

“Life” and “To Live”

— An Essay on Nishida's Philosophy of Life

Ching-yuen CHEUNG

1. Introduction

Philosophy, or the love of wisdom, can be defined as the theoretical knowledge (*sophia*) about philosophical concepts or doctrines, but it is also related to the act of philosophising that deals with practical wisdom (*phronēsis*) for the very need of life. In this sense, one can say that any philosophy failing to touch the problem of life is aimless or empty. Indeed, life is an important topic of philosophy. The fundamental task of philosophy of life is to answer the question “what is life?” It is clear that life is not merely an abstract concept, but a process or an act that cannot be simplified into a straightforward formula. One may find that there are many definitions of life in the form of “life is so and so,” but these so-called answers or definitions of life are usually one-sided claims, which are mostly misleading or even confusing. In fact, the question “what is life?” may sound ambiguous, since it can refer to the concept of life as well as the act of living. In my opinion, it is necessary to distinguish two aspects of life, namely, the noun *life* and the verb *to live*. In this way, “what is life?” has a twofold meaning: “what is the meaning of the noun *life*?” and “what is the meaning of the verb *to live*?” The former question is asking the essence of the concept of life, while the latter one is a question on the act of living as such.

If we look into the Japanese language, we shall notice that the word for life is *seimei*, which includes both *sei* (to live) and *mei*

(*life*).⁽¹⁾ *Mei* is usually represented by the noun *inochi*, while the verbal form for *sei* is *ikiru*. We shall see that philosophy of life (*seimei tetsugaku*) should deal with two phenomena of life, namely, *life (inochi)* and *to live (ikiru)*.

Japanese philosophy, or preferably the philosophy in Japan, does not ignore the philosophical significance of the problem of life (*seimei*). For example, Nishida Kitaro (1870-1945) is a philosopher who argues that "the problem of philosophy is deeply rooted in the problem of life."⁽²⁾ Widely regarded as the first philosopher in Japan, Nishida is not only a seeker of truth, good and beauty in the deepest sense; his tragic life leads him to reflect philosophically on the problem of life or true life.

Although Nishida has never claimed that his philosophical thought is a philosophy of life, he has mentioned that he is neither a psychologist nor a sociologist but "a researcher of life."⁽³⁾ In fact, some of the topics of his essays are directly related to life, for examples, "On the philosophy of life" (1932), "Logic and life" (1936) and "Life" (1944-45). Although Nishida is interested in the problem of life, he does not leave us any clear answers to the question what life is. Rather, he tried to deal with the phenomenon of life, and to develop his own philosophy of life.

In this paper, I shall demonstrate that Nishida's philosophy of life is not only about the theoretical knowledge of the abstract concept of life, but also a philosophy that deals with the practical wisdom concerning life as such. However, Nishida's philosophy of life is not about the concept of life (*inochi*) alone, but is also related to the act of living (*ikiru*). Hereafter, I shall discuss Nishida's philosophy of *life*, and then his philosophy of *to live*.

2. Life

What is meaning of the noun *life*? The word for life in Japanese is *inochi*, which can be regarded as the life span (*jumyo*) of an organism. In the case of human being, one can consider life as the length of the time between birth and death of a person. For example, there are terms such as long life, short life, life expectancy, etc. However, life span is clearly not enough for us to understand what life is, since the definitions concerning the beginning of life and the end of life are highly questionable. For example, in the ethical problem concerning abortion, there is a debate on whether an embryo has a life. If life precedes the birth of an organism, then when is the beginning of life? Similarly, in the debate over organ transplantation, it is now widely accepted that the death of brain is the end of life, and hence the organ transplantation can take place legally. However, if the death of the brain is not regarded as the end of life of a person, then when is the end of life?

It is not my intention here to further the discussion concerning the ethical problem of abortion or organ transplantation. However, the issue of brain death reminds us a fundamental philosophical problem: the life of a person is treated as a machine. Using computer as an analogy, CPU is the most important unit of the computer, and hence all computers cannot function properly when the CPU is damaged. In case the damage of the CPU is irreparable, the computer becomes worthless and hence other parts of the computer can be reused in other computers. Although the CPU of a computer is far less complicated than a human brain, which deals with thinking, emotion, memory, languages, etc., we are more or less influenced by this mechanical view of life.

