The Politics of Pure Experience: Individual and State in *An Inquiry into the Good*

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**Abstract**

In this contribution, I shall attempt to clearly work out the political implications of Nishida Kitaro’s theory of pure experience in *An Inquiry into the Good*. This effort comes in response to the multitude of vastly different claims about the political meaning and dangers of Nishida’s early philosophy. Is it an implicit foundation for Japanese nationalism and the seeds of the controversial political philosophy he would work out later? Or is it a subtle attempt to critique the nationalist philosophy and educational policies surrounding Nishida while he was writing in the Meiji era? Or, perhaps most obviously, is this work unconnected with any and all political matters (including those that Nishida would face later on in his life)? In this paper, I shall argue that, although there is good reason to endorse any of these claims, ultimately a balanced assessment will find that Nishida’s early philosophy was indeed apolitical in nature, and that attempts to claim the contrary inevitably either go beyond textual evidence or miss key elements of his thought. Yet, as I shall further argue, being apolitical hardly means that Nishida’s work has no political consequences. Instead, for better or worse, the defining characteristic of Nishida’s early political philosophy is its capacity to allow readers to transcend such political issues.

**Keywords:** Nishida Kitarō, pure experience, Miyake Setsurei, Nitobe Inazō, Meiji Period, nationalism, imperialism, self-realization

**Politika čiste izkušnje: posameznik in država v Raziskavah o dobrem**

**Izvleček**

V prispevku bom skušal jasno opredeliti politične posledice teorije čistega izkustva Nishide Kitaroja iz njegovega dela *Raziskave o dobrem*. Gre za odgovor na številne zelo različne trditve o političnem pomenu in nevarnostih Nishidove zgodnje filozofije. Je njegova filozofija implicitni temelj japonskega nacionalizma in seme kontroverzne politične filozofije, ki jo je pozneje oblikoval? Ali pa gre za prefinjen poskus kritike nacionalistične filozofije in izobraževalne politike, s katerima se je srečeval Nishida med svojim pisanjem v obdobju Meiji? Ali pa, kar je morda najbolj očitno, to delo ni povezano z nobenim političnim vprašanjem (vključno s tistimi, s katerimi se je Nishida soočil pozneje v svojem življenju)? V tem članku bom dokazoval, da čeprav obstaja dober razlog za podporo katerikoli od teh

Ključne besede: Nishida Kitarō, čista izkušnja, Miyake Setsurei, Nitobe Inazō, obdobje Meiji, nacionalizem, imperializem, samouresničitev

Introduction

Reading through the pages of Nishida Kitarō’s *An Inquiry into the Good* (1911), one finds little to no rigorous exploration of the political consequences of the unique conception of pure experience it has to offer. Instead, politics seem to be rather distant from Nishida’s mind at this point in his intellectual career. However, in his youth Nishida was concerned with Japanese politics and quite enthusiastic about the ratification of the Meiji Constitution in 1889. Later on in his life as well, he could not avoid tackling the political issues facing Japan in the late 1930s and early 1940s, lending his name and philosophical terminology to infamously problematic texts on Japan’s culture and place in Asia and the world. However, *Inquiry*—the foundation of his philosophical enterprise—seems to have avoided

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1. Knauth (1965) highlights changes in Nishida’s diary entries as evidence that he was not particularly “political” while writing *Inquiry*, and his interest in politics only picked back up around 1928.

2. Yusa (2002, 24‒29) highlights the young Nishida’s interest in (and enthusiasm for) Japan’s new constitution, as well as his support for individual rights and interests.

3. These problematic texts include writings like “The Principle of the New World Order (Sekai shinchi tsujo no genri 世界新秩序の原理, 1943)” which seem to openly endorse both the emperor system and the imperialistic view that Japan should lead the other East Asian countries. The reason that I use this roundabout way of speaking about Nishida’s culpability is because it is not entirely clear to what extent Nishida is responsible for the content of this text. Naturally, this includes the question of whether he wrote these papers enthusiastically or only due to the pressure put upon him by the navy. More importantly, however, there are questions about whether these documents were doctored or rewritten by those in the navy (and, assuming that the texts were altered in some way, there are further questions of the extent to which these documents were changed and how well they reflect Nishida’s own stance). For a sympathetic viewing of the Kyoto School’s political ventures, see Parkes (1997). A more critical view of Nishida’s later political philosophy can be seen in sources like Lavelle (1994) and Osaki (2019). Discussions of Nishida’s texts having been altered by the navy can be found in Arisaka (1996).

4. Nishida himself seems to agree with this prognosis, granted that he himself stated “that 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” (Nishida 1990, xxxiii). However, this does not mean that literally everything stayed the same, so it is not necessarily proof that Nishida’s early philosophy directly connects to his wartime thoughts on politics, but it is evidence for anyone who takes such a viewpoint.
any difficult political questions, opting for more detailed analyses of the ontological, epistemological, and religious consequences of pure experience and leaving only simple explanations when tasked with discussing the relation between the individual to the state.

And yet, perhaps because Nishida avoided applying his ontological, ethical, or religious views to any events occurring at the time of writing *Inquiry*, his early philosophy has been interpreted as an endorsement of just about every political position imaginable. For example, Richard M. Reitan has found in Nishida's theory of pure experience (and the ethical worldview grounded therein) a subtle means of criticizing the statist educational and moral policies espoused in the “Imperial Rescript on Education (*Kyōiku ni kansuru chokugo* 教育に関する勅語)” (Reitan 2009, 139). Atsuko Hirai, on the other hand, accuses Nishida of propagating precisely the nationalist worldview that Reitan believes him to be criticizing. This accusation is compounded by the fact that various post-war Marxist historians in Japan found in Nishida's early work the foundation for his later political thought and its alleged fascist tendencies, insofar as both necessarily end with a subjugation of the individual to greater communal needs. On the other hand, although he does not draw out the political consequences in detail, Itabashi Yūjin has offered a compelling case that Nishida's descriptions of pure experience can instead point us toward a state of “effortless” or “groundless” peace (Itabashi 2014). Finally, Christopher S. Goto-Jones takes this connection between pure experience and peacefulness a step further by arguing for a view of Nishida's early philosophy as an “ineffective and dissident” academic's endorsement of a utopian view of international cooperation (Goto-Jones 2005, 19-24, 66-67). For a book that at times seems to be apolitical, or perhaps even naïve, it seems that Nishida's ideas concerning pure experience contain powerful implications that can vastly change both its potential appeal to contemporary debates about selfhood and the life of the individual in concrete political societies, as well as how we understand the beginnings of the history of the Kyoto School's connections to Japanese imperialism.

