The Insight of Action-Intuition: Nishida Kitarō's Artistic Expression and the Buddha Nature of Moral Virtue

Abstract

East Asian Mahayana Buddhist tradition reveals that the path to liberation lies in understanding the wisdom of emptiness as the interconnectedness and impermanence of all things, both fostering and implicitly supported by compassion, comprising the complete absence of concepts yet allowing the individual to have empathy with the conventional appearance of the world.

What does it mean to say that visible form is empty? What does it mean that even wisdom, and the compassion of Buddhahood are empty?

In the Japanese aesthetic tradition, as a powerful and persistent legacy of Zen Buddhism, art, especially painting can awaken and transform our ordinary consciousness, give us access to this pre-reflective unity of self and world, to know reality at its most basic level, such that art can be seen to represent the intuitive expression of existence itself.

In his 1927 book *Art and Morality* Kyoto philosopher Nishida Kitaro argues for a process of the individual self and the world mutually forming each other through acts of creation and interaction such that both art and morality are seen as manifestations of a fundamental, non-dualistic "pure experience" that precedes the separation of subject and object. He later develops this idea to an understanding of artistic creation as not merely a reflection of a pre-existing world, but a form of "action-intuition" where the artist is both engaged in the world and intuitively creating it. Just as artistic expression can overcome the distinction between thought and action, moral action is similarly active intuitive such that dissolving the distinction between subject and the world, liberates one to practice morality which is not flawed by conventional faulty reasoning.

Nishida sets out a complete metaphysical framework designed to serve as a foundation for his ethical standpoint, fortified by his idea of artistic creativity as a form of active “self-awakening”. Accordingly, for Nishida, philosophical thinking and both art and morality all come into being out of the ontological relationship between the Self and the Absolute. However, maintaining the (Zen) Buddha-nature position that intrinsic moral values are apprehended in a state of awareness that is prior to the dualistic intrusion of human everyday reference determinations, admits the difficulty of the very idea of ‘self-emptiness’ as a subject of moral choice and lays bare the ontic existential dilemma for Mahayana Buddhism in relating ultimate emptiness to conventional living.

Keywords :- pure experience, Japanese aesthetics, emptiness, Yogacara, moral realism

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Significance and Implications

"Whatever exists appears
like a painting or a shimmering mirage
all the forms that are seen
are like a dream in which nothing is real."
(The *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, the most authoritative and influential text of the Yogacara school of Indian Mahayana Buddhism, Chapter 2, XXXV)

Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1 Background to the Study

Ontology — the study of being or what it means for something to exist — has always been an ideological battleground for metaphysicians. In Western thinking existence is something that exists (and nothingness does not), notwithstanding Heidegger's concern that metaphysics, in focusing only on beings or entities *within* the Being, has neglected the primordial happening of Ultimate Being in itself, which he comes to understand as 'a ground without ground (Heidegger, pp 90, 93). Nevertheless, the coherence of the fundamental ontological question 'What is being?' would seem to intrinsically entail both an asking 'subject' and an 'object' of inquiry.
Rather than abstract speculation about the nature of the universe, the Buddha's highest priority was the practical question of how to alleviate suffering, the soteriological release from dukkha. Despite this emphasis on ethics most Buddhist traditions are built upon metaphysical foundations. In all schools, understanding reality and attaining enlightenment are integral, emphasising that perception and inference are the means to correct knowledge, underpinned by commitment to the core ontological doctrine of the two truths.
Nagarjuna, whose writings are the basis for the Madhyamaka, or "Middle Way," school attributes the two truths to the Buddha as follows:
"the Dharma taught by the buddhas is precisely based on the two truths: a truth of mundane conventions and a truth of the ultimate" (Garfield XXIV :8, p.68).

So, the Buddhist understanding is that all beings and phenomena are dependently originating. They lack inherent existence and arise only interdependently. Despite developing radical arguments demonstrating that means of knowledge and their objects cannot exist as essentially different entities, Nagarjuna was sceptical of the ability of reason and language to capture this conditioned nature of reality and his view of ultimate truth as the truth of

emptiness (*śūnyatā)*. As it transpires, our everyday view of the world is not ultimately true, and yet, as an empty elaborate conceptual linguistic construct it has a kind of conventional reality that is needed in order that from the standpoint of Madhyamaka philosophy we might somehow gain liberating insight into the highest truth realised by wisdom- *śūnyatā* which is itself emptiness. But crucially,

> "Without a foundation in the conventional truth,
> The significance of the ultimate cannot be taught.
> Without understanding the significance of the ultimate,
> Liberation is not achieved"
> (Garfield XXIV :10, p68).

Madhyamaka recognises an ultimate 'fruit', the nirvana of emptiness, but the theory of two truths leaves a troubling disjuncture between our common-sense experience and enlightenment. Nagarjuna uses language to acknowledge that language deceives us. We cannot provide knowledge with secure foundations in either personal experiences or pure reason. Indeed, the existence of what we call knowledge only exists because we have created it. Yet even supposing that our experience of the world is shaped by language, it does not bring things into existence.

The Yogācāra school criticised Nagarjuna's anti-foundationalist standpoint and his 'negativistic' interpretation of emptiness. The Madhyamika concept of emptiness becomes identified with pure consciousness, or rather the ālayavijñāna or storehouse consciousness, responsible for the flow of mental phenomena which is all one directly knows to exist, but something that positively and necessarily exists, and without which real basis the erroneous, commonsense construction, the conceptualised reality could not come about.

> "'There exists the imagination of the unreal, there is no duality,
> but there is emptiness, even in this there is that."'
> (Madhyāntavibhāga cited in King, 665).

If this intermediary dependently originating nature of perceptions did not exist, then realising things the way they really are, 'empty' as in lacking a real subject/object duality, and ultimately nirvana, the full liberation that comes with the transcendent experience of an undifferentiated unity, could not occur. This experience, also known as tathata, can only come about as a result of profound meditative spiritual practice. In influential sutras predating the formal emergence of the Yogācāra school the latent supporting essence or inherent potential for such awakening is acknowledged as the primordial fundamentally pure tathagatagarbha.

East Asian schools, in wondering how ordinary human beings could become Buddhas,

conflated and adopted the Yogacara alayavijnana/tathagatagarbha concept which came to represent both the awakened and unawakened “Buddha nature” seed, and established it with a cosmological role as the beginningless, unchanging Absolute, an emptiness both at our core and at the base of reality itself which is itself full of possibilities (a synthesis introduced in the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* c. 4th century and developed in *Treatise on Awakening Mahāyāna Faith* c. 6th century). So, in the Chinese Huayan and Chan/Zen traditions, practice involves understanding that one’s Buddha-nature encompasses the single, ‘one mind’ reality, seeing into one’s own true nature and developing a Buddha way of being until this becomes natural and spontaneous.

Drawing deeply on Yogacara’s identification of emptiness with pure consciousness and the illusory nature of the subject-object dichotomy, Zen meditation values losing the sense of an individual self with a personal ego in deliverance of one’s true self, a transpersonal self of luminous awareness, a mystical identification between the self and the universe.

So, the Mahayana Zen tradition contends that compassion (karuna) and intuitive wisdom (prajna) are fundamentally equivalent because both radiate from the pre-ego mode of without-thinking. This is what Dogen had referred to as “casting off of *mind-body*”; attaining the subjectivity of nothingness, a standpoint not predetermined by conceptual language where unconditioned awareness, insight, and compassion already lie in the primordial openness of pre reflective experience, realising the capacity of being truly selfless, and spontaneously moral.

However, to existentially justify the possibility of encounter that is not based on the discrimination between self and other, requires both concurrence and absolute distinction between the concrete human lifeworld, and the dimension of true, authentic encounter.

In terms of Nagarjuna’s two truths, we might ask what part if any, philosophical rationalising regarding the nature of subjectivity or ultimate structure can play in a path of enlightened self-cultivation in order to gain access a primordial ground (or non-ground) that resists, the very possibility of all thinking and being.

1.2 Rationale, Objectives and Methodology

What we will be investigating is, whether we can glean an understanding of this ontological movement from transcendence to emptiness that (allegedly) realises agency and spontaneous ‘without thinking’ ethical action in everyday life, not from metaphysical speculation or epistemological reasoning, but from the world of art and especially the epiphanic quality of particular paintings.

Engaging with paintings exemplifying the relation between emptiness and form, has the capacity to transform our thinking and induce meditative attitudes that might corroborate the fundamental Buddhist rejection of the subject-object model of reality and provide insight or perhaps even in themselves afford access to the better consciousness, the 'enlightened consciousness of moral virtue, and religious devotion, or in terms of the key Yogacara *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, seeing into one's own nature and attaining "Buddhahood".

> "This is the meaning of Zen master Hakuin's saying, "Slice right through the field of the eighth (storehouse) consciousness."
> (Kejii Nishitani quoted by Bret W. Davis in Edelglass and Garfield, p.98)

Nishitani was a follower and disciple of Nishida Kitaro, founder of the Kyoto school who wrestled with a system of thought premised on the Japanese tradition that metaphysics, aesthetics and morality are inextricably interwoven, in order to determine whether the basic Zen concepts of emptiness could be formulated in the terms or in the manner of western philosophy.

By comparing Nishida's philosophy, with (Chapter 2) the western thinking of Merleau-Ponty Iris Murdoch and Schopenhauer and then (Chapter 3) from the perspective of Eastern Emptiness, in accommodating and reconciling (Chapter 4) the seemingly incompatible goals of art as inherent revelation of the universe in its innermost essence, and morality as existential conduct rooted in wisdom and compassion, we recognise (Chapter 5) that an intellectual understanding, as separate from our lived experience of emptiness raises some pertinent ethical difficulties.

The materials for my analysis are collected from various sources - books, journals, seminars and online resources. The study is principally descriptive and interpretive, evolving around an ongoing literature review incorporating the salient previous academic research of:- Nishida and the Kyoto School - Bret Davis, David Dilworth, James Heisig, Thomas Kasulis, Geron Kopf; Zen Art /aesthetics - Raquel Bouso, Robert Carter, Adam Loughnane, John Maraldo, Steve Odin, Kuki Shūzō and Buddhist moral realism - Gordon Davis, Jay Garfield, Glen Mazis

The specific motivation is to integrate the thinking of those scholars who agree that aesthetics has a part to play in philosophical discourse and that art is of ontological significance, not as a technique that is an end in itself, but as a way to self-knowledge, with those who question the moral position of Mahayana Buddhist emptiness, asking whether the "One Mind in Two Aspects" doctrine or acting Buddha nature is a philosophically justifiable position, a dialogue previously unexplored.

Chapter 2. Nishida and Western Philosophy

2.1 Pure Experience

> *"what I upheld as the standpoint of 'pure experience'... was a standpoint that transcended the dichotomy of subject and object, and I tried to investigate the objective world also from that standpoint."* (Nishida Kitaro 1939, quoted in Yusa, p.301)

From the Western outlook, wrestling with how the abstract concepts of Yogacara Buddhism can possibly be grounded in a core guiding conviction about how things actually present in existing reality, might land us in Japan with Nishida Kitaro and the Kyoto school, whose work incorporated Japanese Zen thinking but is also firmly footed in the Western philosophical phenomenology tradition.

