

Nishida Kitarō's *Kōiteki Chokkan*: Active Intuition and Contemporary Metaethics

At the center of the Nishida Kitarō¹ *Tetsugakukan*, or philosophy museum, in Ishikawa Prefecture in Japan, there is a round room on the ground floor with a view through the ceiling to the sky above. It is described as a “space where you can meditate while seeing the blue sky,”² and it is meant to stimulate reflective thought. Throughout the museum, there are numerous places with similar purposes, including an observatory and a “space of emptiness.”

Nishida was born in Ishikawa prefecture in 1870. He attended primary school and became lifelong friends with D.T. Suzuki, studied at the University of Tokyo, and was hired to teach philosophy at Kyoto University, after which he established what is now known as the Kyoto School of philosophy. The Philosopher's Path, a meandering walk through the Western edge of Kyoto, is named after Nishida's route to the university. A practicing Zen Buddhist, Nishida read European philosophy extensively but worked to convey a philosophical system that reflected Japanese and Zen experience.

Despite the title of his first major work, *An Inquiry into the Good* (*Zen no Kenkyū*, 1911), contemporary scholarly work on Nishida has focused on his metaphysics, epistemology, and philosophy of mind to the relative exclusion of his ethics. This is not entirely surprising: Nishida never promoted a complete ethical theory despite pursuing the good, or *zen*³ in his first work. Perhaps this is because, as he wrote in a very early (1902) letter to D.T. Suzuki:

It seems to me that ‘ethics’ in the West is purely an intellectual pursuit. Its arguments are cogent, but no one pays attention to the ‘soul experience’ – experience deep in the human heart. People forget the grounds on which they stand. There are those who analyze and explain the constituents of bread and water, but none considers the actual taste of either. The result is an artificial construct, which has no impact on the human heart. I wish contemporary scholars of ethics would leave their scholarly research and, instead, explain the spiritual experience of great figures of the past. That should be the factual basis for the study of ethics. (cited in Yusa 2002, 74)

An academic himself, Nishida was nevertheless skeptical of intellectualist approaches to the study of ethics. He approached ethics as a deeply personal, embodied experience, not an abstract theory. Nevertheless, there are traces of ethical theory in his work, and outlining them aids in the effort to understand what ethics meant to Nishida and why he only wrote about ethical theory in the sparse terms that he did.

While Nishida's thought has been understood through a number of lenses, such as Marxist theory (Haver 2012) and political theory (Goto-Jones 2003, 2005), I am here

¹ I follow the Japanese convention of writing last name before first name here.

² <http://www.nishidatetsugakukan.org/pamphlet/English.pdf>

³ In Japanese, this is a different word than that for the Buddhist religion, although they are pronounced the same.

interested in building a conceptual bridge between Nishida's understanding of ethics and contemporary metaethics. There are two main reasons for this bridging. First, reading Nishida through the conceptual structures of metaethics may help clarify his ethical perspective; Nishida was concerned about the underlying structure of individuals' ethical experience, a project for which contemporary metaethics is a useful lens. Second, Nishida's thought may spur contemporary metaethicists to consider neglected possibilities for conceiving of ethical thought and action. By reconceptualizing some of Nishida's ideas in contemporary terms, I hope to show the relevance of his work for current issues in metaethics.

In the following analysis, I characterize Nishida's metaethical perspective throughout his work but focus especially on his later papers, most notably his writings on *kōiteki chokkan*, or active intuition. These include *Kōiteki Chokkan no Tachiba* (published in 1935), *Kōiteki Chokkan* (published in 1937), as well as *Nothingness and the Religious Worldview (Bashoteiki Ronri to Shūkyōteki Sekaikan*, published in 1945, and widely available in translation). I explore affinities between Nishida's approach to ethics and metaethical intuitionism and sensibility theory. I then use this analysis to identify a lesson that Nishida offers to contemporary metaethicists.

