that functions unlimitedly, so rather than discarding artificial assumptions, pure experience reconciles them and incorporates them into the true self. Then, acting from this true self, reflection driven by self-centeredness no longer arises since one can no longer divide self and other because the true self within the concept of pure experience must be understood as a whole concept, completely including the self and the other. Thus, individuals can transcend egoism and make judgments about what actions should be taken in any given situation. Furthermore, within such selfless actions, individuals are constantly enveloped by the unifying force of the universe called “love,” and guided toward an ideal universe.

Nishida (1990) also emphasizes that “knowledge and love are the same mental activity; to know a thing we must love it, and to love a thing we must know it” (p. 174). This knowledge is not an outcome from when one analyzes the past consciousness, but should be understood as an activity of knowledge, the knowing. Since nothing exists outside the activity of the experiences of to know and to love, elements in pure experience are different in degree but are the same ideas in the sphere of pure experience. It is believed that “knowing” is an activity of learning something and “loving” is an activity of feeling toward someone. On the other hand, Nishida uses pure experience, the first moment of all activity, to lay the foundations for human epistemology. Pure experience develops itself from moment to moment, and ultimately develops into love with the same action as to know. In conclusion, development in the sphere of pure experience includes knowledge, feelings, will, and love as a unity but to different degrees. The elements within can be divided as much as one prefers, but it is the same activity to a different degree within pure experience.

In Nishida’s philosophy, reality, and the ideal are always in conflict. People in the world strive to break free from reality and move toward their ideals. Everyone desires wealth or dreams of an ideal life that requires no effort. However, in the context of Nishida’s philosophy, the word “ideal” does not have such a simple meaning. As mentioned above, self-realization is required. Through direct experience, if the true self is perceived, then the annihilation of various aspects is realized and there is an understanding that everything is equal. By fully embodying the true self and applying it to human essence and acting selflessly, one becomes the “love” that harmonizes with all things by knowing them.

4 Applying Daisetz Suzuki’s “Logic of Prajñāpāramitā”

Let’s contemplate further the nature of pure experience by referring to Daisetz Suzuki’s “logic of Prajñāpāramitā.” Suzuki was a close friend of Nishida. The reason for utilizing the “logic of Prajñāpāramitā” is primarily because it represents the essential Zen philosophy underlying Nishida’s thought. The first stage of pure experience, which cannot be expressed in words, closely resembles the Zen concept of “no reliance on words.” Various words used to symbolically express this experience are merely functions operating within the human realm. That is, words continue to emerge endlessly. Consequently, from direct experience, a world of words, which inexhaustibly expands, or the “world of intellect,” arises. Nishida’s “pure experience” and Suzuki’s “logic of Prajñāpāramitā” do not negate the potential for infinite development of “words.” Instead, they emphasize that by relying solely

on “words,” one cannot truly grasp reality and this only results in grasping the external shell of all things.

First, the “logic of Prajñāpāramitā” is expressed as follows in Suzuki’s *Japanese Spirituality*:

To say “A is A” is
 To say “A is not A.”
 Therefore, “A is A.” (Suzuki, 2022, p. 327).²

The “logic of Prajñāpāramitā” is explained as a state of “the discrimination of indiscrimination” before language, where everything is originally in a state of “unity.” Natural phenomena without words, such as so-called mountains and rivers appear in the initial experiences of humans. This is the world of “affirmative = suchness.” However, simultaneously, human faculties start to work on this initial experience, creating “individuals” by negating this “unity.” This leads to the second stage of development, marked by the concept of the “negative.” The reason human faculties negate “unity” is that “individuals” do not originally exist within “unity,” and one cannot affirm each individual entity from the beginning. Abstract words arise as a result, and they are arbitrarily labeled as “it.” The final result is the reappearance of the concept of the “affirmative.” Thus, according to Akizuki (1971), humans have taken elements from the unity of the natural world, like mountains and rivers, and symbolically assigned names to them (pp. 119–120). In other words, a pattern of “affirmative (suchness) to negative (discrimination) to affirmative (individuals)” is established, and humans differentiate and abstract the “world of unity” into the “world of intellect.”

