

NISHIDA AND LIVING THOUGHT

The work of Nishida Kitaro is singular because it is the conversion of the pure philosophical thought of the West into the supersensible experience as indicated by Tradition. We ourselves have sustained in one of our studies (Cfr. « East and West », New Series, Vol. 11, No. 4, p. 249) that the greatest conquests of Western philosophy, culminating in Germany in the thought of Fichte, Schelling and Hegel, and in Italy in that of Vico, Rosmini, Gioberti, Spaventa and Gentile, had the task of leading the modern intellectual to an experience of « pure thought », or of pre-dialectic thought, or of the force-thought present and yet always dying in each thought. Because a similar thought works as a living force, or as force of truth, capable of facing and resolving the problems of man, unsolvable dialectically. In fact, up to now only dialectic solutions have been offered, incapable of grasping reality: that of the body and of the soul, of nature and of history.

If we examine the volume *A Study of Good* (translated by V. H. Viglielmo - Japanese National Commission for Unesco, 1961) we note that Nishida has intuited the final meaning of the rationalistic experience of man; he has understood that the logic of Hegel is the movement of the spirit completely descended into materiality and at the point of again grasping itself as freedom. Because this freedom begins where the spirit finds itself alone in sensible experience, deprived of metaphysics, of traditions and of visions, so that it may only achieve force for knowing the world from its isolation; and even though this is the sensible world, the world of disanimated objectivity, the act with which the spirit knows it is in itself supersensible. It is the spirit continuing its history. Even if it is not aware of it. Even if it sees only material, bodies, quantity, multiplicity, the movement of thought in that world is supersensible movement. In being aware of that supersensible essence, the spirit experiments with freedom, an experiment which it could not undertake when it perceived the world metaphysically, and the metaphysical vision of the world conditioned it.

How does Nishida recover the way to the « void », or to absolute nothingness? One must not forget that Nishida was a Zen disciple and that he has therefore been able to understand the final meaning of thought, which is inevitably the thought that Zen thinks; otherwise Zen would be nothing. If it did not begin by being a thinking activity, the practice of Zen would not be available; we are not dealing with contents that may be introduced into conscience without having penetrated into thought; but having thus been penetrated by thought — which is not ordinary thought — they live and are always the movement of thought, but not of reflected, or abstract, thought, rather of the thought in which the entire spirit is expressed, or is in the process of expressing itself.

A similar intuition explains the logic of the self-identity of absolute contradictions of Nishida. The thought that makes itself the passive expression of exterior multiplicity cannot cease to be the thought that emanates from the spirit; but it must be rediscovered, because, in making itself the expression of multiplicity, it loses awareness of its own movement. The latter, becoming a form of multiplicity, seems to be the movement of multiplicity, from which is born materialistic science; but it is the movement of the spirit which, by means of thought, may be rediscovered. Thought must grasp its own movement; this movement is « pure experience », so sought-after today by positivists and phenomenologists, but sought in vain. Extreme contradictions are the furthest boundary of the passage of thought from its enchantment with the sensible to the perception of its supersensible nature. The thought that fulfills a similar experience substantially annihilates its chains of « name » and « form », and becomes pure substance of thought; and it is with this the first form of the void, but equally the communion with the creative essence of the world.

The thought of Nishida Kitaro represents in the Far East perhaps the most serious meeting-point between the ancient mystical vision and the modern experience of concepts. This experience takes place in the West on the condition that the spirit extinguishes itself, that metaphysics disappears. (What Hegel, Fichte, Schelling may really have wished to say in the language of philosophy yet remains to be understood: it remains to be seen if in their systems there may not have been expressed the last gleam of a thought still capable of immersing itself in the supersensible, that which now is the « nothing », just because it has become abstraction. This escapes Sartre, as it does all those who do not know how to find in thought the annihilation of *being* that they seek).

Certain Oriental thinkers, children of the ancient metaphysical vocation, can make the bridge between the metaphysical and the physical, between the mystical and the realistic vision, on the condition that they do not allow themselves to be trapped in that into which Western philosophizing has recently fallen: dialectic as an end in itself. Dialectic is not thought in its creative moment, it is not the spirit, but its contingent determination.

The dialectic which becomes automatic and becomes research, vision of the world, philosophy or anti-philosophy, idealism or anti-idealism, spiritualism or materialism, is not the vehicle of the spirit, is not the vehicle of truth, but the expressive process that has mastered man; that is, the expressive process devoid of interior content; process of man impotent by now to express his own essence, but capable only of expressing his own impotence. The terms circulating in philosophical literature, « being », « existing », « basis », « essence », « phenomenon », « nothing », « truth », « logism », etcetera, are in truth empty words: they say nothing. There is nothing behind them. It is merely dialectical automatism dressing the nature of a determined philosophizing person, who probably philosophizes because he does not know what thought is: he does not know that through which something knows.

Nishida, then, is found as a *pe* in Japan, as the indication of a way. Son of ancient metaphysical stock, he sees the world, the scenery of the world, nature, history, with an eye free from dialecticisms. He knows philosophy but remains metaphysical; he understands that there is only one real physical world, but that that world is metaphysical in its concreteness. Reality is metaphysical and only through this may be physical; the ancient Taoist masters, the Zen masters, the Buddhist

ascetics, were right in taking the « void » as essence. But theirs was merely a vision donated by the Gods, thanks to an art of contemplation whose secret has been lost. However, that which was vision in ancient times reflowers in the child of this time as thought aware. In thought aware one may continue the art of the ancient vision: this is the meaning of science. But if thought aware loses contact with the spirit, from which it yet derives, its activity becomes rhetorical, renounces internal creative virtue, falls into the sphere of quantity, is overcome by formalism, by methodology, by technique. This is the danger of modern science, but it is also the danger of the world: that truth may limit itself to the measurable, which is not reality, but something that is abstracted from reality, and which one wrongly begins to consider as all of reality. In fact, one no longer knows how to grasp that which is beyond the measurable, there is no longer a movement of thought for it; while thought should be recognized already as the presence of that which is not measurable. Thence thought should be known, the thought with which in truth everything decides itself. The intimate unknown.

