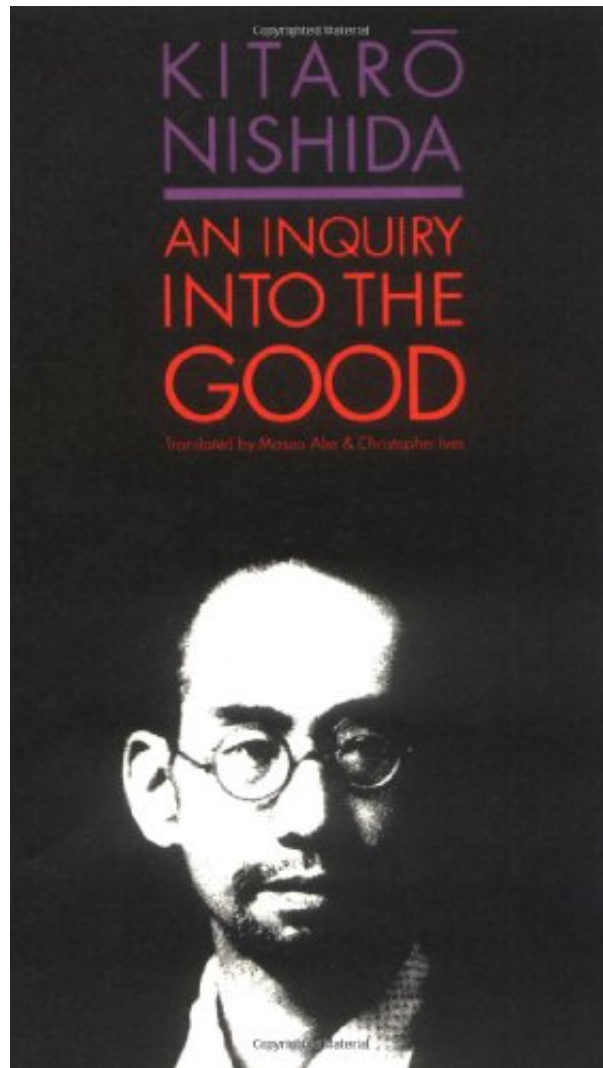
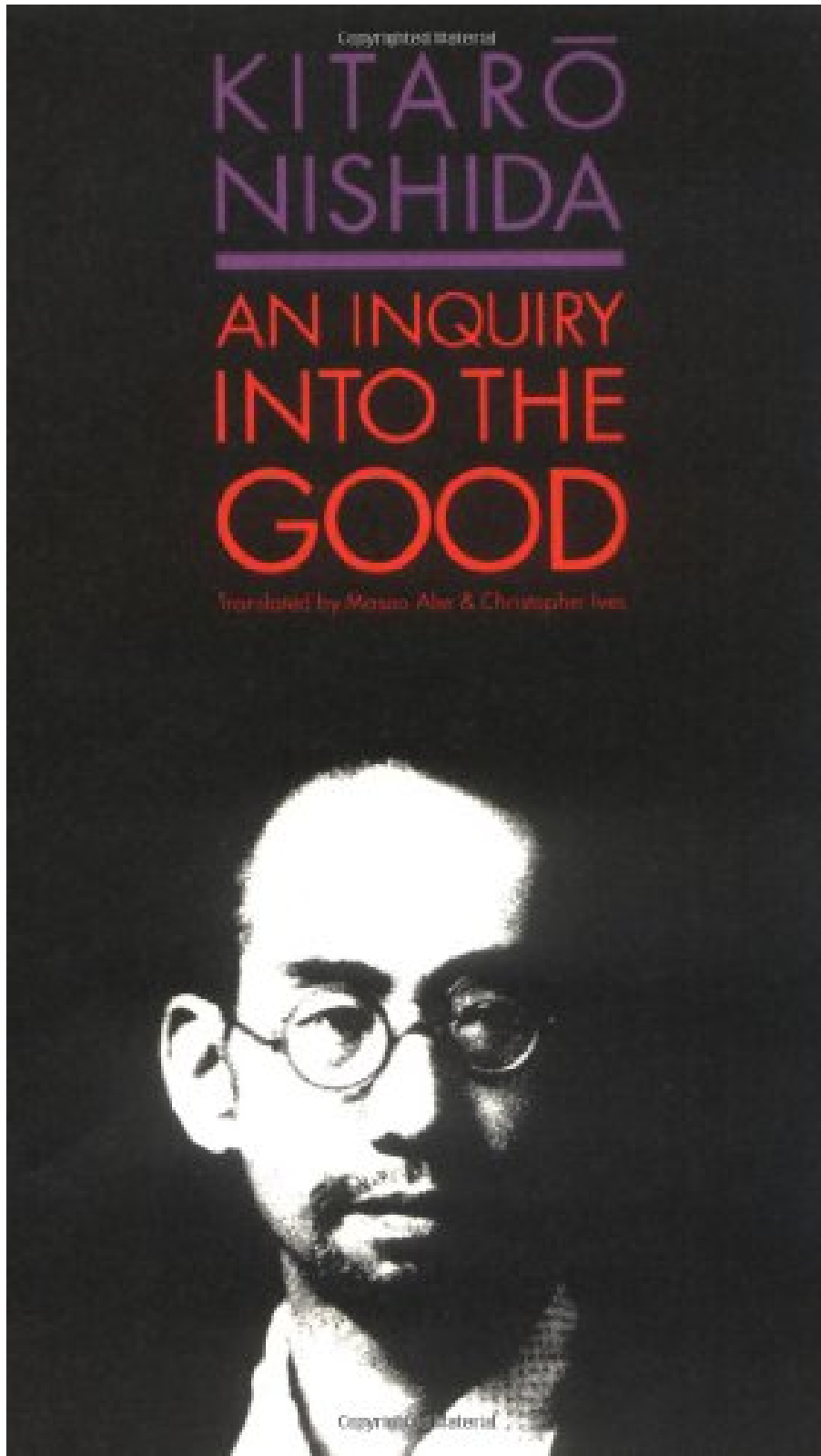