As is mentioned by Nishida, there are two opposite philosophical positions on the problem of life, namely, mechanism and vitalism. Mechanism is a doctrine that life is explicable by material causes and mechanical principles, while vitalism is the opposite doctrine of mechanism, which suggests life processes arise from nonmaterial vital principles that cannot be explained physically or chemically. Facing these two theories of life, Nishida chooses neither mechanism nor vitalism. In fact, he is not satisfied with these two positions, for life is not merely a substantial machine or a mystifying entelechy. Nishida's position is clearly influenced by the biology of J. S. Haldane (1860-1936). Indeed, Nishida admitted that Haldane's position is closest to his philosophical thought.⁽⁴⁾ What is the common point in Nishida and Haldane's view of life? In *The Philosophical Basis of Biology* (1931), Haldane writes,

We perceive the relations of the parts and environment of an organism as being of such a nature that a normal and specific structure and environment is actively maintained. This active maintenance is what we called life, and the perception of it is the perception of life.⁽⁵⁾

Haldane's basic position is that the existence of life is the axiom of scientific biology. Biology is the science of life, but it is neither the physical and chemical interpretations of the mechanisms of life, nor the interpretation of life by vital principle or vital force. In Haldane's words, "Biology deals, not with the dead bodies of organisms, but with their living bodies in constant active relationships with their environment."⁽⁶⁾ Following Haldane's holistic theory of life, Nishida rejects the idea that life can be explained by mechanical or vitalistic theories. He agrees with Haldane that life is an active maintenance, in which the

body is constantly in relationship with environment.⁽⁷⁾ Life and the environmental world are actively related to each other. It is impossible to study life by isolating it from the world.

However, how can the active maintenance of an organism be possible? Nishida's approach is to discuss the relationship between the body and the world. Body is one of the crucial concepts in Nishida's philosophy of person. For Nishida, the person is always an embodied person. A person without body is unthinkable. Indeed, the word “person” can mean the bodily appearance of someone. For example, “to be present bodily” can be expressed by the phrase “in person”. Hence, to speak of a person is to emphasize the bodily presence of someone, which is related to his status of individuality and autonomy.

Traditionally, there is a so-called problem of mind and body, in which the body is thought to be a less important concept than the mind, for the mind is a more clear and distinct concept than the body. This leads to the well-known problem of philosophical dichotomy. Nishida's basic position is against all naive philosophical dichotomies. Concerning the problem of mind and body, Nishida's position is that without mind there is no body and without body there is no mind. He is against the naturalistic view on life that life is a body-machine. Nishida suggests that the body is not a machine but a tool. However, it should be emphasized that his concept of tool is not simply regarded as the prolongation of the body. Body is a tool in a sense that it is not a passive and mechanical organ for sensation only, but an active and creative-productive organ that involves in the perception of the world. This notion of life presupposes a philosophical anthropological thesis: man is *Homo faber*. However, it does not mean that man is the only animal that can use tool. In fact, Nishida is well aware of the fact that some animals can use

“tools” for some practical purposes, but only human beings use tools with self-awareness.⁽⁸⁾

The world, on the other hand, is not simply the external environment (material world). All living organisms are living in the world, but Nishida argues that the relationship between life and world is not the same as the subject-object relationship. World is the “place” (*basho*) where a living organism interacts with the environment. Nishida further suggests that world is necessarily related to the historical world. In a lecture to the emperor in 1941, Nishida clarified the difference between biological world and historical world. He states,

Human life is different from biological life in that it is historical... The historical world does not unfold mechanically the way the material world does, nor does it proceed teleologically the way the biological world does. Rather, it continues to develop itself, having as its content that what is beyond time, that what is eternal. In other words, the historical world is cultural.⁽⁹⁾

Life and world are the keywords of Nishida’s philosophy of life, which is not on the explanation of the abstract concept of life, but is on the investigation of the fundamental relationship between life and the historical-cultural world.