The Zen teachings were primarily derived from Yogacara. Accordingly, emphasis is on the cultivation of mental clarity through samādhi (meditative concentration), to discover nonduality without relying on thought, maintaining that language and logic can be hindrances to the authenticating of Buddha-nature that is the achievement of enlightenment.

Even though liberation instills the knowledge that only the flow of conscious experience is ultimately real, somehow this awareness institutes a way of being, a lived ontology, 'lingering' beyond formal meditation to undistracted full engagement with the present moment in conventional daily life activity.

For Nagarjuna, sunyata remained an *epistemological* emptiness, and strictly speaking, the difference between the two levels of truth was held as experiential not ontological. Whereas for Nishida, assumedly influenced by Yogacara theories of consciousness as the primary reality, what he refers to as first "pure experience" and then shaped by Zen tradition as "absolute nothingness", bears on the metaphysical as shown to lie at the logical ultimate ground of all reality; the ontological domain of the primordial foundation of consciousness in which the ontic self as the individual arises.

Nishida's fundamental conviction was that the epistemological dichotomy between objectivity and subjectivity assumed by western philosophy needed to be overcome in order to realise true reality as we actually experience it, "always already" before our understanding becomes mediated and distorted through concepts like minds and material objects.

> "When one directly experiences one's own conscious states, there is not yet a subject or an object, and knowing and its object are complete unified" (Nishida, 1992, pp 3-4)

For Nishida then "it is not that experience exists because there is an individual, but that an individual exists because there is experience" (p.xxx), implying that pure experience is the

foundation that makes possible and determines the relation between the self and the other. Self-awareness (a pivotal concept) is inherently embedded within the emergence of experience "when an intuiting subject and an intuited object are realised as one in the original fact of awareness, while, at the same time, this duality-in-unity is grasped in reflection…this kind of unity is what constitutes the state of pure experience" (Hisao and Yoko, p.v), and the self can be viewed as both the activity and manifestation of the primordial unifying power of consciousness in itself.

Hence, the 'subjective' self has to be negated and "made nothing" in order to actualise its awakened universal self, an absolute that is beyond, or prior to dualistic distinctions, what Nishida comes to call the place or 'basho' of absolute nothingness.

> "This ultimate 'groundless ground,' which "envelops" all beings, yet which does so in such a way that lets them contain their own principle of self-determination.... It must be thought of as both the epistemic source of consciousness and the ontological origin of beings." (B.Davis, 2023)

As a philosopher Nishida has the difficulty of explaining how this metaphysical absolute nothingness, the ground of ontological arising and epistemological realisation of true self and the pure experience unity of reality 'as it is', then logically connects with an ethical embodied lived experience of the historical world and the acting self in it. To do so Nishida is required to affirm what he calls a dialectical world; that the self-identity of contradictories, of the many and the one/nothingness cannot be resolved but must be accepted as the experience of reality as it is known by us.

Thus, Nishida's philosophical assurance on his 'logic' of identity in contradiction, so-called 'Absolute Nothingness', offers a determinedly "more inclusive position than Zen in that it can account for the experience of both analysis and immediacy within one description of consciousness" (Kasulis, p.64).

However, we should say that Nishida never lost sight of the ultimate limitations of language and conceptualization. Indeed, for Nishida,

> "My thought has reached the point where it cannot be explained by the framework of conventional philosophical language" (Suzuki quoting Nishida in Yusa, p.190)

There will be more to say about Zen's interest in language, in relation to whether its role in philosophy precludes an ontology that could ever possess the capability to directly get at what is fundamental in all experience the origin of Being.

Gereon Kopf writes

> "While the claim that Nishida's thought constitutes a Buddhist philosophy

> or even a Zen philosophy is rather controversial I believe it is justified to utilise Nishida's thought as a philosophical expression of Zen (and thus as Zen philosophy)**" (**Kopf, p.xv)

It does seem evident that Nishida, inspired by the 13th century Zen monk and founder of the Soto Zen School of Japanese Buddhism, Dogen, firmly believed that experience achieved in zazen meditation corroborated his philosophical conclusions regarding the primordially given unifying power of consciousness; the pre-reflective dimension of "pure experience". Accordingly for Nishida, the self-awareness of absolute nothingness as the ground of a life of true compassion overlaps with the self-negation in Zen Buddhism, the "casting off of body-mind" and emergence of egoless "non-knowing" Buddha-nature (tahathagarba), whereby those who have realised enlightenment feel unity with everything that exists and spontaneously act with empathy for all suffering beings. Both thinkers allege that pure reason *alone* without any notion of intuition or insight is unable to penetrate the depth of living reality and stress the pre-eminence of experiential rather than abstract truth.
Quoting Nishida's friend and Zen scholar DT Suzuki: -

> "The proper way to study śūnyatā (emptiness) is to become aware of it, in the only way śūnyatā can be approached" (Suzuki, p.5)

Very much influenced by Suzuki, the prevailing conception of Zen enlightenment is of a state of pure consciousness, a flow of "pure" sense-data uncorrupted by conceptual reflection or indeed valuational mediation, implying an anti-philosophical, irrational or at best vague quietist standpoint for authentic moral practice.

> "Chan//Zen pronouncements can even be disparaging about goals, ideals and the kind of normative reflection that sees moral truth as somehow above and beyond mundane descriptive truths" (Heinrich Dumoulin 2005 cited in G. Davis. p.27)

Whereas Nishida's philosophy, although it remains firmly embedded in the non-duality tradition, this meditative state-of-mind when consciousness becomes "absolutely nothing "and realises self-awakening reality, yes, it manifests a kind of intuitive knowledge that surpasses conventional understanding, yet it embraces the standpoint of being.
Thereupon the crux of our investigation will be how Nishida develops and negotiates his notion of pure experience as a particular awakened consciousness, yet also a unifying activity in which seeing things primordially as they are does not entail a denial of our acquired world of thoughts, concepts, meaning and judgments.
We will find in our later discussion of language that determining precisely where the term "thinking" sits on a cognition and conscious awareness spectrum that ranges from problem

solving back to ‘default’ core beliefs can be particularly problematic. At this point it is sufficient to recognise that in contrast to the Zen tradition’s anti-intellectual devotion to its ultimate irrelevance, Nishida’s, pure experience includes thinking,

> “The fact of pure experience in this regard is the alpha and omega of our thought, and thinking is the process by which a great system of consciousness develops and actualizes itself” (Nishida, p.16),

where even critical thinking, to assimilate the historical preoccupations and social conditions of the human narrative that can indeed shed light on the nature of ‘duality-in-unity and guide our behaviour, is grasped in ‘reflection’; materialising as non-egoic sedimented abstractions from the original unity seen as “different facets of one and the same thing.” (Nishida 1911/1990, 10.)

But at the deepest level of reality, the basho of absolute nothingness, through the “logic of self-contradictory identity”, unconditioned non dualistic awareness is our basic nature revealed in the conventional world by an instinctive integration of insight and compassion. Highlighting that agents are embodied subjects immersed within the intersubjective and social world, Nishida calls this “action intuition”’, understood as the body’s originary structural capacity for a non-conceptual *affective* engagement between self and world. As he puts it:

> “In our standpoint of action, what is outside is inside and vice versa . . . we ‘see’ things by acting, and things determine us and at the same time we determine things. This is action-intuition. We say that experience is the foundation of knowledge, but this is because experience is understood as action-intuition in this sense” (Arisaka p.206)

So, for Nishida morality is intuitive, based on the immediate apprehension of a situation, wherein our ability to focus our mind to the point where the subject-object dichotomy disappears achieves not just a psychological experience but is enacted in decisive participation and response in the objective world.

As we will be discussing, this a type of connectedness that is fundamental to zazen meditation and ethical expression, in which the role of the body is crucial, also grounded Nishida’s view of artistic creativity and aesthetic experience as a body mind engagement, active meditation.

2.2 The sheath of non-being

> *“That the presence of the world is precisely the presence of its flesh to my flesh, that I “am of the world” and that I am not it … it is the sheath of non-being that the subjectivity always carries about itself.”* (Merleau-Ponty,1969, p. 127)

Nishida's account of the body as the instrument of the self-formation provides a propitious conceptual bridge between the Zen Buddhist philosophy of Dogen and the 'lived body' phenomenology of the French philosopher Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961), whose conceptualisation of embodiment is similarly grounded in the primordial unity of conscious experience and pre reflective bodily existence.

Merleau-Ponty's method shares Nishida's experiential emphasis and foundation. Asserting the "primacy of perception" and the undeniable givenness and interdependence of both the subject and the world, he sought to overcome the dualistic metaphysic of mind and body, self and environment by recognising the body as the crucial aspect in the coordinated complexity of knower and known. This "ambiguity" of *being* a conscious body- subject Merleau-Ponty reconceives as "flesh", defined by elements offering inherently reversible perspectives and providing a balanced unity, yet which are, and remain, fundamentally different from one another.

As elucidated by Glen Mazis

> "...to elaborate how there can be both oneness and twoness, intertwining yet the uniqueness of every living being. It is the same logic of emptiness at the heart of Buddhism" (Mazis, p.186)

Merleau-Ponty acknowledges the chiasmic logic of this interweaving of the transcendental and empirical where the body subject's consciousness "crosses" with the objective existence of the world. Meanwhile, the primary ground of self-knowledge, that which is prior to cognitive reflection, that cannot itself be realised within the act of perception, is encapsulated in his phrase 'wild being', inferring the brute world that transcends nature's *givenness*. Alluding to an original unity prior to the split between subject and object just as in the case of Nagarjuna's śūnyatā, there is seemingly no substantial or inherently self-existing entity which functions as this foundation for experience. Indeed, the rejection of ultimate essence entails that it is solely through the 'samsaric' lived body's existential perceptual flow that the understanding of 'flesh' as the constitutional unfolding of mutual responsiveness between the perceiving subject and the world can emerge; a third dimension of reciprocal receptivity delineating an ontological rejection of both body and mind as basic structural substance. Within this conception, consciousness as the mediating condition between the body and the world it inhabits comes secondary to our initial primordial reactions to the world an ontological position with remarkably similar to Nishida's signature idea of basho as the unified field in the background of consciousness, what he refers to as contradictory self-identity of the many and the one; a "dialectical" view of our embodied existence, which in turn bears a distinct resemblance to Merleau-Ponty's ambiguous body of the flesh and the chiasm.

