

THE CONCEPTUAL SIGNIFICANCE OF NISHIDA'S SOCIO-EXISTENTIALIST ETHICS

Tun Pa May

ABSTRACT

Nishida discusses the problem of ethics, especially human conduct, the freedom of the will, and the good and personality. For him, the problem of morality is always in connection with the problem of truth or reality. The good is not merely the way of human beings. It is also the way of reality. The good is understood on the basis of reality. According to Nishida, truly good conduct has not to be objective. Men reach the purest and most perfect form of good conduct only when subject and object merge, self and things forget each other, and all that exists is the activity of the sole reality of the universe. This is the uniqueness of Nishida's understanding of the good and ethics, an understanding deeply rooted in the Asian tradition.

Key words: human conduct, good, reality, ethics

INTRODUCTION

In the Western philosophy, one of the general characteristics is that philosophy and religion occupy two different fields. It is said that philosophy is based on intellect and reason while religion is a matter of faith and practice. Western intellectual tradition is an attempt to study analytically between philosophy and religion, reason and faith. But Western philosophers have usually tried to make their philosophy to be independent from religion and have insisted upon the autonomy of human reason. That is the reason why logic, purely theoretical philosophy and science are unique to the Western Philosophy.

In the Eastern Philosophy, Japan like India and China, philosophy cannot be originally differentiated and separated from religion. For the east truth in knowledge is the same as truth in practice. This is why Nishida said "to be is to act". Generally logic and purely theoretical knowledge are scarcely found in the Eastern Philosophy. But in the nineteenth century Japanese thinkers who are steeped in Buddhism and Confucianism were attracted to the Western way of theoretical clarity and logical consistency. They have tried to generate a synthesis of Western thought and Eastern thought. Nishida's work *An Inquiry into the Good* which he has published in 1911 is the very first attempt to generate the need for this kind of synthesis.

Nishida's view is opposed to the ordinary understanding of personality because it is an understanding based on the subjective self-personality and is grasped as the infinite power of unity in terms of pure experience and is realized by forgetting the subjective self. Nishida maintains that the purpose of the good is not to obey the formal laws of morality as in Kant. It is not to seek for pleasure as in hedonism. For Nishida, the good has to fulfill one's deepest nature, to realize one's personality. This is why he bases his own ethics on his theory of self-realization. To realize the fundamental identity of the self and the universe is to realize this infinite reality as infinite truth, good, and beauty.

CONDUCT AS A PHENOMENON OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Conduct must be distinguished from the following two kinds of movements: organisms' reflex movements that are goal-oriented but unconscious. It must also be distinguished from the instinctive action of animals which is goal-oriented and involves some consciousness, but in which the goals are not clearly known. For Nishida conduct is physical action in which the goal is clearly known in consciousness. Human beings have bodies so that they can make a variety of physical movements, including reflexive and instinctual actions. But the activity of the self is limited to conduct.

According to Nishida conduct is often accompanied by movement in the external world. Conduct is a physical action that arises because of a conscious goal and it is willed action. Hence the term conduct includes action in the external world, but the will mainly indicates internal phenomena of consciousness. Therefore for Nishida to discuss the phenomena of consciousness that is involved in conduct is to discuss the will.

Nishida explains how the will arise as follows:

The human body is fundamentally constructed so as to make movements appropriate for preserving and developing its own life. Consciousness, arising together with these movements, is initially the simple feeling of pain or pleasure. But as ideas regarding the external world gradually become clearer and the activity of association becomes active, the initial movements no longer occur unconsciously in response to stimuli from the external world; rather, one first generates an idea of a result, then generates an idea of the movements that can serve as the means to the result, and finally shifts to actual movement. In this way, the will arises.¹

Then, according to Nishida for the will to arise, there must be a physical or mental cause that initially determines the direction of movement or, in terms of consciousness, the direction of association. This cause appears in consciousness as a kind of impulsive feeling, which is called by Nishida the power of the will. Nishida asserts that the will is an internal phenomenon of consciousness, not the external actions. The will is the essential part of conduct. Even if actions do not occur while the will is present, it can be called conduct. On the contrary when the will is not sufficiently present, even if there are actions, it cannot be said that there is conduct. This means that the will as internal phenomena of consciousness precedes action. If there is pure consciousness, there will be good will that makes good action.