Haldane’s biology and Nishida’s philosophy of life were established in early 20th century. At that time, mechanism was the prevailing theory on the problem of life, with vitalism being rejected by most biologists. Mechanism became more influential since the discovery of DNA molecule structure in 1953. The “Human Genome Project,” which is aimed to decode the genetic structure of human beings, explains various mechanisms of human life in biochemical terms. However, Nishida’s philosophy of

life is still applicable to the current condition: even most mechanisms of life can be explained successfully by genetic engineering, the active maintenance between a living organism and its environment remains unexplainable in terms of physical and chemical principles. The relationship between life and environment remains an essential topic in any further investigations on the problem of life.

In this section, it is demonstrated that life is always actively maintained with the environment. In this sense, it is impossible to study the noun *life* alone, since life is necessarily related to the act of living, i.e., *to live*. In fact, Nishida's philosophy of life is not on life as a scientific object, but it deals with the active relationship between life and environment.

3. To live

Nishida's philosophy of life is not merely a philosophy concerning the concept of the noun *life*, but is a philosophy that deals with the act of living, i.e., the verb *to live*. In English, the verb to live has two grammatical forms: verb intransitive (*v. i.*) and verb transitive (*v. t.*). In the former case, it means to exist or to be alive (e.g. I am now living in Japan); while in the latter case, it means to spend or practise one's life (e.g. I live my life). In Japanese, the verb to live is *ikiru*, which is in the form of intransitive verb only. Etymologically speaking, the verb *ikiru* is from *iki*, which means breath.

The word *ikiru* recalls us the title of Kurosawa's famous movie: *Ikiru* (1952). The story of this movie is about a bureaucratic officer who got gastric cancer. Although being frustrated by the predicable forthcoming of death, the officer began to think of what he can do in the last chapter of his life. Finally, he realised

that life can still be valuable even it is short, and he managed to build a small park in his community before he passed away.

The movie *Ikiru* was made almost 50 years ago, but Kurosawa's message remains clear: to live is not simply to keep ourselves alive, but to answer the question "what is living for?" Or more precisely, "what is the meaning of life?" Concerning the problem of the meaning of life, there is one Japanese word that deserves deeper reflection: *ikigai*. *Ikigai* means "something to live for," or "the reason of living." Here, one should pay attention to the word reason, which is not the meaning of rational calculation or explanation, but it refers to the ultimate meaning or ground of life for a person. I shall interpret the word *ikigai* as "that makes one's life worth living."

Due to recent advancement in biotechnology, the human dream of long-living and immortality may be realised in the foreseeable future. However, a long life is not necessarily a worth-living life, if one is living without *ikigai*. On the other hand, even a short life can still be a meaningful and worthy life, if one can find out the *ikigai* during his/her lifetime. For example, we can imagine that even one's life is shortened due to a terminal disease, he/she can still live a life with quality (i.e. to live a meaningful life). Life should not be quantified into the length of life span, since there is another criterion of life that is related to *ikigai*, i.e. the meaning of life. Kurosawa does not give us any direct answer to what *ikigai* is. In fact, there is no formal answer to what is *ikigai*. *Ikigai* cannot be taught or learnt; rather, it is intrinsic in one's own self. In other words, it is from the self-awareness of a person.

Self-awareness (*jikaku*) is one of the most important concepts in Nishida's philosophy. However, Nishida did not see the self-awareness of *ikigai* as the most essential self-awareness of a

person. In fact, the problem of *ikigai* has never been discussed thematically in Nishida's works. For Nishida, the most fundamental self-awareness is not about *ikigai* but is on the self-awareness of the absolute nothingness, which is about the self-realisation of one's limit of life, i.e. death. In other words, the most important thing in life is not to look for one's own *ikigai*, but to practise the self-awareness about life and death.

