[Book Review] Fujita Masakatsu, *A Human Being: The Unfinished Philosophy of Nishida Kitarō*

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Fujita Masakatsu's most recent book *A Human Being: The Unfinished Philosophy of Nishida Kitarō* (『人間・西田幾多郎―未完の哲学』) published in October 2020 is the author's first biography on Nishida Kitarō. In the Afterword, Fujita writes that he initially started thinking about writing a critical biography on Nishida Kitarō while he was editing the new edition of *The Complete Works of Nishida Kitarō*(『西田幾多郎全集』) from 2002 to 2009. Takeda Atsushi was initially in charge of compiling the diaries and correspondences, but after his passing away, Fujita took up this task. While the old edition contained around 2800 letters of correspondence, more than 4500 letters were compiled in the new edition. As he carefully read through all of these letters as well as Nishida's diary, he studied the lives of the people who came up in these writings and developed a detailed chronicle of Nishida's life. Such arduous efforts eventually led Fujita to feel that he was coming face to face with "a human being (人間), Nishida Kitarō", full of vitality while at times steeped in deep sorrow (381). He says in the Preface, Nishida is not a person in the past nor is his writings a mere historical text. His whole being, both his life and his work, continue to move us today: "Nishida's thinking involves something that pushes us to come face to face with his philosophy whenever we attempt to rethink the present" (x). In this way, this biography is written not as a mere amusement for the reader, but as an attempt to encourage the reader to think along with Nishida as a stepping stone to develop their own thinking. It may be worth mentioning that the "we" in the above quote not only applies to Japanese readers, but to any thinker living in this globalizing world as Fujita points out the increasing relevance of Nishida's philosophy in the world as it continues to gain attention by scholars outside of Japan.

This last observation about the author's intention brings us to an important question that is at work as an undercurrent of this book. This is the question regarding the relationship between the life of a philosopher and their work: *How does a philosopher's personal background—family relationship, education, milieu, relationship with peers and mentors, etc.—shape the development of their thought?* Fujita does not explicitly address this question. However, it is crucial that we do so here as it relates to the question of how we should read this book. According to a

Wittgenstein scholar, James Conant, there are two standard ways of understanding the relationship between philosophy and biography. On the one hand, we have the *reductionists* who believe that the personal life of a philosopher holds the secret to understanding their work. On the other hand, there are the *compartmentalists* who hold that the understanding of a philosopher's life is irrelevant to an understanding of their work. This leads us to a "deadlock" whereby we are caught between two unsatisfactory views: an understanding of the author's work is to be found either *wholly outside* of the work or *wholly within* the work (Conant 2001, 17-19). It is interesting that Nishida himself was somewhat of a compartmentalist as Shimomura Toratarō recalls him saying that a philosopher's personal life, unlike that of a writer, is not so important for understanding their work. Indeed, this caused a controversy amongst the editors of the old edition of the *Complete Works of Nishida Kitarō* whether or not to include Nishida's diary and correspondences at all. At the end they decided to include them and Fujita clearly appreciated this choice as he (together with the other editors) decided to include more correspondences in the new edition. It is also clear that Fujita rejects the compartmentalist's view since his intention of writing a biography was to shed light on Nishida's philosophy by getting to know the human being, Nishida Kitarō. As he says in the Afterword, "I realized that new light can be shed on Nishida's philosophy by approaching Nishida's thought from behind, so to say" (382), namely by examining the backstories to his work and life.

However, this is not to say that Fujita was a reductionist who seeks to understand the work of a philosopher purely as an effect of life events external to the work. As we will see below, a good portion of the book is devoted to a close reading of Nishida's philosophy based on his published works, and it is evident that Nishida's own testimony of his life as well as the words from his close ones are provided as a means to shed light on his philosophical ideas, and not as holding the ultimate secret to understanding them. Steering clear from the two extremes, Fujita's book can be said to be what James Conant and others have called a "philosophical biography", namely a biography that attempts to facilitate the understanding of a philosopher's thought through attention to their life (Conant 2001, 16; Monk 2001). This is probably what sets his biography apart from those written by his disciples and his relatives, as well as some of the more recent ones, that bring to light the historical significance of Nishida's life and philosophy. As mentioned earlier, for Fujita, Nishida is not a person in the past nor is his writings a mere historical text. Fujita's philosophical biography is written with the clear aim of helping the reader better understand Nishida's philosophy and think along with Nishida to develop their own thinking from their milieu today.