Nishida has discussed how the process of the will is a necessary part of conduct. He examines the view of the psychologist. From the perspective of psychology, the will is an activity that unifies ideas so that it must be a type of apperception. There are two types of activity which join ideas in consciousness. In one type, the cause of the union of ideas is found primarily in conditions of the external world. But the direction of the union is not clear in consciousness therefore it is felt to be passive. In psychology this type of activity is called association. In the other, the cause of the union of ideas is found in consciousness. In this type the direction of the union is clearly conscious. Therefore it is felt to be actively united. This second type of activity is called apperception.

¹Nishida Kitarō. (1990). *An Inquiry into the Good*. (Masao Abe and Christopher Ives. (trans.)New Haven and London: Yale University Press. p.88.

According to Nishida, the goal of imagination is the imitation of nature and that the goal of the will is movement. When imagination unifies ideas, they accord with the true state of nature. When the will unifies ideas they accord with the desires of the self. So when man imagines something in nature, man must first become that thing and then think, because imagination is always concerned with external things with which one cannot be completely congruent, so that they are felt to be other than one.

Nishida says that imagining a certain thing and acting on it seems to be different. However, the difference is a quantitative, not qualitative difference. Here Nishida gives an artist's imagination as an example. If someone attains to the realm of inspiration, he totally submerges the self in the thing. Consequently the self and the thing are in complete congruence, and felt as the action of the thing to be the activity of one's own will.

Nishida tries to analyze conduct. He has taken the will and action to be two different things, but their relationship is not one of cause and effect, for they are the two sides of one and the same thing. Action is the expression of the will, and that which is regarded from without as action can be regarded from within as the will.

THE FREEDOM OF THE WILL

Nishida explains that one cannot freely control all things in the external world. Even one's own body cannot be freely manipulated in any absolute sense. When one moves voluntarily it seems that one's muscles are free. But if one becomes ill one is no longer able to move one's muscles freely. Hence Nishida concludes that the only things men can freely manage are their own phenomena of consciousness. Even then, they do not have the freedom to create ideas anew. They do not have the freedom to recall at any time something they once experienced. They regard that they can unite, analyze and synthesize the ideas freely, and thus the union, the analysis and the synthesis of ideas are derived from the freedom of self. But there is an a priori law of functions in the analysis and synthesis of ideas, so they are not able to do as they please either.

Moreover, when a union of ideas stands alone or when a certain union is especially strong, they must fully obey it. So Nishida says that men possess total freedom of choice only in the context of the a priori law of the establishment of ideas. They are free only when of two or more ways to unite ideas and none has the strength to dominate. Nishida gives a remark that those who accept the freedom of the will base their arguments on the facts of experience in the internal world. According to them, man is free to select motives and has no other reason than him. They argue that decision is based on a type of mystical power called the will. The will is independent of both the various conditions in the external world and disposition, habit, and character in the internal world. In short, they posit a power that exists apart from the union of ideas while controlling it.

According to Nishida there are also those who expound deterministic theories of the will. They generally do on the basis of observations of facts in the external world. According to them, the phenomena of the universe do not occur by chance. Even extremely minute matters, necessarily possess a sufficient cause. With the development of science it becomes increasingly certain. They accept causes and effects of natural phenomena. Even the will, however, cannot escape from the great, unchanging laws of nature.

Nishida criticizes that even if modern Physiological Psychology advances to state the point that man can physically or chemically explain each and every function of the brain at the base of consciousness man cannot assert whether phenomena of consciousness are controlled by the mechanical law of necessity. Nishida gives an example of a bronze statue. Being its raw material is bronze it is determined by the law of mechanical necessity. But whether the meaning of bronze statue exists apart from those laws cannot be said. Nishida asserts that so-called spiritual meaning transcends the law of mechanical necessity.

For Nishida, the kind of will described by those who argue for the freedom of the will is a will that is totally without cause or reason. Nishida asserts that it does not exist. Such a contingent will would not be felt to be free; rather, it would be felt to be oppressive. The reason behind the will, however, is not a mechanical cause as described by determinists. Spirit contains a law governing its activity, and when spirit functions in accordance with its own law, it is truly free.