The problem of life and death is undeniably one of the most difficult philosophical problems. Nishida writes, "Life is full of uncertainty. One never knows what tomorrow will bring."¹⁰ Thousands of lives may be lost or sacrificed due to a sudden earthquake, a war, or an infectious disease (e.g. SARS). It seems that life and death are two opposite concepts: the former is positive and the latter is negative. The purpose of life is to keep ourselves alive since death is fearful. However, "to live" is not simply "not to die." Nishida argues that by realising the possibility of death, one begins to live his/her true life. Human being is different from other animals in the sense that we live with self-awareness. That is to say that we are able to anticipate death, which is an event that will arrive sooner or later. This self-awareness of life and death is the key point in Nishida's philosophy of life. Concerning this dialectical thinking of life and death, Nishida writes,

True dialectical method is not about dying in expectation of revival from the beginning, but is about living through true dying. It is a revival through entering into the absolute death.¹¹

Nishida's view on life and death is related to his logic of dialectical thinking. Life is always in relationship with its opposite concept: death. Life and death are in contradiction, but

true life is only possible from this contradictory fact of life. In Nishida's own wordings, this state is called the "self-identity of contradiction." By realising the possibility of the absolute death, life becomes "true life" (revived life) which is on a higher level than life and death. In the essay "Logic and life," Nishida explains,

Life is thinkable in the sense of this self-identity of contradiction. Hence, it is possible to say that sickness is in life. No, one can even say that death is in true life. Normally speaking, death is conceived from life as the negation of life. However, it is necessary that true health includes sickness, and true life includes death. Death is essential to life.¹²

True life is an inevitable topic in Nishida's philosophy, which can be found in a philosophical essay titled "I and thou" (1932). As is hinted in the title, the purpose of the essay is to tackle the problem of solipsism, but Nishida's real ambition is to develop a holistic philosophy based on the concept of person. Nishida writes in "I and thou,"

What should be called the true life is not the mere continuous internal development as in the creational evolution of Bergson, but is a discontinuous continuity. From dying, one is born again. The spring of life is discontinuous.¹³

From the standpoint of Nishida's dialectical logic, life is not the opposite of death, but true life is necessarily related to death. For all personal beings, death can happen at any time since they are living organisms. In this sense, life is highly uncertain. However, to live is necessarily related to dying, which means that the self-awareness of death brings the ultimate possibilities of a person. For Nishida, to live is neither to keep alive nor to spend a life;

rather, it is the act of the self-awareness of realising the finiteness (i.e. death) of human being. It is an important task for a person to live his/her true life with this dialectical thinking of life and death.

Nishida's dialectical thinking of life and death is related to a unique philosophy of time, which is called discontinuous continuity. Theoretically speaking, Nishida's theory of discontinuous continuity is opposite to the theory of Henri Bergson's philosophy of time, in which time is conceived as pure duration (*durée pure*). Nishida argues that true life is not a continuing process but a discontinuous continuity: the I yesterday and the I today are not identical, but I remains the same unity. However, this personal unity of I is not a mere psychological continuity; rather, it is a continuity in a sense that I recognise myself by recognising the thou inside me.

Discontinuous continuity is an important topic in Nishida's philosophy, especially in his philosophical thinking concerning the problem of I and thou. In the essay "I and thou," Nishida argues that I and thou are not linked by any physical means in the external world; rather, I and thou are connected by their ground (*soko*) inside themselves. Nishida states,

I and thou are absolute others. There are no universal substances that subsume I and thou. However, I am what I am by recognising thou, and thou are what thou are by recognising me. At the ground of me is thou, and at the ground of thou is me. I come to thou through the ground in me, and thou combine with me through the ground in thou. I and thou are absolute others, thus we are connected internally.⁽⁴⁾

Nishida argues that two personal beings, for example I and thou, are not connected by any external means, but they are connected

at the "ground" (*soko*) in themselves. For Nishida, I is simply the absolute other for thou, and thou is simply the absolute other for I. However, I and thou can mutually recognise the absolute other inside themselves. I and thou meet one and another by a two-way relationship. This relationship is not a one-way cognitive act between an observer and a person being observed. Rather, it is a two-way correlation between personal beings. This correlation is possible by means of dialogue. Nishida claims that it will be a fruitless attempt to prove the existence of the other as in the case of analogy or empathy, which presupposes the primacy of the subject "I." Rather, I and thou can recognise each other because they share a common ground where I and thou can meet each other. Therefore, Nishida suggests that it is impossible for a person to exist alone in the world, since one person necessarily meets the other persons in life.

