

Nishida and Wittgenstein - the empty place beyond words

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I'd like to talk today about some work in progress, so please accept this work as half-formed, and accept also my thanks to Saori san for organising this discussion. I'm very grateful for any comments and criticism, all of which will improve my work.

The epigraph is from Roland Barthes:

Well, life, the sensation of life, the feeling of being alive; and, as we know, if that feeling is to be pure, intense, glorious, perfect, a certain void has to form within the subject; even when the jubilation (of love), for example, is at its most intense it's because there's a language void within the subject: it's when language is silent, when there's no longer any commentary, interpretation, or meaning that existence is pure Barthes, Preparation for the novel p. 47.

My interest is Nishida Kitaro and Ludwig Wittgenstein, and in the question of how to work across, for want of a better way of putting it, two different cultures of philosophy. Nishida and Wittgenstein are emblematic in some ways of philosophy East and West. There are several ways to align them, and by extension the relationship between Western and Eastern philosophies. I will argue though that there may really be only one culture of philosophy, even if it is expressed in different ways.

The first way to align them is through their shared ethico-spiritual perspective, and a shared emphasis on the value of an ordinary life.

As you know at one point Wittgenstein seriously considered entering a monastery, driven by his intense interest in living an ethical, "decent" life and his deep concern with religious ideas, although he never formally committed to an organized religion; he gave away most of his wealth; his favourite book was the Gospel in brief by Tolstoy, and he craved contemplative seclusion. While he was baptized Catholic and received a Catholic burial, he did not consider himself a Christian in the conventional sense and generally rejected religious dogma. He once told his friend Drury, "*I am not a religious man, but I cannot help seeing every problem from a religious point of view*" (Malcolm 1996). A bibliography of articles, books, and theses in the twentieth century that relate

the philosophy Wittgenstein to the study of religion and theology contains almost 900 items (Stagaman 2001).

Nishida Kitaro too considered becoming a Buddhist monk; he was deeply involved in Zen practice early in his life but ultimately pursued a career as a philosopher (Yusa 2002). His philosophy of religion is rooted in a deep engagement with Japanese religious traditions, particularly Pure Land Buddhism, which he viewed as a model for a religious philosophy that integrates with reality. He explored concepts like *basho*, the "logic of place", to understand religious experience, arguing against the Western secular-religious binary and emphasizing a religious world-view in which faith is not separate from creative, historical action in the world. Nishida saw religious life as a confrontation with one's own mortality and the realisation of an "absolutely free individual being" through self-denial, which he termed "ordinariness".

Looking from West to East, Wittgenstein can readily be seen as a zen-like philosopher. Recurrent themes in his work include: philosophy as therapy; experience beyond language; the value of ordinary life lived with enlightenment, and practice rather than dogma.

[[The first commentary to explore Wittgenstein and Zen was in 1958 (Wienpahl 1958) which noted some Zen-like formulations in the *Tractatus*, especially section 6, The general form of truth functions. One example:

6.41 The sense of the world must lie outside it. In the world everything is as it is and happens as it happens - there is no value in it - and if there were, it would be of no value.

Wittgenstein's Zen is treated at length in *Wittgenstein and Buddhism* by Chris Gudmundsen (Gudmundsen 1977), which argues in detail for the affinity of Wittgenstein and Mahayana Buddhism.]]

Beyond this shared moral seriousness lies a deeper structural similarity: both thinkers confront the problem of what lies beyond language. **The second** way to connect them therefore is the constitutive role of the emptiness beyond or outside language in their philosophies. Wittgenstein considered value to be ineffable, indescribable; in contrast Nishida's articulation of *basho*, absolute nothingness, is the active and dynamic source of expression.

Nishida's first philosophical breakthrough was the publication of *Zen no kenku*. (trans. *An inquiry into the good*) in 1911, whose reception enabled him to move to the centre of Japanese philosophy. The second breakthrough was his 1926 essay *basho* (available in Krummel 2012). Nishida's aim in *basho* was to overcome what he saw as some false dichotomies in western epistemology such as subject and object, idealism and realism, experience and reality. Originating in the Western metaphysical tradition of positing a foundational "being" from which the binaries emerge, Nishida posits "absolute nothingness" as the ultimate ground of existence - it is not a mere void or absence of things, but rather an active, dynamic, and creative source from which all phenomena emerge and into which they return.

