NISHIDA KITARŌ'S PURE EXPERIENCE BEYOND CONSCIOUSNESS

ABSTRACT

This paper examines Nishida Kitarō's concept of pure experience and whether one can be conscious of it. Pure experience being the foundation for all experience in that it merges the subject and object while rejecting common-sense dualism. However, while tracking Nishida's argument, it becomes apparent that there is a contradiction as he characterizes thinking as "deliberate discrimination" and "a kind of pure experience." I trace Nishida's movement from a psychological to a metaphysical account of pure experience. I argue that one cannot be conscious of it without reintroducing the subject-object distinction it precedes.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Western epistemology has been historically governed by a dualistic model that divides the individual and reality into two distinct camps: realism and idealism. Scholars, such as Kopf, argue that Nishida Kitarō believed that this dualism permeated all philosophical discourse — even monism, which defines itself against dualism and falls prey to binary thinking.[1] This led Nishida to construct an answer that would challenge the framework altogether. As Abe notes in his introduction to An *Inquiry into the Good*, "[Nishida] had to transform Zen experience into a philosophical answer," and thus Nishida introduces the concept of pure experience, a metaphysical phenomenon that inverts all our intuitive conceptions of the world.[2] It is a concept defined by two features: it merges the subject and object while rejecting common-sense dualism, and it is pre-cognitive, occurring prior to reflection and conceptualization.[3] This is counterintuitive, as it suggests that pure experience is non-conscious yet is meant to replace our usual notion of consciousness. A way to make this more comprehensible is found in Daisetz T. Suzuki's "Zen and Swordsmanship I," where he explains how, "when the opponent tries to strike you, your eyes at once catch the movement of his sword, and you may strive to follow it. But as soon as this takes place, you cease to be master of yourself, and you are sure to be beaten. This is called 'stopping.'"[4] The swordsman is in a flow state, acting in the moment without reflection. He is purely instinctual, exemplifying pure experience in action. The difficulty of pure experience is that it is a concept that undermines the tools you would normally use to grasp it and asks for an understanding that cannot exactly be put into language.

Yet as one dives deeper, apparent inconsistencies within the framework emerge that one must grapple with to see whether this is an adequate conceptualization of what our understanding should be. For example, Nishida characterized thinking as "deliberate discrimination"[5] that destroys the concrete unity of pure experience but later

1 Gereon Kopf, "Between Identity and Difference: Three Ways of Reading Nishida's Non-Dualism," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 31, no. 1 (2004): 73–103, https://www.jstor.org/stable/30233738.

2 Masao Abe, "Introduction," in *Inquiry into the Good*, by Nishida Kitarō, trans. Masao Abe and Christopher Ives (Yale University Press, 1990), vii-xxvi.

3 Kitarō Nishida, *An Inquiry into the Good*, trans. Masao Abe and Christopher Ives (Yale University Press, 1990), 47.

4 Daisetz T. Suzuki, "Zen and Swordsmanship I," in *Zen and Japanese Culture* (Princeton University Press, 1959), 87–136, https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvc77449.12.

5 Nishida, *Inquiry into the Good*, 3.

says that "the activity of thinking constitutes a kind of pure experience."[6] This leads into the question: Can we become conscious of pure experience? Alternatively, is this question incoherent with Nishida's framework? In this paper, I will argue that Nishida's *Inquiry into the Good* systematically inverts the assumption that consciousness is the primary function for pure experience, and that we can never truly be 'conscious' of pure experience. The name itself could reasonably leave one with the impression that this is a type of experience one can perceive or reflect upon, yet through the examination of pure experience, it will be made clear that it is truly the fundamental field of reality that places the individual's consciousness as a secondary component within it. The self is not the "owner" of experience, but a temporary focal point within the event of experiencing itself. In doing so, Nishida moves from constraining pure experience to the individual, to shifting pure experience as the medium through which reality takes place, creating a relational unity between the two. As a result, it is impossible to be conscious of pure experience, and framing the concept in such a way would be a misunderstanding of the system in the first place. It is important to note that Nishida's conception of pure experience arises in his earliest work, meaning we are dealing with what is often called 'early Nishida.' This stage is characterized by his attempt to articulate a philosophical foundation for insights drawn from Zen practice without explicitly invoking Buddhist terminology.