Hence, in this contribution, we will attempt to work through the political implications of Nishida's earliest philosophy of pure experience and, in doing so, accomplish the following two tasks. First, we will clarify the history of why Nishida's seemingly apolitical early philosophy has received so much scrutiny over the past century. Second, we will proceed through these past critiques in order to

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6 Note, however, that, Goto-Jones is never unaware of the political dangers of Nishida's early thought and, even if he does not cite any of the historians mentioned above, does discuss the potential problems that come with what we will later discuss as an "organic" view of politics (Goto-Jones 2005, 62).
make sense of whether or not an endorsement of pure experience could also entail any kind of undesirable endorsement of nationalism. In order to complete this operation, we will proceed in the following order. First, we will provide a brief and schematic summary of Nishida’s early ethics to give a groundwork for our exploration of its political consequences. Second, we will contextualize this philosophical background within the framework of Meiji political thought in order to make sense of criticisms of nationalism from those who find some kind of latent nationalist or fascist tendencies in Nishida’s early philosophy. In the third section, we will consider the validity of these criticisms in the face of Goto-Jones’ detailed account of politics in Inquiry. In the final section we will reach our conclusion: That a careful interpretation of Nishida shows that his philosophy need not necessarily end in an endorsement of nationalism or utopianism, but was rather, for better or worse, a primarily aesthetic account of the good life of an individual, thus making it a means of transcending (or, perhaps better, escaping from) such political quandaries. We will then end this paper with several closing remarks and conclusions about what this means for contemporary authors looking to learn from Nishida’s views on selfhood and individuality.

The Basic Idea: Pure Experience and Self-Realization

Now, as was mentioned previously, in order to make sense of the many different views on Nishida’s early work in the introduction, we will first need to have a functional understanding of the main principles in his early philosophy. As is well known, *An Inquiry into the Good* was Nishida’s first major work and was published in 1911 as a revised and completed version of several articles he had published in the early 1900s. In this book, Nishida attempts to rethink the fundamental problems of philosophy arising from his re-evaluation of the nature of reality as pure or direct experience. *Inquiry* consists of four sections, each one dedicated to a specific facet of this enterprise (they pertain to, in order, his psychology/epistemology, ontology, ethics, and religion). While a complete rundown of the intricacies of Nishida’s early philosophy goes beyond the scope of this paper, we will here attempt to understand precisely what pure experience is and how Nishida himself worked out the political consequences—namely the relationship between the individual and society—of this theory.

Now, the first step in reconstructing Nishida’s early philosophy is to outline his goal in *Inquiry*. Luckily, Nishida provides a clear articulation of his aims at the

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7 See Yusa (2002) for an in-depth explanation of the publishing process and the personal and academic influences on Nishida’s writing during this time period.
beginning of the second section, stating he will strive “to understand true reality and to know the nature of universe” by “doubt[ing] whatever can be doubted, and proceed[ing] on the basis of direct and indubitable knowledge” (Nishida 1990, 38). To paraphrase, Nishida’s aim was to rethink the nature of reality by taking only what is disclosed to us in our direct or indubitable knowledge, things that we cannot even begin to doubt. As for what this direct knowledge consists of, Nishida explains as follows:

What is direct knowledge that we cannot even begin to doubt? 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. Of course we can err when we judge or recollect a phenomenon of consciousness, but at such a time we are no longer engaged in intuition, for we have shifted to inference. The later consciousness—which is engaged in judgment or recollection—and the original consciousness are different phenomena of consciousness: intuition is not the judging of the original consciousness by the latter one, but simply knowledge of facts just as they are. […] All our knowledge must be constructed upon such intuitive experience. (Nishida 1990, 39)

By calling for a return to what is given in “direct experience” in the quotation given above, Nishida aims to remove from his philosophy any suppositions or dogmas that could never be “fulfilled” in intuition, rendering them instead as useful inferences that may help us understand the world in a simple way, but have no place in critical philosophical contemplation. The only way to achieve this goal, Nishida reasons, is to base our philosophical ventures on what is given in pre-subjective “pure” or “direct” experiences, i.e., that “most refined” (ibid., 4) state of experience that stands prior to the fabrications of thought or judgments about the world (for example, the state of consciousness in which we merely intuit a flower as it is given, before making any judgments about its colour or anything else) (ibid., 3).

The ramifications of this return to pre-subjective experience are as wide-reaching as they are shocking. Crucially, Nishida relies on this methodology to deny the existence of an independent subject or object in experience. From Nishida’s viewpoint, there is no use in supposing a trans-experiential soul or subjectivity that could never be verified or intuited as existing apart from the world it lives in. Additionally, the supposition of a mind-independent world or any conception of a “thing-in-itself” would also be eliminated as a mere “demand of our thinking”
But perhaps the most important finding—particularly for our purposes—would be Nishida’s claim that such pre-subjective experience does not necessarily require an individuated cognitive subject or 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 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. (Nishida 1990, 19, italics added by the author of this paper)

As one can glean from the quotation given above, Nishida does not take the individual for granted as the “owner” of experience in any way. After all, there is no immediately evident “cut” between where my experiences end and the “world” begins and, as such, the only way that I can be demarcate myself as an individual is through the context that develops over the course of this experience. Thus, to assume that experience is “mine” and therefore independent of the world it lives (and other minds) in is akin to abstracting only one small portion of the concrete whole.

The upshot of this line of thought is that, for Nishida, our “true self” or “true experience” does not consist in our individuated subjectivity. To the contrary, for Nishida, the true self is none other than the “unifier” (tōitsu-teki aru mono 統一的或る物) that pervades throughout reality and connects different individual experiences into a comprehensive system. Put more simply, contrary to our common belief that our self is an individuated subjectivity and the owner of experience, Nishida instead finds our “true self” to exist in continuity with the entirety of reality. Even more striking, though, is the positive ethical and religious connotations that Nishida attaches to this “true self”.