AN INQUIRY INTO THE GOOD BY KITARO NISHIDA



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AN INQUIRY INTO THE GOOD BY KITARO NISHIDA PDF

A translation of Nishida's earliest book which represented the foundation of his philosophy - reflecting both his study of Zen Buddhism and his thorough analysis of Western philosophy. The book provides an account of this 20th-century Japanese philosopher's ideas.

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Brilliant beginning, but...

By Brian C.

This review will divide itself roughly into two sections. In the first section I will attempt to provide a brief summary of Nishida's philosophy as presented in this book which, due to limitations of space, will remain profoundly inadequate. In the second section I will attempt to make a case for also reading Nishida's later works in addition to this work. *An Inquiry into the Good* is Nishida's first book, and it is also his most popular book. While it is certainly profound in its own right, and deserves close attention, Nishida's thought underwent a tremendous development throughout his life. So I thoroughly recommend that anyone who reads this book also attempt to get their hands on some of Nishida's later works (especially *Intelligibility and the Philosophy of Nothingness: Three Philosophical Essays* and *Last Writings: Nothingness and the Religious Worldview*).

I.

Nishida's ultimate concern in this work, as his title suggests, is with the question of the nature of the good which can be considered an ethical question in the broad sense. This fact is often overlooked because Nishida considers questions about value to be intimately connected with questions about the nature of reality, or what we ordinarily call metaphysical questions. In fact one of the great motivating sources for Nishida's philosophy as a whole is Nishida's attempt to overcome what has become known in the West as the fact/value dichotomy. So in order to address the nature of the good Nishida first has to address questions about the nature of reality. *An Inquiry into the Good* is not, therefore, a book merely about ethics in the restricted sense of that term. Over half of the book is devoted to attempting to answer metaphysical questions about the nature of reality and so Nishida's primary interest in the nature of the good is often overlooked.

Nishida's approach to metaphysics, however, is unique. Nishida was personally influenced profoundly by zen. Zen is often suspicious of abstract, rational conceptions of reality and instead favors a method of "direct seeing" in approaching reality. This is in direct contrast to the Western method of approach to questions about the nature of reality which rely primarily on logic and rational argument in attempting to determine or uncover the nature of reality. Nishitani Keiji summarizes these different approaches well in his book on Nishida. Nishitani writes, "The sense of quest...as it appears in Plato's dialogues entails a spirit of inquiry aimed at the gradual discovery through dialogue of something new, something not yet known to the participants. This spirit appears as the standpoint of pure reason that seeks to uncover something new and completely unknown, to discover according to the laws of logic." The Western method usually begins with premises accepted as self-evident, or with facts known directly through sense experience, and through the use of reason and discussion attempts to deduce other unknown, or not immediately self-evident truths through the methods of valid reasoning as determined by logic. In other words, the Western method attempts to transcend "phenomenal" reality, or what can be immediately known, and to uncover "noumenal" reality, which cannot be directly or immediately known, through the use of reason and logic. This is, broadly speaking, the method of the empirical sciences.

Nishida, on the other hand, argues that thinking (itself a part of the phenomenal world) does not possess any inherent ability to transcend the phenomenal world and reveal noumenal reality as it is "in itself". Nishida, therefore, adopts a different method in approaching metaphysical questions. We turn again to Nishitani who writes, "In order to grasp something in its actual form, we must distance ourselves from the discriminating, relativizing self...The standpoint of the conscious self consists in setting up an opposition between the self and things so that we have a self on the one hand and things existing apart from the self on the other." In order to grasp reality as it is we must overcome the standpoint of the conscious self and adopt the standpoint of the non-ego which, as Nishitani writes, "smashes that pattern we call self to become one with the Life of the universe, of nature. When one stands there, all things, just as they are, become the actual form and actual reality that they are...This is very different from materialism, which is not a standpoint that thinks things by becoming them." There is no doubt that this method will have an idealistic sound to most Western readers (more on this later). But correctly understood Nishida's views cannot be reduced to either idealism or realism as these are commonly understood.