But first, a necessary caveat. According to some critics, translating East Asian philosophy into a Euro-American philosophical lens corrupts the meaning of the original work by stretching and compressing it to fit the constraints of an alien conceptual structure. While comparative philosophy does involve some distortion of the texts in their original languages, this is true of all projects of translation. The caveat is that the analysis here makes no claims as to the true meaning or best interpretation of Nishida's ethics. Rather, it is intended to offer a particular approach for thinking about Nishida's thought that may prove useful for East Asian and analytic philosophical projects, among others. Within these types of constructive, comparative projects, it is not necessarily true, as Kakuzo Okakura writes in *The Book of Tea*, that "translation is a treason... can at its best be only the reverse side of a brocade – all the threads are there, but not the subtlety of color or design" (Okakura 1964, 34). Nishida's philosophy is notoriously abstract and dense; he almost never uses examples or situations to illustrate his arguments. To better make sense of Nishida's point and to demonstrate its relationship to contemporary metaethical thought, throughout this paper I have endeavored to describe concretely the meaning of his arguments. Thus this project inevitably includes some "coloring in" based on the threads of Nishida's philosophy.

1. *Kōiteki Chokkan* or Active Intuition

Nishida's work on his concept of *koiteki chokkan*, or active intuition, came late in his career (1935-37). During this time, Nishida departed from his earlier psychologism in *Inquiry into the Good* (1911), and concerned himself more directly with the individual's relationship with the world, rather than the individual's relationship with his or her psychological experience. While his earlier conceptions of intuition had focused on intuitive moments of self-awareness, his idea of *basho* (place) helped him to reconceive intuition as something enacted, not just experienced. This established a two-way relationship with the world, whereby self-expression as creative activity is made possible through an individual's active participation as an embodied subject. This participation reflects their acting self back to them and gives them a sense of self (which is then

necessary for self-expression). For example, when we respond to someone who asks us a question, our response is occasioned by the prompt we are given and the situation we find ourselves in, but it is also shaped by who we are and our past experience. Each time we craft a response, we express this interaction between the self and the world, learning about both in the process. This general view grounded Nishida's interest in creative expression and made his idea of active intuition more concrete than in his earlier work, by redefining experience as embodied, not just psychological (Krueger 2008). Yet Nishida did not discuss the ethical implications of his idea of active intuition until the last year of his life, in *Nothingness and the Religious Worldview/ Bashoteki Ronri to Shūkyōteki Sekaikan* (Nishida 1945).

One of the clearest elements in *Nothingness and the Religious Worldview* is Nishida's critique of Kant. He writes that the Kantian self is purely formal, "the self of no person and yet the self of any person... merely an abstract being. The conscious activity of such a formal will would have no concrete meaning, for from it nothing particular or individual could emerge" (Nishida 1945, 72). At a later point in the same essay his criticism is more pointed, "Kant's ethics of practical reason was only a bourgeois ethics. A historically transformative ethics, I say, is one that is based on the vow of compassion" (Nishida 1945, 107). On my interpretation, Nishida critiques Kantian ethics as "bourgeois" because it is more concerned with the logical structure of an individual's will than it is with how that individual relates to the world around her. In other words, Kantian ethics focuses more on what it means for an individual to be a good person, and less on how an individual can best respond to those with whom she interacts.

For Nishida, the individual in the world is fundamentally particular and concrete. To focus on the abstract will is not only to focus on the individual in isolation from the world, but also to focus on an aspect of the individual that is so general as to be absent of any meaningful ethical content. After all, human beings are much more than a will functioning in isolation – we are also complex emotional, social, and embodied beings – and all of these components are involved when we act ethically. This is especially true if interpersonal relationships are fundamental to ethical activity. In Nishida's critique of Kant, we see that ethics necessarily involves a connection to others, and cannot be constrained to the individual will in abstraction.

Nishida's philosophical development suggests that the route that ethicists — both theoretical and practical — may take around Kant's abstract formality of the will is to concentrate on the concrete dimensions of individuals' embodied experiences through the philosophy of active intuition. The appeal to active intuition is how Nishida fleshes out the relationship between the individual and the world in epistemic, aesthetic, and ethical terms. Essentially, active intuition is a proposal about the self and the world (alternatively: the particular and the universal or the one and the many, in some of Nishida's other formulations). It is about how a particular subjectivity relates to a sea of objectivity. Other philosophers had seen self-world relationships as either purely passive, as in perception, or purely active, as in movement and motion. This is to say nothing of the abstracted selves originating in Descartes' *Cogito* and culminating in Kant's pure reason. Active intuition was a way for Nishida to bring together the experience of the individual as simultaneously a point of active production in the world as well as a receptive perceiver of its changes. He used his longstanding interest in art to theorize active intuition from the standpoint of creative individuals who, in moments of pure

production, are united with their craft without separating themselves and their materials into subject and object. As with an individual's response to a question, Nishida conceived of paradigmatic active intuition as artistic production that responds to one's environment while also reflecting one's experience and sense of self.

