SOCIAL SELF AND RELIGIOUS SELF: AN INQUIRY INTO COMPASSION
AND THE SELF-OTHER DIALECTIC

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

One of the greatest contributions to the history of ideas is the exerted efforts of many twentieth century philosophers and theologians to understand their own systems of thought and belief by consciously embracing other traditions. This pluralistic approach can be thought of as a hallmark of late twentieth century intellectual efforts. Many philosophers, like Richard Rorty, have made conscious efforts to incorporate continental, pragmatic and analytic views; and many, like Kenneth Inada, have made great efforts to bridge East and West perspectives.

In his masterful survey, The Social Self in Zen and American Pragmatism, Steve Odin carries this tradition forward. In rich detail, he highlights many similarities between American and Japanese philosophy. Odin states that:

In the twentieth century, both in the East and in the West, there has been a paradigm shift in the history of philosophical anthropology to an intersubjective communication model of personhood based on the concept of a bipolar social self.
which exists in the between of I and Other.¹

Both American and Japanese contemporary philosophy exhibit a “fully social concept of the person based on a dialectic of self-other relations.”² Odin focuses on George Herbert Mead as representative of the turn to the social self in American philosophy through his dialectic of I and Me. Mead’s counterpart in the East is Nishida Kitaro. As Mead approaches the social self through the I and Me, Nishida represents contemporary Japanese philosophy’s turn toward the social self through his dialectic of I and Thou.

The following chapters will explore Odin’s interpretation of Nishida’s I-Thou dialectic, Mead’s I-Me dialectic and his position on the parallels and inter-relation of the two systems. When we speak of the self-other relation:

The I and Other are not separate atomic entities that are subsequently related, but rather the I-Other relation is itself the primary ontological unit from which both the I and Other are constituted through their mutuality of relation.³

Odin contends that Mead’s dialectic differs from some other self-other philosophies in that it is wholly secular.

² Ibid., 32.
³ Ibid., 418.
Both Martin Buber and John Macmurray, famous for their expositions on the idea of the self and the other, include some sort of relationship with God through the self-other dialectic, "while the Generalized Other of Mead remains a wholly secular concept with no reference to God." In fact, Odin insists that Mead’s communication model of the social self overcomes dualism as it "accounts for the social origin and formation of the self through its incorporation of the generalized other without any reference whatsoever to a transcendent or supernatural principle." In fact, there is nothing wrong with Mead’s secular approach given its purposes, but a problem arises when Odin draws the comparison between Nishida’s I-Thou and Mead’s secular I-Me.

In building his case for the turn towards the social self in both twentieth century American and Japanese philosophy, Odin strips Nishida of his religious foundations. This religious reduction – or reduction of religious meaning to secular meaning – certainly makes it easier to compare the two thinkers in aspects of the social self, but it leaves, at best, only a partial picture of

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4 Ibid., 419.
5 Ibid., 420.
Nishida’s dialectical thought, which is firmly rooted in a religious perspective and tradition. In fact, I hope to show that even without reducing religion from Nishida’s perspective, the comparison between these two thinkers is not impossible and can prove more bountiful in allowing the discussion to accommodate concepts of compassion regardless of whether they come from a religious or secular viewpoint.
Nishida Kitaro (1870-1945) is widely regarded as the founder of an important school of contemporary Japanese philosophy which is commonly referred to as the Kyōto school. Many thinkers associated with the Kyōto school were students, friends and colleagues of Nishida with much of the thrust of their endeavors aimed at the development and criticism of Nishida’s thought and writings.

As I see it there are two prominent facets to Nishida and the Kyōto school thinkers. Nishida and his followers were all serious students of the history of Western philosophy. They devoured and digested the Western cannon resulting in an excellent understanding of the evolution of ideas in Western culture. They studied and taught the philosophies of Plato, Descartes and Kant as well as such contemporaries as James, Heidegger and Bergson. This resulted in the Kyōto school having a very
strong understanding of and unique perspective on Western philosophy.

The second prominent factor of the Kyoto school, and maybe the most important, is that their thought remains rooted in their Buddhist tradition. This tradition primarily follows two paths in the Kyoto school. Nishida, along with Nishitani Keiji, Abe Masao and D.T. Suzuki, was more oriented towards Zen Buddhism in the tradition of thinkers like Dogen (1200-1253), "wherein the true self of absolute Nothingness is directly apprehended in an immediate experience through the 'self-power' (jiriki) method of intuitive contemplation as a function of will."6 Other Kyoto school thinkers, like Tanabe Hajime, find their foundation in Pure Land Buddhism which is based on the teachings of Shinran (1174-1262), "wherein Nothingness now becomes understood as the transformative grace of absolute 'Other-power' (tariki) which breaks in upon the self from without through the operation of faith."7

This great expertise in Western philosophy, alongside their Buddhist heritage, Odin believes, leads Nishida and the Kyoto school to their two greatest accomplishments: the

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7 Ibid., 80.
establishment of an East-West comparative philosophy and the launching of a Buddhist-Christian inter-religious dialogue “within an overall Mahayana Buddhist framework of Nothingness (mu).”

The development of Nishida’s thought is generally viewed as comprised of two distinct stages. The publication of his initial work, Zen no kenkyū, in 1911 launched his career and brought him great acclaim in Japan. This publication introduces his “concept of ‘pure experience’ (junsui keiken) devoid of subject-object dualism and empty of thought which has clearly been influenced by William James in American Pragmatism.” Nishida takes James’s notion of pure experience and reformulates it in light of his own foundational grounding in Zen Buddhism. In 1926 with the publication of From the Acting to the Seeing, Nishida’s thought undergoes a major shift which pushes his Jamesian, pragmatist notion of pure experience even further into a radical Zen perspective. In this work Nishida introduces his concept of the Zen Buddhist notion of basho, or the place of absolute Nothingness, as a reformulation of

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8 Ibid.
9 Zen no kenkyū (1911) was originally translated into English by Valdo Viglielmo as A Study of Good (1960) and later by Abe Masao as An Inquiry into the Good (1990).
10 Odin, The Social Self in Zen and American Pragmatism, 80.
his earlier notion of pure experience. The place (basho) of absolute Nothingness is the “spatial locus wherein the ‘true self’ is revealed as a self identity of absolute contradictions.”¹¹ For Nishida this translates into “the social-historical world as the spatial topos of absolute Nothingness in which the self is intersubjectively constituted as a contradictory self-identity of I and Thou.”¹²

Odin claims that most Japanese and Western philosophers overlook the common thread in the development of Nishida’s thought that unites his earlier idea of the self as pure experience with his later notion of the self as absolute Nothingness. Odin contends that:

Nishida’s social-self theory is in fact a central and recurrent motif running throughout his entire philosophical career in its various phases of development, starting from its original formulation in his maiden work An Inquiry into the Good ... continuing up until his penultimate essay, “The Logic of Place and a Religious Worldview.”¹³

A central notion throughout the development of Nishida’s thought is his idea that the true self is in fact a social

¹¹ Ibid.
¹² Ibid.
¹³ Ibid., 81.
self that arises through a dialectic between I and Thou in the place (basho) of absolute Nothingness.\footnote{Ibid., 80.}

Odin takes note of the obvious influence of William James on Nishida’s early ideas on the self and pure experience. In 1911 with the publication of \textit{An Inquiry into the Good}, Nishida brought forth his adaptation of James’ idea of pure experience derived from the Harvard professor’s 1904 two-part article “A World of Pure Experience.” Fittingly, James begins his article articulating a “curious unrest in the philosophic atmosphere of the time”\footnote{William James, "A World of Pure Experience." \textit{The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods} 1, no. 20 (Sep. 29 1904): 533.} with a call to integrate philosophies. James identifies a “mutual borrowing from one another on the part of systems anciently closed, and an interest in new suggestions, however vague, as if the one thing sure were the inadequacy of the extant school solutions.”\footnote{Ibid.} Clearly Nishida was part of this generation, took up James’ call, and achieved a significant integration of James’ ideas with his own Mahayana Buddhist tradition.