Discontinuous continuity is an important concept in Nishida's philosophy of true life. Nishida further explains the concept of discontinuous continuity in an essay titled "On the philosophy of life," which is written after the essay "I and thou." He writes,

It is possible to think about true life when one sees the self in the absolute other, that is to say, when one revives from the absolute death. As time is not conceived as a mere continuity but as a discontinuous continuity, true life is conceived as the continuity in this sense.⁽¹⁵⁾

Time is not the continuity of past, present and future, but a continuity in the sense of discontinuous continuity. For history is not about passed events; rather, history is the "place" where I and thou are connected at the ground in themselves. However, what is the meaning of two persons connected internally? Or

more specifically, why I can meet thou at the "ground" of myself?

To answer the above question, one has to look into Nishida's logic of place (*basho*). For Nishida, the personhood of a being is not grasped from the outside the person, but it is simply the ground or place that is inside the personal self. In fact, Nishida's concept of place refers to an underlying principle or the ground for personal beings. This underlying principle is nothing but the place of absolute nothingness. Nishida's concept of absolute nothingness is usually associated with the notion of nothingness in Zen Buddhism.⁽⁶⁾ However, one has to pay extra attention to the fact that Nishida's notion of nothingness is related to the dialectical thinking of "absolute contradictory self-identity." As is suggested by James Heisig, Nishida's notion of contradictory is closer to what we might call contraries or correlatives.⁽⁷⁾ Being and nothingness, life and death, I and thou, are examples of these contradictories. In the case of nothingness, Nishida points out that nothingness is not the negation of being (i.e. non-being). True nothingness, or the absolute nothingness, is the place where being and non-being are subsumed. For Nishida, absolute nothingness is not a mere metaphysical concept. Rather, it is related to the absolute death of a person. However, absolute nothingness is also the ultimate possibility for a personal being. Without the self-awareness of the absolute nothingness (death), it is impossible for a person to live the true life. "Absolute contradictory self-identity" is a crucial philosophical concept for the understanding of Nishida's philosophy of life.

4. Conclusion

In the beginning of this paper, I have mentioned that

philosophy is aimless and empty if it fails to touch the problem of life. Nishida further claims that philosophical thinking is necessarily related to life. He writes, "Philosophy begins from the fact of self-contradiction of our self. The motive of philosophy is not 'wondering,' but the deep sorrow of our life."⁽¹⁸⁾ In fact, Nishida might have an intense reflection on the problem of life and death. He experienced the deaths of four of his seven children, wife, as well as other family members and colleagues. His sorrow and frustration can be seen in his *waka* poems, diary and private letters. However, Nishida did not just praise life and condemned death. Rather, he tried to live a life with the overcoming of the life-death dichotomy, and to develop his own dialectical logic of life.

My interpretation of Nishida's philosophy of life can be summarised like this: Nishida's approach is not to grasp the abstract concept of life as such, since his aim is not only to develop a theoretical knowledge (*sophia*) about life, but to explore into the possibilities of a practical wisdom (*phronēsis*) for life, i.e., to investigate into the relationship between life and environment, as well as the dialectical logic between life and death. Nishida's philosophy of life should not be regarded as a philosophy of the noun *life* alone, but a philosophy that also deals with the verb *to live*. These two aspects of life are important in any further investigations into the problem of life.