A key feature of active intuition is "immediate perception." Immediate perception is the direct apprehension of a situation or an object. While it is receptive, immediate perception is not passive but is enacted. It comes about through active engagement with objects and with other people in the world. As Nishida writes in *Kōiteki Chokkan*, "speaking of intuition, people readily think of something passive, or even the state of being in a trance. This is thought to be the polar opposite of action (*kōi*)" (Nishida 1937, 541). The word Nishida uses for action here is significant, because he does not think that just anything (such as deliberation or even instinct) count as the type of action he describes. Rather, the word *kōi*, which can also be translated as "conduct," suggests that the type of action he has in mind is appropriate in particular situations and at particular times, but is not habitual or instinctual. Just as an individual's particular way of conducting him or herself can be appropriate for a party but not for a department meeting, Nishida thinks that the morality of active intuition is unique to the individual and is temporally and locally constrained.

Beyond the Japanese term *kōi*, the point here can be difficult to grasp, especially given the language Nishida is using, rich in the terminology of German idealism and French phenomenology. To bring this to life, imagine you are standing on the sidewalk and someone trips on an uneven piece of concrete. You immediately reach out to help the person regain balance. If perception is understood as receptive *and* passive then the explanation might be that you saw the person start to fall, which you recognized as a situation that is not good and that requires intervention, and this recognition stimulated you to reach out and offer your hand. In short, if we were using a purely passive understanding of perception, we would explain this situation abstractly, as something that any agent might do given the appropriate stimulus. Yet Nishida writes that:

Such thinking does not realize that our action is in any case historical, that we as individuals (*ko*) in the historical world are active. Thinking of the self abstractly is the result. Even our action must be something that came to develop historically from instinctual patterns of action (*dōsa*). Instinctual action patterns are one type of formative activity (*keisei sayō*). However, life is not simply one type of formative activity. That is, the human as subject limits the environment and the environment limits the subject, and subject and environment must be in dialectical self-identity (Nishida 1937, 542-543, my translation).

Nishida might propose that what happens in the above situation is not that my perception stimulates my action, but that my action in response to the person tripping – reaching out my hand – stimulates my recognition of the situation as one that required action. There is no self that abstractly perceives the need to respond in the situation before I act within it. This is why Nishida proposes that immediate perception is active. We do not immediately perceive things by passively receiving them, but by actively engaging with them. This participation through active intuition is not random, aimless, or unproductive – it "makes things" (Nishida 1935, 74). In other words, my action in the situation is what produces

my knowledge of the situation as one in which I should act. This is not subjectivism but a unification of subjectivity with objectivity, such that “Truth arises in the concrete dimension where we open our eyes and see the world and open our ears and hear the world” (Nishida 1945, 107). We do not find objective truth in empirical data separate from active human experience, but instead we develop it through our participation in the objective world.

By the time Nishida began to flesh out his theory of active intuition he was no longer interested in the structure of individual experience alone. Rather, he became increasingly focused on explaining how individual experience relates to historical development. This is the other side of active intuition – acknowledging that ethical perception always take place within a world that is temporally unfolding:

It is not the case that because our minds exist, the world exists. It is not that we merely see the world from the self. The self is rather something seen from this historical world. In my essay “Life” I argue that the world of the conscious self is the self-determination of the historical world’s temporality. Every subjectivist interpretation, by taking its point of departure from an abstractly imagined, pre-existent conscious self, clouds our vision (Nishida 1945, 109).

His argument against subjectivism is meant to show that the self is an aspect of the world seen from a certain perspective. The self is one thin slice of the world at a particular time and in a particular place. Immediate perception is contingent on the features of the world that necessitate action. Whether I find myself compelled to reach out to someone who has tripped depends on the factors that bring me to that moment. Nishida is pointing to historical constraints on active intuition when he writes that “to make must be to see. Action arises due to our being in a world of [already made] things. In the arising of action, there must be things. Things are not thought, but are seen, and must appear as that which has been historically formed” (Nishida 1937, 543). We cannot act in ways that are not shaped by our environment. If no one trips in front of me, I will never participate in the reaching out of my hand in this way, and I will never come to see and know this act as something that must be done. In this way the world limits the knowledge we can gain through action.