In his essay James describes his \textit{Weltanschauung}, his world of pure experience, as a ‘radical empiricism.’ He
contends that his thought is “essentially a mosaic philosophy, a philosophy of plural facts, like that of Hume and his descendants,” but he departs from Hume’s approach with his own radical epithet. James contends that ordinary empiricism has a tendency to do away with the connections of things in general and to insist on disjunction. On the contrary, James’ radical empiricism cannot include any element not directly experienced nor will it exclude any element directly experienced. James says:

For such a philosophy, the relations that connect experiences must themselves be experienced relations, and any kind of relation experienced must be accounted as ‘real’ as anything else in the system.\footnote{Ibid.}

For James, this view eliminates the need for any artificial corrections that naturalism may try to posit in order to bridge any gaps in the prevailing theories “by the additions of trans-experiential agents of unification, substances, intellectual categories and powers, or Selves.”\footnote{Ibid.} James contends that his world of pure experience is “fair to both the unity and the disconnection.”\footnote{Ibid., 536.}
With his radical empiricism, James stresses the continuity among all relations. Even something seemingly discontinuous has that experience of discontinuity as something directly experienced. James elaborates on this by talking about personal experiences:

My experiences and your experiences are ‘with’ each other in various external ways, but mine pass into mine, and yours pass into yours in a way in which yours and mine never pass into one another. Within each of our personal histories, subject, object, interest and purpose are continuous or may be continuous. Personal histories are processes of change in time, and the change itself is one of the things immediately experienced. 21

My personal experiences are continuous. This continuity is my experience of my own personal change and is as real as anything experienced. When I try to relate my experiences to another’s experience, the relation is quite unlike what I find within myself. James says, “I have to get on and off again, to pass from a thing lived to another thing only conceived.” 22 The experience of another’s experience is discontinuous rather than the continuous experience I find within myself. But this discontinuity is certainly still experienced and should be given to no higher or lower order than continuous experience. James says, “that conjunctions

21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
and separations are, at all events, coordinate phenomena which, if we take experiences at their face value, must be accounted equally real.”

For James, this radical understanding of pure experience can save philosophy from the great pitfall of the “artificial conception of the relations between knower and known.” James contends that:

Throughout the history of philosophy the subject and its object have been treated as absolutely discontinuous entities; and thereupon the presence of the later to the former, or the ‘apprehension’ by the former of the later, has assumed a paradoxical character which all sorts of theories had to be invented to overcome.

These theories discounted the ability for a discontinuous relation to be intelligible and only served to manufacture artificial bridges attempting to unite subject and object. James contends that “all the while, in the very bosom of the finite experience, every conjunction required to make the relation intelligible is given in full.” James believed that what is intelligible is mediated through experience and those experiences are apprehended through either a series of continuous or discontinuous relations.

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23 Ibid., 537.
24 Ibid., 538.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
that are all equally valid experience. “Knowledge thus lives inside the tissue of experience. It is made; and made by relations that unroll themselves in time.”27

For James object and subject reside in fields of experience in which those experiences relate to one another in either continuous or discontinuous fashions. Objective reference in a strict sense is a difficulty because “so much of our experience comes as an insufficient and is of process and transition.”28 As we have seen, many traditions try to force artificial intermediaries between these experiences and glue them together in the hopes of containing them inside some fashion of intelligibility. Rather, James does not feel the need to do this for in his field of pure experience the subject and object as well as continuous and discontinuous experiences continually flow in process and in transition toward new relationships which are intelligible. “Our fields of experience have no more definite boundaries than have our fields of view. Both are fringed forever by a more that continuously develops, and that continuously supersedes them as life proceeds.”

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27 Ibid., 539.
In fact within this field of pure experience the subject and object are not separate or dissimilar. Neither are they continuous or discontinuous. Pure experience in the

...instant field of the present is always experience in its ‘pure’ state, plain unqualified actuality, a simple that, as yet undifferentiated into thing and thought, and only virtually classifiable as objective fact or as some one’s opinion about fact.²⁹

Within the instant moment of the present, experience is pure without distinction or differentiation. Within pure experience there is no subject and object or transition from this to that. There is only the radical experience of the moment. Only when we build upon the moment of pure experience does our mind or consciousness bend and shape that moment into a past-present-future construct. Only then do we identify transitions and the experiences they link whether continuous or discontinuous. James identifies that “a ‘mind’ or ‘personal consciousness’ is the name for a series of experiences run together by certain definite transitions, and an objective reality is a series of similar experiences knit by different transitions.”³⁰

²⁹ Ibid., 564.
³⁰ Ibid., 566.
James hereby declares his mosaic philosophy of pure experience as a radical empiricism that neither allows that which cannot be experienced nor denies what can be experienced whether conjunctive and disjunctive transitions or relations play a part. For James’ pure experience “there is in general no separateness needing to be overcome by an external cement; and whatever separateness is actually experienced is not overcome, it stays and counts as separateness to the end.” 31 The field of experience grows by its edges and “one moment of it proliferates into the next by transitions which, whether conjunctive or disjunctive, continue the experiential tissue.” 32 James contends that the world is a pluralism that has yet to fully experience unity, but as separate experiences run into one another within this field of pure experience “the unity of the world is on the whole undergoing increase.” 33 James believes that his philosophy of pure experience “harmonizes best with a radical pluralism” 34 that from the outset tries to integrate theories of indeterminism, moralism, theism and humanism. He contends that at the beginning of the 20th

31 Ibid., 568.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid., 569.
34 Ibid., 570.
century, many minds are turning towards radical empiricism and "if they are carried farther by my words, and if then they add their stronger voices to my feeble one, the publication of this essay will have been worth while." Although James could not anticipate the specific forms in which his hopes would be actualized, he clearly anticipated that there would be such contributions and those developed by the Kyoto School in general and Nishida in particular illustrate them.

Nishida opens his book, An Inquiry into the Good, echoing James’ notion of pure experience:

To experience means to know facts as they are, to know in accordance with facts by completely relinquishing one’s own fabrications. What we usually refer to as experience is adulterated with some sort of thought, so by pure I am referring to the state of experience just as it is without the least addition of deliberate discrimination.  

Nishitani Keiji, one of Nishida’s most famous students, notes that the opening words of this tome express most aptly the essence of experience. Nishitani states that the “term ‘facts as they are’ means that experience is the locus where facts are given most immediately, while

35 Ibid.
‘knowing facts as they are’ means that experience is the locus where knowing arises most immediately.”37 It is from this standpoint of pure experience that knowing develops. Nishida’s opening words confirm the unity between “the objectivity of facts as they are and the certainty of knowing what there is to know.”38 Of course meaning comes later. “A truly pure experience has no meaning whatsoever; it is simply a present consciousness of facts just as they are.”39

Nishida discusses his notion of the self as an “egoless ‘pure experience’ (junsui keiken), which arises prior to the subject-object distinction and is anterior to cognitive reflection.”40 For Nishida, pure experience perceives events directly or immediately, before thought and reflection erect a subject-object dichotomy. “When one directly experiences one’s own state of consciousness, there is not yet a subject or an object, and knowing and its object are completely unified.”41 As pure experience exists before the subject-object distinction, Nishida emphasizes that pure experience is a “unified, concrete

38 Ibid.
39 Nishida, An Inquiry into the Good, 4.
40 Odin, The Social Self in Zen and American Pragmatism, 81.
41 Nishida, An Inquiry into the Good, 3-4.
whole that exists prior to the individual." In fact a person cannot have or possess pure experience. Rather, it is pure experience from which the individual arises, and through the process of reflection, the individual in turn gives rise to the subject-object distinction. Nishida’s foundational value for art, morality and religion is pure experience. Odin also carefully points out Nishida’s emphasis that pure experience is ultimately the unifying power of consciousness associated with the religious experience of God. “All types of philosophy and science acknowledge this unity. And this unity is, namely, God.”