So what conclusions does Nishida reach in regard to the nature of reality by following this method? Briefly stated Nishida arrives at a vision of reality as "an independent, self-sufficient, pure activity" which is held together by what Nishida calls (in this translation) "a certain unifying reality" at the base of experience. Nishida, therefore, opposes a vision of reality conceived as a relation between passive "things" interacting with each other, and whose motion is imparted from some outside source. Reality for Nishida is always active and self-developing.

What implications does this have in the realm of ethics? Again, to state things as briefly as possible "If we regard this unifying power [the certain unifying reality] as the personality of each individual, then the good resides in the maintenance and development of personality as this unifying power." To conceive of the good as the "maintenance and development of personality" may at first appear to be a very self-centered ethics. But this would be to misunderstand Nishida entirely. It would take me too long, and too far afield, to explain fully why this is a misunderstanding but to put it simply, Nishida argues that it is only by giving up our usual "self-centeredness", which places the ground of our activity in the conscious self already isolated from an objective world of things and other people, that we are able to unify our activity with the ground of our true personality, or the unifying power at the base of reality, which Nishida also calls God. Nishida sees the ultimate good for the human being in a surrendering to God, or in a becoming one with the activity of the universe.

This is a very simplistic overview of Nishida's theory of the Good and does not come close to doing it justice. But even in this simple form it has drastic implications in perhaps unexpected ways. I have recently, for instance, been pondering the implications of Nishida's theory of the good for the field of economics. It seems to me that Nishida's theory provides a powerful alternative to more hedonistic theories of human motivation and economics based on the principles of marginal utility and has the potential to reconcile the liberal ideals of individual liberty with what is usually referred to as the welfare state. This could have interesting implications for our current political situation in the United States. This is an area in which one might not at first expect Nishida's thought to have much to say, but I think it does.

II.

Nishida himself summarizes the shortcomings of his first book in his preface, "As I look at it now, the standpoint of this book is that of consciousness, which might be thought of as a kind of psychologism. Yet even if people criticize it as being too psychological, there is little I can do now. I do think, however, that what lay deep in my thought when I wrote it was not something that is merely psychological." Psychologism is a doctrine that attempts to ground the laws of logic in empirical psychology. Carried to an extreme this view tends towards various forms of relativism since it attempts to base logical laws, which are supposed to be ideal laws valid for all time, on empirical facts. Nishida attempts to overcome any psychologistic tendencies in his early thought in his later work by developing his notion of logical spaces, or basho.

I cannot summarize Nishida's later books here but, in my opinion, another short-coming of Nishida's choice to begin from "the standpoint of consciousness" is that it opens his thought to being misinterpreted in an idealist fashion. It is almost impossible for any Western reader to interpret Nishida's statement that true reality consists in phenomena of consciousness in anything but an idealist way. Since idealism as a metaphysical system is largely out of favor this might make Nishida's metaphysics seem quaint and irrelevant. Nothing could be further from the truth in my opinion. Nishida develops (along with Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty) one of the most profound critiques by any philosopher of the subject-object dichotomy and the metaphysics that are based on this dichotomy. But this is clearer in Nishida's later works. In Nishida's later works it is clear that the opposition between subject and object is not overcome by collapsing or absorbing the object into the subject (which is idealism). This book still lends itself to misinterpretation in that regard.

So while I highly suggest that anyone with an interest in philosophy buy this book and read it carefully, I also highly suggest that anyone interested in Nishida do all that they can to get their hands on Nishida's later works.

And as one final note. Many reviewers have argued that it would be helpful to have an understanding of zen when approaching this work. It would definitely be helpful to know something of zen when reading Nishida, and zen is certainly worth studying in it's own right, but in my opinion an understanding of Kant, and especially his notion of the transcendental unity of apperception, is more important when approaching this work than an understanding of zen. I think someone with a decent understanding of Kant will have an easier time unraveling this work than someone who limits themselves to studying zen.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful.

Good deal

By Fred Evans

just got another copy of Nishida's first work. Every time somebody sees me reading this book, for years now, they borrow it and I never see the book again. Got this one used, good shape, good shipping, not too much writing in it, I am happy. Gonna stay home with this copy until I finish it again! This book is NOT about Zen

at all. If you are new to Buddhism get this for later use. You will use it! Its mostly a compilation of the thoughts of Satoru.

8 of 13 people found the following review helpful.

A tedious read, with some real gems within.

By Anton Sevilla

Nishida's book was a bit tedious. The translation seems good and his writing style isn't deliberately cryptic. Familiarity in Eastern thought, particularly Zen Buddhist thought, greatly aids making sense of what he says. Also a familiarity with Kant and Hegel (whom he responds to) and the Western tradition would be greatly helpful.

Aside from his key point on reckoning with things in their immediacy (paraphrase), I found quite a gem in his description of God in his later chapters -- a view of God even atheistic materialists might agree with.

All in all a good book, lacking in style but not in substance.

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