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8 Nishida offers two claims to support this unintuitive argument. First, the content of our thought and feeling is “entirely general” (Nishida 1990, 44). This means it is possible for two persons to share the same (qualitatively speaking) experience. Additionally, insofar as the content of consciousness is the same—since consciousness itself is qualitative—we must conclude that any experiences with the same content are, indeed, the same experience (ibid., 61). Hence, in the same way that we consider ourselves from yesterday and today as “the same” due to shared content (memories, beliefs, etc.), we can ultimately share experiences with others as well. While this may sound strange, anyone who has laughed or cried alongside friends will likely at least understand what Nishida is getting at. When our friend shares a sob-story, we probably do not distinguish between what is “my” misery or “her” sadness; rather, there is an event of crying, and it is only afterward that we can abstract how much of those tears were “actually” mine.
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. The method through which we can know the true self and fuse with God is our self-attainment of the union of subject and object. (Nishida 1990, 145)

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. (Nishida 1990, 156)

The driving force behind either of these passages seems to be that in pure experience, understood as a state in which there is no distinction between subject and object, we find a “true self” that cannot be separated from the dynamic progression of reality as a whole—i.e., God. To understand the true self, then, it seems that we must achieve a state in which our typical perceptions of ourselves as a “subject”, in contrast with the “objective” world, dissolve. Nishida gives multiple different examples of these cases – including, but not limited to, artists, musicians, and mountain climbers – but no matter how one achieves this state, the ultimate point is clear: To cultivate ourselves such that we are able to go beyond our usual sense of ourselves as limited and separate from the world and instead experience a one-ness with reality as a whole constitutes the highest form of religious consciousness we can achieve.

Now, putting all this aside, what can this quasi-religious view of the self tell us about the political life of the individual? The first, and most important point, is that we can extrapolate what is essentially the cornerstone of Nishida’s early ethics just by understanding the general formula of his theory of pure experience:

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 called 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. (Nishida 1990, 126)
In conjunction with his theory of pure experience, Nishida disavows any moral standards that come from without. As we can see in this passage, for Nishida, finding the true self in our continuity with reality is not only the highest good, but the source of all moral judgments. Cultivating the self, so one is able to achieve a state of pure experience, thereby takes priority over any other concerns (or, rather, any other ethical issues we may have can only be possible as a result of this demand for a greater unity within the self). To find unity in pure experience, Nishida explains, is to satisfy the most basic demand of the self and realize the full-extent of one’s personality.

Now, one may here be convinced that Nishida is actively promoting some kind of selfish neglect for communal or political duties and urging individuals to do whatever they like in pursuit of this nebulous “true self”. Crucially, however, Nishida applies his ontological considerations on selfhood to combat these claims.

To follow the sincere demands of the self—to actualize the true personality of the self—does not mean to establish subjectivity in opposition to objectivity or to make external objects obey the self. Only when we thoroughly eliminate the subjective fancies of the self and unite with a thing can we satisfy the true demands of the self and see the true self. (Nishida 1990, 134)

If we analyze individual consciousness, we do not find a separate, unifying self. But because there is a unity upon which a unique character arises and various phenomena are established, we consider this unity a living reality. For the same reason, we can consider social consciousness as a living reality. Like individual consciousness, social consciousness constitutes a system with a centre and interconnections. 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 the cells called individuals. (Nishida 1990, 139)

These two claims both come from the worldview described up to this point, but in different ways. In the first case, we find Nishida’s claim that the desires of the

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9 With that said, Nishida’s claims are also partially substantiated by his systematic critique of all other alternative theories of morality, which are presented in the first half of the 3rd section of Inquiry. While we do not have time to go through these claims one by one, the only important point we ought to note is that the upshot of any of them is that any attempt to ground morality outside of the self is always bound for failure. For a more extensive description see Fujita (2022, 85–108).
true self are not selfish insofar as they should not be conflated with the desires of an individual standing in opposition to the rest of reality. Pure experience, as our true self, naturally tends to pursue a unity between subject and object, something Nishida sees as proof that there is an “ideal” or “ideational” force moving at the deepest reaches of the desires of our self (Nishida 1990, 123). In the second claim, we find Nishida further building off of the notion that an individual consciousness does not exist opposed to society insofar as individual consciousnesses comprise a greater whole to make the point that individual consciousnesses—as part of the same ultimate reality—comprise society in the same way that cells make up a body. This is a claim that Nishida would make several times throughout the book and in his research notes on pure experience, seemingly implying that all consciousnesses are part of a society, which are part of a state, which are ultimately part of the universal spirit mentioned at the very beginning of this section.10

The upshot of this is actually a rather tame view of the relation between the individual and society. Speaking very clearly, Nishida makes the following statement regarding the relation between “individualism” and “communalism”:

Individualism and communalism are spoken of as diametrically opposed to each other, but I think that they coincide. It is only when individuals fully engage in action and express their natural talents that society progresses. A society that ignores the individual is anything but a healthy one. (Nishida 1990, 137‒38)

Putting aside how Nishida understood the words individualism and communalism, the idea is clear. Individual interests and social interests will never “truly” conflict, because they are both part of the same continuity leading up to the whole of reality. The goal of ethics is to develop the individual person, who therein manifests his or her talents in society. This brings a progressively higher sense of harmony, leading to a condition wherein all nations (and the individuals that comprise them) are able to express their unique characteristics on a global scale. The nation may not be the final stop in our quest to find a greater unity with the universe, but it is an important step in doing so.11

10 See Nishida (1990, 61, 138‒39); see also Nishida (1966, 356‒57).
11 “If we retrace the development of humankind from the beginning of history, we see that the nation is not the final goal of humanity. A meaningful purpose runs consistently throughout the development of humankind, and the nation appears to be something that rises and falls in order to fulfil part of humankind’s mission. […] Genuine universalism, however, does not require that each nation ceases to be. Rather, it means that each nation becomes increasingly stable, displays its distinctive characteristics, and contributes to the history of the world.” (Nishida 1990, 142; italics added by the author of this paper).
This is thus the consequence of Nishida’s early philosophy and its views on the role of the individual in society. As we have seen, Nishida works through his philosophy of pure experience to ultimately conclude that the cultivation of individual talents in pursuit of the true self is the key to a good society, insofar as the two are ultimately inseparable elements of the same overarching reality known as pure experience. For many reasons, the conclusions presented here—with regard to politics, at least—will likely seem rather tame for many readers. Chief among these reasons is that Nishida ultimately comes away with little more than a vague description of a certain kind of individualism while leaving the bulk of his work to the metaphysical elements of the nature of selfhood, reality, and individual consciousness. Yet, as we shall see, this apparently innocent conception of society may connect to problematic tendencies among his contemporary writers.