Nishida adopts James’ notion of the self as a relational and temporal process within the context of pure experience:

[He] abandons the notion of self as “substance” with permanent existence and instead adopts a process view that regards the self as a series of events of “pure experience” in the ever-changing stream of consciousness with no underlying substantial identity.

Not only does Nishida borrow William James’ notion of the self as pure experience in the stream of consciousness. Odin also insists that scholars have overlooked Nishida’s

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42 Odin, The Social Self in Zen and American Pragmatism, 81.
43 Nishida, An Inquiry into the Good, 159.
44 Odin, The Social Self in Zen and American Pragmatism, 82.
adoption of James’s notion of the social self. For both thinkers the social self is

An extension of the focus-field model of selfhood as a “pure experience” in which the focal self is at each moment surrounded by a fringe of social relationships in the felt background of experiential immediacy which constitutes each moment as a felt whole and confers upon it boundless depths with intrinsic value.\(^{45}\)

As he rejects the concept of the self as separate existence, Nishida embraces a focus-field model of the self structured in pure experience where attention is drawn to the self in the foreground of the field while surrounded by a fringe of causal relationships in the background. In his later writings, Nishida explicitly talks of this fringe of consciousness as the spatial locus, rather the basho or place, of absolute Nothingness “which gives bottomless depths to the self in the immediacy of pure experience.”\(^{46}\)

Even though Nishida makes no explicit reference in his early writings to any relation between pure experience and Zen Buddhism, his followers in the Kyoto School filled many pages noting such similarities. They equated the Zen Buddhist notion of satori, the awakening to the true self, to Nishida’s idea of pure experience. Odin notes:

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\(^{45}\) Ibid., 85.

\(^{46}\) Ibid., 82.
Like the satori of Zen, “pure experience” is an egoless state in the immediate flux of the present which is empty of thought and devoid of subject-object bifurcation wherein the self is abandoned and events are seen as just as they are in their concrete qualitative suchness.\footnote{Ibid.}

Many of his commentators readily admit that Nishida is not simply equating pure experience with Zen. Rather, he proceeds with his ontological investigations as a Zen Buddhist well trained in Western philosophy. He has a strong desire for Zen to be appreciated by the Western mind and develops a dialog that he feels is rooted in the Japanese tradition and experience. His idea of the self in terms of pure experience has been viewed by many in his tradition as a contemporary formulation of the Zen experience of satori or enlightenment.\footnote{Ibid., 82-84.}

Even though Nishida’s ideas are rooted in the Zen Buddhist tradition, Odin points out a very striking aspect of An Inquiry into the Good, which seems on the surface to be a sharp detour from his Zen training. Surprisingly enough, in this work Nishida claims “that the highest good is to be found in the realization of ‘personality’ (jinkaku). Moreover, he argues that the true self is
precisely that of a ‘personal self’ (*jinkakuteki jiko*)."\(^49\)

For the Westerner with a passing acquaintance of Zen, this seems to be an obvious contradiction. Zen authors commonly resort to negative language within metaphors of annihilation; such as the *true-self is no-self* and *when you meet the Buddha on the road kill him*. As Thomas Merton says:

> It is usually thought in the West that a Buddhist simply turns away from the world and other people as “unreal” and cultivates meditation in order to enter a trance and eventually a complete negative state of *Nirvana*. But Buddhist “mindfulness,” far from being contemptuous of life, is extremely solicitous for all life.\(^50\)

On the surface, it may appear as if Zen Buddhism tries to destroy or at least dissipate the notion of the person and individuality in favor of the void, but Nishida rescues us from this misunderstanding.

The influence of Western personalism and individuality seeped into Nishida’s understanding of Zen. It did not alter his fundamental understanding of the *true-self* as *no-self* in Zen, but rather allowed him a new way to express the idea of *muga* or *anātman* (*no-self*), particularly to the Western mind. One of the first and most insightful

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\(^49\) Ibid., 84.

Westerners to grasp this distinction in Nishida was Thomas Merton. Merton notes that Nishida wants to preserve the existing unity between consciousness and the outer world in which it is reflected. "The starting point of Nishida is a 'pure experience' a 'direct experience' of undifferentiated unity which is quite the opposite to the starting point of Descartes in his cogito."\(^{51}\) The primary intuition of Descartes relied on a reflective self awareness of an individual thinking subject that stands apart from and outside of objects. Nishida, on the other hand, starts from a "unifying intuition of the basic unity of subject and object in being ... prior to all differentiations and contradictions. Zen calls it emptiness, Sunyata, or 'suchness.'"\(^{52}\)

But out of this pure experience of undifferentiated unity:

Contradictions must develop, and through conflict and contradiction the mind and will of man must work their way strenuously to a higher unity in which the primitive "direct experience" is now manifested on a higher level. Here contradictions and conflicts are resolved in a transcendent unity which is, in fact, a religious experience.\(^{53}\)

\(^{51}\) Ibid., 67.  
\(^{52}\) Ibid., 68.  
\(^{53}\) Ibid.
Unlike Descartes’ cogito that constantly tries to reconcile individuated and isolated subjects and objects, Nishida’s personalism does not confuse individual ego with true-self. Merton explains:

Nishida is not confusing the “person” with the external and individual self. Nor is the “person” for him simply the “subject” related to various objects, or even to God in an I-Thou relationship. The root of personality is to be sought in the “true Self” which is manifested in the basic unification of consciousness in which subject and object are one. Hence the highest good is the “self’s fusion with the highest reality.”

In fact, for Nishida, the human personality is the force effecting this fusion; and, even though this force flows from human personality, the individual self is not the center or focus of unity and consciousness. Rather, God is the deepest center of consciousness and unification; as Merton says, “To fully realize this, not by quietistic annihilation and immersion but by the active and creative awareness of love, is our highest good.” This network of concepts stands at the heart of Nishida’s personalism and Zen philosophy.