The book is divided into four parts in chronological order of Nishida's life. The title of each part includes Nishida's own words taken from his diary and writings and is accompanied with a few words. The first part is titled "Nonetheless, I was not happy": From Zen to Philosophy; the second, "I found the clue to lay the logical base for my ideas": Pure Experience and Basho; the third, "My mind and body felt lighter": From the "Self" to the "World"; and fourth, "The world has become an actuality": In Between East and West. These titles are like snapshots of milestones in Nishida's life, and taken together, they already give us a glimpse of how Nishida's life and career developed. In fact, the choice of including Nishida's own words in the titles reflects Fujita's basic stance observed throughout the book to include as much as possible Nishida's own account, as well as testimony from others close to him, to provide a compelling picture of Nishida's life. This approach allows the reader to feel more like we are listening to Nishida and others speak through Fujita and less like merely listening to Fujita tell a story about Nishida. Indeed, it is astounding as to the breadth of testimony Fujita manages to bring in from Nishida's social circle. Some of this reflects the new findings about the details of Nishida's life based on the recent additions made to the *Complete Works of Nishida Kitarō*, but much of it is a result of Fujita's efforts to study the various connections and backstories hidden behind the written words.

Let us now take a closer look at each part. Part I probably gives the reader the most feeling of reading a typical biography as it walks you through the details of Nishida's life from his upbringing and relationship to his family to his school life and his relationship to his peers and teachers. Among the various anecdotes that Fujita introduces, there is one in particular from Nishida's high school days that is quite intriguing in light of what we know about Nishida's philosophy today. This is found in a correspondence to his close friend and one of the several with whom Nishida had various intellectual discussions: Yamamoto Ryōkichi （山本良吉）. Against Yamamoto who argued for the immortality of the soul, Nishida argued in favor of materialism based on Nakae Chōmin's materialistic view of nature. This is quite surprising given that what he develops later in *An Inquiry into the Good* （『善の研究』） is far from a materialistic worldview. And even more surprising is how he dismisses religion and god as nothing but a delusion in another letter to Yamamoto (18-19). Leaving the young Nishida, Fujita then goes on to survey Nishida's difficult life as a non-regular student at the University of Tokyo and his early years of teaching at various high schools. This period of teaching was a time of struggle for Nishida. Fujita draws from Nishida's letters he wrote to his friends and colleagues that testifies to the struggles he was experiencing revolving his family life. In an essay titled "The Doubts of the Human Mind" (人心の疑惑; 1903,

compiled in Vol. 11 of the new edition) he writes that the doubts of the human mind is not a philosophical problem that arises from an intellectual demand, but is a "life problem" （生命の問題） that arises from a practical demand. During this time, he chose to put his philosophical career on hold to focus on gaining peace of mind through Zen training. As he writes in his diary, "I will not think about religion or philosophy until I reach awakening" (57).Yet what is interesting is that on the day he finally passed the famous Mu koan, he wrote in his diary: "Nonetheless, I was not happy". To his utter disappointment, the *kensho* experience did not have the transformative power to give him the peace of mind that he desperately wanted. However, this event occasioned Nishida to realize that the appropriate place for him was academia and not Zen. As if to signal a turn away from Zen to philosophy (though he would continue his practice), he started publishing several essays around this time that would later become parts of *An Inquiry into the Good*.

Compared to Part I, which is largely about Nishida's pre-philosophical life, Part II is more philosophical. The bulk of this section is devoted to outlining the development of Nishida's thought based on the idea of pure experience to the period where he struggles to find his original standpoint around the time of *Intuition and Reflection in Self-awareness* （『自覚に於ける直観と反省』）, and finally where he makes a breakthrough to his idea of *basho* in the mid-1920s. Fujita does a wonderful job of making Nishida's philosophy comprehensible and accessible, and thereby making the transition from Part I to Part II less challenging than what one may expect. This is also aided by the stories Fujita tells us about Nishida's lecture style as well as his relationship with his students, which were typically reciprocal. His lectures were not about him disseminating knowledge to his students, but as Miki Kiyoshi later revealed, they had the spirit of "inviting others to a philosophical investigation" (114). Nishida often quoted from the Zen Master Baizhang Huaihai （百丈懐海）, "If your view equals your teacher's, you diminish your teacher's virtue by half", which is to say that only by going beyond the teacher can one become competent. Nishida encouraged his students to think for themselves and praised those who developed their original ideas. Even when their ideas developed in a different direction from Nishida's, as did Miki Kiyoshi and Tosaka Jun, this didn't deter his affection for them. Another point Fujita brings up is the contrast between the gleaming success he was enjoying as his works were gaining recognition, on the one hand, and the deep and intense sorrow he was experiencing in his personal life, on the other. He lost two of his young daughters in 1907, his son in 1920 and finally his beloved wife Kotomi in 1925. Recalling this period, Nishida writes in a letter to his old friend Hori Ikō （堀維孝） that the fame and recognition that he was gaining were no more than "bubbles of illusion" （虚幻の

泡）. He also wrote that he was working hard during this period as a way to deal with the deep sorrow and loneliness he was feeling within (191).