II. THE INDIVIDUAL'S RELATION TO PURE EXPERIENCE

To understand whether an individual can be conscious of pure experience, there must first be an understanding of where the individual stands with relation to it. In working toward the final definition of pure experience, Nishida characterizes it as having "no meaning whatsoever; it is simply a present consciousness of facts just as they are."[7] This type of experience is meant to be the simplest experience one can have and is foundational for all other experiences. It occurs prior to the subject-object distinction, when the "experiencer" has not yet been able to separate themselves from what they are experiencing; rather, they are still one and the same. As a result, Nishida expands our understanding by introducing the "perceptual train," describing how a person can move through actions without breaking the subject-object distinction; they act without reflection. This shows that this phenomenon is not restricted to simple sensations; rather, the defining

6 Nishida, *Inquiry into the Good*, 13.
7 Nishida, *Inquiry into the Good*, 4.

aspect is that pure experience is a strict unity of concrete consciousness. A unity that leaves no room between "the demands of the will and their fulfillment."[8] Pure experience is fundamentally connected to the individual; however, at this point, it is unclear whether that individual could be conscious of it.

At this point, Nishida provides what seems like an answer: he says that "the activity of thinking constitutes a kind of pure experience."[9] A statement that, until this point, must be incompatible with what he has already worked so hard to establish. As early as the first page, thought was characterized as a "deliberate discrimination" within experience, and that characterization primed our minds to understand the nature of this concept.[10] Nishida does not appear to be trying to contradict that understanding but instead is now expanding the scope of what pure experience can be. Still, we now need to reconcile how both statements can be true. How can thinking be both a form of discrimination and a kind of pure experience?

III. THE PSYCHOLOGICAL ANSWER

Initially, we are getting what I propose to be a 'psychological answer.' I claim this because it focuses solely on the individual's mindset and lays the foundation for what will later become a 'metaphysical shift.' This distinction is necessary because it constitutes only part of pure experience and explains why the phenomenon needed to be expanded in the first place. In this context, thinking means "the activity that determines relations between representations and unifies them."[11] To think of thinking as part of the pure experience already established, he highlights how thinking can be passive, much like the passivity we experience with our perceptions. This psychological account, however, proves insufficient because it relies solely on the individual, thereby ignoring the constitutive role of reality itself in the phenomenon of pure experience.

In this account, pure experience is an individual having experiences, completely constrained to themselves, effectively missing the playing field on which these experiences take place. It makes it seem as though pure experience is completely individualistic, disregarding the fact that the reality we interact with is a pivotal component of this phenomenon. The psychological reading presupposes the very sub-

8 Nishida, *Inquiry into the Good*, 8.
9 Nishida, *Inquiry into the Good*, 13.
10 Nishida, *Inquiry into the Good*, 3.
11 Nishida, *Inquiry into the Good*, 11.

ject-object distinction that pure experience is meant to precede. It assumes that there is a subject that has experiences, and those experiences are objects of analysis or reflection. Even if one finds themselves experiencing something that was pre-reflective phenomenologically, that experience is still post-reflective conceptually. Therefore, the psychological account cannot be the ground of pure experience; instead, pure experience is the condition for the possibility of psychology as such. The limitations of the psychological account, therefore, necessitate a metaphysical shift in Nishida's conceptualization, as we still do not have an answer that unites the fact that thinking can be discriminatory while also being part of pure experience without creating a contradiction.

IV. THE METAPHYSICAL SHIFT

My analysis will now show how Nishida responds to this tension not psychologically, but metaphysically. As Abe notes, Nishida "regarded pure experience as the sole reality and wanted to develop his philosophy on this basis; he was not satisfied with the theories of pure experience expounded by the psychological philosophers," and therefore sought to "connect his own theory of pure experience to transcendent philosophy or metaphysics by grasping experience as active."[12] In other words, the metaphysical shift is not an interpretive imposition, but a direction Nishida himself considered necessary. By reacting to these "psychological philosophers," there is concrete signaling that, while informed by these philosophies, the next direction Nishida's answer must take will separate itself from the commonsense dualism that inherently underlies any account relying on the individual.