The Charge: Subjugating the Individual to the State

As an observation that is equal parts important and obvious, the aforementioned ideas about ethics and individuality found in Inquiry are at least somewhat indicative of Nishida’s historical milieu in the Meiji era. Indeed, it has been shown by various authors that interest in “self-realization” (particularly as it was described by the British Idealist, T.H. Green) echoed in both Nishida’s work as well as in the thought of many of his contemporaries for precisely the reasons we have seen above. Moreover, similarly to Nishida, many accounts of this claim were grounded in what has been referred to as an “organic” cosmology. In other words, Nishida was not alone in interpreting reality as a “macro-consciousness” or “macro-personality” that is made up of various “small selves”, in the same way that an individual organism is comprised of its various cells. As a result of this proximity, however, Nishida has also been accused of sharing the same alleged problematic, nationalistic tendencies that are associated with such “idealists” or “organicists” authors. In this section, we will briefly cover not only how similar trends can be found in the Meiji era, but also what about this formulation could be conceived of as problematic or nationalistic in the first place.

Now, while a full-fledged investigation of self-realization and “organic” thought in the Meiji period goes far beyond the scope of this paper, we would do well to first recognize what has frequently been pointed to as the principle issue driving the

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12 See, for instance, Stone (2018) for a genealogical account of how Nishida’s ideas on individualism can be situated within Meiji period philosophy. Additionally, Hirai (1979) provides a thoroughgoing account of how widespread Green’s philosophy was in late 19th and early 20th century Japanese intellectual circles.
development of such theories: The tension between the need for individual liberties and a unified sense of national identity. That is, as has been described by numerous other authors, the simultaneous need for responsible, self-sufficient individuals and a strict sense of national unity in identity—whether it be in education, language, or even a “national morality” (*kokumindōtōka* 国民道徳)—created a need to reconcile the actualization of the individual with the needs of the community.\(^{13}\) To be more specific, while several early Meiji-era authors agreed with the likes of Fukuzawa Yukichi and Nishi Amane when they introduced the need for strong individuals as the principle problem facing Japan in the middle of the 19th century, not as many agreed with their assessment of human rights and a liberal view of social theory as the keys to producing these individuals, and concerns over selfishness and the possibility of prioritizing one’s own needs over the state raised worries.\(^{14}\)

Crucially, however, the same could not be said for the “organic scheme” of self-realization that I have been hinting at above. That is to say, self-realization, if understood in terms of the individual pursuing their complete or ideal form, did not aim to strike a balance between individual and community, but rather provide a metaphysical grounds for showing that individual self-realization could only be achieved while pursuing the “common-good”. Again, as Hirai has pointed out, this metaphysical basis for combining the public good with individual freedoms was why Green (and his arguments that the ideal form of humanity is reproduced in the individual as society progresses) was so popular in the mid-Meiji era—as well as the reason why his philosophy was co-opted into so many different debates.\(^{15}\) Additionally, the compatibility of this organic view with not only philosophers like Green, but also traditional East Asian or Japanese sentiments, was likely also helpful in legitimizing discussions of self-realization as consisting being equivalent to one’s role in fostering the common-good (and thus that such self-realization cannot be reduced to individual selfishness).\(^{16}\) Namely, the idea

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13 Chapter 5 of Gluck (1985) provides a comprehensive view of how this tension manifested in debates on national morality, showing how the simultaneous need for morally upstanding individuals and a unified sense of Japanese identity contributed to impacting society in spheres as diverse as religious freedom, education, nationalistic fervour, and relations with foreigners in Japan.

14 Needless to say, this is a great oversimplification of concerns that does not factor in how the intellectual landscape of the Meiji era changed over the course of the 19th century. For a more nuanced view of concerns about selfishness with regard to individual liberties in the Meiji period, see Howland (2001).

15 At the same time, we should also recognize that—as Hirai (1979, 116‒25) repeatedly stresses—no authors in the Meiji period seemed to fully grasp what Green meant by this term. While Green stressed equality between all individuals to the greatest extent possible, Hirai shows that almost all Meiji commentators mistook this notion of public good for a nebulous notion of national interests.

16 The relationship between this worldview and traditional Song Confucian and Japanese Buddhism thought is discussed by Inoue Katsuhiro (2016) in more detail than we could hope to approach here.
losing one’s “small self” and eventually regaining it by joining a “bigger self” seems to have both matched with trends in the Japanese intellectual tradition, and also served as a basis to explain how the individual could be conceived of in terms of being enmeshed with a macro-consciousness or personality, rather than as a solitary entity.\(^{17}\)

While going through all of the iterations of this formula going back to the early years of the Meiji era would go well beyond the scope of what we can hope to achieve in this contribution, we can take Miyake Setsurei as a paradigmatic example. Miyake, known as a journalist and philosopher active in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, gave a straightforward version of what we are referring to here as the “organic” vision of the world. Most notably in his masterwork, The Cosmos (Uchū 宇宙), Miyake presents a worldview in which every step of reality can be considered in terms of the relation between cell and body. A community is made up of individuals, a nation is made up of local communities, the planet is made up of nations, and the universe is made up of planets, etc. This claim is based partially on the notion that philosophy should be done through making analogies between part and whole, a notion present in his work since his earliest philosophical enterprises,\(^ {18}\) and partially on his observations about the perceived rationality of the universe (Miyake 1909, 103‒05). As far as Miyake was concerned, everything in the universe moved far too reasonably to be reducible to blind materialism—the rationality and predictability of even physical phenomenon (the fact that reality “works” in the first place) is proof that even material entities are part of a larger, living whole that has its own purpose. In other words, the universe was a living organism and we individuals are the cells that make it run.

The ethical upshot of this worldview is that the purpose and movement of each component can only be understood with regard to the whole to which it belongs. In other words, just as the purpose of a cell is to uphold the health of the organism, the self-realization of the individual person can only be understood in terms of its relation to the purpose of the whole of the universe. With that said, as Miyake reminds us, we should remember that we may not ever fully understand the ultimate goal of the universe (beyond the quasi-religious experience of losing ourselves in the whole, which Miyake describes as the “subjective

\(^{17}\) As Tomonaga Sanjūrō prophesized while discussing the importation of Western theories of Personalism (jinkaku shugi 人格主義) into Japan, the traditionally Japanese or Buddhist tendency to find the self by losing the self remained prevalent in reconstructions of Western discussions on the importance of personality. Indeed, as Tomonaga states, “Personal idealism will be trans-personalized or non-personalized as it enters our country” (cited in Inoue 2016, 14).