Nishida's open and welcoming attitude towards criticisms and original ideas was held towards his colleagues as well. Indeed, throughout his life, he continued to develop his ideas in light of the criticisms he received, which is why Fujita decided to give the subtitle of the book "Unfinished Philosophy". Drawing on Nishida's famous line, "Thinking by becoming the thing, acting by becoming the thing", Fujita identifies the attempt to grasp the dynamic movement of life and reality in the midst of their movement as the defining marker of Nishida's philosophy. Furthermore, Fujita adds that Nishida's philosophy itself was also dynamic and constantly renewing itself (336). As is well known, in an essay titled "Requesting Instruction from Professor Nishida" from 1930, Tanabe Hajime posed a severe criticism toward Nishida's early ideas of *basho*. Taking these criticisms, as well as those posed by Tosaka Jun and others based on their Marxist views, seriously, Nishida continued to develop his views after his retirement. Part III sketches out this development as he moved away from his earlier focus on consciousness to the consideration of the bodily self acting within the historical world. Fujita sums up this move as that from consciousness or the self to the world (206). The author then moves on to Nishida's personal life after his retirement. He quotes from Nishida's diary on the day of his last lecture where he says: "My mind and body felt lighter. From now on I am a private individual and will focus on merely developing my own thought" (201). Nishida was indeed true to his words as he continued to refine his ideas, but his life was not entirely free from concerns. Fujita sheds light on the fatherly side of Nishida as he actively sought various possibilities to ensure that his three young daughters marry and settle down. We also learn about the more vulnerable side of Nishida struggling with loneliness before finally finding solace in his second marriage with Yamada Koto.

Part IV draws out the later years of Nishida's life as he finds himself in the midst of the increasingly nationalistic tendency of wartime Japan. Several of Nishida's published writings during this time employ controversial terms such as "the Japanese Spirit" （日本精神）, "the Imperial Way" （皇道）, and "*kokutai*" or "the National Polity" （国体）. While this has prompted much criticism, Fujita draws attention to the context in which these were written and sheds light on the backstories of his involvement with some of the governmental bodies. For example, we learn that his involvement with the Council for Education Reform （教学刷新評議会）, which was an advisory body for the Minister of Education, was not a voluntary choice but a rather reluctant one; he basically could not let down his former student from the Fourth High School who had directly requested Nishida to

accept the position (270-273). And a closer reading of his writings where he employs those controversial terms reveals that he was attempting to not merely reiterate the discourse, but rather, to redefine the terms based on a global and multicultural standpoint. Far from a narrow-minded nationalism, Nishida believed that each nation and culture must go beyond itself to contribute to the making of the world. Indeed, he believed that this was both inevitable and necessary, as he claimed in a public talk he gave at Kyoto University, "The world today has become concrete. Instead of being abstract, the world has become an actuality" (277).

Earlier I said that when reading this book, one gets the impression that we are listening to Nishida and others speak through Fujita rather than merely listening to Fujita tell a story about Nishida. But this is not to say that the author is completely invisible. Indeed, a good biography is one where we learn not only about the person in question but also about the author him or herself. Although Fujita generally keeps his own voice in the background, his presence can be felt most in his emphasis on the compassionate side of Nishida. As we already saw, Fujita talks about Nishida's sympathetic attitude towards his students even when they developed ideas quite far from Nishida's. And we also saw how he cared deeply about his family. To give another example, Fujita tells a story about Nishida writing the Preface to his high school friend, Fujioka Sakutarō's （藤岡作太郎） book *Lectures on the History of Japanese Literature* （『国文学史講和』） published in 1908. Instead of writing about the content of the book, which would have made it more appropriate for the occasion, Nishida wrote about the deep sadness one feels when losing one's loved ones. Fujioka had just lost his daughter and Nishida had resonated with him as he had also just lost two of his young daughters. By casting light on this compassionate side of Nishida, Fujita provides a revision to the common understanding of Nishida as a solemn and unfaltering thinker as one-sided and complements this by shedding light on Nishida as a warmhearted and vulnerable human being. This provides us with a more nuanced picture of Nishida and perhaps brings him a bit closer to us, which could be quite helpful when one is dealing with difficult material such as Nishida's works.

To conclude, let us return to the question of how we should read this book. Oftentimes we choose to read a biography or an autobiography to learn about the interesting stories of a person who had a successful career. However, while we certainly learn interesting facts about Nishida, this is not all that the book offers and it is also not what makes this book unique and interesting. As I stated earlier, Fujita makes it very clear that his intention of writing this book is not to entertain the readers, but to shed light on Nishida's philosophy from a different angle; the book is not just any biography, but a *philosophical* biography. Furthermore, Fujita's

ultimate aim is to encourage readers to think along with Nishida to develop their own ideas. As an "unfinished philosophy", Nishida's thinking moves us to continue where Nishida left off, or to revisit the problems he grappled with. Therefore, we should read this book with a philosophical aim of better understanding Nishida's philosophy, and ultimately, to make his problems our own for us to contemplate from our milieu today. Having beautifully sketched out Nishida's life and his philosophy for us, and bringing to the fore the compassionate side of Nishida, Fujita has left the reader the important task to assess for ourselves whether or not and to what extent Fujita's exposition of the human being, Nishida Kitarō helps us toward this end.

Reference List

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