For Nishida, logic and life are deeply related to each other. Without the dialectical logic of life, it is impossible for us to understand true life. For many philosophers, logic and life are two opposite concepts. However, Nishida argues that logic is necessarily related to life. He explains,

Logic is not something separate from the historical world; rather, it is the formula of the expressive self-formation of historical life. [...] The formulation of concrete logic has to be sought in the establishment of historical life. In my essay, "Logic and life," I investigated that fundamental issue.⁽¹⁰⁾

However, Nishida's dialectical logic is not easy to understand, for his notion of logic is different from what logic normally means. Thus, we are legitimate to ask, "Is this dialectical logic a logic?" In fact, Nishida is well aware of this criticism, but the task of reforming logic is exactly the purpose of his philosophy. Nishida realises that the prominent subject-oriented logic cannot stand his philosophical system, so it is necessary to develop his own logic.⁽¹¹⁾ His attempt to reform logic can be seen in his essay "Place" (1926), in which he develops his logic of place. In contrast to the Aristotelian logic of subject, logic of place is a logic of predicate, which is not focused on the subject (*hypokeimenon*), but on the place (*basho*) of the predicate. Nishida's logic of place can be seen as an attempt to overcome the traditional subject-oriented logic. However, one should notice that Nishida's position is not to eliminate formal logic as such, but to investigate into the possibility of a logic that can deal with the absolute nothingness, or the so-called Eastern nothingness. Nishida's own response to the above criticism can be found in his last essay "Concerning my logic" (1945). He writes,

Some people will say that my logic of contradictory is not a logic. They may dismiss it as a religious experience. I ask them, however - what is logic? [...] If we take this question seriously, we have to rethink the whole question of what logic is. Logic is the discursive form of our thinking. And we will only be able to clarify what logic is by reflecting on the form of our own thinking.⁽¹²⁾

Here, I shall not conclude by judging whether Nishida's logic is a logic or not. Rather, I have endeavoured to state that it is Nishida's credit to tackle the philosophical problem of logic and life. Nishida's philosophy of life is not merely about the theoretical knowledge of life, but is also about the practical wisdom in life. In other words, it is not a philosophical doctrine about life, but is a philosophy that philosophises into the problem of life.

Notes

- (1) In this paper, the transliteration of Japanese in English text is written in italicised *romaji*. Long vowels of Japanese words (including names) are not emphasized to avoid confusion.
- (2) Nishida, Kitaro, *Nishida Kitaro Zenshu* [Collected Works of Nishida Kitaro, hereafter abbreviated as NKZ], 19 Vols., Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1978-80, 7 : 83. All quotations from NKZ are my translation except elsewhere cited.
- (3) Cf. *Nishida Tetsugaku*, ed. Kayano Yoshio & Ohashi Ryosuke, Kyoto: Minerva Shobo, 1987, p. 62.
- (4) NKZ, 11: 289.
- (5) Cf. Haldane, J. S., *The Philosophical Basis of Biology: Donnellan lectures, University of Dublin, 1930*, London: Hodder and Stoughton Ltd., 1931, p. 18. Nishida's quotation of Haldane can be found in NKZ, 11: 292.
- (6) Haldane, *op. cit.*, p. 23.
- (7) NKZ, 11: 292.
- (8) NKZ, 8: 293.
- (9) Yusa, Michiko, *Zen and Philosophy*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002, pp. 316-7.
- (10) NKZ, 17: 698. Quoted by Yusa, *op.cit.*, p. 328.
- (11) NKZ, 6: 351.
- (12) NKZ, 8: 281-2.
- (13) NKZ, 6: 356.
- (14) NKZ, 6: 381.
- (15) NKZ, 6: 442.
- (16) For example, see Suzuki, Daisetsu, "How to read Nishida" in *A Study of Good*, Tokyo: Printing Bureau, Japanese Government, 1960, pp. iii-vi.

- (17) Heisig, James, *Philosophers of Nothingness*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001, p. 66.
- (18) NKZ, 6: 116.
- (19) Cf. Yusa, *op. cit.*, pp. 303-4.
- (20) NKZ, 9: 3-4.
- (21) Nishida, *Last Writings*, trans. David Dilworth, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987, pp. 125-6.

(CHEUNG, Ching-yuen
Student, Graduate School of Arts and Letters, Tohoku University)