\(^{18}\) As Miyake states in “A Brief Introduction to my Worldview”, analogy is the “starting point” of his philosophical inquiry (see Miyake [1892] 1967, 245–48).
component” of his organic view of the universe) (Miyake 1909, 109). Instead, as Miyake notes in articles such as “The True, Beautiful, and Good of the Japanese People” (shinzenbi nihonjin 真善美日本人), we must limit ourselves to a whole whose purpose we can better understand which, at this point in our development as human-beings, is none other than the nation to which we belong. In a scheme similar to how we described Nishida’s political philosophy in the previous section, Miyake states, “[t]o do one’s best for the nation is to do one’s best for the world. The growth of each nation’s special characteristics will supplement the development of humanity” (Miyake [1891] 1931, 215). Therefore, individuals can only achieve self-realization and find their true purpose by helping their particular nation contribute to the improvement of the world. Note that this idea need not imply that this goal looks the same for all nations, communities, or even individuals at this current moment. What is important is—just as different cells fulfil different roles in the body—each individual, community, and nation will exercise their talents within the context of helping the whole to which they belong thrive. And, again similarly to how individual cells are more likely to thrive in a healthy body, individual persons will also more fully realize themselves as they continue to build and improve their society.

Now, with this brief summary out of the way, we shall ask: what, if anything, makes this worldview problematic? For some scholars, the answer would be “nothing”. In contrast, those like Nagatsuma Misao would argue that an organic worldview is not just blind nationalism or fascism, but is rather a strong defence of international diversity, promoting a political philosophy in which different individuals and nations realizing their own unique talents contributes to the self-realization of mankind as a whole. As such, one could conceivably think that, whether it be Nishida or Miyake, there are no serious political issues that come from following this worldview. And yet for many post-war historians this notion of conceiving of part and whole, subject and object, or small self and greater self as two sides of the same coin, were little more than justifications of Japanese imperial ideology. Robert Wargo outlines a common theme among many of the early Nishida’s post-war critics:

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19 For a slightly more detailed explanation of what precise characteristics the good, true, and beautiful of the Japanese people consisted in, see Morita (2015, 16‒22).

20 See Nagatsuma (2012) for a picture of Miyake as endorsing a strong view of international diversity and the rights of different cultures to self-determination. Morita (2015, 118‒32) paints a slightly more nuanced picture of Miyake, acknowledging his approval of Japanese actions in Korea and Manchuria while still arguing that these actions need to be contextualized in their time period. For both, regardless of Miyake’s conclusions on real issues, this logic should entail a strong belief in the importance of all cultures to contribute to the world’s diversity.
Marxists regard this passage [i.e., Nishida’s claim the individual exists because of pure experience and not the other way around] as providing the grounds for their justly accusing Nishida of neglecting the individual at the expense of some whole (which is interpreted as referring to the state). They believe his guilt on this point justifies their placing of Nishida’s philosophy in the camp of latent fascism. Moreover, the emphasis on experience can be utilized to “demonstrate” Nishida’s idealism. I have no desire to become enmeshed in the tangle that surrounds the political interpretations of Nishida at this point, but the charge that this passage clearly stamps Nishida as an idealist is a charge which is grave enough to nullify the effect of much of his writing, if it is true. (Wargo 1972, 65)21

The idea is simple, but important. In one form or another, this view of the individual as one “part” of a whole (presumably the national spirit) ends with little more than the individual person being subjugated to the whole, rendering critical reflection or rebellion impossible, and ultimately serving as a tacit basis for “Meiji Absolutism”. Indeed, while their methods and critiques all approach the matter differently, noted Marxist historians like Miyakawa Toru (1962), Miyajima Hajime (1960), and Funayama Shinichi ([1956] 1998; [1959] 1965) all agree that, even in his earliest philosophy of pure experience, Nishida ended up – albeit possibly unwittingly – enabling fascist policies by accepting the individual as being somehow subservient to the greater whole (i.e., the state).22

Naturally, there may be ways to avoid this conclusion that individual needs are ultimately bound to be subordinated to the state on this logic (or that this would necessarily be such a bad thing). However, there is one other point that is worth considering before returning to Nishida. Namely, if we conceive of individual persons in the same way we think of cells in a body, one may be concerned as to what happens when these “cells” are perceived as not contributing to the whole which they comprise. As an important historical example, consider Japanese attitudes towards Korea, wherein even “internationalist” authors like Nitobe Inazo referred to Korea as a “dead” or “fallen” country (mekkoku 滅国; horobiru kuni 滅びる国) which was not able to contribute to the advancement of humanity.23 Insofar as the

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21 See also Wargo (2005, 35).
22 Again, the argument here is not if Nishida intended to support nationalist or fascist policies. The argument is that Nishida’s philosophy of pure experience inherently leads to these conclusions. As Funayama ([1956] 1998, 182) states, “[s]peaking in terms of political problems, Nishida’s philosophy also ended up as a foundation for imperialism and the emperor system. […] Of course, this does not mean that Nishida’s philosophy surrendered (kuppuku 屈服) to the emperor system. Rather, it means that Nishida’s philosophy had these elements as part of its essence.”
23 See Kweon (2008) for an extensive examination of Nitobe’s discussion of Korea as a perished country.
national spirit was, so to speak, sick, the Korean populace were in need of Japanese guidance to heal and continue contributing to the progress of the world. To paraphrase, in the same way that “sick” cells need to be cured for the whole body to be healthy, so too did Korea require revitalization. Indeed, the idea that the neighbouring Asian nations required Japan’s guidance in order to contribute to a greater purpose was not limited in its focus to Korea. If anything, such a worldview seems to have been the defining characteristic of Japan’s imperial attitude leading up to the Second World War (and at least partially what Nishida has been criticized as endorsing in his later writings). Finally, beyond even just the particular Japanese case, it is not hard to see how such views of statehood as an organism could connect easily with imperialism or totalitarianism in just about any intellectual tradition.

In light of these comments, the problems associated with the organic philosophy present in the Meiji philosophical world likely become much easier to understand. To think of individual human beings in society in the same way that we think of cells in an organism is seemingly tantamount to saying that individual self-realization and interests are secondary to the needs of the state. Any diversion from this “national spirit” or resistance to common values could thus assumed to be ultimately deleterious to both the individual and the whole. At the ultimate level, these principles were deployed to justify Japanese intervention abroad (and could easily be applied to repress other cultures or minorities in a contemporary situation as well). If Nishida’s philosophy of pure experience leads us to these conclusions, then there is evidently a problem that interpreters of his philosophy need to take heed of before glorifying the loss of the self to a greater whole. This raises two questions to be answered in the next section. First, is Nishida actually endorsing the kind of “organic” view of the world that we are supposing here? Second, if he is endorsing such a worldview, is there any way that he can necessarily escape the charges levelled against him?