Nishida's metaphysical shift does not so much resolve the problem of pure experience as it relocates it. This relocation becomes especially clear when his position is set against the psychological framework of William James. Nishida himself acknowledges that the initial, more psychological move of identifying thinking within pure experience came from William James. Yet the contrast between their final positions is striking. In "The World of Pure Experience," James writes, "There is no other nature, no other whatness than this absence of break and this sense of continuity in that most intimate of all conjunctive relations, the passing of one experience into another when

12 Abe, "Introduction," xiv.

they belong to the same self."[13] While James affirms the continuity of experience, he restricts its significance to what is immediately given; it "rests on the claim that experience is not a thing but a *function*."[14] Whereas Nishida takes pure experience to be the ground of a reality that surpasses the individual. This divergence specifically reveals how Nishida situates aspects of his own Zen philosophy into this broader philosophical conversation, transforming a psychological notion into a metaphysical principle. Both approaches contrast with commonsense dualism, but whereas James focuses on the pure experience of being a unity within the individual, Nishida makes the unity something the individual exists within. Revealing how the problem of pure experience should not have been focused within the individual; rather, it should go beyond the individual.

From Nishida's perspective, pure experience becomes the basis for experience, and he says, "It is not that there is experience because there is an individual, but 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."[15] This inverts our traditional assumption that pure experience is not a psychological state produced by an individual brain; it is fundamental to an objective reality from which the world and individual consciousness arise. It prevents the argument from devolving into idealism and instead fosters pure experience and thinking, which are interdependent. In this way, thinking stops being an activity *opposed* to pure experience and becomes part of it, and the act of discrimination occurs within the unity of experience rather than functioning as a disruption.

To avoid interpreting this view as eliminating the individual, Nishida clarifies the person's role within true experience. Pure experience is something that contains individual people; however, it does not mean that the objective reality is pure experience; the individual still plays a pivotal role in this phenomenon. 'True experience' cannot merely be the world in and of itself; the mind's interaction with it is still a key aspect of 'true experience.' Instead, the individual plays the role that makes the field determined and self-aware. Therefore, the mind's interaction with the world is not a secondary event but is the primary substance of reality itself; 'true experience' is pure experience in this

13 William James, "A World of Pure Experience," *The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods*, vol. 1, no. 20 (1904): 533–43, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2011912.

14 Andrew Feenberg and Yoko Arisaka, "Experiential Ontology: The Origins of the Nishida Philosophy in the Doctrine of Pure Experience," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (June 1990): 180, https://doi.org/10.5840/ipq19903023.

15 Nishida, *Inquiry into the Good*, 19.

final form. My understanding is that true experience is the non-dual event of interaction, prior to the conceptual split into mind and world.

This resolution invites a pressing objection, if 'true experience' is fundamental and we are merely 'limited spheres' within it, does Nishida account for individuality and a subjective perspective? No, for Nishida, unity is not sameness, but structured relatedness within a shared system. This is clear when he discusses the systemic nature of consciousness, saying, "If we acknowledge that my consciousness of yesterday and today are independent and at the same time one consciousness in that they both belong to the same system, then we can recognize the same relationship between one's own consciousness and that of others."[16] It establishes that, for Nishida, unity is not always *sameness*; rather, it is systemic relatedness. Nishida exemplifies this by asking us to consider an influential person who can sway many people's opinions. This does not necessarily mean everyone will be swayed in the same way or to the same degree; however, it is possible to be swayed because we all exist in the same system. It is possible for a great person to influence everyone, and for a mathematical principle to hold true every time.[17] Rather, the system's unity comes from its structure, which allows us to hold diverse opinions while working within it. If we were not working within the same structured system, it would be impossible for a great person to influence anyone, and, by extension, for us to communicate with one another.

V. THE ESSENCE OF CONSCIOUSNESS

This clarified account of individuality is essential for addressing whether we can be conscious of pure experience at all. If pure experience is the non-dual field in which both the objective world and the individual arise, then it cannot appear as an *object* to a subject. A common concern is that the metaphysical account dissolves individuality altogether, but Nishida's systemic conception of unity shows that individuality is preserved as a standpoint within a larger relational whole. This unity aligns with our everyday experience of acting in a world that is neither strictly subjective nor strictly objective.

With this in mind, we can now ask whether the individual, understood as a limited sphere within true experience, can reflect upon pure experience itself. Masao Abe's commentary makes the answer clear. Abe states that "the standpoint of consciousness [is] truly the subject,

16 Nishida, *Inquiry into the Good*, 44.
17 Nishida, *Inquiry into the Good*, 45.

not the object, of consciousness," and therefore, you cannot make consciousness into an object of consciousness without already presupposing consciousness.[18] Because pure experience is the pre-reflective ground of consciousness, attempting to become *conscious* of it reintroduces the very subject–object division; it precedes. Thinking back to the example of the samurai, they are aware and conscious in the sense that they are not asleep, but they are not conscious in the sense that they can reflect on what is happening to them without breaking the unity of consciousness. Thus, the question of being conscious of pure experience is based on a misunderstanding of its fundamental nature: pure experience is not something we can observe, but the condition that makes all observation possible.