Thus, freedom has two possible meanings. First, freedom means being totally without cause. That is, fortuitous or contingent. Secondly, freedom means having no external restrictions and therefore functioning of and by oneself. The latter indicates autonomous freedom, and this is the freedom of the will. Nishida points out that at this point, the following problem arises. If one assumes that freedom means to function according to one's character. So for example, there is the flowing of water and the burning of fire. In these cases only the will is considered to be free.

According to Nishida the occurrence of a phenomenon in the natural world is determined strictly by its circumstances. Only one, certain phenomenon and no others arises from a particular set of circumstances. Nishida calls it "blind necessity". However phenomena of consciousness do not simply arise, for they are phenomena of which one is conscious. They arise and known that they have arisen. Knowing something or being conscious of it includes other possibilities. To be conscious of taking something includes the possibility of not taking it. It also means that consciousness always possesses a universal character consciousness. Consciousness always includes an idealistic element. If it is not so it is not consciousness. That consciousness has such a character means that it harbors possibilities other than actual events.

Nishida believes that consciousness is free not because it functions fortuitously beyond the laws of nature, but rather because it follows its own nature. It is free not because it functions for no reason, but because it knows well the reasons behind it's functioning. Hence so far as one's knowledge advances, one becomes freer people. Even if one is controlled or oppressed by others, when one knows this one can free oneself from the oppression. If men go even farther and realize the unavoidable reason for the situation, then the oppression turns into freedom.

LAWS OF VALUE AND PERSONALITY

According to Nishida all phenomena or events can be examined in two ways. One is the investigation of their cause or reason. It is the investigation of how they occurred and why they must be as they are. The other is the investigation of goals. It is the investigation of the purpose for which they occurred. Here Nishida gives an example of a flower.

Concerning the question "how does it come into being?" the answer must be that it arises in accordance with botanical and environmental conditions and in accordance with the laws of physics and chemistry. But if someone asks about the purpose for which it occurred, the answer would be that it arises to produce fruit. The former approach constitutes theoretical inquiry into

the laws of the establishment of things, whereas the latter constitutes practical inquiry into the laws of the activity of things.

Concerning the phenomena of the inorganic world, Nishida says that one can ask how they arise. But one cannot ask for what purpose they arise, because it must be said that they have no goal. However, one can argue that the goal and the cause in this case are identical. Nishida continues to give another example of a billiard ball. A billiard ball is hit with a certain force in a specific direction, it will undoubtedly roll in that fixed direction, but the ball has no goal. The person who hit the ball might have a goal, but it is not a goal internal to the ball. Nishida says that the ball is moved of necessity in accordance with causes in the external world. But he says that there may be another point of view. From another point of view, the ball moves in a fixed direction precisely because there is such a power of movement in the ball itself. In terms of the internal force of the ball, it can be viewed the movement as a purposeful activity of self-actualization.

Nishida asserts that some theorists may argue that what gives great pleasure has great value and contend that they have thus been able to derive the law of value from the law of cause and effect. But for Nishida it cannot be explained merely from the law of cause and effect why a certain result gives us pleasure and why another does not. What kinds of things people like and what kinds people hate are facts of direct experience and these are fundamentally different from the law of cause and effect.

Nishida states that all of our desires and demands are unexplainable, given facts. It is said that men eat in order to live, but "in order to live" is an explanation added after the fact. Man's appetite does not arise for such a reason. Here Nishida gives an example of the feeding of an infant. An infant's first drinking of milk is not so it can live: because the infant drinks for the sake of drinking. Man's desires and demands are not only unexplainable facts of direct experience but also, contrary to what one might think, the secret keys by which they are able to understand the true meaning of reality. Hence Nishida remarks that a complete explanation of reality must explain not only how things exist, but also why they exist.

According to Nishida, there are two main theories of traditional ethics. They are heteronomous ethical theory and autonomous ethical theory. The heteronomous theory locates the standard of good and evil in authority. The autonomous theory locates the standard of good and evil in human nature. Besides these two main theories, there is another group of theories and it is called the intuitive theory.