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24 See Kweon (2008; 2021) for different discussions of such connections between Japanese imperialism and such a “global” or “world” ethics.

25 This could be conceivably true both in terms of the conception of a “national body” or “national polity” as kokutai (国体), and in terms of Japan’s vision of herself as a leader in Asia within the East Asian greater co-prosperity sphere. Or, perhaps put better, this organic view seems to be critical for connecting the individual to the enlightened state, which in turn guides surrounding nations. At any rate, what is important for now is that the view of the universe as a lived organism can mesh quite well with the actions taken, and rhetoric utilized, by Japan from the late Meiji period until the Second World War. For more on the notion of co-prosperity and Japan’s role as a guide for Asian countries on their path to fulfilling their “world mission”, see Arisaka (1996) and Osaki (2019).

26 See Berlin’s ([1958] 2017) critique of notions of positive freedom for a detailed explanation of how this schema of finding true freedom in connection with a larger whole connects, by nature, to the same kind of totalitarianism we see in dictatorships throughout the world.
The Reality: Neither Wholly Nationalist nor Utopian, But Aestheticist

In the previous questions, we established a connection between Nishida’s early philosophy of pure experience and—what we will call here—the organic worldview. While summarizing this stance, we have furthermore seen that the organic worldview has been accused of necessarily subordinating the interests of the individual to the needs of the state and, in extreme cases, justifying imperialistic policies. Importantly, Nishida himself did not explicitly support the Japanese annexation of Korea in 1910, nor did he ever apply his early philosophy of pure experience to concrete political issues. Additionally, as we saw above, Nishida at least claimed that his system did not end with the state being the ultimate goal of our self-realization. However, if this connection between the organic worldview presented above and the ability to justify imperialism or the suppression of individuals to a greater whole exists as a structural aspect of Nishida’s philosophy, then readers of Nishida will have to admit that the very logical formulations at the heart of his early philosophy does contain the kind of fascist or nationalistic elements that would only be drawn out explicitly later on in his life. This raises two questions. First, is the early Nishida actually endorsing the kind of “organic” view of the world that we are supposing here? Second, if he is endorsing such a worldview, is there any way that he can necessarily escape the charges levelled against him?

Let us start with the surprisingly complex first question: Is Nishida’s philosophy actually schematically similar to Miyake’s? That is to say, did Nishida actually endorse a worldview in which (1) the individual exists as a “cell” or “part” of a greater macro-consciousness (i.e., the entirety of reality) and (2) achieves self-realization through losing her “small-self” to join with this larger self? In at least some respects, the answer to this question is obvious. As we have seen at the outset of this paper, Nishida ostensibly writes in the same language that those like Miyake utilized. Nishida’s endorsement of such comparisons between the individual and society or reality and cells an in an organism have already been covered earlier in the paper. Nishida’s endorsement of such comparisons between the individual and society or reality and cells an in an organism have already been covered earlier in the paper. Nishida’s endorsement of such comparisons between the individual and society or reality and cells an in an organism have already been covered earlier in the paper. Nishida is also clearly convinced by the same logic that the promotion of individual cultivation makes for a stronger, more diverse society and, ultimately, world. Finally, losing the individual self in order to find a connection with the whole of reality appears to be the most striking aspect of Nishida’s early philosophy. Multiple times throughout the book, Nishida cites various philosophers and religious texts (from both the Eastern and Western traditions) to claim specifically that losing the small self is to gain the “true” self.27

27 With respect to Christianity: “Our taking refuge in God seems in some respect to be a loss of the self, but in another respect it is the way we find the self. Christ said, ‘he who finds his life shall lose
Now, with all of this out of the way, I do think there is an interpretation of Nishida’s philosophy wherein he is not arguing for a scheme in which there are two distinct “smaller” or “greater” selves, much less that we literally fuse with the entirety of the universe. Or, to be more specific, a careful reading of Nishida’s philosophy seems to reveal that Nishida might be better understood as arguing in favour of the individual self as part of the whole of reality as a system of meanings, rather than in terms of our typical views of the individual consciousness acting as part of reality in a “spatial sense”. Moreover, to assume that there is a “small” self and a “greater” self would—if nothing else—seem to violate Nishida’s premise that, in the end, all experience is pure experience. Rather than thinking in terms of magnitude between small self and great self, I think there is a non-trivial reading of Nishida wherein the self should be considered as something closer to a mathematical function in that it serves as the unifying force that produces different results depending on the “variables” or “context” available at the time, but ultimately connects and unifies different sequences of experience through a shared “formula”. If this reading holds true, then there is no such thing as a “greater” or “true” self and “smaller” self, but only the distinction between the unifying force of consciousness (i.e., our self as the “function”) and the consciousness of oneself as an individual produced as this force develops greater context or meaning.

Of course, defending such a view in any full-blooded way would require far more space than we have in this contribution and, at any rate, would not fully solve the problem. After all, it is a fact that Nishida speaks in the language of individuals as “cells” in society. In the end, if we were to limit ourselves solely to whether or not Nishida adopts a similar “organic” view of society or the state, the answer seems to be yes, in at least some regard. This leaves us with our second and more urgent question: Does this likeness between Nishida and his predecessors necessarily entail the justification of an imperialist worldview (or, otherwise, entail the

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28 See Nishida (1965, 300–02) for an unambiguous statement that all experience is pure experience.

29 With that said, I do think there are ways to reconcile these two views with one another. Namely, I believe that there is a reading in which we say that—insofar as the principles or structures at the base of pure experience are the same—it is possible for the system of meanings they create to aggregate and be shared by members of a community. Hence, even if there is no literal union of my perspective and your perspective, the fact that the context of our experiences all ultimately exist within the same system of meanings could serve as a whole to contextualize the individuals living in a certain community. See Stone (2022) for an articulation of such a view of selfhood in the early Nishida.
inclusion of elements that could be used to justify imperialism)? This question seems to me even more difficult.

Despite the tendency among post-war Marxist historians to include Nishida in the same category as other “idealistic” or organicist thinkers of his time, it is not immediately clear that Nishida is subject to the same concerns that could be cast upon his contemporary authors. After all, there is at least one element that Nishida does not necessarily share with them, namely the *teleological* underpinnings that justify their nationalism. Indeed, as we saw when looking at Miyake in the previous chapter, there was a not uncommon assumption that the universe had some sense of “purpose”, or was otherwise inclined to achieve something, even if we do not know what purpose is yet. The ultimate “goal” of pure experience that Nishida refers to on occasion is none other than the harmony between subject and object (or, perhaps better, between the individual self and the world it inhabits). Indeed, as we covered in the first section of this paper, Nishida places a clear moral and religious value on cultivating one’s abilities to the point that there is no distinction between subject and object. It is not just that experience “can” lack any distinction between subject and object, but rather that it is structurally inclined to pursue such a unity. All this points to an important fact—the ultimate goal of pure experience is *not* to contribute to the state, but instead to find a sense of harmony with the rest of reality.