Crucially, as a phenomenological existentialist Merleau-Ponty grapples with the requirement of an implicit awareness of oneself as a subject; that some notion of the self is part of the experience, a pre reflective, tacit level of selfhood

> "the tacit cogito, a pre reflective silent consciousness, an intentional operative, which supports reflective consciousness forming the basis of all evidence and certainty that originates in the act of perception and not the prior correspondence of consciousness with itself…… a primitive self-consciousness which is simultaneous with the consciousness of the world" (Olsen, p.86)

Whereas in contending that the phenomenologist can never totally eliminate this objectifying standpoint, Nishida upholds a more radical overturning of the self where the body becomes the primary site of self-knowledge, in which the entire cosmos is reflected and manifested

> "Nishida does not stress that the vision is mine, as Merleau-Ponty does, but rather emphasizes its neutral thingness…… The self-awakening of the world takes place in human consciousness, and consciousness marks the advent of the world" (Stevens p.139)

In the case of Zen, this reaches even further to an emptiness beyond any notion of intentional thinking, equating to the perception of Buddha-nature itself.
The ontological ambiguity of "flesh" could also imply ambiguity in relation to ethics. But, as with Buddhist emptiness and Nishida nothingness, for Merleau-Ponty, ethical conduct in the world involves reorienting one's being away from notions of moral truth to awareness of the fundamental pre reflective intertwining of subject and object in existential co-existence.

2.3 Unselfing

> *"The notion of achieving a pure cognitive state where the object is not disturbed by the subjective ego, but where subject and object simply exist as one is here made comprehensible through a certain experience of art and nature… A discipline of meditation wherein the mind is alert but emptied of self enables this form of awareness, and the disciplined practice of various skills may promote a similar unselfing... Attend 'without thinking about'."* (Murdoch, 1994, p. 245)

For Merleau-Ponty, perception requires at least some minimal consciousness of the self, however inconclusive; "there is a world for me because I am not unaware of myself" (Merleau-Ponty, 2013, p.311). In the moral philosophy of Iris Murdoch (1919–1999), this ambiguous, tacit awareness of oneself as a subject, is argued for as a substantial self,

against any contention that denigrates its importance or denies its existence. Moreover, this self is a persistent self, a private inner realm of reflection, constantly changing and developing in reaction to the social world we inhabit. But crucially Murdoch sees the idea of a private inner space of freedom as “a necessary regulative idea, about which it makes no sense to ask, is it true or false that it is so” (Murdoch, 1951, p.31), and without which we could not comprehend the nature ourselves as the human beings we are.

There are a number of strands to Murdoch’s philosophical outlook but what we are chiefly interested in is her idea that this substantial self is what shapes and conditions our attention to the world. Yet critically Murdoch also writes “The self, the place where we live, is a place of illusion” (Murdoch 2014, p.93). Here, Murdoch is adopting and modifying some ideas of the mystic, French philosopher Simone Weil, and in particular her central ethical concept of “attention” as “de-creation” of the Self. For Weil, this is a profound religious viewpoint of self-withdrawal in which the self disappears, and we become nothing. Murdoch concurs that attentive perceiving requires adopting and exerting a particular attitude, one which engages the whole person, in which ego-centric “illusions” are suppressed such that the whole of reality is more fully realised.

> “We cease to be in order to attend to the existence of something else”. (Murdoch, 1999, p.348)

But in this, Murdoch’s own idea of unselfing, the primary focus is on inner self transformation, rather than a radical wholesale rejection of the self.

> “Attention reveals the world as it is, but for Murdoch, it cannot reveal a world without us” (Panizza, p.8)

If we might contrast with Merleau-Ponty,

> “Truth does not merely ‘dwell’ in the ‘inner man; or rather, there is no “inner man,” man is in and toward the world, and it is in the world that he knows himself.
> (Merleau-Ponty 2013 p.xxiv)

Yet although they clearly differ in the matter of its ambiguity or substantiality, we see that Merleau-Ponty and Murdoch link their conceptions of self with the idea of attention, and in this respect are in agreement that the act of attention is not energised and governed solely by exercising the will.

For Murdoch, unselfing opens the subject up to the idea of perfect Goodness in the world enabling them to apprehend the truth of moral reality outside the individual self.

“The authority of morals is the authority of truth, that is, of reality” (Murdoch, 2014, p.88), self-awakening as a self-aware journey to authenticity.

So, although she recognises the appeal, of Zen teacher Katsuki Sekida's view of meditation in rooting out the selfish ego (Murdoch, 1994, pp. 239-243), Murdoch clearly does not embrace the extreme radical empty self represented by Zen Buddhism, a no self, something that never existed in the first place. Yes, "unselfing" means *something* of the critical self is lost, but it is not the way of ultimate removal of duality, nor does it make any definite claim as to the nature of human experience in its primal pre-reflective dimension. Murdoch emphasises that perception is deeply conceptual and that mental concepts participate in all aspects of moral understanding as part of her argument for the existence of a moral reality - the sovereignty of good over other concepts. Since experiences always involve intellect and cognitive activity, there can never be pure experience.

Accordingly, ethics is concerned with personal transformation shaped by our acquisition of the relevant concepts, the "background moral attitudes" and values, distinctly not an affirmation of moral agency as spontaneous right action.

As Silvia Caprioglio Panizza appreciates,

> "Murdoch is putting her finger on something of extreme importance: the idea that in Zen meditative practice, dualism is overcome, and the self is neither an instrument of perception, nor a problematic entity that we need to destroy (Panizza, p.8).

It would appear that Murdoch's concept of unselfing is very different from Nagarjuna's empty self. Indeed, Murdoch's substantial self is firmly ensconced in conventional reality. But we should remember Nagarjuna affirmed a "Middle Way" of Two Truths and notably pointed out that without dependence on everyday practice "the significance of the ultimate cannot be taught "".

In her 'Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals', Murdoch draws inspiration from the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer who like Murdoch was convinced of "the fundamental nature of the moral" (Murdoch 1994, p.65).

2.4 The better consciousness

> "the better consciousness in me lifts me into a world where there is neither personality nor causality, nor subject and object" (cited in App, p.89)

Schopenhauer stays faithful to Kant's claim that the moral significance of human actions somehow pertains to "the thing-in-itself", the absolute reality of a noumenal world beyond, (Schopenhauer 1998, pp. 49–50.), something that exists eternally, and which, since it is not in space and time it cannot entail multiplicity.

“Hence knowledge of the whole, of the inner nature of the thing-in-itself [[...]] becomes the quieter of all and every willing” (Schopenhauer, 2000, vol1, p.379)

For Schopenhauer, (as we discussed for Nishida and Zen Buddhism), somehow via deep metaphysical insight into an absolute reality “beyond” and the realisation of the ultimate transcendent unity of all beings, overcomes human egoism and arouses compassion.

> *“ we enter the state of pure contemplation, we are raised for the moment above all willing, above all desires and cares; we are, so to speak, rid of ourselves. We are no longer the individual that knows in the interest of its constant willing;* **(**Schopenhauer, 2000, vol1 p.390)

Murdoch concurs that moral activity involves the apprehension of an objective moral reality. Unlike Kant’s ‘moral law within’, which is fundamentally located deep within the self and understood as a deliberation of reason and conscience and duty, for Murdoch, a knowable moral reality outside the individual self instigates our moral activity, and moral responsibility remains in the substantive ‘conventional’ world

> “the attempted purification of consciousness as the central and fundamental ‘arena’ of morality, but the nature of the world must be thought of as essentially ’in’ this place to” (Murdoch, 1994, p.293)

Both Murdoch and Schopenhauer are committed to the existence of an objective morality which is affiliated with “purification of consciousness”. For Murdoch, clearly, compassion does not originate from inner command but is rather the intuitive, spontaneous response to an enticement that draws attention. Whereas, in Schopenhauer’s terms, the impetus seems primarily to deny and defeat the will in our own selves in order to attain a state of ecstasy, which somewhat paradoxically requires the absence of all egoistic motivation.

We might feel that this apparent disparity of the two attitudes chimes with similar tensions in the Buddhist position. The ideal motivation in Buddhist tradition is called *bodhicitta*, the mental state that leads to awakening, characterised as the intention to free all living beings from every kind of suffering, forever; suffering witnessed in the conventional world. But on the other hand, we have the desire to capture something of the ultimate truth of reality and move towards true salvation, nirvana or bliss.

We will be returning to the thorny question of whether Buddhist ethics ‘requires’ moral realism. In any case, Murdoch approves Schopenhauer’s allegation that the condition of spiritual liberation, in which the divide between subject and object breaks down, is an aesthetic state. Captivated by great, art our ‘willing’ individuality is overcome when,

> “the noisy ego is silenced, we are freed from possessive selfish desires and anxieties and are one with what we contemplate, enjoying a unique unity with something which is itself unique” (Murdoch 1994, p.59)

Nishida was similarly influenced by Schopenhauer’s idea of complete absorption in the aesthetic presence as an ecstatic selfless contemplation, where the distinction between individual and world dissolves.

Chapter 3 Nishida and Buddhist Philosophy

3.1 Mono No Aware

> *“One who really possesses a mind which has profound feelings about the phenomenal world and the noumenal realm is... one who knows mono no aware”* (Kato, p. 558)

Buddhism and especially Zen Buddhism was instrumental in shaping the Japanese arts.
In “A Philosophic Grounding for Japanese Aesthetics”, Robert Carter references Nishida as someone whose philosophy is steeped in the language and concepts of Zen Buddhism, and its impact on “aesthetic sensibility”. In particular, Carter examines the transformative power of the characteristic feature "becoming the thing itself” (Carter in Nguyen p.6), “emptying” one’s mind in the union of subject/object.
In Zen Buddhism the arts of poetry, painting and calligraphy are central to cultivating a mind open to enlightenment. However, our inquiry will focus on monochrome sumi-e ink painting, which originated in China as a natural development of brush calligraphy and came to be the ultimate medium for the transmission of Japanese Zen.
Carter continues his exploration of this negation of subjectivity, the merging of what the (no) mind perceives/conceives and the hand executes, at the critical moment.

> “This activity is the union of subject and object, it is the activity in which the self unites with things……How is it possible for us, as individuals, to unite with things? Is to unite with something merely a metaphor? (Carter, p.6)

As Carter is saying, Buddhist texts and commentaries on Asian philosophy are littered with references to ‘unity’. What exactly do they mean?
So regarding calligraphy, somehow the artist, training her mind to attain a self- awareness, to apprehend a reality that transcends space, time and the individual, beyond the

subject-object divide, a state of oneness, a nothingness, then engages the body-mind to a dynamic process of self-expression, without thinking, but yet not resulting from accidents or processes beyond human control, that is said to embody spontaneity and freedom.
Can we yet make sense of this?
Nishida claims this artistic practice of removing “I”, the self, the consciousness, and being fully "immersed in things, or “becoming the thing itself”, as a way of achieving “pure experience.’
Subsequently, through a ‘fully present’ encounter with the artwork, ‘intellectual intuition” reveals this self-same “pure experience” such that the observer and the object become one. What’s more, the Zen work of art that Nishida has in mind is not a mere object of contemplation and implies a concomitant dynamic process of self - expression in the viewer, a motivation, a passing on or rebirth of the transcendent ontological artistic intuition, an “acting intuition” in the ontic world of historical reality.