Through our action we not only enable our own knowledge production but we also limit the historical unfolding of events by intervening in them. This in turn limits our opportunities for action further down the line. Each action is a limit on the world as well as a limit on both what we can do in the future and the knowledge that this action can produce. In other words, the arising of an action involves seeing the world as it has been made. When that action occurs we are “making” our own present. Nishida writes that:

Furthermore, this [process] takes place in the dialectical relationship with the self. While the world is thoroughly determined as the historical present, the self contains the negation of the self within itself, and in the overcoming of the self and the movement from the present moment to the present moment, there is the establishment of action. Therefore this is why action is practice and production (Nishida 1937, 543).

In other words, while acting in the world produces our knowledge of the self as a person who intervenes when someone trips on the sidewalk, it also limits the self by negating all the other possible ways in which we could have acted in that moment. We negate some pre-action conceptions of ourselves by acting in a way that asserts which type of person we are.

This links up with Nishida's understanding of morality and his critique of Kantian ethics. He asserts that moral knowledge is not the result of *a priori* reflection on our maxims but instead comes about through our interaction with the world and our perception of what we actually do. In other words, our actions in the world "make" our moral knowledge rather than expressing this knowledge. When he writes that, "true knowing and true moral practice arise in this horizon of true individuality" (Nishida 1945, 111), he indicates that we better understand the particularity of our own moral practice when we as agents attend to (a) the moments in which our actions produce moral knowledge and limit the world, while being themselves constrained by the world and (b) the moral selves we have developed through past action. What makes this practice *moral* is that through active intuition we act not from a conception of our selves as particular types of moral beings, but from a responsiveness and sense of connectedness to the world (which includes other people and our community) and our environment. In Joel Krueger's terms, active intuition highlights that agents are embodied and embedded in the world. The self-world relationship is non-dualistic – active intuition can be understood as "the body's capacity for a non-conceptual felt integration with the world," a type of connectedness that is fundamental to aesthetic, but also ethical, experience (Krueger 2008, 215).

To return to a point from the beginning of this section, this clarifies Nishida's suggestion that morality must be based on the vow of compassion. In short, the point of active intuition is that a moral orientation that truly changes the world is one in which an abstract or theoretical vision of the self as a certain type of person is negated in favor of a responsiveness to what the situation we are in calls for us, in particular, to do. Nishida calls this a "sympathetic coalescence" (Nishida 1945, 108). As I explain below, whereas the most common contemporary theory of moral intuitionism proposes that moral knowledge is the perception of self-evident and objective moral truths, for Nishida morality is intuitive in that it is based on accurate perception of one's response to the world within moments of decisive action.

2. Intuitionism and Sensibility Theory in Contemporary Metaethics

"Intuitionism" has a wide variety of meanings in contemporary metaethics, but it most often indicates a moral epistemology that is committed to non-inferential moral knowledge (Audi 2004, Tropman 2009, Tropman 2010, Tropman 2014). Intuitionism proposes that foundational moral knowledge is gained by a process that is not a form of reasoning, either from evidence or from other principles. Varieties of moral intuitionism split on their characterization of how moral knowledge is gained (while agreeing that it is non-inferential) and on their account of why such non-inferential moral beliefs are justified. Elizabeth Tropman identifies three main types of intuitionism: rationalist intuitionism, response intuitionism, and appearance intuitionism. I focus on rationalist

and response intuitionism here before turning to a related view: moral sentimentalism or sensibility theory.⁴

Rationalist intuitionism is the theory that intuitive moral knowledge is a result of rational thought and is the most common form of ethical intuitionism. W.D. Ross is the best-known rational intuitionist. According to Ross, there are a number of self-evident moral principles that form the basis of ethical duties. Intuition, for Ross, is a rational capacity. The set of moral principles he identifies are self-evident in the same way that mathematical axioms or valid forms of inference are self-evident (Audi 2004, 40-41). The trouble with rationalist intuitionism, as Tropman points out, is the lack of attention to the emotional and practical components of moral thought (see Roeser 2006) and the difficulty of identifying meaningful moral propositions that are self-evident (beyond trivialities such as “it is right to do that which is right to be done”).