But — observes Nishida — thought may not be known if it limits itself to philosophizing; its movement is not philosophy, but that which has nothing behind itself, if not the unlimitedness of the spirit, as an interior act. Philosophy is a product, not a condition. Knowing is the living moment of the spirit, but he who limits himself to philosophizing does not know it; unless philosophizing is the form of pure experience, *junsui keiken*, that is, of the pure experimentation of thought.

The philosophy of the Far East has given us an interesting school: the so-called « School of Kyôto », *Kyôto-ha*, which grew up at that University. Japan's awakening to Western philosophy began in the first decades of this century, taking place under the sign of a regular contact with the great German thinkers, Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, with the phenomenology of Husserl and the existentialism of Heidegger and Jaspers. The « School of Kyôto » is the root of Nishida's thought and may be considered the most alive aspect of Japanese philosophy, for just the reasons quoted: for not having lost the *logos* in logic, for not having lost the vital lymph of ideas in dialectic, for having maintained contact with the forces of ancient inspiration, while penetrating into the world of concepts and seeking to grasp being in rational activity.

Nishida's work, *Zen no Kenkyû*, is fundamental because it may be considered the « positive » synthesis of the different currents of Western thought. He has understood the best of it, because he has known how to distinguish dialectic from the pure movement of thought which is not dialectic and renders truth, with its light, to dialectic. The « School of Kyôto » is undoubtedly in line with that thought, even if the successor of Nishida, Tanabe Hajime, opening himself to the philosophy of science, has re-evaluated Kantian teleology, accepting at the same time the phenomenalism of Edmund Husserl; in this way he has somehow renounced the value of the « pure knowing » which moves as essence of the objective world in the awakened conscience and which Nishida affirmed. The latter's thought has been most faithfully sustained by his disciple Koyama, who has contributed to the knowledge of his work in the West.

The meaning of our considerations is the following: Nishida's work is important from the point of view of an authentic understanding, of a new urgent understanding, because it bears an orientation which the latest philosophies are in danger of losing, if they have not already lost it: an orientation without which dialecticism can demonstrate all things, be always true, because it is not thought penetrating the state

of fact, but the state of fact making thought subservient to itself. Thus every ideology is good as an ideal pretext for making into reality that to which one is drawn by one's own nature, not by spirit. And philosophy becomes the philosophical dress of determined positions, apparently mental, but in effect psycho-physical.

What Nishida indicates should make a serious seeker attentive. For what reason does this lively thinker, despite his clear knowledge of Western logic and of the various evolutions of dialectic, still indicate as the original point of reference for knowledge the « void » or the « nothing »? That « void », that « nothing », are not the abstraction of thought, but the experience of the intimate life of thought, in itself informal and pre-dialectic, not to be grasped by rationality but determining rationality; this therefore may also be the rationality which fills the true and luminous and penetrating movement of thought, such as abstract rationality, taken from living thought, and, with the mechanism of speech, representing the movement of the thought that is not there; the movement here being the movement of nature: psycho-physical, not ideal.

In the work of Nishida one finds a position of thinking more creative, from the point of view of a revivification of Zen, than that proper to the philosophical center of Sendai, started by two interesting thinkers, Eugen Herrigel — whose work on « Zen Art in Archery » is highly appreciated — and Karl Loewith. Because Nishida's art is the refined art of thinking which does not elude its own presence and grasps itself in an intensive continuity that, felt there where it is born, leads knowingly to individual limits, to the level of a liberty and a lucid immensity which is the void of being, but the unlimited richness of all that which is born and will continue to be born in the world. It is the experience of pure thought, which does not depend on « spiritual facts », on myths, on interior attitudes, on mystical mediations, but draws directly from the spiritual source. This is pursued by the traditional mysticisms, with no possibility of the immediacy that thought, by being pure thought, consciously actuates. But it is pure thought, possibility open to the thinker of this time who may arrive at experimenting with rationality, so as to live it to the limit, to its moment of arising; while the teachings of the revivers of Zen propose attitudes, visions of life, ways of being, sentiments, that already imply the movement of thought, without which they could not arise, but have the task of distracting thought from its own essence, just because they presume to give it. But they do not give it, they give only a part of it, because they place themselves as « objects of the spirit », presenting themselves as spirit and implying that the ascetic may not know it. Otherwise the latter would devote himself to his activity which makes them arise, rather than to them.

Thought is the last-born of the spirit, through which, however, spirit begins to enter directly into the world; but it may only enter on the condition that it does not take for the content of the world that which rises before it thanks to its activity; the form of the world being already its penetration into it. Only the awareness of this surging entrance into the world can offer the spirit the means of avoiding the mythicizing of nature or of the supernatural, and of observing these as contents that it reveals by offering them form.

And this is the highest way of the seekers of this time, which intellectual laziness prevents most men from knowing, and which Nishida, reviver of the unextinguishable tradition, has objectively intuited.