> “what is important is the realization that “seeing” penetrates through the acting-self, and the aesthetic and the practical are unified” (Kobayashi Nobuyuki in (Nguyen, P.185)

Is what we are talking about here in any way the same as the “attention” and unselfing” that Iris Murdoch articulated, enabling the apprehension of a moral reality outside the individual self?
The term “mono no aware” elucidates the key (Zen) sentiment of impermanence in Japanese aesthetics as describing the feelings of sympathy a person feels upon becoming aware of the fleeting, nature of life; conflated with an empathy towards this inevitable passing of all things", and the concept has been deeply ingrained in Japanese painting. Japanese scholar Motoori Norinaga’s (1730-1801) emphasis on the wording “to *know* mono no aware” chimes with Nishida’s understanding of ‘pure experience’ as a meditative state-of-mind, manifesting a kind of intuitive knowledge that surpasses conventional understanding. Furthermore, rather than merely being profoundly moved in contemplation, experiencing mono no aware serves as a means of cultivating empathy and for a more compassionate and enriched understanding of the worlds of others. Thus regarded, mono no aware can be easily related to the Buddhist notion of impermanence which is key to understanding the chain of dependent origination, the Buddhist concept of true emptiness. Most significantly, in Motoori's interpretation, mono no aware can be cultivated through experiencing and responding to art.
Both Nishida’s pure experience and Moringa’s mono no aware, are interpreted as more than simply intuitive feeling, but further that they are both suffused with cognition, thinking, which requires self-awareness in which real human beings grasp the cognitive object through

reason. So, questions we perhaps need now to go back to are, what part does cognition have to play in (Buddhist) emptiness? and whether knowledge claims aren't rather dependent on human subjects.

The difficulty here is with different interpretations of attention particularly in connection with the key Buddhist term 'mindfulness', to construe the cultivation of present-centered observation of thoughts, feelings, and sensations without judgment or attachment, crucial to the process of meditation and to an understanding of emptiness; those who see mindfulness as bare attention awareness and those who think that the alert attention and mental clarity of mindfulness necessarily comprises a degree of cognitive evaluation.

If mindfulness is key to awareness of the morality of behaviour and a key step on the path to emptiness, how precisely do the two, mindfulness and emptiness, different words with ostensibly different meanings, relate? One might say that ultimately emptiness transcends mindfulness and that emptiness thus subsumes mindfulness. But can there be mindfulness in emptiness, and if so, is it still emptiness?

Yogacara and Madhyamaka Buddhist accounts usually hold that enlightenment is a state free of conception but also that such enlightenment is expressed in a compassionate response. But such response, surely, involves the recognition of, and action in the conceptualised world. Therefore, there must be a persistence of conceptuality if an enlightened one is to act compassionately.

The problem then is to reconcile the conception-free nature of pure cognition enlightenment, (i.e. to understand that there is no discrimination, neither subject-self nor external world of objects which do not exist irreducibly), with the ostensible requirement in post-enlightenment compassionate activity. A fundamental point is that understanding seems irreducibly conceptual. The cognition of the person who attains enlightenment must return to conception-loaded consciousness in order to be of service. And furthermore, compassion involves directing those who, unenlightened, suffer about the nature of things, again which necessitates understanding and entails language, which is nothing other than the verbalization of concepts.

This takes us back to the crucial controversial question of whether or not conceptuality is required for the possibility of spontaneous moral action, and the relevance of critical thinking and legitimacy of reason, from the standpoint of human being, embodied in the world, which we discussed with reference to Dogen and Nishida's "self realisation of nonduality.

Raquel Bouso construes that "Nishida is thinking of a world of Intuition outside of conceptual knowledge" (in (Atsushi and Keiichi p.24) and furthermore, Bouso suggests that Nishida's notion of morality as action intuitive *can* be related to the Buddhist concept of true emptiness.

Sympathetically, Merleau-Ponty offers a non-representational account of intentionality which emphasises that spontaneity is at the core of consciousness, and that we cannot separate the certainty of our thoughts from that of our perceptions. The ambiguous pre- reflective cogito, grounds our non-egoic sense of experience in the primordial world and recognises basic purposive, skilful, bodily activities, distinct from, and capable of functioning independently of any cognitive "private sphere of consciousness"(Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p,395) or critical thinking

As it happens and counterintuitive as it may seem there are some western thinkers namely, Jay Garfield, an American philosopher who specialises in Buddhist studies, who defend such a 'non-representational' account of mind, (Garfield, pp 69-70), or rather "the transcendence of a representational model of thought" (p.62), such that intuitive moral behaviour, need not necessitate precedence by consciously represented propositional attitudes, deliberation or formation of intention; the behaviour of a buddha. However, there is a crucial ambiguity in Garfield's discussion of spontaneous responsiveness,

"Just as action without thinking is an achievement depending on prior thought, selflessness in this sense is an achievement depending on careful cultivation of self." (p.79)

3.2 Words and Speech are Illusory

> *"Because words and speech are illusory. So, all wise men do not cling to words and speech, and this is why they fear nothing. Why? Because words and speech have no independent nature of their own and, when they are no more you are liberated."* (The *Vimalakirti Nirdesa Sutra*, Chapter 3, The Disciples)

Merleau-Ponty's evaluation of the scope of consciousness was reinforced by a conviction that the abstract "post conceptual" works of modern artists could have ontological significance that went beyond his unfolding philosophy of 'Flesh' as ambiguous perceptual embodied experience.

> "painting's capacity both to enter and create territory that is unavailable to cognition as conventionally understood…" (Andrews, p.22)

Merleau-Ponty's philosophy argues that the participatory viewing and interpretation of the painting - the intermingling of seer and seen, interweaving self and world - undercuts the subjective-objective dualism, and edges us toward a pre-personal liminal state of receptivity and assimilation, engaging the domains of pre-objective and pre-linguistic experience. This chimes with what we have already articulated about the Zen aesthetic ideology, that nothing must come between the object and the perception of the viewer or participants. Indeed, in

the Japanese-style painting world, artists have special terms to convey this imaginative participation in the viewing encounter, especially the notion of yugen, as characterising an epiphany of the beauty of the infinite mystery beyond the limits of seeing. A submission to personal transformation, it describes not only the properties of some external phenomenon but also the internal response, an altered state of consciousness of profundity. Crucially, none of this is explicitly stated, rather is forcefully absorbed through implication and suggestion, and so again echoing Merleau-Ponty, prelinguistic, the extension of awareness into a region beyond words.

A fundamental area of commonality between Merleau-Ponty and Zen and indeed Nagarjuna is the emphasis they all place on the limitations and perniciousness of language.

It might seem that this amounts to philosophical emasculation, that reality is unknowable, incomprehensible and exceeds any images created in words and intellect; that language keeps informing solutions to philosophical problems, and yet problems of language underlie those very problems?

Whereas Iris Murdoch insists that language and concepts play a ‘crystallising role’ (Murdoch and Lloyd, p.26), for both Merleau-Ponty and Zen, language may be needed to conceptualise life into philosophy, but one's understanding of reality needs to be rooted in something antecedent.

Similarly, Nishida is seeking to come up with a language of absolute contradictories which simultaneously draws attention to its limitations, yet that can talk about those things that Zen had always insisted were not amenable to logical rationalisation and can still somehow express the full meaning of conscious experience, as it is experienced.

One of the most perplexing aspects of Dogen’s teaching is his koanlike use of the word hishiryo for the state of mind attained during the practice of Zazen supposedly the answer given by Great Zen Master Yaohan in reply to a puzzled monk who asks, ‘How do you think not thinking?’ (Dogen trans. Waddell and Abe p.123)

The most common understanding of this implies that there is some state we have to reach which is beyond thinking, that “not thinking,” is really something which transcends thinking all together, and indeed that thinking is an obstruction. Both thinking and not thinking are regarded as mistakes.

Kasulis relates ‘without-thinking’ to emptiness, analysing it as a way of consciousness which although devoid of understanding is immersed in the “pure presence of things as they are” (Kasulis, p.73), a” non-conceptual and pre-reflective mode of consciousness" (p.75) but not signifying an experience without content.

So, can we make sense of the respective equivocacy of these differing views about thinking and the inadequacy of language; how much language is indebted to what is before it? Can one have meaning prior to language? And critically, while accepting that language is the

authorised tool for expressing and communicating concepts, and apropos philosophers- Merleau-Ponty, Nishida and Dogen- how should we regard the capability, value or legitimacy of using the framework of conventional philosophical language, of terms such as “pure experience,” “nothingness”, to articulate a consciousness that pre-exists the actuality of experiences,(even more so the “suchness” that emerges with Zen meditation and “emptiness”/ sunyata of Mahayana sutras)?

On one hand, philosophically we seem to be corroborating Kant’s claim that what is presented by our senses is of no value, until our minds synthetically construct it into objects of experience and empirical knowledge. Indeed, the Buddhist position pushes further regarding our immersion in language; that there is no way to determine exactly a distinction between cognitive awareness, the conditioned reflexivity it provides, conceptualised through and then in turn self-reinforced by language, as the very medium of our thought and ideas.

> “Cognitive awareness, language, and thought are thus so inseparable that they give rise to a runaway recursivity in their own right” (Waldron, p.38)

But on the other hand, Buddhism is a process of, without resorting to concepts, experiencing and realizing that to which no cognitive language can refer, emphasising the inner realization of supreme wisdom primarily through meditation practice. If the way we conceptualise things limits our understanding, what then can we say is the relationship between our thoughts and actions, body and world; our awareness and our behaviour in the ongoing construction of our shared world of human experience? Moreover, language's role in philosophy must preclude an ontology that could claim to ascertain the truth of reality and being.

To enlarge and strengthen the ontological insight would seem to require something more than language. Something to speak for the experience of the liminal pre-reflective body subject, the pre-reflective realm out of which a linguistic form of personal consciousness emerges; Merleau-Ponty’s wrestle with “The tacit Cogito” that “should make understood how language is not impossible but cannot make understood how it is possible.” (Merleau-Ponty, 1969, p.176)

But then weren’t (western) philosophies ever born of the futile want of a metaphysical surrogate for the place where consciousness and reality in fact come to occupy the very same conceptual space. For phenomenologists, the self is the core experiential dimension, central to the very structure of consciousness. To be a being capable of experience is to possess a first-person perspective on the world. In the unity of the self-conscious subject, we are still rooted in the standpoint of what is my experience, the unity of the self-conscious subject, the primordial implicit awareness that all experience articulates itself in first person perspective, notwithstanding the individual’s intuitive conjecture of a dimension of ‘flesh’.

The problem for Buddhism of course is that outside of 'without-thinking' or whatever, there is no person, no person to do the philosophy.