The second form of intuitionism Tropman identifies is response intuitionism. This theory proposes that non-inferential moral knowledge comes not from our rational capacities, but from some combination of emotional responses. These felt responses ground our belief that something is wrong or right, but they do so without serving as premises for inferential reasoning. Sabine Roeser has worked with Jonathan Dancy in identifying what she describes as the intuitionist epistemology underlying moral particularism (Roeser 2006). Termed “affectual intuitionism,” Roeser understands an intuition as an emotion that is united with a normative belief. In other words, the belief that “murder is wrong” comes in part from our gut emotional reaction to murder. The emotional reaction itself signals murder’s wrongness, and is accompanied with a judgment that this emotional reaction is appropriate.

Response intuitionism is a close cousin to moral sentimentalism. Moral sentimentalism, or sensibility theory, espouses one or all of the theses that moral facts reduce to emotions, that moral knowledge comes from our emotions, or that moral thoughts are sentimental thoughts (D’Arms and Jacobsen 2006, Kauppinen 2014). However, most advocates of moral sentimentalism hold that moral knowledge is not the result of an intuition but of a direct perception. In other words, moral qualities are seen in the world, either because they actually exist as natural properties or because features of the world trigger a moral response in perceivers. The latter form of sentimentalism is generally thought to be the most viable. It proposes that moral facts refer to human emotional responses (D’Arms and Jacobson 2006, 188).

Many normative virtue ethical theories depend on sentimentalist metaethics. John McDowell, for instance, proposes that virtue is a form of perception, such that to be virtuous is to see what is moral in different situations through sensitivity to their salient moral features (McDowell 1979). Peggy Desautels develops a sentimentalist virtue ethics through her description of two types of moral perceivers, analytic and concrete. For the concrete moral perceiver, moral knowledge is identified with a felt need to respond to others – a kind of interpersonal intelligence (Desautels 1998, 279). This approach is also represented in Confucian philosophy. Stephen Angle defends an interpretation of *zhi* as sagely ease – a consistent disposition that is the unity of knowledge and action, such that moral perception is in part constituted by an appropriate response and an individual

⁴ Appearance intuitionism may be a version of the other two forms, but there is not space to argue for this thesis here.

cannot be said to know something until they have enacted it in practice (Angle 2005, 41-43). Within these theories, there is broad agreement that moral knowledge is acquired through a faculty like perception, that it is dependent on the cultivation of a set of human responses often described as sensitivities or dispositions, and that it is internalist, which means that moral knowledge includes the motivation to act on that knowledge. As McDowell argues, it is impossible for a virtuous agent to have knowledge of virtue without being appropriately motivated as well (McDowell 1979).

In this section I have outlined two similar metaethical theories, intuitionism and sensibility theory, that can be helpful in interpreting Nishida's metaethics. In the following section, I consider affinities and differences between Nishida's theory of active intuition and these metaethical theories.

3. Active Intuition and Contemporary Metaethics

The views described in the previous section hold that we know what is ethical by perceiving it – because it appears some way to us or because it engenders an evaluative response. But for Nishida, ethical knowledge is not passive perception; it is knowledge that is inseparable from action and is unique to each individual, based on that individual's history of interaction with the world. Nishida seems to accept that there are moral facts in the world, but these moral facts do not exist independently of world-historical constraints on our action. As with Kant, morality consists in some level of self-constraint, preventing us from doing some things we might want to do and limiting us towards those things that we ought to do.

Nishida suggests that we access the facts about what we ought to do not through reason, but through action that is receptive of the world while also expressive of our history of interaction with it. This suggests that the apprehended moral facts are not universal moral truths that are the same for every person, but that they are unique facts that we perceive about our active relationship with the world. While these are constrained by the world – not everything is permissible – they are constrained not by universal moral principles or moral laws that exist due to the structure of our rational capacities, but by our own patterns of self-limitation.⁵ In concrete terms, when I reach out a hand to help someone who is falling next to me on the sidewalk, that is not just what anyone would or should do in the situation – it is something I have done, and it embodies my active intuition in that situation.