One of Nishida’s most famous students, Nishitani Keiji, also recognizes that the central topic of An Inquiry

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54 Ibid., 69.
55 Ibid.
into the Good is that of the realization of the person or the self. Like Merton, Nishitani notes that Nishida’s notion of the self rests in the unifying power of consciousness where the subject and object or the self and other are fused. But Odin contends that even Nishida’s most beloved student fails to recognize the fundamental undercurrents of the philosopher’s doctrine of the social self in this early work; as well as its later reformation as an I-Thou dialectical relationship.⁵⁶

Nishida introduces his concept of the social self in a chapter of An Inquiry into the Good titled “The Goal of the Good,” where he identifies the social self as the very content of the good. In this way he tries to overcome the false alternatives of individualism and collectivism. While most think of individualism and collectivism as opposing forces and functions of society, Nishida sees them as correlative functions that coincide with one another. The only way in which they can coincide is through the social self. Odin summarizes Nishida’s position:

When Nishida holds that the highest good is the achievement of the person and the development of personality, he specifically means that the supreme value of concrete human existence is the realization of the “social self” as a middle

⁵⁶ Odin, The Social Self in Zen and American Pragmatism, 85.
axiom between abstract individualism and abstract collectivism.\textsuperscript{57}

Nishida’s philosophy of the self is usually viewed only in terms of the unity of subject and object in pure experience. In later works he makes his notion of the self as a social self more explicit. He claims that the self is always a social self arising from an inter-subjective relationship between I and Thou expressed within the relational modes of self with other, self with nature, and self with God. The social self is more than the mere fusion of subject and object unified in pure experience. Rather, it is the contradictory self-identity of I and Thou. This relies on a self-consciousness or self-awareness that is actually a “social consciousness of spatial relationships between persons in society, or as it were, a social consciousness of dialectical relations between the I and Thou.”\textsuperscript{58}

Based on his focus-field model of the self, Nishida talks of the spatial locus (basho, topos, or place) of absolute Nothingness where the self is revealed as true-self or no-self and is precisely the social self understood as the contradictory self-identity of I and Thou. At the

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 86.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 88.
core of this and predominant throughout Nishida’s writings is the recurring theme of self-consciousness which relies on “a dialectic of mutual recognition whereby self-consciousness arises only through recognition of the other and recognition by the other.”59 This mutual recognition distinguishes between agape as a self-giving love and eros as a personal desire for an object. “True love is to see the I through the absolute other.”60 While eros is symptomatic of the extremes of individualism and subject-object dualism in the individual ego, agape substantiates the dialectical relation between the I and the Thou of the personal self in realization of the true self. “We can be personal because we love our neighbor as ourselves following God’s agape.”61

For Nishida the ideal of the personal self or personhood is a self-emptying love expressed as kenosis in Christianity and sunyata in Buddhism. Odin explains that for Nishida these concepts “are to be understood as cross-cultural variants of his paradoxical Zen logic wherein the true self is realized by an act of total self-negation in

59 Ibid., 91.
60 Nishida as quoted in Odin, 90.
61 Nishida as quoted in Odin, 90.
Thomas Merton also recognizes the cross-cultural connection of *kenosis* and *sunyata*, but Odin claims that Merton’s understanding of *kenosis* and *sunyata* is limited by the fact that he interprets them “in mystical terms as a form of absorptionism based upon an individualistic psychology.” While Merton’s understanding is still profound, it does not represent the final or absolute stage of self-emptying as expressed by Nishida and other Kyoto school thinkers. Odin succinctly summarizes Nishida’s absolute perspective when he states:

> In the *topos* of absolute Nothingness the true self is related to other selves, to nature, and to God as an I in relation to a Thou or absolute Other as an expression of *agape*, divine love. The kenotic ideal of an “emptied self” or “selfless self” is therefore ultimately to be regarded in moral terms as a social self constituted by an I-Thou dialectic of intersubjectivity.

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62 Ibid., 102.
63 Ibid., 103.
64 Ibid., 106-107.
CHAPTER III

MEAD’S SOCIAL SELF (I-ME)

George Herbert Mead (1863-1931) stands as one of the most prominent figures in the classical tradition of American philosophy and occupies a central role in both the movements of pragmatism and process philosophy.\(^6^5\) Odin states that Mead “represents a creative synthesis of the whole tradition of classical American philosophy running through Peirce, James, Royce, Dewey, Cooley, and Whitehead.”\(^6^6\)

A look at Mead’s life shows his involvement with the intellectual leaders of his day, especially the pragmatists. Mead, certainly not a stranger to the rigors of both academic and religious life, was born in South Hadley, Massachusetts where his father, Hiram Mead, served as minister to the South Hadley Congregational Church. In 1870, Hiram accepted a position as professor of homiletics at the Oberlin Theological Seminary and moved his family to


\(^{66}\) Ibid., 187.
Oberlin, Ohio. Hiram held this position until his death in 1881. After Hiram’s death, his wife, Elizabeth Storrs Billings Mead, taught at Oberlin College for two years. She later returned to South Hadley to serve as the president of Mount Holyoke College from 1890 to 1900.⁶⁷

Mead began his undergraduate work at Oberlin College in 1879. He graduated in 1883 and spent the next few years tutoring and working as a surveyor for the Wisconsin Central Rail Road Company. In 1887, Mead left the railroad to pursue graduate work in philosophy at Harvard University. While at Harvard, Mead studied under Josiah Royce and became influenced by the work of William James. Even though Mead was later to become a leading figure in American Pragmatism, he did not study with James while at Harvard. Instead, Mead lived in the home of William James as tutor for the James children until the completion of his MA degree in 1888.⁶⁸

After Mead left Harvard, he traveled to Germany to pursue doctoral studies in philosophy and physiological psychology at the University of Leipzig where he studied

under Wilhelm Wundt and G. Stanley Hall. At Hall’s recommendation, Mead transferred to the University of Berlin where he studied with Wilhelm Dilthey.\textsuperscript{69}

An offer by the University of Michigan for an instructorship interrupted his doctoral studies in 1891. Mead left Leipzig to replace James H. Tufts who was pursuing his own doctoral studies at the University of Freiburg. Unfortunately, after this Mead never again resumed his doctoral work.\textsuperscript{70}

Mead accepted the position and taught both philosophy and psychology at the University of Michigan from 1891 through 1894. While at Michigan, Mead became acquainted with and was influenced by several of his colleagues. Most notable is Mead’s personal and intellectual friendship with the philosopher John Dewey, which remained intact throughout their lives. The sociologist, Charles H. Cooley, also had a notable influence over the development of Mead’s social theory.\textsuperscript{71}

After completing his Ph.D, James H. Tufts, the instructor Mead replaced at Michigan, accepted an administrative position to help organize the recently

\textsuperscript{69} Odin, *The Social Self in Zen and American Pragmatism*, 456.
\textsuperscript{70} Cronk, *Mead*, http://www.iep.utm.edu/m/mead.htm.
established University of Chicago. He appointed John Dewey as chair of the Philosophy department; Dewey accepted the position with the condition that Mead be granted a position as assistant professor in the philosophy department as well. In 1894, both Mead and Dewey left the University of Michigan for the University of Chicago giving birth to the “Chicago School of Pragmatism.” Even though Dewey left the University of Chicago in 1904 to teach at Columbia University, Mead remained in Chicago teaching, writing and advising doctoral students until his death in 1931.\textsuperscript{72} It is interesting to note that at the time of Mead’s death, he was in the process of leaving Chicago. The new president of the University of Chicago, Robert M. Hutchins, wished to change the character of the department and appointed Mortimer J. Adler to the faculty. Mead accepted a position at Columbia University that was to commence in the fall of 1931, but he passed away, heartbroken over his wife’s recent death, in April of that year.\textsuperscript{73}

Odin raises the point that even though Mead is one of the preeminent figures of the classical tradition of American philosophy, his writings have been long neglected.