3.3 Beyond Good and Evil

"In sharp contrast to Christianity, it (Buddhism) has left the self-deception of moral concepts behind, - it stands, as I put it, beyond good and evil"
(Nietzsche, The Anti-Christ, p.16)

The dilemma is perfectly summarised by Chakravarthi Ram-Prasad in his paper focusing on the problem of reconciling the conception-free nature of enlightenment with the conceptual activity required for and in post-enlightenment teaching (Ram-Prasad, p.279). What Ram Prasad is getting at is that understanding seems inherently conceptual, compelling the challenge of whether enlightenment can be both cognitively pure and concept-utilizing?
In another persuasive paper *"Moral Realism and Anti-Realism Outside the West"*, Gordon F. Davis explores the difficulty in normatively explaining the derivation of a doctrine of universal compassion grounded in metaphysical insight into ultimate truths about emptiness in Mahayana Buddhist ethics. Davis delves into the thorny (meta-)ethical problem of if and how the virtuous actions of an enlightened being whose mind operates non-conceptually, and thus independent of moral reasoning can be considered or understood according to our (western) ideals and theory. For Davis the pivotal question is "Does the insight gained through bodhicitta capture a conventional truth or an ultimate truth?" He follows on,

> "When it is suggested that there is neither truth nor ontology at stake because the value is of a practical nature (e.g., therapeutic or instrumental), sceptics will press other questions. What could account for such 'practical' value if this value does not stand in relation to something that is ultimately valuable and that can explain why certain courses of action have more practical value than others?"

Seemingly "if your final position is to affirm "non-attachment to views" and universal "emptiness," and no ultimate moral truths "how do you justify claiming anything to be more correct than anything else"?

Iris Murdoch's stance that moral behaviour equates with perception that is conceptually prior to the separation of thought from action, may not accede to a primordial awareness of value, but it is her conviction that value is inherently built into the metaphysics of consciousness

> "as moral beings we are immersed in a reality which transcends us and that moral progress consists in awareness of this reality and submission to its purpose" (Murdoch and Hepburn, p.56),

and we are morally tuned to awareness of this reality, shaped by the system of concepts (good and evil) with which we function. So moral thinking involves 'unselfing' attention to that which lies outside us but wrapped up in an inner world of value judgments, with understanding, interpretation, and reflection, all having a role to play, raising the question of whether these moral 'truths' cannot become apparent until certain other concepts are in currency.

In any case, we reach a pivotal challenge. Is it, as Murdoch claims, that moral activity is always irreducibly conceptual? In which case, even a spontaneous accompaniment to intuitive affective feeling can never be truly pure and equate with the Buddhist concept of sunyata (emptiness).

All the philosophers we have discussed agree that moral engagement manifests in the surrender of the ego, which in the Buddhist ideal scenario is paramount to the obliteration of one's self to the context of the unified whole. Although subsequently, reasons may be self-attributed to account for actions it should not be assumed that the agent has any conscious awareness of the mental processes that actually produced them.

On the other hand, even Buddhist philosopher Masao Abe points out

> "But in the direction of moral practice, for instance, we do not confront the problem of the self's existence because its direction presupposes the existence of the self". (Abe, p.56)

Surely Murdoch's stance is convincing. Moral deliberations are predicated on at least a subtle idea of a self, and moral activity is always purposeful on assumption of some notion of free will, and in that sense, it cannot be 'empty'.

Likely influenced by Zen's Yogacara Buddhist lineage, Nishida in his early works looks to philosophically circumnavigate Nagarjuna's nihilist/dialetheist position, maintaining that there must be an unconstructed ontological foundation for conceptual construction and attempting to explain all reality in terms of consciousness; from the roots of pure experience which is absolved of all thought-construction.

However even when insight is logically the cessation of conceptualization, we will see that Nishida's dialectical self-identity philosophy explores and ultimately embraces those contradictories arising at the limits of thought in acknowledgement of our undeniable experience, (à la Murdoch) that truth and compassion call out to us through our intersubjectivity, and the intertwining of real existent of things in their place in an actual historical world.

This (self-aware) desire to be moral, manifesting itself in the relinquishing of the distinction between self and world at the critical moment of encounter to something deeper than individual consciousness, to a "timeless, nonsubjective, egoless presence that opens up the possibility of a new standpoint for knowing and acting" ((Heisig, 2001 p.51), can be seen as

offering a modern philosophical theory that supports the notions of Buddhist enlightenment and no self, and especially the Yogācāra focus on cognition and consciousness.
In the Yogacara theory, eight consciousnesses provide a framework for understanding how three ‘apparent’ natures - the conceptualised, the other- dependent and the perfected - manifest in our experience, within the context of karmic influence. Those that cultivate samadhi leave behind the conceptualisation of doctrine and are thus in direct perceptual cognition of realizing the true nature of reality as the absolute emptiness of the purified eighth consciousness. This alaya or storehouse consciousness provides the basis for the seven active consciousnesses. Furthermore, Yogacara asserts the conditioned nature of consciousness, associated with sensation, perception, volition and emphasizing the role of attention; that directs each consciousness and controls our experience of reality.
For Iris Murdoch and Merleau-Ponty, perception is the way in which we are involved in the world. Murdoch’s “unselfing” opens us to the idea of perfect Goodness in the world supposing that it effectively equates with perception (of a moral reality) that is conceptually prior to the separation of thought from action. Merleau-Ponty’s understands flesh, as the reciprocal influence between current action ‘pre-thinking’ sensory consciousnesses, and the “wild being” foundational role that reaches ‘back’ to the provisional being‘.In both we might discern a subliminal wave and intimation of a deeper consciousness without self nature.
But “these perturbations do not affect the ever-still depths of the ocean-like alaya, though” (Harvey, p.131), that the Yogacara mind consciousness can only ‘know’ through meditation; ‘the ever still depths’ unstirred by any notion of God or Good.
Just as Yogacara’s alaya consciousness serves as the foundation of all other consciousnesses, for Nishida, consciousness arises as a dynamic self-determining expression of this ‘basho’ of Absolute Nothingness, primarily as a pre-reflective, foundational awareness that underlies all thought and experience
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Nishida’s basho of Absolute Nothingness will attempt to build upon the meditative emptiness of Yogacara’s enlightened perfected nature, the alaya consciousness that remains once the karmic accretions are cleared away**,** to *philosophically* reach and realise the pure cosmic Zen Buddha nature mind, “something that reaches all the way back to the very origins of human existence and life itself “(Shun’ei, Living Yogacara, p.35).

Chapter 4 Art and the Absolute

4.1 Nishida and Action Intuition

> *"What was defined as the world of "direct experience", "pure experience" and so on, now has come to be thought of as the world of Historical Reality. It is the very world of action-intuition, the very world of poiesis that is the world of pure experience""* (Nishida, 1911, p. xxxiii)

We have previously characterised the role played by action intuition for Nishida in morality as an attuned responsiveness, instinctive but evaluative of our embodied active relationship with the world and so always impregnated by our own socio- historical situatedness. Importantly, in terms of philosophy the "body is first woven into that world and that is the locus of phenomenological investigation and insight" (Loughnane, 2020 p.10) and moral knowledge is gained through the individual's ongoing active production and perceptive interaction with the world.

Nishida in his early essay *"An explanation of beauty*" recognised that although morality derives from "a greater dimension than individual consciousness" (Stevens, p.130), it is, of course, in the (for Buddhists) world of mundane reality, that suffering is located. This is where, shaped by concept-utilising relations with others that the enlightened person, having claimed a cognitively pure no self, will demonstrate the soteriological practice of Buddha nature.

It would seem then that moral behaviour, absolute nothingness in action, what Raquel Bouso refers to as pure affective feeling (in Atsushi and Keichii chapter 2) spontaneously accompanied by the activity of the body, epistemically relates to an emptiness of ego. Nonetheless, can this immanent realm of compassion correspond to the *true* ontological emptiness of the Buddhist concept of śūnyatā?

Moral behaviour always unfolds in 'the world of discrimination', a realm dependent upon questions of value and the distinction between self and other; a realm deemed ontologically subordinate such that morality in itself can only ever be seen to espouse conventional truth. But is it indeed possible to gain *philosophical* access to the ultimate level of truth, to Schopenhauer's better consciousness, "beyond all experience and beyond all reason", that "expresses itself in conduct as saintliness" (cited in App, pp.83,89); to "the 'original willing

ground' or 'non ground', prior to any duality, that resists all classification , the very possibility of all thinking and being" (App, p.99)?

For Merleau-Ponty, ontologically understanding the pre-linguistic embodied self as already caught up in the 'flesh' of the world is crucial to the possibility of overcoming the subject-object dichotomy, and the separation between the knower and the known. This involves accessing the pre-reflexive, expressive possibilities of the human body, which in his last published work *'Eye and Mind'*, he comes to associate with the process of creating artworks, especially painting. Emphasising how "the painter takes his body with him (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p.162**)**, he conceives of the space in which art happens or into which it draws us.

> "There is no break at all in this circuit; it is impossible to say that nature ends here and that man or expression starts here" (p.188)

Nishida too insists that the opportunity calls for the radical transformation of a subjectivistic standpoint wherein the world of discrimination is *absolutely* transcended. While concurring that the challenge of a philosophical gateway to subverting western dualism is accessed by exploring artistic creativity, for Nishida this can be approached not just by investigation of the moving and perceiving body but also involves 'seeing into one's own nature'.
All importantly, if words are inadequate for understanding the truth of ultimate reality, what other means should we use to grasp it? To philosophically speak about the full meaning of conscious experience requires finding a language beyond language to express those things that Zen had always insisted were not readily yielding to reason and logical form. Aspiring to an ontology not mediated by language requires Nishida to develop an increasingly complex philosophical non-dualism throughout his career, a 'dialectical' formulation of the self as the place (basho) of Absolute Nothingness that Nishida comes to call the 'logic of topos'. Critically, it is from the standpoint of art and aesthetics that this dialectical character of the reality of our existential experience can be grasped through the actions of the human body and importantly individual creativity. Still emphasising that the subject is not ontologically primary, the negation of the self in pure experience is now expressed as "Seeing without a seer", but what is important is the interconnectedness of action and perception, an overcoming of the distinction between thought and action, the acting-intuition.

> "Acting intuition was, in effect, Nishida's essential attempt to ontologically "locate 'seeing without a seer' at the requisite foundations of all true knowledge about self and world" (Heisig, 2001, p. 56)

Acting intuition encompasses the experiential dynamic in the possibility of actually realising and cultivating pure experience through the total unification of bodily practice engagement

from the standpoint of ‘the ordinary level’, the perspective of the unfolding self-conscious creative-productive self that acts and knows regarding the seemingly inconsistent endeavours of art and morality.

To more fully grasp this pivotal role of active intuition in aesthetics, we should reengage fully the development of Nishida’s thought, understanding that each stage has its own value and should not be replaced by the next.