It is here where we find the grounds for the other, much more balanced interpretation of the political consequences of pure experience. In the end, Nishida’s philosophy may be fruitfully read as a (possibly naïve) endorsement of a kind of pacifistic utopianism, given that the highest good is conceived of as harmony and one-ness with reality. Goto-Jones (2005), although certainly aware of the dangers that organic views of the state may present, explains that the philosophy of pure experience aimed at an (essentially) never-ending struggle to unite individuals into a more complete and larger personality, wherein different *en-lightened* nations all allow one another to develop diverse individuals who all have something novel to contribute to this peaceful world order (Goto-Jones 2005, 66–67). This is a view that I find both truly compelling and to be based on a much more charitable reading of Nishida than any claims that his philosophy necessarily includes imperialistic or nationalistic elements. To understand through the quasi-religious state of feeling a sense of unity with the universe that one’s true self lives in continuity with the various diverse elements that make up reality and, as a result, finding peace and harmony with humanity as a whole, seems to be a better representation of Nishida’s early thought. Moreover, the connections between these ideas and some semblance of pacifistic utopianism seem to have at least some degree of textual support (depending upon
how one reads the brief passage in which global peace is referred to by Nishida explicitly). 30

With all of that said, however, I do still have some doubts about how well this interpretation holds up to inspection. As an oversimplification of the matter at hand, consider a total annihilation of any group of humans or creatures that could bring about strife or cause the “unity” or “harmony” in our own society to crumble. In theory, this would reduce the amount of disharmony in the world and help ensure that the remaining individuals are better able to live in peace with one another. This is, obviously, not an example of pacifism nor enlightened utopianism, but why wouldn’t it meet the standards for Nishida’s scheme? After all, there would be a greater harmony after the early struggles. If what we are trying to achieve is a state in which there are no contradictions or struggles left to pull us from our more “unified” state of mind, then would not this kind of genocide be the most expedient way to achieve such peace? Naturally, one may say that this is a wilful misreading of Inquiry, insofar as the harmony Nishida advocates consists of the unification of all the diverse elements that make up reality, not a return to primordial homogeneity. After all, as Itabashi deftly explains, the very nature of peace in Nishida’s philosophy is such that we are “co-present” together amidst all of the hectic and contradictory elements that make up our world (Itabashi 2014, 35–38). Or, perhaps more importantly, Nishida seems to imply that, because any disruptions in the unity or harmony of reality are a necessary step for reaching a higher good, we should allow for diversity to prosper, even if we butt heads sometimes, and that what is more important here is that we enjoy the moments of peace that come between these struggles.

However, if this is the case, then why do we need to worry about any kind of world peace in the first place? Regardless of what kind of wars or struggles are going on around us, they seem to be little more than the key to unlocking a greater level of diversity qua unity. In this sense, would not these struggles be something praise-worthy or, from a Nishidian perspective, necessary for achieving a higher good? If one considers Nishida’s discussion of the nature of evil, this seems to be the case:

To my way of thinking, there is nothing absolutely evil; all things are fundamentally good, and reality, just as it is, is the good. [...] Fundamentally, then, things themselves contain nothing evil. Evil arises from the contradictions and conflicts of the system of reality. If someone asks about

30 There is not much to go on in terms of explicit calls for pacifism, granted, but one can glean disappointment from Nishida’s claim that “[t]he present age is still one of armed peace,” (Nishida 1990, 141) despite the fact that our personality demands “a social union that includes all humankind” (ibid.).
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. Again, reality develops through contradictions and conflicts. Although, he constantly sought evil, Mephistopheles professed to be part of the power that constantly creates good. (Nishida 1990, 171)

If this is an accurate representation of Nishida’s early ethics, then is there a way that he can avoid the seemingly absurd conclusion that things like war and famine are useful steps for furthering humanity? What would compel a human-being to take any kind of political action if these kinds of tragedies are but a mere step towards progress? At any rate, I suspect that no matter how you try to apply Nishida’s early philosophy to concrete issues, one would end up with either abstract or absurd consequences.

The reason for this, I surmise, is that Nishida’s early moral philosophy was ultimately neither nationalistic nor utopian. It was simply an “aesthetic” account of how the individual should live their life. Questions about world peace, international cooperation, or the individual’s relation to the state were, it seems to me, secondary to concerns about how one ought to lead one’s daily life. Indeed, the consideration of why doubts may remain with regard to any interpretation of Nishida’s political aims is bound to end with more questions than answers, precisely because these issues were never fleshed out beyond the necessary level for Nishida to address what were—to my mind—relatively obvious potential problems. Most notably, Nishida seems to have offered enough to dissuade a potential critic from taking the view that his work was somehow selfish or radically individualistic in a way that could damage society as a whole. As such, it seems to me quite easy to agree with the common-sense doctrine that Nishida’s early philosophy was apolitical. However, as we shall see in the next section, we must only admit this point on the condition that we also recognize that “apolitical” is not equivalent to having no consequences for the political life of the individual.

The Upshot: Embracing the Trans-ethical Element in the Early Nishida

The idea that Nishida bases his view of what he finds to be an intrinsic connection between the good or moral life and the aesthetically pleasing life is not mere speculation or interpretation on my part. It is rather directly verifiable within the text.31 However, what does it mean to lead a beautiful life? One can easily imagine

31 “From this perspective, the concept of good approaches that of beauty. Beauty is felt when things like ideals are realized, which means for things to display their original nature. Just as flowers are
an artist or poet leading an aesthetically pleasing life—and indeed, Nishida praises those with an artistic vision throughout the book—but he does not seem to limit himself only to those who produce beautiful objects. Instead, when I refer to the aesthetic aspects of Nishida's ethics, I mean simply that the Nishida glorifies the individual who has cultivated herself to the point that she can express her "true" self without any need to contemplate her actions or detach herself from reality in reflection. In this sense, even a moralist doing a good deed without hesitation or a philosopher lost in the stream of thought could enter into the realm of an aesthetic life.