The form of intuitionism that Nishida's active intuition best resembles is response intuitionism. Nishida is certainly not a rationalist intuitionist – his ethical picture contains nothing like *prima facie* moral principles, but emphasizes the interconnection of moral practice with moral knowledge. On his view, the basis of our moral knowledge is not just how a situation appears, but also our perception of our own response in the form of action.

Nishida's theory of active intuition also has strong similarities to an internalist sensibility theory, according to which moral knowledge is a disposition or sensitivity to

⁵ There is still the possibility that there are universal moral facts that constrain action in particular ways. For instance, Nishida's discussion of compassion suggests that it could be understood as a universal moral fact. However, this would require much broader analysis than is possible here.

certain aspects of situations that is necessarily tied to motivation. Yet Nishida might object that both response intuitionism and sensibility theory get the directionality of moral knowledge the wrong way around. Both theories suggest that moral knowledge is prior to moral action and determines it, such that agents' sensitivities to morally significant features of situations condition their responses. Yet, as suggested by the title of his essay "From the Acting to the Seeing" (*Hatarakumono kara miru mono e* 1927), Nishida proposes that moral action is not based on perception of a situation, but that action conditions perception. That is, our perception of a given situation as expressing a certain normative outcome depends not on our detached viewing of it but on our acting within it, and our action in each situation is dependent on our entire history of interaction with the world. One way of understanding Nishida's point is to say that, according to the theory of active intuition, moral knowledge comes about through perception of our conduct. In the moment in which we act, there is no time for conscious assessment or thought – how we act in a given situation does not just express our moral knowledge, but also constructs it.

Consider two agents, A and B, both who are interested in acquiring moral knowledge and promoting the good. Person A is a recluse, spending the majority of her days at home, reading books, watching television, and so on. She also has rather highbrow tastes, so she reads historical and contemporary works in philosophy and psychology as well as novels and plays. She does not consider herself an expressive person; she would prefer to absorb than to emit. Person B, by contrast, is a socialite. She also enjoys reading, but her time is balanced with interpersonal relationships, with making decisions that influence and involve other people, and with other such social activities. She is creative and enjoys expressing herself through prose and poetry. Both people care about morality.

It seems that person A and person B have equal prospects for possessing moral knowledge. Both can use their judgment to determine actions that are right or good to do. If we take the contemporary versions of intuitionism outlined above, both person A and person B have equal access to moral intuitions, as rational or affective responses to features of the world. Person A might find herself crying at a scene in play, or might just see that something a character does in a movie is wrong – these responses then inform her moral understanding. Likewise, person B might become angry at a friend's action or praise an organization she is involved with for their good work, interactions that inform her understanding as well. For contemporary versions of intuitionism, person A and person B seem to have equivalent opportunities to develop moral knowledge.

Yet for Nishida, person A is epistemically worse off than person B. Whereas person A is largely passive and does not express herself through words or actions, person B acts in ways that affect others whom she cares about and expresses her knowledge through creative activity. Only person B's habits seem to qualify as active intuition, because they are based on her individual history, her felt responses to different people and situations, and her attempts to express her thoughts and ideas. Not only that, but it is only because she acts that features of the world can respond to her action. In other words, she does not just passively receive the world but acts in the world herself and thus completes the circle. If she did not act in the world, she would not only lack knowledge of her own personal moral understanding, but would also not experience the world's reaction to her action – which in turns allows her to internalize this action within her

personal history, thus shaping her own intuition. For instance, even though person A might have abstract moral knowledge, without acting in the world and encountering responses to her actions as good or bad, right or wrong, her moral knowledge is incomplete. This is why active intuition is so important for Nishida and what distinguishes his metaethical approach. Nishida conceives of ethics as a give and take, as an expressive action and as a responsive reaction, where the human agent is simultaneously the subject expressing herself and the object of the world's response.

A relatively similar contemporary analogue to Nishida's description of active intuition is the idea that moral knowledge is not propositional (not "knowledge that") but skillful – "knowledge how" (Ryle 1949, Stanley and Williamson 2001). This distinction is often framed in terms of intellectualism and practicalism (Hetherington and Lai 2012). According to the former, knowledge-how is best understood as a form of knowledge-that; for the latter, the roles are reversed.