\textsuperscript{72} Cronk, Mead, http://www.iep.utm.edu/m/mead.htm.
by philosophers. Sociologists warmly embrace Mead as one of the founders of their field, but philosophers often pay little attention to his philosophical contributions. Odin believes that a main reason for this neglect is the fact that Mead never published a book during his lifetime. Although he published over thirty articles in scholarly journals, the lack of a major tome has resulted in a lack of significant Mead scholarship. The books attributed to him posthumously are a collection of his presentations, lectures, notes and his student’s notes.\footnote{Odin, \textit{The Social Self in Zen and American Pragmatism}, 13.}

Odin’s careful analysis of Mead’s thought unfolds with a discourse detailing the influence of several American philosophical giants. From Peirce, Mead, like many of his contemporaries, adopted his pragmatic methodology which applied the scientific experimental laboratory method to all fields of inquiry.\footnote{Ibid., 188.} Mead also adapted Peirce’s ideas on linguistic philosophy and behavioristic psychology which led to both thinkers utilizing a semiotic communication model of selfhood. “Mead, like Peirce, can be said to have abandoned the notion of a ‘separate self’ for that of a
This perspective was able to unhinge and decenter the notion of an autonomous Cartesian self without eliminating human agency. Odin says that in:

Mead’s symbolic communication model of the social self in terms of an I–Me dialectic ... the Me or generalized other represents the Peircian “community of interpretation,” and the I represents the creative agency of the acting self.  

As will be explained later, the I is the self as agent and the Me is the self as seen by others (who can be ‘generalized’ as the ‘generalized other’). Peirce’s semiotic view of the self as a web of signs to be mediated and interpreted through communicative interaction between the individual and the community crystallizes in Mead’s social self as “symbolically mediated communicative interaction between the individual and the community.”

One of the most profound influences on Mead was James’ notion of the focus/field model of immediate experience in which “the focal self is always surrounded by an encompassing fringe or field of social relationships within a flowing stream of consciousness.” This field is made up of both foreground and background elements that are

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76 Ibid.
77 Ibid., 189.
78 Ibid.
79 Ibid.
organized by our attention. This ability to focus our attention or exert our will within the field of streaming consciousness allows the self to act and to determine its environment.\(^{80}\)

Another profound Jamesian influence on Mead is the notion of the \textit{social self} and its two component phases of I and Me representing the subjective and objective aspects of the self, respectively. For James the social self is also a relational, multiple self that encompasses a social mirroring that reflects the other selves in the community.\(^{81}\)

Mead was also strongly influenced by Royce’s absolute idealist metaphysics which in turn were influenced by “German idealism, especially Hegel’s self-other dialectic of mutual recognition.”\(^ {82}\) Odin points out that both Mead and Royce agree that the self cannot stand apart from its community and that the self actually requires community in order to develop. “For both thinkers, self consciousness and personality development require a self-other dialectic.”\(^ {83}\) In turn the community is in fact the larger unit of the self-conscious individual. Even though Mead


\(^{81}\) Odin, \textit{The Social Self in Zen and American Pragmatism}, 189.

\(^{82}\) Ibid., 190.

\(^{83}\) Ibid.
eschews religious transcendence, Odin notes that Mead’s value-centric notion of realizing a *greater social self* through community is based on a naturalistic reformulation of Josiah Royce’s philosophy of religion.\(^{84}\)

According to Odin, Mead also adopted a Leibnizian cosmology of perspectives from Alfred North Whitehead which becomes the basis for Mead’s theory of socialization as *sociality* or the ability to enter into multiple perspectives. The social self for Mead is also a *multiple self*, a field of selves that recreates itself with every new social situation:

The social self develops through perspective-taking whereby it enters into the emergent perspectives of others and then into the common perspective of the general other, thus to function as a mirror which reflects its entire community from a unique perspective as an individual microcosm of the social macrocosm.\(^{85}\)

By “perspective taking” is meant putting oneself in another’s shoes, so to speak, imagining things from another person’s perspective. It is within this communication theory of the social self that Mead analyzes aesthetic, moral and religious experiences as a function of sociality.

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\(^{84}\) Ibid., 16-17.

\(^{85}\) Ibid., 16.
Odin champions Mead as the great synthesizer of American philosophy and hails Mead’s social-self theory and I-Me dialectic as “one of the crowning achievements of classical American pragmatism.”

The I and the Me as two poles of Mead’s social self are focal points within the social field. Mead states:

The “I” is the response of the organism to the attitudes of the others; the “me” is the organized set of attitudes of others which one assumes. The attitudes of the others constitute the organized “me,” and then one reacts toward that as an “I.”

Self-consciousness arises within what Mead calls a field of gesture wherein there is not yet an I or a Me. Once an individual is able to arouse the attitudes of others, an organized group of responses also comes to be. Self-consciousness arises with the individual’s ability to take on the attitudes of others. “The taking of all of those organized sets of attitudes gives him his “me”; that is the self he is aware of.

Odin notes that even though Mead relied heavily on James’ account of the social self, Mead draws a distinction between the influence and the function of James’ notion of

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86 Ibid., 187.
88 Ibid.
mirroring in regards to the social self. Mead believes that James relies too much on an "individualistic account of selfhood based on introspective psychology" that can only attribute influence rather than a constitutive function to the social self where the self can exist apart from social interaction with others in the community. Mead believes that James’ standpoint does not allow for a genetic account of the self arising from its social context. Mead thereby criticizes James when James endeavors

...to find the basis of the self in reflexive affective experience, i.e., experiences involving "self-feeling"; but the theory that the nature of the self is to be found in such experiences does not account for the origin of the self, or of the self feeling which is supposed to characterize such experiences.  

Mead states here that the essence of the self does not dwell in reflexive, affective self-feeling. Rather, the self manifests alongside cognition within the I-Me dialectic as an internal conversation of gestures from which thought proceeds and “hence the origin and foundations of the self, like those of thinking, are social.” Mead is able to reformulate James’ tendencies

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91 Ibid.
toward an individualist psychology and embrace a more "thoroughgoing social psychology."  

For Mead the social self dialectic, that James terms the "I" as the subjective self and the "Me" as the objective self, is not two separate entities. Mead states that:

Selves can only exist in definite relationships to other selves. No hard-and-fast line can be drawn between our own selves and the selves of others, since our own selves exist and enter as such into our experience only in so far as the selves of others exist and enter as such into our experience also.

Rather, from an absolute perspective the I and Me are two sides of the same coin. In fact they cannot be considered apart from one another, nor are they distinct from one another. For Mead the human self is not some sort of disembodied Cartesian subject or separate self or even an absolute self. Rather, the human self is a social self with two poles: the "I" pole representing individuality and the "Me" pole representing sociality. Mead’s rejection of the Cartesian notion of a private subject extends through his social self theory so that even what is considered an individual’s mind is "a field of relationships which cannot

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92 Odin, The Social Self in Zen and American Pragmatism, 190.
be localized in the body or the brain but extends throughout the whole field.”\textsuperscript{94} As Mead says, “Minds and selves are essentially social products.”\textsuperscript{95} The social self arises through interaction between the individual organism (I) and the social environment (Me).