Nishida investigates the problem of good approached by the autonomous ethical theory. According to autonomous ethics, the basis of morality is in human nature. There are three main types of autonomous ethical theory. The first one, based on reason is called the rational or intellectual theory. The second one, based on the feelings of pain and pleasure is called the hedonic theory. The third one, based on action of the will is called the activity theory.

According to Nishida the rational theory of ethics can go a step farther than heteronomous theory because it attempts to explain the good and terms of human nature. But Nishida says that only by basing on formal reason, one cannot solve the fundamental problem of why one must perform the good. For Nishida when one reflects deeply on the self, one can see feelings of pleasure and pain and willing which emerges from feeling. Hedonism, when it is compared to rational theory is closer to the reality of human nature. But for Hedonism the distinction between

good and evil can be determined only according to the feeling of pleasure and pain. Hence it can never explain the imperative elements of moral goodness.

For Nishida, the good must be the goal of one's will. The good must be the standard that must determine the value of one's conduct. As the value judgments are found in one consciousness, the good must be articulated from the internal demands of consciousness not from without. According to Nishida, the ultimate standard of truth is found in the internal necessity of consciousness. For him, a moment of consciousness is not simple. It contains complex elements that are dependent on each other. Consciousness at a given time and also over a life time is organized into a system. Nishida gives the name for the system, 'the self', which means the unity of this whole. Hence for Nishida, the good is a coordinated harmony or mean between various activities. Consciousness for Nishida is not an assemblage of sequential actions. It is a single unified system.

According to Nishida the good refers to that which satisfies the internal demands of the self. The greatest demands of the self are the demands of personality. The demands of personality are the fundamental unifying power of consciousness. Hence to satisfy these demands and to actualize personality is the absolute good. According to Nishida one reaches the purest and most perfect form of good conduct only when there is no distinction between things and the self. Just as the objective world is the reflection of the self, the self is a reflection of objective world the self does not exist apart from the world that it sees. Hence good conduct is not a mere event inside consciousness. It is rather an action in which the goal is the creative results in the world of facts.

In the history of Western thought, the idea that harmony constitutes the good is started by Plato. Plato theorizes the good in terms of harmony in music. Aristotle says that the means is the good. For Nishida the view of Plato and Aristotle that the good is harmony or the mean does not clarify the meaning of the good. According to him no human can be satisfied by physical desires because ideas are always functioning in the human minds. According to Nishida, consciousness should be controlled by the activity of ideas. So the true good for man is to satisfy the demand arising from that activity. When men proceed further to inquire the activity of ideas men can reach the law of reason. For Nishida, the true person appears where the (subject) self has been forgotten. Personality is the unifying power of consciousness in the sense of immediate experience. The true personality comes forth when a person eradicates highly subjective hopes and forgets his or her self.

Nishida holds that the good of the individual is most important and it is the basis of all other goods. But this individual good differs from self-interest and selfish desires. Individualism and egoism are different. Egoism is selfishness that takes one's own pleasure as its goal. Hence this is the opposite of individualism. For Nishida, when human live in communities social consciousness necessarily functions. Hence language, manners, customs, social systems, laws, religion, and literature are all phenomena of this social consciousness. Individual consciousnesses emerge from and are nurtured by it. They are single cells that constitute this great consciousness. Knowledge, morality, and aesthetic taste all have social significance, and even the most universal learning does not escape social convention.

Since individual consciousnesses are parts of social consciousness, most of individual's demands are social. If all altruistic elements are removed from man's desires almost nothing would remain. The center of the self is not limited to the interior of the individual. The self of a mother is

found in her child, and the self of a loyal subject is found in the monarch. As one's personality becomes greater, the demands of the self become increasingly social. According to Nishida the development of social consciousness is not limited to the small group of the family because mental and physical life can develop in all of the various social groups. The nation which is next level beyond the family unifies the entirety of all conscious activity and expresses a single personality.