Stephen Hetherington and Karyn Lai have proposed that Chinese philosophy, as represented by the Confucian *Analects*, contains a form of proto-practicalism in its portrayal of moral knowledge as knowledge-how (Hetherington and Lai 2012, Lai 2012). Lai has further developed this idea in proposing that the moral epistemology of the *Analects* contains the idea of "knowing to act in the moment", or "knowing-to" (Lai 2012). Lai describes knowing-to as knowing to enact a particular virtue in a given situation – thus knowing-to is an expression of virtuous ethical skill. Knowing-to resembles Aristotelian practical wisdom. Both concepts emphasize the development of situational wisdom through habit and experience that allows an agent to act skillfully in new encounters.⁶ Thus knowing-to and practical wisdom are both active and historical, just as Nishida's active intuition is.⁷

Nevertheless, Nishida's point still seems to be slightly different. One might say that for Nishida, knowledge-that is a result of many instances of knowledge-how. In other words, while for both knowing-to and practical wisdom there is some conception of agential knowledge prior to action (in the form of a disposition or a sensitivity), Nishida seems to repeatedly resist the idea that agents have ethical knowledge prior to action. Virtuous ethical sensitivity is often described as being sensitive to ethical features of given situations in such a way that one is able to act skillfully (Swartwood 2013). For instance, appreciating the character and validity of principles of injustice is different from being sensitive to actual injustice in particular situations, as in the cases of person A and person B above (Blum 1991). The sensitivity precedes and occasions the agent's intervention. Yet for Nishida, one cannot see without acting (Nishida 1935, 74). In other words, there is no ethical knowledge, either as sensitivity or disposition, that an agent possesses and which is then expressed in action. The action is interdependent with the

⁶ Jay Garfield uses this same understanding of Confucian moral epistemology to defend the idea of ethical spontaneous responsiveness (Garfield 2011).

⁷ Another important difference between Confucian knowing-to and Nishida's active intuition is that knowing-to is described with the context of a rich normative ethical theory, according to which the good is defined in terms of behavior that is effective at achieving certain socially sanctioned moral ends. Nishida, on the other hand, never identifies just what the good or right consists in; he seems more concerned to provide a procedural account of morality than to construct a substantive conception.

knowledge, because it is only through the action that the agent receives the world's response. Moral facts can only be grasped in the relationship between agential action and worldly reaction. Further, this relationship is a historical one insofar as it is a pattern of action-reaction, not a particular instantiation of a skill.

Nishida's account of active intuition is unclear on whether his point is metaphysical – making a point about moral realism or anti-realism – or just epistemic – about how human beings possess moral knowledge. While Nishida himself does not say as much, his attempt to undermine the distinction between subjective moral knowledge and objective moral facts suggests that for him, there is no straightforward difference between the metaphysical and the epistemic. In other words, an individual's moral knowledge reflects the point at which their subjective perception of the world intersects with the objective facts of the world via the world's response to the agent's action.

4. Conclusion

Seen through the lens of contemporary metaethical theory, Nishida's idea of active intuition is best understood as the proposal that moral knowledge does not precede and determine moral action, but that moral knowledge is gained in action that develops in a particular way based on each agent's history of interaction with the world. The lesson for contemporary metaethicists here is that moral knowledge, conceived of as active intuition, can be understood as both active and historical. This develops a metaethical perspective that bridges response intuitionism and sensibility theory, such that intuition's non-inferentiality comes from its immediate, enacted responsiveness, and its justification comes not from reasons but from the response of one's community, conceptualized as the world. Perhaps this is why the Nishida *Testsugakukan* includes not just space for individual reflection but also spaces that include the influence of the environment. On the ground floor of the museum, the "space of emptiness" has neither ceiling nor roof; the rain and the snow fall directly onto the museum-goers passing through.

This proposal offers a new way of thinking about intuition in metaethics. Rather than presenting a picture of non-inferential moral knowledge as the apprehension of axiomatic principles or the insight into one's emotional responses, Nishida proposes that it is on the basis of our action in a historical world that includes our peers that we see what is good, and it is through the internalization of our perception of the good that we permit the world to shape our agential capacities and influence our future action. This interpretation not only aids in understanding Nishida's ethical commitments and his broader statements in letters to D.T. Suzuki, his last work (*Bashoteiki Ronri to Shūkyōteki Sekaikan*), and elsewhere; it also suggests new avenues for the development of contemporary metaethical theories.

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