This does not detract from the physiological mechanisms underlying experience. In fact Mead stresses that these are indispensable to the genesis and existence of both minds and selves. Mead simply eschews individual psychology for its abstraction of certain factors whereas “social psychology deals more nearly in its concrete totality.”\textsuperscript{96}

It is important to keep in mind that the social environment for Mead includes both human social interactions as well as living nature. The self is not given or presented to us at birth as some sort of innate subjectivity. Rather, the self is “realized through a developmental process of communicative interaction with others.”\textsuperscript{97} The individual is intersubjectively constituted as a social self through the process of role-taking. By

\textsuperscript{94} Odin, The Social Self in Zen and American Pragmatism, 198.
\textsuperscript{95} Mead, Mind, Self, and Society : From the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist, 1.
\textsuperscript{96} Ibid., 2.
\textsuperscript{97} Odin, The Social Self in Zen and American Pragmatism, 15.
this process of role-taking, the self takes on the roles of the generalized other (Me) which represents the attitudes of its entire community.\textsuperscript{98}

Odin makes special note of one of the striking differences between Mead and Royce on the grounding of an ethical framework. Whereas Royce rooted his ethical system based on the Christian belief that the world contains a predetermined moral order established by a transcendent God, Mead finds a moral order only in regard to the social institutions. Mead maneuvers toward a wholly secular account of the human self “without any reference to a transcendent or supernatural principle.”\textsuperscript{99}

Royce’s ethics are somewhat fixed and absolute, echoing his own Christian ideals as well as his absolute idealist metaphysics. Mead grounds his own ethics within the human community and the social institutions that it generates and finds ethics in flux and continually subject to change.\textsuperscript{100} Mead ultimately defends the “essentially social character of the ethical end.”\textsuperscript{101}

\textsuperscript{98} Ibid., 16.
\textsuperscript{99} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{100} Ibid., 191.
It is also important to note that for Mead the human self is more than just its present field of interpersonal relationships and intersubjectivity. The human or social self is also temporal and multiple. As temporal self, the human self arises “as a sequence of emergent or discontinuous events which arise from the deterministic social situation inherited from the past as a Me and then respond[s] with creativity, spontaneity, and novelty in the present as an I.”¹⁰² In this way Mead is able to link the process of role-taking and the notion of the generalized other as Me in the social self to a temporal historicity that seems to eschew transcendence. In a sense we are thrown into our social situation out of which we take on inherited roles in order to engage the I- Me dialectic of the social self.

¹⁰² Odin, The Social Self in Zen and American Pragmatism, 16.
CHAPTER IV

THE SOCIAL SELF IN MEAD AND NISHIDA

Through the course of Odin’s investigation of the social self in Japanese and American philosophy, he focuses on the development of Mead’s social self theory. Odin believes that Mead’s theories provide the best framework to cut across disciplines and cultures in order to interpret the various theories of the Japanese self. Hence, Odin applies Mead’s “communicative interaction theory of self to those fully explicit models of the social self which have been formulated in modern Japanese thought.”\textsuperscript{103} One of Odin’s most striking and important contributions compares Mead’s social self and I-Me dialectic with Nishida’s social self and I-Thou dialectic.

After Odin’s careful analysis of both Mead and Nishida, there can be little doubt as to the existence of significant parallels linking these two great thinkers. Mead and Nishida both independently arrive at explicit

\textsuperscript{103} Odin, \textit{The Social Self in Zen and American Pragmatism}, 295.
theories of the self based on a Self-Other relationship. Odin shows that this can be directly attributed to the common sources influencing both thinkers. Odin notes that both William James and Josiah Royce have exerted significant influence over the formation of Mead’s and Nishida’s theories establishing a fundamental connection between twentieth century Japanese and American philosophy.\footnote{Ibid., 325.}

As said previously, Mead adopted James’s notion of the social self within a bipolar construction of I and Me. From Royce, Mead constructs his notion that the self develops self-realization from an ego-alter dialectic through the community.

Similarly, Nishida borrowed James’ idea of pure experience devoid of subject-object dualism. Nishida also borrows James’ focus-field model of selfhood where consciousness is a foreground focus within a surrounding background field fringed with intersubjective relationships in the periphery. For James and Nishida, the self encompasses the whole field and not just the focal points of consciousness. Nishida later talks of this field as the topos of absolute Nothingness wherein the “true self is the
whole field of causal relationships from which it has emerged."\textsuperscript{105}

Overall, Odin insightfully lines up significant parallels of influence of James and Royce on Mead and Nishida. Odin also acknowledges the influence on Mead and Nishida stemming from German social thought such as "Hegel’s self-other dialectic of mutual recognition, Dilthey’s philosophical anthropology, and the social psychology of Wundt."\textsuperscript{106} Against this backdrop, both Mead and Nishida developed similar social-self theories derived from dialectical Self-Other relationships.\textsuperscript{107}

At this point Odin concisely summarizes the similarities between Mead and Nishida. He shows that both thinkers’ social self theories reject the notion of a substantial Cartesian subject in favor of a processual development of the self. This process functions through a dialectic between self and other (I and Me or I and Thou) through the medium of language moving towards self-realization actualized as personality. Both thinkers also develop a social field theory as the locus of the

\textsuperscript{105} Ibid., 326.
\textsuperscript{106} Ibid., 327.
\textsuperscript{107} Ibid.
development of the social self wherein selfhood has both a temporal and perspectival structure.

As Mead and Nishida reject the idea of a given Cartesian ego, they both maintain that the self is not an isolated substantial entity, but rather manifests from a developmental process of self-realization resulting in the actualization of personality.\textsuperscript{108} For Nishida the actualization (\textit{jitsugen}) of personality (\textit{jinkaku}) is the good. The internal actualization of personality is the forgetting of self and the fusion of subject and object. When viewed externally “this actualization advances from the small-scale development of individuality to a culmination in the large scale unified development of all humankind.”\textsuperscript{109} For Nishida the actualization of personality is clearly a developmental process.

Likewise, for Mead the origin and genesis of the self is a developmental process. Mead explains:

\begin{quote}
The self is something that has a development; it is not initially there, at birth, but arises in the process of social experience and activity, that is, develops in the given individual as a result of his relations to that process as a
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., 327-328.
\textsuperscript{109} Nishida, \textit{An Inquiry into the Good}, 142.
whole and to other individuals within that process.\textsuperscript{110}

Moreover for Mead this developmental process of personality depends on linguistic communication as “the process by which a personality arises.”\textsuperscript{111} This intersubjective communication leads both thinkers to formulate a two-fold social self that constantly reconciles the self and other, integrating the subjective and objective, the individual and society, and the mental and the physical.

Both thinkers underscore the processual development of the self with the other through the intersubjective medium of language. Mead expresses this communicative theory as the dialectic of I and Me while Nishida talks of the relation of I and Thou. The social self arises as a dialectical relationship between I and Other mediated through language.\textsuperscript{112}

Mead and Nishida offer what Odin calls a social field theory of existence.\textsuperscript{113} Both thinkers hold that the development of self occurs within a field, locus or matrix of existence whereby the self and other interact within a

\textsuperscript{110} Mead, Mind, Self, and Society : From the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist, 135.
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., 160.
\textsuperscript{112} Odin, The Social Self in Zen and American Pragmatism, 328.
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid., 329-331.
certain context as a unifying whole. They each express their own social field theory, but are clearly driving towards a similar understanding.

Mead expresses his social field theory as an organism interacting with its environment within a certain social context or situation. This context is the field of interaction wherein the self is the foreground focus amidst the background field of the social environment pervaded by a single unifying situation that infuses said situation with value. The situation is the basic unit of immediate experience which spans beyond all dualism. The self, for Mead, cannot be simply located in this field, but rather “contains and pervades the whole spatio-temporal field of social relationships by which it has been constituted.”\footnote{114 Ibid., 329.}

Nishida’s social field theory stems from his earlier Jamesian idea of pure experience which he develops into a Zen Buddhist notion of the spatial field, or basho, of absolute Nothingness wherein the true self is revealed. Odin notes that Nishida’s individual-as-environment within the basho of Nothingness functions much like Mead’s social self as an organism-environment situation. Nishida contends that the mutual determination between self and other
assumes a locus for this mutual determination. Mead determines that this locus is the situation. Nishida calls this locus the basho, or place, of absolute Nothingness whereby the social self comes together as an individual-society interaction. For Nishida, neither the individual nor the society can assume ontological primacy. Ontological primacy can only be reserved for the basho of absolute Nothingness wherein “both the individual and society arise through mutual encounter.”