For Nishida individuals are entities that have developed as cells of one society. Hence the essence of the nation is the expression of the communal consciousness that constitutes the foundation of all minds. The nation is a unified personality, and the systems and laws of the nation are expressions of the will of this communal consciousness. Hence when a nation punishes an individual, it does so neither for revenge nor for the safety of society, but because personality possesses an inviolable dignity.

Nishida says that if one assumes that only phenomena of consciousness are the only reality then one's personality is the activity of the unifying power of the universe. For Nishida the good is the realization of this great power. The good refers to that which satisfies the internal demands of the self. Hence the demands of personality are the fundamental unifying power of consciousness. So to actualize or to fulfill one's personality means to become one with the unifying power. Then the nature of good conduct can be determined. For Nishida all good conduct takes personality as its goal. Personality is the basis of all values. Although there are various demands such as wealth, power, knowledge and art which are valuable, these lose all values if these are independent of personality. Wealth, health, honor, authority, skill and knowledge are not good in themselves. For Nishida conduct is a conduct which takes actualization of personality as its goal.

For Nishida, the good is the realization of ideals and the satisfaction of desires. The will is the deepest unifying activity of consciousness. It is the self itself at work. Hence the desires and the ideals that are the cause of the will arise from the self itself. Nishida also discusses the conditions of good conduct. First, good conduct is one which takes personality its goal. Another condition is sincerity. He says that sincerity is good not because of its results but because it is good in itself. Sincerity is the internal necessity of personality. Sincerity is a demand based on knowledge, feeling and volition.

According to Nishida to follow the sincere internal demand of the self does not mean to establish subjectivity as opposed to objectivity. For Nishida only when one can eliminate the subjective fancies of the self and unite with a thing one can see the true self. So the objective world is a reflection of his or her personality. Hence the sincere demands of each person coincide with the ideals which he sees in the objective world. Self-awareness of the true self comes about when the subject-object opposition is overthrown. This self-awareness comes about in seeing the self reflected in the objective world and the objective world reflected in the self. In one sense, each one's objective world is a reflection of that one's personality.

Nishida maintains that the purpose of the good is neither to obey the formal laws of morality as in Kant nor to seek for pleasure as in hedonism, but to fulfill one's deepest nature, to realize one's personality. This is why he bases his own ethics on energetism and his theory of self-realization. To realize the fundamental identity of the self and the universe is to realize this infinite reality as infinite truth, good, and beauty.

In this paper the research question is "how and why Nishida's epistemological concept precedes ethical concept" and it is already proved. For Nishida morality is not a search for

something apart from the self awareness of pure experience of *mu*. It is simply the discovery of something within the self consciousness of pure experience of personality. This is only one true good of personality after the knowing of pure experience of *mu*. This means that one's true self of self consciousness of *mu* makes one's personality.

According to Nishida the good refers to that which satisfies the internal demands of the self that makes personality. This means that the greatest demands of the self are the demands of personality and the demands of personality are the fundamental unifying power of consciousness. Hence Nishida said that to satisfy these demands and to actualize personality is the absolute good. For Nishida, one can reach the pure form of good conduct only when there is no distinction between things and the self or after realization of pure experience of *mu*. Just as the objective world is the reflection of the self, the self is a reflection of objective world the self does not exist apart from the world that it sees. Hence good conduct is not a mere event inside consciousness. It is rather an action in which the goal is the creative results in the world of facts. For these reasons, we can say that Nishida view on epistemological concept precedes his ethical concept.

CONCLUSION

Nishida discussed the problem of ethics in connection with the problem of truth or reality. The good is not merely the way of human beings but it is also the way of reality. This means that the concept of good is understood on the basis of the concept of reality. For Nishida, the good has to fulfill one's deepest nature, to realize one's personality, so that, he bases his own ethics on his epistemology. According to Nishida, men reach the purest and most perfect form of good conduct only when subject and object merge, self and things forget each other, and all that exists is the activity of the sole reality of the universe.