An empty place is also constitutive of Wittgenstein's early philosophy. In the well-known letter to Ludwig Ficker of 1919, Wittgenstein says that the *Tractatus* is basically an ethical text, and that the ethical realm lives in silence:

...the point of the book is ethical. I once wanted to give a few words in the foreword which now actually are not in it, which, however, I'll write to you now because they might be a key for you: I wanted to write that my work consists of two parts: of the one which is here, and of everything which I have not written. And precisely this second part is the important one ... In brief, I think: All of that which many are babbling today, I have defined in my book by remaining silent about it. (Luckhardt 1979, p94-95).

In short, an empty place is central to Wittgenstein and Nishida. But Wittgenstein's empty place is logical rather than ontological; Nishida's is ontological rather than logical.

The **third** alignment is their common intellectual roots. They may be regarded as occupying separate philosophical worlds, yet both were formed by William James' radical empiricism, and by the Austrian intellectual environment that developed out of Bolzano and Brentano's descriptive psychology which ran through to Twardowski, Meinong, and Husserl, though neither embraced phenomenology.

Nishida's engagement with this tradition can be seen in the contents of his personal library, which contains German editions of Bolzano, Brentano, Meinong, and Husserl (Kyoto University 1983), and in his 1915/6 Kyoto University lecture series "The Austrian School of Philosophy from Bolzano and Brentano to Husserl". Wittgenstein absorbed Bolzano and Brentano through his formative Viennese philosophical-scientific milieu

dominated by questions of language, science, and ethics documented in (Smith 1981) and especially in (Janik 1973).

Both inherit Brentano's project of describing psychology from an empirical standpoint, that is the description of experience without reduction - a unified science of psychology involving the appreciation of mental phenomena in their full, lived complexity and intentional nature (Brentano 1874). Nishida translates Brentano into an ontology of pure experience; Wittgenstein transforms him into an externally focussed logical grammar, and later the pragmatic pluralism of forms of life and language games.

Both also take from William James the grounding of reality in empiricism, as detailed in (Botz-Borstein 2003) In the *Tractatus* the facts in logical space are the world (1.13), and in *Philosophical Investigations* meaning is rooted in everyday practice. Nishida's conception of pure experience can be traced directly to James' essays collected posthumously as *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (Burckhardt 1976).

Finally, to close, I'd like to extend this idea of emptiness through Foucault's analysis of language. The **fourth possible** alignment, which is one that I feel most uncertain about, is that Nishida's and Wittgenstein's respective turns - toward absolute nothingness, and toward language - may represent divergent long range solutions to the same epistemic crisis, the one identified by Foucault in *Order of Things* as the demotion of language to being one object among others:

*From the nineteenth century, language began to fold in upon itself, to acquire its own particular density, to deploy a history, an objectivity, and laws of its own. **It became one object of knowledge among others**, on the same level as living beings, wealth and value, and the history of events and men.* (Foucault 1994 p295 my emphasis)

This turn towards language explains the rise of analytic philosophy in the West, and I have argued elsewhere that the ground of Wittgenstein's first philosophy can be found in the epistemic mutation Foucault described (Toth 2021).

Was there a shared linguistic turn? Can it be that Japanese philosophy, at least that philosophy born with Nishida, dealt with the same shift, even if it dealt with it in a different way? I am not sure. Certainly, the changes accompanying the Meiji restoration involved a strong linguistic dimension (Ueda 2021). The restoration took place at the same time as the West was adopting a philosophy that reflected its own linguistic dimension. As Ian Hacking has argued, from the nineteenth century onwards language

isn't just a concern or issue for philosophy; it becomes foundational to the development of philosophical ideas (Hacking 1975).

If, in Western discourse from the nineteenth century on, language becomes an object of discourse, what would it mean for language to become an object in Nishida's philosophy? I am hoping to understand all this better during my time in Japan and I would be very interested to hear your thoughts.

To conclude, today's talk is merely work in progress. It finds affinities between the philosophy of Wittgenstein and Nishida Kitaro, even if their different cultures mean that their work appears to be different. Both philosophies are profoundly ethical. Both share an interest in the world beyond or before language. Both share an intellectual background in Austrian philosophy and the empiricism of William James.

In *The Birth of the Clinic*, Foucault described a shift in the nature of medical language: from a focus on the patient's narrative and visible symptoms to an empty place that allows the objective, clinical gaze to operate and restructure knowledge. The "hollowness" Foucault describes is not an absence, but a precondition for a new kind of medical truth to emerge.

In Wittgenstein, the empty place is silence - a logical-grammatical boundary beyond which is ethics. In Nishida, the empty place is the ontological ground from which being emerges. If the modern episteme situates language as one object among others, both Wittgenstein and Nishida attempt, in their own way, to establish language's transcendental relation to the world.

Thank you very much for coming along today. I'm grateful.

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