Mead and Nishida both challenge the tenets of substance philosophy by rejecting the notion that there “is an unbroken continuity of the self.” Selfhood ultimately has a temporal structure not of continuity, but rather a discontinuous continuity, as we shall see.

Mead was influenced by Whitehead’s process cosmology that abandons the notion of a self composed of enduring substance in favor of a process model which sees the self as a series of occasions of becoming and perishing “each of which atomizes the whole space-time continuum as a one-in-many and a many-in-one.” Mead talked of this radical discontinuity within his theory of emergence where the

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115 Ibid., 330.
116 Ibid., 338.
117 Ibid., 339.
present is marked by its own becoming and its own disappearing. He refers to this as an emergent event where the past is recast by each novel emergent event given its unique perspective. Each present moment is related to its past, allowing a temporal continuity. But the emergent act, or the creative or novel element, is unique and discontinuous. This allows Mead to construct a social self theory that holds together as a temporal process within a "continuous stream of discontinuous events."\footnote{Ibid., 341.}

Likewise, Nishida also emphasizes a radical temporal character of the self. For Nishida the self of pure experience always resides in the field of the absolute present (\textit{zettaiteki genzai}). The unity of the self is established by events of immediate experience which appear and disappear so that each moment finds a new self in the absolute present which is not identical to the previous self. The unity of the self is preserved as an emergent creative act with each new moment harmonizing the many into one "constituting the unity of the self as a continuity of discontinuity."\footnote{Ibid., 344.} Hence, Odin sees both Mead and Nishida able to establish the temporal nature of the self as a
discontinuous continuity whereby the creative or emergent synthesis from many to one constitutes “a sequence of transitory events forever arising and perishing whole in the present moment of the stream of becoming.”

Even though Odin champions Mead and Nishida for both formulating an explicit theory of the social self based on the I-Other dialectic and establishing an ontology of social fields to overcome the isolated Cartesian subject without losing the creative agency of the individual, he does note a discrepancy between the social-self theories of these great thinkers. When discussing individualism versus collectivism and freedom versus determinism, the disparity, for Odin, comes to light. Both Mead and Nishida articulate the creativity of the I. Mead discusses the “creativity, novelty, and spontaneity of the I or individual pole in relation to the Me or social pole.” Nishida emphasizes the “self creation of the I in relation to the Thou.” According to Odin, they both attempt to avoid the problems of social determinism by holding forth to the idea of a mutual interaction between the individual and society.

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120 Ibid., 345.
121 Ibid., 334.
122 Ibid.
within the “locus of an ontological context, field, or situation.”\textsuperscript{123}

For Odin, Nishida’s social self theory based on mutual determinism dissolves on the political level of discourse wherein Nishida:

\ldots falls into a version of totalitarian statism where the self as an individual-qua-totality is emptied into the great void of the Japanese \textit{kokutai} [National Polity] with the Emperor and its imperial household as its absolute center.\textsuperscript{124}

Odin stresses that while Nishida’s descendents in the Kyoto school tend to emphasize his philosophy of religion and Christian-Buddhist dialogue in the sphere of pure experience and absolute Nothingness, Japanese Marxist thinkers have criticized Nishida for his nationalistic political thought and that he should be “strongly criticized for his allegiance to the Emperor system during the critical prewar years.”\textsuperscript{125}

From Odin’s political perspective, Nishida’s social self theory disengages from Mead’s perspective whereby it may ultimately propagate support for an “ultranationalistic imperial ideology of the Japanese kokutai.”\textsuperscript{126} On the other
hand, Mead’s social self theory lays the foundation for a “political vision of a liberal democratic society based on the self determination of free and equal individuals through open communication and universal discourse.”

Another point of contention between Mead and Nishida arises when we look at what Odin terms as their perspectivist models of self. Both Mead and Nishida derive a perspectivist model of self based on a Leibnizian framework of perspectives. Nishida likened the self to a creative point, much like Leibniz’s monad or metaphysical point, to a living mirror reflecting the universe from its own perspective as a “microcosm of the macrocosm.” This individual self as a creative point both extends into the eternal future and reaches back to the eternal past in the absolute present. For Nishida the self actually reflects all past, present and future while emphasizing the creative agency of the self as a “creative point (sozoten) of the socio-historical world in the basho or locus of absolute Nothingness.”

Mead also sees the social self as similar to the Leibnizian monad in that it mirrors the whole community

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127 Ibid.
128 Ibid., 345.
129 Ibid., 345-346.
from its own unique standpoint or perspective. Mead’s theory of social psychology requires being able to enter into the perspective of others. Mead’s perspectivist model not only highlights the social nature of the self, but also highlights the temporal nature of the self as a creative advance into novelty. Unlike Nishida’s creative point which encompasses past present and future, Mead’s creative advance from many to one considers only antecedent events. Odin points out that for Mead:

\[\ldots\text{the creative advance from many into one whereby each event actualizes itself in the present signifies an emergent creative synthesis of antecedent multiplicity into a novel unity so that the sum total of events increases with each passing moment.}\]

Odin observes that both Mead and Nishida infuse their Leibnizian cosmologies with a doctrine of creativity so that each can synthesize the many into one. Where they differ is that Nishida’s perspective mirrors all events of the past present and future into what Odin calls a \textit{symmetrical} theory of social relations. Mead, on the other hand, develops an \textit{asymmetrical} theory of social relations wherein the self only mirrors past events, allowing for

\footnote{Ibid., 348.}
creative agency in the present and the future. Odin explains that:

...underlying Mead’s bipolar model of the social self as an I-Me dialectic, the emerging perspectival self arises from it deterministic social environment inherited from the past at the Me pole, but then responds to it with spontaneity, creativity and freedom in the present as an individual organism at the I pole.\textsuperscript{131}

Odin claims that while Nishida retains his symmetrical time framework mirroring past, present, and future, his thought falls into a standpoint of social determinism that does not allow for the individual freedom and creativity present in Mead’s time framework. For Odin, Nishida fails in this respect while Mead is able to “overcome the problem of social determinism and constitutes the autonomous nature of selfhood as a creative advance into novelty.”\textsuperscript{132}

\textsuperscript{131} Ibid., 349.
\textsuperscript{132} Ibid.
CHAPTER V

ODIN’S REDUCTION AND THE RELIGIOUS SELF

In the previous chapters, we looked at Odin’s masterful survey of social self theory in both contemporary Japan and America through the individual philosophies of Nishida and Mead. Odin lays an important foundation for East-West comparative studies by tracing the intellectual influences driving the genesis of Mead’s and Nishida’s social self theories while highlighting significant similarities between their philosophies. Even though Odin claims victory in this regard, his final analysis suffers from ignoring vital aspects of Nishida’s religious philosophy.

When Odin assesses the significance of Nishida, he clearly identifies Nishida as a philosopher rooted in the Zen Buddhist tradition and well versed with Western philosophy, allowing Nishida to formulate a unique religious philosophical perspective. When Odin executes his final analysis between Mead and Nishida, Nishida’s
religious perspective simply dissipates into the background of the comparison, an irrelevance that seems to offer nothing to the self.

While Odin initially champions both Mead and Nishida for attempting to infuse creative agency into their respective social self theories to allow some semblance of individuality and freedom within the self, Odin resolves on two major points. Nishida fails and (1) falls into a social determinism that (2) ultimately results in a socially deterministic nationalism. On the other hand, Odin contends that Mead’s construct enables the self to be a free, acting individual within a liberal democratic society. Odin’s secular bias eliminates a fair comparison between Mead and Nishida.