Why does this matter politically? After all, it seems quite easy to imagine how the glorification of this realm of aesthetic cultivation could be taken as “apolitical” or, perhaps better, how Nishida could be understood as promoting a realm of experience that goes beyond any temporary political confinements. I say this based on both his descriptions of the nature of evil and the transcendent state of consciousness this seems to imply. First, as was noted earlier, Nishida seems to imply that no matter what despicable act may take place, it eventually culminates in a higher good and serves as a stepping stone in the individual’s process of self-cultivation. As such, it would seem that even wars, famine, and starvation are all only momentary or mundane issues that eventually lead to a greater unity in pure experience. Second, the state of moving in lockstep with reality, without any separation between oneself and the world, seems to go beyond any of these worldly concerns. Regardless of how the most recent election went or whether or not the nation is suffering, the artist achieving the pinnacle of aesthetic praxis will certainly not be torn from her canvas while she is at one with her brush. Or perhaps one could even say that any suffering she has endured due to war, starvation, or other tragedies becomes the basis for her to achieve a profound creative ecstasy. This transcendence of “ordinary” ethical, legal, or political concerns could, as I mentioned earlier, easily be conceived of as “apolitical”. And yet, this does not mean that there are no political consequences to Nishida’s work. Instead, the glorification of a level of self-awareness that goes beyond worldly concerns is likely going to be a divisive claim. First, Nishida’s pseudo-Leibnizian view of good and evil will certainly be difficult to embrace for many readers. The problems that come with this view are exacerbated by the fact that, contrary to Leibniz, Nishida does not suppose that an intelligent creator chooses from all possible worlds, 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.” (Nishida 1990, 125)


(Nishida 1990, 125)
instead relying on the structures of experience to explain why it is safe to say that evil is but one developmental phase in the procession of reality. Moreover, it seems to follow intuitively from Nishida’s philosophy that political praxis and contemplation are secondary to the cultivation of one’s aesthetic engagements. There may be ways to work around this conclusion, but a less charitable reading of Nishida could take his philosophy as an excuse for those caught in turbulent times to hide their heads in the proverbial sand.²²

And yet, for all the potential issues that one could find in this view (and its alleged tacit acceptance of imperialist rhetoric or thought), we would be hasty to unilaterally condemn Nishida’s early philosophy as entirely problematic. As one can at least to some degree confirm from historical analyses, Nishida’s philosophy can—if nothing else—help serve as a means to protect or preserve the private or existential life of the self beyond its value to the state, even during times of intense change or nationalistic fervour. My suspicion is that this is the reason why Reitan, as we mentioned before, found in Nishida a critique of the statist educational policies that would be crystallized in the “Imperial Rescript on Education”, despite Nishida never mentioning the document in Inquiry. Now, to be certain, I am not suggesting we accept this view of Nishida as a critic of Meiji and Taisho policies on moral education in the same way we would other Meiji period philosophers like Onishi Hajime,³³ but I do think there is enough historical evidence to suggest that young students who felt overwhelmed by the pressures of their time period found shelter in Nishida’s aestheticist worldview. While covering them all individually goes beyond the scope of this paper, Nishitani Keiji, Miki Kiyoshi, and Kurata Hyakuzo all report feeling existential relief upon having discovered Nishida’s early philosophy of pure experience.³⁴

²² For instance, Miyakawa Toru (1962, 117‒32) has taken Inquiry as the “crystallization” (結晶化) of the tension between early Meiji liberalism and state absolutism, arguing that the early Nishida is offering a kind of “I-philosophy” (shitetsugaku 私哲学), similar to the kind of “I-novel” (shishōsetsu 私小説) found among the early 20th century naturalist novelists. In other words, rather than facing the concrete problems of Japanese society, Nishida instead focused on introspecting on his own life, retreating into the depths of the self, and expounding upon the quasi-religious experience of cultivating oneself to the greatest extent possible. In the end, for Miyakawa, Inquiry is essentially the beginning of Nishida’s career as a bourgeois philosopher, speaking to the spiritual needs of the elite while ignoring the material needs of the working class (as well as the problem of absolute authority).

³³ As one can see in Nolte (1983), Onishi not only offered a metaphysical explanation of the development of the individual’s moral consciousness, but also applied these standards to a thoroughgoing critique of the “Imperial Rescript on Education” (Kyōiku ni kansuru chokugo 教育に関する勅語). My point here is not to say which of these styles are preferable, but merely to point out that Nishida should probably not be considered as a critic of nationalism in the same way that someone like Onishi is.

At any rate, perhaps the political nature of this early philosophy can best be summarized in the following way: Nishida's political philosophy is apolitical, but this does not mean that there are no political ramifications, for better or worse. On the one hand, Nishida's early thoughts on the nature of evil and his implications that the achievement of pure experience go beyond such worldly concerns are naïve at best. Moreover, one may take issue with this worldview, insofar as it also seems to offer a path in which individuals can avoid their political obligations or need to reflect on society and solely cultivate their own lives. On the other hand, however, this emphasis on individual cultivation may not always be a bad thing. Instead, precisely because of such demands—particularly in times of growing nationalist or imperialist insistence on a shared national identity and morality—Nishida's philosophy could serve as a refuge for those seeking to preserve their internal privacy or peace amidst overbearing calls for some kind of political conformity.

Concluding Thoughts

As is often the case in these scenarios, a careful examination of the political ramifications of Nishida's early philosophy seems to reveal that there is a at least a kernel of truth in just about all of the different interpretations that have been put forward so far. The Marxists have non-trivial reasons to associate Nishida's philosophy with late 19th and early 20th century nationalism in Japan, and also good reasons to be wary of this view. However, there is also a more positive aspect of this philosophy, insofar as Nishida can (and, in all likelihood, did) offer an outlet to escape from overwhelming political discourse and find something beyond an individual's role in the totality of the state. Whether or not this necessarily entails an endorsement of any form of significant commitment to utopianism or pacifism is something I doubt, but keeping in mind the emphasis on harmony and unity among all of the diverse elements that make up reality, it is also not hard to see why Itabashi and Goto-Jones have found a connection between Nishida's early philosophy and peacefulness.

In the end, however, Nishida's political philosophy is precisely what most of his readers will likely assume it to be—apolitical. There are, as I have stated several times, positive and negative aspects to this stance. In the end, though, rather than tallying up these different factors and making any further value judgments about this conclusion, I believe there is a more relevant claim to be made here. Namely, those who intend to interpret or develop any conception of the self or the individual arising from pure experience will have to be careful of whether or not they want to commit to this apolitical schema, because Nishida's early work may not provide us with the tools needed for articulating a more nuanced view of a political pure experience.
References