The “logic of Prajñāpāramitā” possesses the characteristics of contradiction and infinity. In other words, the negative and affirmative coexist, allowing for the infinite elaboration of explanations. This is why it can be expressed using terms like “self-identity of contradiction” or “unity of infinite disunity.” These terms contribute to the understanding of the continuity of pure experience in Nishida’s philosophy. In Nishida’s case, as mentioned earlier, the first stage of pure experience is about perceiving facts as they are and then, through spontaneous self-development, encompassing various other aspects. Even when pure experience evolves into the true self, it still falls within the scope of pure experience. In Suzuki’s case, when explaining a single entity through the “logic of Prajñāpāramitā,” all existence is necessary. To affirm A, one must negate the existence of A itself. Since the world of phenomena holds no words, one finds harmony only by sensing everything as it is. However, with sensation, existence appears symbolically. People usually understand

² In this section, the author uses Yusa Michiko’s translated work (2019) as the basis for expressing the function of the “logic of Prajñāpāramitā.”

that the “world of intellect” is the truth. The “logic of Prajñāpāramitā” reveals that it is not the truth. One must go beyond the “world of intellect” to the area where we negate the existence of everything, which leads to the world of dualism. Rather than moving only to the world of phenomena where no words appear, one must realize that the “logic of Prajñāpāramitā” affirms and negates things simultaneously. Ultimately, the-affirmative-is-negative-world is not a mundane concept of rejecting words, but rather, it should be understood that language is just a tool used to share ideas with other people and is not the truth itself.

In essence, the self, which exists only in relation to others, may be insufficient when considering how to live in the future. What Nishida and Suzuki aimed to convey was the importance of “thinking” beyond the perspective of self and others – in a state transcending self and other – in the fleetingness of human life and within the activities of that life, which exists solely in relation to others. The “self” that exists only within the context of interactions with others fundamentally lacks inherent existence. Therefore, it is possible for humans to discard their self-centeredness, and until the arrival of inevitable death, strive to save others. However, this requires aspiring toward “you are me; I am you,” and in that state, saving others is synonymous with saving oneself. In essence, without the division of self and other, i.e., when humans are considered identical, acting through the logic of Prajñāpāramitā or pure experience is understood as acting in harmony with the universe.

5 Conclusion

Nishida presents various discussions in his work, *An Inquiry into the Good*, where he focuses on pure experience. He takes on challenges that are inherent in Western philosophy, such as the problem of object-mind duality, and seeks to resolve them in his own way. Through his experience with Zen, he formulates the theory of “pure experience” and consistently emphasizes the function of an “infinite unifying force” that extends from philosophy to religion within this theoretical construct. Furthermore, he discovers the fundamental concept of “nondualism” at the core of human cognition. He recognizes this as “the self that is non-self,” the true self, and believes that by actualizing this realization, one can discern how to act going forward. In this manner, Nishida systematically connects epistemology, ethics, and application of religion by explaining the intricate steps of spontaneous self-development within pure experience. Although the expressions may vary, the form in which the unifying force self-limits within these contexts is universal. This universality ultimately guides humans towards the concept of “good.”

At the same time, Suzuki explains the concept of the logic of Prajñāpāramitā, which resembles that of pure experience. The first step of sensing the world “as it is”

is more than likely the first moment of pure experience. In other words, the world of mere phenomena has no language from Suzuki's standpoint, and has no meaning whatsoever from Nishida's standpoint. Still, the affirmative and negative characteristics of all things can be compared to different degrees within the self-development of pure experience, which means that humans assign meaning to the world of mere phenomena as a part of human functions. They are very similar, yet have different points for further comparison. However, according to the text, the ways to express and reach the answer are systematically different. The way Nishida chose is more philosophical than that of Suzuki, and the way Suzuki chose resembles Mahayana Buddhism more than does Nishida's.

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