Thus Nishida’s idea of pure experience becomes not just a passive static meditation but has an active and creative dimension such as we might ordinarily recognise in say the effortless execution of a skilled musician playing music who is able to “lose himself” or be “in the zone”, and, in the mind state of pure absorption the zen painter seeks; the “seeing” that penetrates through the acting-self. Emptying one’s mind to an intuitive unconflicted harmony of knowledge and will, and dynamic spontaneity of self-expression it is as if the artist does not have charge of the brush at all and “ can get out of the way," and "let nature take over” (Mark Tobey, cited in Seitz p.38), such that the work appears to 'create itself' through what we might call the unobstructed automatic flow of Nature's universal process; the aesthetic moment of pure creation, wherein the distinction between individual and world dissolves, manifesting the awakening unity of the true self or in terms of Buddhism, the present moment, that awakens us to the tathata or suchness of each individual happening.

In this way Nishida claimed aesthetic experience as a way of achieving ‘pure experience’. As such, it can be said to encompass something both immanent and transcendent. But can we transcend the material world? If so, can the seemingly transcendental experiences generated by means of the creation and apprehension of art by the human acting self in the world of historical reality, be revelative of the true world in its innermost essence, the silencing of all concepts and an elucidation of the unconditioned ontological ground of all things?

Is the "seeing without a seer,” of artistic practice a concrete way to ontically get hold of the primordial unity?

In order to think through this exceptional, some might say grandiose claim of art as a direct expression of the Absolute, of both a physical and metaphysical reality that cannot be grasped in any other way, we need once more to invoke Schopenhauer’ and his appreciation of the bliss of contemplation as the self overcoming of willing.

4.2 The Surrogate of the Philosopher

“The artist becomes the surrogate of the philosopher confined in her subjectivity or the prophet/priest who can dream of an absolute order, but cannot supply objectivity or evidence to such claims.” (Vater. p.70)

Schopenhauer's thinking is clearly shaped by German Romanticism's core concepts of the unity of humankind and nature, and in particular Friedrich Schelling's early privileging of works of art as a conduit to understanding that which cannot appear as an object of knowledge. In *"Art as the Absolute*", Paul Gordon writes

> "The artwork is thus here defined as the immersion in something absolute in which the subject/spectator becomes lost in the reality of an object/work that is the reality of the subject/spectator - the subject/object synthesis of every " intellectual intuition" referred to by Kant (among others) that will lead Schelling to declare the artwork as the original model and ultimate reality of any absolute thing in itself" (Gordon, p.60-61)

Schelling had anticipated Schopenhauer in upholding that, in art, the opposition between subjectivity and objectivity is sublimated, and all contradictions are harmonised, that knower and what is known are fundamentally the same, and that by the whetting and cultivating of an aesthetic sense –we can realise full consciousness of our fundamental identity with the world.

To Romantic artists, art represents a transformative dynamic process of self-expression in which the brush mediates the artist's intuitive creative impulses, into the actual lines and shapes of the work in which the viewer then participates as part of this larger whole, and as such the constitution of existence itself. Furthermore

"we are entirely satisfied by the impression of a work of art only when it leaves behind something that, in spite of all our reflection on it, we cannot bring down to the distinctness of a concept" (Schopenhauer, 2000, vol II, p.409)

Similarly Japanese calligraphy realises an inseparable interaction of artist, brush, ink, and paper; a oneness of painter and painted.

> "You learn of Japanese calligraphy to let the hand take over, then you begin to watch the hand as though it is not yours... When the viscosity is right, it is close to mindlessness, or to pure essences, with nothing between your beingness and the external world. As though your beingness were transmitted without intervention." (Robert Motherwell in Ashton and Flam, p.23)

Influenced by Zen's thorough integration of body and mind the artist must clear one's ego mind and become one with the materials and the subject matter such that the brush strokes channel and enact the self transcendence of the calligrapher at a moment in time and evoke a direct experience of the interconnectedness of all things in the participating viewer. Accomplished works affect no analysis or interpretation. The viewer has an empathetic awareness; no sense of 'I' and 'it', a state of 'no mind', an immediate connection to

something (spiritual) beyond the rational perception of the surface form of the (physical) painting; a view from the nowhere, at nature's primordial essence.

In considering Mark Rothko's chapel paintings, Sheldon Nodelman writes that the art "forces disturbing questions about the nature of the self and its relation to the world." (Nodelman p.330) and this induces an interpretive change in the viewer, in which "the experiential structure of the installation (itself) is transformed" (p.342). What Nodelman is saying is that when viewing some artworks, we do not intellectually think about them, we experience them. Rather than serving to communicate 'information' of some kind, abstract art, with its lack of representation, by actively challenging and unsettling the viewer's perceptual assumptions and indeed their existential identity, encourages introspection and a deeper connection to one's inner self, stimulating a self-transformation.

This is the very ethos of the Zen aesthetics of emptiness as evidenced by sumi ink calligraphy and Zenga painting traditions, wherein the awakened artist's awareness to emptiness and form as not opposite but actually coincident, is exposed through the improvisational aesthetic qualities of the artwork. Spontaneous, intuitive gestural shapes float freely in a primacy of negative space without loss of an omnipresent all-over textural homogeneity, and which make manifest the fundamental Heart Sutra teaching of interconnectedness, that forms exist only through their relationship with other forms, or in other words, are essentially empty.

By embodying the 'Formless Self', these paintings help us make sense of the way our consciousness sees form in emptiness, and through this 'realisation 'we can awaken to a reality beyond the limitations of our ordinary consciousness, that is, the sublime continuum of the Buddha-nature, such that the aesthetic experience becomes, in turn, for the observer, a spiritual insight, a "seeing of one's (true) nature. As per Merleau-Ponty "It gives visible existence to what profane vision believes to be invisible" (1964, p.166) and "that empty space is not empty. It serves an energy function which makes the invisible visible" (Paul Jenkins cited in Clarke, p.46)

An artwork born of oneness vitally emerges out of the interaction between the artist's brushstrokes on the whiteness of the medium evincing a yearning to go beyond mere visual language representation through reduction of artistic expression to simplified organic forms and its essential elements. The images although clearly expressions affected by the author's emotions are not resolvable into concepts or narratives but are rather about a spiritual quest to connect with the deepest aspects of the world and access to the mystery of being, through the materialization of what Jacques Maritain calls 'creative intuition' and "the intercommunication of the inner being of things and the inner human Self, which is a kind of divination (Maritain 1978, p. 3)."

Moreover, there is something of the divine in the perceptual understanding of form seen as arising from formlessness or emptiness, such that viewing the artwork is transformed into an essentially contemplative intuition of this fundamental truth that goes beyond the geometry of the objectively perceived artwork and beyond the inner life of the psyche, reaching into the underlying metaphysical system.

Schelling had maintained that art opened up a path to realisation of the Absolute and as such should be part of any complete system of philosophy. (Shaw, 2012)

Schopenhauer speaks of a mystical vision, of pure absorption in selfless contemplation.

Art brings us to a fuller understanding of that supersensible 'thing in itself'", understood as a unified, unconditioned reality, and the rejection of the duality of subject and object suggesting a new mode of consciousness, a 'better' consciousness.

Iris Murdoch analogises art to a sacrament (Murdoch, 2014, pp.83-84), that being attentive to art equates to a spiritual experience and the purification of the consciousness of the individual.

For Merleau-Ponty, painting, in particular is a means to primordially experience the world at the fission of Being (Merleau-Ponty,1964, p.186) and the separation of a subjective self, before conceptual characterisation and explanation, "the world more ancient than thought" (2013, p.265).

One might interject that it was Schopenhauer's idea of its redemptive power that was the progenitor of Nietzsche's notion of art's great creative energy as immersion in the chaotic Dionysian essence of Primordial Unity; a similar realm of direct access to the will beyond language, form and reason, but not an escape, rather an embracing of the will in self overcoming and a rejection of compassion (or pity) as weakness, and hence " against the moral interpretation and significance of existence." (Nietzsche, p.8)

Nevertheless, Nishida eventually established religion as the prerequisite unifying force of his philosophy. In his earlier work Nishida had acknowledged that art can provide an embodied "pure experience of wisdom and "intuition within action", freed from the reification of language, that cannot be captured through purely conceptual analysis; "it is the artist, not the scholar, who arrives at the true nature of reality" (Nishida, 1992, p.49) and what we are fostering here is the belief that art itself is an inherently religious concern.

4.3 Religious Experience

> *"In religious experience the self, however it is viewed, disappears; it becomes a no-self.… There is no longer anyone who sees or anything that is seen. It is the experience of form-in-emptiness, emptiness-in-*

Form." (Nishida, 1939, cited in Heisig 2015, p.55)

Most significantly Nishida came to the view that both art and morality are innately religious. The three are essentially interdependent. Morality however, although it too is conceived in the place where the historical world transcends itself in the unity of subject and object, its realisation is to some degree necessarily conceptual.

> "Although morality also originally derives from the Great Way of muga, it still belongs to the world of discrimination, because the idea of duty that is the essential condition of morality is built on the distinction between self and other, good and evil. It does not yet reach the sublime realms of religion and art. (Odin and Nishida, p.217)

The quotation is from a very early essay, written in 1900, eleven years before his first major published work and decades before his later development of action intuition. Nevertheless, the kernel of the argument we are bringing forward is prefigured in this early essay and the implication therein that art's primacy lies in its spiritual presence, its being more fully transcendent, more sacrosanct, more religious.

Nishida's subsequent thinking continues to be deeply inspired by art through its respective stages of development and demonstrates an ongoing dialogue with it.

In his 1941 essay *"Artistic Creation as an Act of Historical Formation*", the central theme is artistic creativity as poesis; a deliberate act of creating, not just as embodied active intuition but as a religious process of active meditation; the self-awakening of Absolute Nothingness.

> "What we call a work of art is the object of artistic intuition, which is established where our poiesis is considered poiesis in the immediate world from the standpoint of self-identity of absolute contradictions. A work of art so defined is no longer a work of mine, but a piece of heaven" (Cited by Kobayashi in Hisao and Yoko, p.189).

Emphasising the dynamic tension of opposites within a field of "acting-intuiting", where the unity of the knower and the operation of knowing takes place in the "field of consciousness" or topos of pure emptiness, Nishida in later works characterises the pure experience wherein the 'logic of topos' operates, as the ultimate "basho of Absolute Nothingness" in which all reality is established as identity-in-contradiction.

He acknowledges that formulating a concrete system of such profound complexity is philosophically elusive, culminating in his final essay *"The Logic of "Topos" and the Religious Worldview"*, in which Nishida develops his own concern with the self-contradictory existence of the self as a religious question - exactly what it is and where it exists. Ultimately

> "Religion comes into focus from the standpoint of the absolutely contradictory identity, the dynamic equilibrium, of immanence and transcendence" (p.119) .... "that the self transcends itself in its own immanent depths does not signify a loss of itself; it rather

> becomes a unique expression of the world's self-expression. It rather signifies that the self becomes truly individual, a real self" (p.111).

In this last work Nishida did finally acknowledge a connection between his dialectical conception of the nothingness of the absolute and the Buddhist doctrine of the Prajñāpāramitā sutras. Admitting the futility of occidental logic grasping the paradox of emptiness, that indeed "Buddhist scholars in the past had not always clarified" (p.89), Nishida underscores that *"religion* can be philosophically grasped only by the logic of absolutely contradictory identity (p.91).