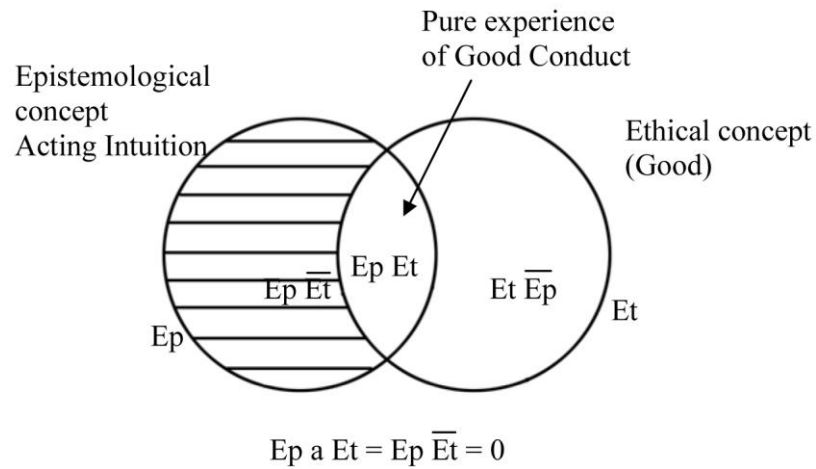
Nishida considers applied philosophy what we ought to do, what the good is, and what the basis of human action ought to be. This cause appears in consciousness as a kind of impulsive feeling, which is called by Nishida the power of the will or motivation which is accompanied by an idea of a result. For Nishida, Will is the deepest unifying power of consciousness and also the most profound expression of the unifying power of reality. Then, an action is the expression of the will. Hence Nishida said that the only things men can freely manage are their own phenomena of consciousness that is the freedom of the will. Hence so far as one's knowledge advances, one becomes freer. This shows that knowledge leads to ethical behavior or epistemological concept leads to ethical concept.

For Nishida, the good must be the goal of one's will and it must be the standard to consciousness, the good must be articulated from pure consciousness. Hence for Nishida, the good is a coordinated harmony or mean between various activities. The good refers to determine the value of one's conduct.

To draw a logical diagram this paper can be summed up into a sentence. It can be coined as "to be is to have personality". For Nishida, the value judgments are found in one that which satisfies the internal demands of the self consciousness and the greatest demands of the self are the demands of personality. The demands of personality are the fundamental unifying power of consciousness and to satisfy these demands and to actualize personality is the absolute good. According to Nishida one reaches the pure experience of good conduct only when there is no distinction between things and the self or subject and object. For Nishida, the personality appears where the self has been forgotten that personality is the unifying power of consciousness in the

sense of pure experience. This means that Nishida's view on epistemological concept leads to his ethical concept. This can be symbolized as "Universal Affirmative Proposition". "Ep" is for epistemological concept and "Et" for ethical concept. It can be symbolized as Ep a Et. This can be stated by Venn's diagram as follows;

TO BE IS TO HAVE PERSONALITY



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to Principal Dr Myint Swe, Taunggoke Degree College, for his advice and help, value knowledge, and idea to complete this study. I also want to thank Daw Hla Hla Maw, Lecturer, Head of the Department of Philosophy, Taunggoke Degree College for her suggestion and invaluable advice.

REFERENCES

- Nishida Kitaro. (1990). **An Inquiry into the Good.** (Masao Abe and Christopher Ives. (trsans))
- Nishida Kitaro. (1970). **Fundamental Problems of Philosophy: The World of Action and the Dialectical World.** David A. Dilworth, (trans.) Tokyo: Sophia Unversity.
- Nishida Kitarō. (1973). **Art and Morality.** David A. Dilworth & Valdo H.Viglielmo(trans.) Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii (An East–West Center Book).
- Nishida Kitarō. (1987). **Last Writings: Nothingness and the Religious Worldview.** David A. Dilworth,(trans.). Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Nishida Kitarō. (1958). **Intelligibility and the Philosophy of Nothingness.** Schinzinger, Robert (trans.) Honolulu: East-West Center Press.
- Nishida Kitarō. (1987). **Intuition and Reflection in Self-Consciousness.** Valdo H. Viglielmo, Takeuchi Yoshinori & Joseph S. O’Leary(trans.). Albany, New York: State University of New York Press.
- Fung Yu-Lan, (1966) . **A Short History of Chinese Philosophy.** New York: The Free Press.
- Gilligan, Carol, (1982). **In a Different Voice.** Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.