VI. THE OBJECTION: CAN WE BE CONSCIOUS OF PURE EXPERIENCE

Yet the objection still stands: if the act of discrimination occurs within the unity of experience rather than disrupting it, then why would becoming conscious of that unity be any different? In fact, when discussing the lack of distinction between consciousness and reality, Nishida himself says, "True reality is not found outside of phenomena of consciousness, and the true reality realized in direct experience always comes forth in the same mode."[19] For there to be a reality, there must be consciousness; the two are not independent of one another. Thus, to say one cannot be conscious of pure experience, the domain for which consciousness arises, seems contradictory to Nishida's conception of reality itself. In fact, Nishida even says in the very beginning of his work on pure experience that, "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"[20] Making it clear that we can be conscious of pure experience.

For instance, we can experience the state of consciousness, and if this consciousness occurs in the unity required for pure experience, then we can be conscious of pure experience. From this, one might conclude that an individual can be aware of pure experience. If we accept that there is no distinction between the individual and reality, then perhaps our mere existence is consciousness of pure experi-

18 Masao Abe, "The Logic of Absolute Nothingness as Expounded by Nishida Kitarō," *The Eastern Buddhist* 28, no. 2 (1995): 168, https://www.jstor.org/stable/44362093.
19 Nishida, *Inquiry into the Good*, 54.
20 Nishida, *Inquiry into the Good*, 3–4.

ence. When you take this metaphysics and carry it to its conclusion, we must accept that we can be conscious of pure experience, since to say otherwise presupposes there is an individual that undermines the goal of unity in the first place.

However, I argue that concluding consciousness grasps pure experience would be to mistake a part for the whole. Consciousness arises from pure experience, but that does not grant it access to the totality that makes it possible. On the other hand, looking back at our definition, pure experience merges the subject and object while rejecting common sense dualism, and it is pre-cognitive, occurring prior to reflection and conceptualization.[21] Under this definition, even an understanding of consciousness based on awareness rather than reflection is incompatible with pure experience and reinforces my point that one cannot be conscious of pure experience. Granting that awareness is consciousness of pure experience would risk devolving back into common sense dualism, which Nishida was avoiding in this conception in the first place.

In "Experiential Ontology: The Origins of the Nishida Philosophy in the Doctrine of Pure Experience," this interpretation is supported. Here, Feenberg and Arisaka state, "The subject does not 'have' the pure experience 'of' the object, but rather pure experience is a unified totality, and subject and object come to be differentiated within that totality through reflection."[22] Consciousness exists within pure experience, whereas the act of being conscious requires a reflective state that breaks concrete unity and eliminates the state of pure experience. So, while it may be true that we can be conscious and exist within pure experience, that does not mean we are conscious of pure experience.

VII. CONCLUSION

To conclude, pure experience is not something we can be conscious of; it is a unity between ourselves and constitutes the way we are able to experience anything in the first place. While thinking, constituting a type of pure experience may lead some to believe that this means we can reflect upon pure experience and therefore be conscious of it. This would be a misunderstanding of what Nishida means by thinking and does not account for the phenomenon in its entirety. By tracing his movement from a psychological answer to a metaphysical account in which the individual becomes a "limited sphere" within true experience, we have seen why pure experience cannot be an object of consciousness. Yet this shift raises further questions: Was Nishida right to make this move? Does this early metaphysical expansion adequately secure non-duality, or does it risk obscuring the immediacy he first set out to describe? I propose that the metaphysical shift was necessary. As outlined in this paper, the mere psychological account introduced tension with his original emphasis on immediacy. However, that tension is not directly resolved in his early work, though the metaphysical conception of pure experience sets the foundation for an understanding that avoids dualism altogether. Thus, these questions are precisely what lead us into Nishida's later philosophy, such as his logic of basho, his reflections on absolute nothingness, and his evolving account of self-awareness. All of these work to rectify the inconsistencies in this earlier work and solidify the fact that the tensions addressed in this work are tensions Nishida identified as well.

21 Nishida, *Inquiry into the Good*, 47.
22 Feenberg and Arisaka, "Experiential Ontology," 178.

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