A logic that is not found in the accepted philosophical domain? If not there, then where? Potent and mystical, the Heart Sutra is believed to contain the distilled essence of this truth as Prajnaparamita, the ineffable wisdom and the mysterious living heart of Mahayana Buddhist emptiness, that

> "form is no other than emptiness, emptiness no other than form. Form is emptiness, emptiness is form" (Waddell, p.60)

Nishida's explanation endeavours to bridge the gap between rational knowledge and mystical experience, arguing on one hand that the Heart Sutra's teachings on emptiness can be guided by discursive reason, and on the other that experience reaches further than thought and that a finite understanding is insufficient.

What are the possibilities for gaining access to pure experience, the essentially holistic dimension, ontologically and phenomenologically preceding the subject-object duality? Philosophy attempts to formulate what is essentially a spiritual experience through conventional thinking and intellectual reasoning. It can declare the existential primordiality of the religious consciousness, but it ultimately cannot communicate with the religious dimension as a direct or pure experience. It encounters such limits also in matters of art. Nishida claims the artistic practice of removing "I", the self consciousness, and being fully "immersed in things, or "becoming the thing itself", as a way of achieving "pure experience; that "when the artist is thoroughly immersed in the horizon of pure visual perception, he spontaneously moves the organs of his whole body and becomes one expressive movement. At this time . . . the artist himself cannot foretell the direction and meaning of his own expressive act." (Nishida, "*Art and Morality"*, cited in Loughnane p.727)

While the 'pure experience' meditative terminology affects a sort of mysticism, the 'acting intuition' dimension identifies that what is being transformed is the artist as much as the artwork.

> "The 'seeing' of Zen signifies an absolute overturning of the self. Thus, it has the same meaning as the gaining of religious faith (Nishida, 1987, p.91).

We are indeed now reaching beyond philosophy. Beyond Schelling's idea that (aesthetic) experience reaches further than thought and the artwork as providing a sensible understanding of philosophical thinking, outreaching even Merleau-Ponty's profession of painting as that which is hidden away from discriminatory and dualistic thinking. Rather toward art as the revelation of the true nature of the world in its innermost essence, a path of enlightened self-cultivation in and of itself, akin to the mystical consciousness-emptying samadhi state achieved through Buddhist meditation. The mingled integrated encountering of artist, brush, ink, paper becomes a means to an end. The end that is the transformative religious experience of Zen, the place of emptiness of the Heart sutra.

To awaken to emptiness is to awaken to the true self and to the profoundly evocative implications of perceptual transformation with regard to how the direct seeing into the fundamental inherent interconnectedness of beings and things, fosters the holistic understanding that it is the heart mind that it is the seat of enlightenment, of intuitive wisdom and as such the enjoiner of compassionate action.

The issue of course arises from the allegation that compassionate action will ineluctably result from a condition where there is no room for discrimination or judgment.

'Engaged' Buddhist Zen monk, peace activist, and poet Tich Nhat Hanh might defend that "The wisdom of non-discrimination is innate in us (2004, Hanh, p.44) and for the Buddhist disciple, the fruit of enlightenment is to claim the freedom of original human nature, "to penetrate to the heart of reality itself without being paralysed by duality" (Hanh, 1995 p.135). But from the question of morality the sceptic might rather turn this on its head and query the ability of the viewing of an empty heart(- mind) to penetrate conventional reality without being paralysed by 'emptiness'.

We have already referenced Gordon Davis' paper on the problem for Buddhist philosophers aiming to defend how an enlightened being whose mind performs non conceptually can engage morally, i.e. in a way that requires taking values in question, in the conventional world. Davis refers extensively to the work of Bronwyn Finnigan and Koji Tanaka, and quotes from their 2011 essay *"Ethics for Mādhyamikas",*

"The bodhisattva precepts and their role as active values require a robust engagement with the conventional world" (cited, p.41)

But we still have the question begging for the circular justification of emptiness as the path to compassion, yet a foundation of compassion as essential for understanding and experiencing emptiness. In the end, Davis argues that the fundamental value of karuna (typically translated as compassion) necessitates that key features of Buddhist ethics

philosophically require moral realism, and as such are incompatible with say Buddhist Madhyamika anti-realism.

Nishida puts it that the standpoint of morality cannot reach the True self, implying that conceivably, without the aid of *something* beyond his perceptual self, man cannot apprehend moral truths

Here we might acknowledge Iris Murdoch's standpoint as moral realist in that she believes that value, essentially in the form of the 'Good' exists metaphysically in reality, as a 'single, perfect, transcendent, non-representable, necessarily real object of attention' (Murdoch, 2001, p.55).

Although this echoes the positive claims for a transcendental condition of consciousness made by Yogacara Buddhists regarding ultimate truth, it remains the case that, for Buddhist morality to succeed, as it were philosophically, the enlightened subject's direct pure experience of nature in its primordial unity needs to elementally contain, carry or indeed consist of (the concept of) the Good. And yet it is of paramountcy to the teaching that this is a state absolutely unclouded by preconceptions.

Davis, having referenced Garfield regarding Yogācāra's claim to a "mystical intuition of a transcendent realm" (p.44) surmises

> "it is arguably only possible to have a mystical understanding of something when that thing is sufficiently real that human language and concepts might fail to measure up to it" (p.45)

So, again we are impelled to approach the ineffable mystery of the absoluteness of emptiness through those domains that lie beyond language - art and religion - that is, an artwork's capacity to be a medium for meditative engagement that inspires a transformational change in the conventionally thinking subject.

Chapter 5. Nishida Art and Morality Summary and Discussion

5.1 Self-Awareness

> *"With self-awareness, the contents of consciousness change completely. In artistic intuition we arrive at a level of self-awareness deeper than the merely conceptual. It is not non-self-aware or unconscious in the sense perceptual consciousness is. It leads truly to a self-awareness of the free I."* (Nishida from 'Art and Morality', 1923, cited in (Heisig, 2015, p.43)

The highly influential Heart Sutra, the ‘heart of Mahayana Buddhism, reveals that the path to liberation lies in understanding the wisdom of emptiness as the interconnectedness and impermanence of all things, both fostering and implicitly supported by compassion, comprising the complete absence of concepts yet allowing the individual to have empathy with the conventional appearance of the world. The sutra’s most cogent line discloses how our consciousness sees form in an observable reality but one which is ultimately empty of inherent existence. Appropriately, as “the place where the cocreation of artist and painting, painting and viewer, is at work” (Maraldo, in Nguyen, p.349), , art emerges as a powerful expression of the self's interaction with the world and the absolute, a way to access a deeper, more fundamental reality, together with the mysterious aesthetic feeling of yugen Comparably in western art we recognise Rothko’s abstract paintings as having an existential depth, rooted in human suffering - pain, frustration, and fear of death - basic emotions that bind people in common in the conventional world. At the same time, their contemplation can emit a sense of wholeness or ultimate unity, an experience of “energies or forces” that is beyond specific description in language, like the ethically charged mono no aware that cannot be expressed by logical and conceptual expressions.

So, following Merleau-Ponty, Iris Murdoch and Schopenhauer, at issue is the ontological significance of painting and art’s capacity to purify and transform consciousness, which in Nishida’s Zen inspired philosophy comes to characterise the ‘active intuition’ of existence itself. This idea that artistic activity can lead to deeper insights into the nature of acting intuition has been the essence of our assignment.

In “ pursuit of the enlightened mind” (Heisig, 2015, p.36), Nishida seemingly was seeking a synthesis of Yogacara’s systematic epistemological analysis of the ultimate nature of consciousness together with Zen’s focus on the direct experience and meditative insight of the present self, by logically demonstrating the necessity of an ultimate ground source for “unsupported phenomena and context for all existence; the ‘basho’ of Absolute Nothingness. In this quest Nishida sees religion in the form of the absolute, as an existential metaphysical necessity in understanding the contradictory relationship between the ‘inner’ self that reflects itself within itself and an object-self that acts and knows in the objective reality of the ontic social historical world. Accordingly, acting intuition encompasses the experiential dynamic in the possibility of actually *realizing* and cultivating pure experience through bodily engagement of the unfolding self-conscious creative-productive self, and as such, goes beyond the secular and is regarded as religious awareness requiring a complete overturning of the objectively conceived self (Nishida,1987, pp 85-91), as in artistic expression, where the act and its object are interconnected and create their own content. Thereby the corporeal painting or artwork incarnates the meditative clarity of the true self which resides in a deeper, noumenal religious realm than the objectively real but ontologically subordinate conventional

world. It is through the lens of this ontico-ontological framework of self-determination that Nishida's understanding of morality as an (active) intuitive religious awareness and spontaneous expression of 'sympathetic coalescence' (p.107) should be viewed, where religion is seen as "an irreducible fact of the human heart" (Maraldo, p.128), that precedes and informs the moral will.

Yogācārins claim that ultimate reality, the absolute, is something that we can attain through the altered consciousness and intuitive insight induced in 'no-self' meditative states, such that we are unable to communicate true propositions about what it is to be in this state. So, with respect to morality, in Yogacara the philosophically elusive first-person nature of any transformation of consciousness is necessarily surmised. We are told that the concept of Buddha-nature ((Tathāgatagarbha) is to be understood in relation to the Two Truths. We might venture that there must be that which occurs 'inwardly' that exceeds language and concepts. Yet, if in the final realization of Buddhahood, there are no ordinary appearances whatsoever and there is not even the slightest trace of any conceptual focus, there can be no division into two levels of truth. If there can be no karmic intentional state of mind, what can that mean in terms of the moral 'empty' self that is mired in the actual way in which a human being lives in the discriminating self and other world of good and evil?

The bottom line issue is, that Mahayana Yogācāra philosophers never finally answer the question of exactly how, the equitable universal compassion of a bodhisattva flows unequivocally from a 'discriminatory' understanding of the 'non-discriminating' wisdom of emptiness of all things as the nature of reality, especially in regard to the mindbody unity's 'non thinking' ethical application of the concept of skilful means in particular engagement. The ideology is of course that concern regarding apparent ethical contradictions may be quenched by Buddha nature's non-dualistic realisation of the absolute unconditioned reality that grounds the radical interrelatedness of everything such that compassion and selfless striving to alleviate suffering beings is seen to be ineluctably connected. Masao Abe acknowledges

> "Non- discriminating Wisdom which is another term for śūnyatā is not a counterpart to discriminative knowledge, but rather a wisdom which stands beyond all discursive or discriminatory mental constructions and thereby is liberated from the very opposition between discriminative and non-discriminative knowledge. Thus, it can give a place to scientific rationality or autonomous pure reason within itself. *However, this can be said only in principle or in terms of possibility"* (Abe, 1968, cited in Waldenfels p.40)

In the face of traditional Zen's anti-intellectual commitment to its ultimate irrelevance, Nishida's absolutely self-contradictory pure experience admits thinking; the unifying 'self-awareness' that arises through reflection, such that, when awakening is achieved, it is

that thoughts are no longer perceived as separate intrusions disrupting consciousness but rather seamlessly integrate and become part of the flow, suggesting a continuity between direct perception and mental constructs; a fundamental unity between raw experience and conceptual understanding.

Significantly Nishida's stance discernibly subsumes Murdoch's contention of giving yourself over to, accepting and taking in a reality that that you cannot control, the Good, seen as being an ontologically primitive transcendental condition of consciousness. Although "at crucial moments of choice most of the business of choosing is already over" (Murdoch,1997, p.329), that somehow this expression of one's moral being must include how one sees the world, and the application of value judgements, the eponymous 'Good' of Nishida's original 'Inquiry' identified now as embodying the realization of the self as in absolute conformity with ultimate reality.

We can appreciate that the complexities of Nishida's logic of paradox are not easy to fathom. In any case, it is his development of the notion of the enfolding 'basho of true nothing', wherein this immanently transcending mirroring of contradiction between the Absolute and the human being takes place, that grants that the truth of intuitive intellectual thought in respect of the compassionate self is not annihilated in emptiness.

> "That the self transcends itself in its own immanent depths does not signify a loss of itself; it rather becomes a unique expression of the world's self-expression. It rather signifies that the self becomes truly individual, a real self." (Nishida, 1997, p.111)

Here Nishida's perspective approaches the existentialist philosopher/ theologian Paul Tillich who emphasizes religious experience as an awareness of, and participation in the ultimate ground that transcends the subject-object cleavage in which the individual subject becomes part of the divine yet still retains his identity. However, Tillich insists on the presence of a mystical element in all religion whereas somewhat curiously Nishida in his last work writes seemingly unsympathetic to mysticism, yet the origin of his thought is fundamentally mystical, and mysticism clearly plays a part in the investigation we have undertaken in this commentary. Moreover, and above all, in Nishida' self-awareness the absolute and the world of the personal relative are ontologically inseparable.

Thus Nishida, while rooted in Buddhist philosophy, adapts and expands upon these concepts to what some scholars (Kozyra, p.79) have called a more panentheistic interpretation of the interrelationship between transcendence and immanence, to speak "of a truly dialectical God", seemingly stretching the concept of God beyond the traditional Mahayana notions of emptiness, Yogacara storehouse consciousness or even Zen Buddha nature.

5.2 The True Self

> "in actuality there is only one true good: to know the true self. 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 power of the union of subject and object".* (Nishida, 1911, p.145)

What can be said about the ontological status of a dialectical contradiction?
The ontico-existential matter of art, both its creation and its reception uncovers the question of being that is "reality in itself" and can serve as the interface between our ontic conceptual dimension of embodiment and our deeper non- dualistic ontological awareness that transcends the limitations of ordinary perception.
We might see Nishida's fundamental project to investigate concrete reality prior to its theoretical subjective and objective bifurcation, as akin to that of the western postwar painters attempting to find a 'place' or basho of original meaning through a complex admixture of Eastern and Western traditions of abstract forms and empty space, conceived as a metaphysical act, positing "a place of nothingness and co creation" wherein both subject and object exist and consciousness itself is established.; to create and enter a domain that is inaccessible to cognition as conventionally understood, where, emptiness and form are not opposite but actually coincide.
Evidently there is a level beyond which the written word ceases to be an adequate vehicle for the communication of ineffable mystical experience and profound ideas, whereupon art is a medium capable of drawing us into and 'illuminating' the mystery of Being itself (Heidegger). So, we concede that the spiritual nature, the immanent transcendence of certain art encounter, the "contemplative act – continuous, absorbed, attention (Reinhardt in Munroe and Nakagawa, p.288) where the active intuitive self loses its immanent sense of itself in transcendent pure experience and we might grasp the reality of something beyond the ordinary bounds of self and reason.
Abe again,

> "It is the standpoint of art and aesthetics that goes beyond the conceptual realm and always grasps the transcendent immanently by means of physical and bodily production; that is, poesis." (Abe Masao p.54)

In this sense art affords the beholder an affective glimpse into a sacred realm of intuitive understanding into which 'dry' (Murdoch, 1997, pp287-296) intellect can never enter. It can

induce a (temporary) departure from oneself, realising and authenticating the intuitive metaphysical truths about nondual unity and the empty self, what Nishitani calls breaking through the connection between the seventh and eighth consciousness to the Awakening of *Faith* in Mahayana; just as those that cultivate samadhi, a more sustained state of mind**,** leave behind the conceptualisation of doctrine and are thus in direct perceptual cognition of realising the true nature of reality as absolute emptiness.

Although we might turn away from the canvas with new eyes, imbued with mono no aware, yugen, and a religo-aesthetic self-awakening expedient for moral vision, the intuition of an Absolute of unity, of course confirms nothing explicit about the relation between active-intuition and ethical comportment, about 'purifying the karmic moral energy' of the individual, never mind "slicing right through the field of the eighth consciousness", to disclose the ontological status of the tathagatagarbha, the "seed" that enables all sentient beings the possibility to achieve Buddhahood.

Here we are required to come to an understanding that we must loosen our attachment to 'empty' mental constructs to reach consciousness that transcends the limitations of *all* concepts, good and bad included. Even truth and wisdom are let go and left 'in the boat' on reaching the other side. But crucially, somehow forthwith this pure mind 'no-self' as always embroiled in the thinking moral discriminating self in the world of interpersonal relationships is intuitively able to call upon empathy and compassion, now being in a state of perfection above and beyond conventional morality and norms, above and beyond good and evil. Comparably, for Nishida 'nothingness' realises a unity that ultimately resolves the concept of evil into a higher, more absolute level of reality. Yet Nishida as a philosopher came to recognise a paradox between his notion of spontaneous non self- attached autonomous activity and the professed ideal non conceptual autotelic standpoint of the Yogacara understanding of the pure luminous mind of the Tagatha.

The question was how to negotiate the return of the 'true' self to the concrete world standpoint of morality. The inexplicable yet indispensable fundamental unity between raw experience and conceptual understanding necessary to grasp the objective essences of things presupposes that spiritual harmony is already working majestically in the world as already given. Nishida identified the Zen artist's mastery of subject and object unity as the intuitive expression of being that is "reality in itself, actualising the world in its innermost essence and whereby the aesthetic experience becomes, at the same time, a revelatory religious experience. The experience involves an altered state of consciousness and a profound sense of revelation that is in a certain sense "mystical"," a subjective transformation in the heart-mind. So, "seeing without a seer" is not the eradication of the seer; it is simply the way a negated self sees. (Loughnane p.95)

Nishida's account of artistic expression recognised that via the "seeing without a seer" negation of subjectivity, the Zen artist-at-work could serve as the exemplary vehicle to an alternative, transformative 'deeper' awareness in how we understand the world.
Crucially, inspired and guided by the self-same spiritual intuition and expressive nature, our moral action, just like artistic activity, is always premised on the body as being the focal site of the self's "contradictory identity" attunement with the world. So, where the posited luminous empty mind of Buddha nature might suggest behaviour transcending beyond conventional morality and norms, by the paradoxical form of active intuition Nishida can sustain the ambiguity of spontaneous 'enlightened' behavioural activity yet still volitional meaningful acts in the socio historical world in which we are immersed.
Since pure and true Art represents embodiment of the True Self, its mindset must be a manifestation that realises the unity of being and value and is inherently morally virtuous. Nishida viewed moral performance as calling for a spontaneity of the same nature as that of artistic intuition; a spiritual imperative or to use Kandinsky's phrase an "inner necessity", which somehow emerges from the inherent absolute free creative power of the artist and a kind of determined existential orientation towards goodness; a dialectical awakening to something more primordial, more encompassing, than the individual mind, where the vibrations of past experiences and memory are integrated to present moment action in the world. That

> "In the bottomless depths of the self there is that which transcends the self" (Nishida, 1987, p.88), but yet transcends it immanently and gives the moral self its existence.

Nishida's philosophy clearly draws on Zen Buddhist ideas. It allows for the Buddhist view of the (no)-self), and reflects the limitation words to represent reality but for Nishida, the doctrine of emptiness needed, in Merton's phrase to be "supplemented, uplifted and completed", by means of religious awakening of the True Self to the existence of the Absolute, a place enfolding everything, including contradictories, and a place underpinned by the interdependence of the ontic and ontological that he had found in the seemingly incompatible processes of art and morality.

5.3 Conclusion, Significance and Implications for further study

I see this work as a comparative philosophical discourse consolidating two longstanding strands of inquiry -the relation between visual art and metaphysics, and the relation between metaphysics and morality- mediated through Nishida's unique phenomenological synthesis of western Kantianism with Mahayana Buddhist 'emptiness'.

In the western tradition art has been generally seen as manifesting the "elemental mystery of life", a primary innate human creative drive that can reveal the metaphysical, the noumenal 'Absolute', inaccessible to conventional modes of cognition

Metaphysical assumptions in terms of freedom and God are often relied on to frame ethical systems of moral agency, whilst the dominant view holds that ontology, the nature of being itself, is a sub-branch of metaphysics. Mahayana Buddhism's stress on the reality and importance of consciousness may be interpreted as seeing ontology as parallel or even as a prerequisite to metaphysics.

With this in mind, Nishida's explicit correlation of 'Art and Morality' through action intuition dimension can be said to'slice right through the field of the eighth consciousness."

The curtain between our existential ontic truth of conceptual embodiment and the deeper ontological truth of emptiness such that the process of creating Buddhist art can be seen to represent a way of achieving and appreciating the 'two truths' simultaneously. This inner enlightenment involves a "a profound, religious transformative change of the heart-mind in which the " primal" unity of subjectivity and objectivity is immediately apprehended, eliciting a new consciousness when we are awakened to our true self

Understanding the creative process as essentially a "religious" endeavour affords the 'missing link' between the two truths regarding the implausibility of a no-self in times of basic ethical decision by sanctioning a 'religious' empowerment of the conventional no-self to function independently of its ultimate metaphysical significance

In this way, rather than freedom of will per se, the practice of virtue is found in concrete personal experience and the unifying power of the self, underpinned by by a fundamental ontological openness to 'the Good'

The study attests to the credibility of art's ontological significance, and tentatively supports the (Murdoch's) proposition that meditatively engaging with artworks can enable us to achieve a 'metanoic' self-transcendence, which is a necessary prerequisite for moral vision; that one who meditates looks out upon the world, in a different "better consciousness" from one who does not meditate.

It also however highlights the critical question of Buddhism as to whether a non-conceptual ontological awareness of the formless ultimate truth of emptiness, without some concomitant "religious" unifying concept of the good, that indeed shares many of the core features of 'God', can philosophically be seen to take the concrete world seriously enough.

> "He led a double life. Did that make him a liar? He did not feel a liar. He was a man of two truths" (Iris Murdoch, "*The Sacred and Profane Love Machine"*, p.80)

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