In Odin’s final analysis of Mead and Nishida, his comparison resides within a secular context. In this reductionist maneuver that sacrifices the religious element, Odin attempts to place Mead and Nishida on equal footing. Of course Mead is by no means a religious thinker as he centers his own ethics and mores within a secular social framework. From this prejudicial perspective, it is quite understandable how Odin reaches his conclusion.
By eliminating Nishida’s religious perspective from the comparison, Odin does a disservice to Nishida that causes him ultimately to truncate the discussion of the social self, mistakenly viewing Nishida as a social determinist. Odin’s religious reductionism misses important aspects about the self and society and rejects truths about the self, such as love and compassion.

Nishida’s religious philosophy illuminates certain truths about the self that are essential components of the social self and the self-other dialectic. Nishida’s writings about the self, society and religion articulate his standpoint from the Zen Buddhist perspective, reach across boundaries and embrace perspectives from other traditions. As noted earlier, Nishida was the driving force behind the Kyoto School’s emphasis on interreligious dialogue. As Nishida speaks to the social self, love and compassion, his purpose is to illuminate those aspects in both the Buddhist and Christian traditions. Nishida says, “in every religion, God is love in some sense or other.”133 When he speaks of love and the compassion that flows forth from love, he finds relations between the Compassionate

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Buddha and the compassion of Christ and holds them as
different cultural manifestations of God’s absolute love.
“The Buddha saves mankind by appearing in various forms.”
Some cultures experience God as Christ, others as Buddha.

This turn from the relative to the absolute standpoint
involves an act of self-negation, which is sometimes
misunderstood as negating or devaluing the self in nihility
or nothingness. This self-negation is actually a turning
away from the illusions of an isolated ego or self toward
the true self. As shown earlier, for Nishida the true self
is a turn toward the social self in the basho of absolute
Nothingness. It is exactly this turning away from the self
toward the true self that is compassion and true love
(agape) and is expressed by Nishida through the I-Thou
dialectic. Nishida claims that people “do not seem truly to
understand love. It is nothing instinctive. Instinct is not
love; it is selfish desire. True love must be an
interexpressive relation between persons, between I and
Thou.” The instinct of love as desire resides in the
relative standpoint. Compassion and true love arise when
the self is forgotten or negated and the distinctions

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134 Ibid.
135 Ibid., 101.
between self and other fade as illusory from an absolute standpoint or within the basho of absolute Nothingness.

While Odin contends that ultimately Nishida’s social self becomes ensnared in social determinism and loses the agency of the individual to act in a free and creative manner, this perspective can only survive in Odin’s reductionist account of Nishida’s social self in contrast to Mead’s secularism. This is hardly the case when we look at Nishida’s religious worldview. Nishida says,

...the world grounded in absolute love [agape] is not a world of mutual censure. It becomes a creative world through mutual love and respect, through the I and the Thou becoming one. In such a dimension every value can be conceived of from the creative standpoint, for creativity always arises from love. Without it there can be no real creativity.\textsuperscript{136}

Nishida’s social dialectic of the I and Thou based within his religious perspective of a world grounded in agape allows for creative agency, which entails freedom of choice and novel expression from individual selves. When the religious dimensions of Nishida’s conception of the self are not stripped away, it becomes clear that religion cultivates important aspects of the self, namely love and compassion that demand individuality and freedom of choice,

\textsuperscript{136} Ibid.
thereby preventing Nishida’s social self from falling into the traps of social determinism, as Odin claims.

Compassion demands freedom of choice. A simple example from the Buddhist tradition illustrates this point. One of the fundamental tenets of Buddhism is compassion. It is readily illustrated through the story of Buddha’s enlightenment. As Prince Gautama left behind the wealth of his royal family life to pursue the wisdom he hoped would alleviate his own and the world’s suffering, he became very frustrated as his hopes were not met. He took part in every kind of asceticism and religious practice and found them all to be unsatisfactory. At his wit’s ends, he sat down to meditate under a tree and vowed either enlightenment or death. As it happened, the Prince found enlightenment and was reborn as the “Enlightened One,” the Buddha. This in turn led to the fundamental tenets of the Buddha’s teachings, the *Four Noble Truths* and the *Eightfold Path*.

The first truth states that all life is suffering (*dukkha*) and continues on to the second truth that the origin of suffering is craving or attachment to the world’s illusions. The third truth goes on to declare that suffering can be eliminated, while the fourth truth states that this is possible by following the *Noble Eight-fold*
Path. What is important from this story is that the Buddha accomplished his goal and reached enlightenment, but he did make a sacrifice. He had the choice of entering timeless enlightenment (nirvana), but in so doing, he would not be able to relay the truth he found to others entrapped in the world’s suffering. Buddha made a free choice to forgo nirvana. In this act we have the first image of the Compassionate Buddha who sacrifices enlightenment in order to help all other sentient beings.

The Compassionate Buddha’s first act of compassion was grounded in absolute love for others in the world whereby he turned away from self (his own attachment and desire for enlightenment) towards his true self where he recognized the self and other, not as a multiplicity, but rather a unity. This absolute grounding in the basho of compassion presented the Buddha with a choice. From a relative perspective, the Buddha could have achieved his desire for nirvana and left the suffering of the world behind. The basho of enlightenment presented Buddha with a choice wherein he identified with others in the world (I as other and other as I) where his decision lead him back into the world to help liberate others (which is one and the same with liberating the self). The self is most free when it
loses its attachments to itself. This is what guides us to the Buddhist understanding of the absolute, beyond the relative clinging to a mutable self.

As with the social self, Nishida’s comparative religious thought relies on a Zen Buddhist understanding of the distinction between a relative versus an absolute standpoint. The relative standpoint juxtaposes two seemingly contradictory elements which have a fundamental relationship to one another and rely on one another for their existence; for example, night and day, good and bad, self and other or something and nothing. One cannot exist as understood without the other. Arriving at the absolute standpoint requires an act of losing the attachment to the relative self. “The absolute does not transcend the relative, and that which is opposed to the relative is not the true absolute. The true absolute...must negate itself.”\textsuperscript{137} Nishida and his followers, like Nishitani, are careful to point out that this negation does not rest in nihility but ultimately refuses to remain fixed within the relative standpoint. Nihility must be overcome through an absolute standpoint where attachments to self illusions are overcome.

\textsuperscript{137} Ibid., 100.
From this absolute standpoint, religion becomes true religion which unites man with God’s absolute love. Nishida says,

A merely transcendently transcendent God is not the true God. God must be the God of love. Christianity, in fact, teaches that God has created the world out of love. And this entails the self-negation of the absolute – that God is love. From this fact that we are embraced by God’s absolute love, conversely, our moral life wells forth from the depths of our own souls.¹³⁸

We are able to love and show compassion because the absolute nature of God is love and compassion. From the basho of the absolute standpoint, we are one with God and love. All three are the same (us, God and love). Certainly, we can love and show compassion because Christ or the Buddha simply tells us to. But this standpoint is not true love or compassion, but is fixed in a relative position of understanding. The danger of this relative understanding is that we often act in loving or compassionate ways to avoid certain punitive measures of being denied salvation or the fear of going to hell. Nishida says, “that there must be God’s absolute love in the depths of the absolute moral ought. If not, the moral ought degenerates into something

¹³⁸ Ibid., 100-101.
merely legalistic.” Ultimately, an attachment to illusion is the relative in disguise.

Although Odin makes invaluable contributions to the understanding of Zen and American pragmatism, this essay has shown the one-sidedness of Odin's religious reductionism. Nishida's analysis adds to our understanding of the self and reveals that the social self is free, autonomous and not deterministic. My essay also provides a basis for further study of Nishida's nationalism. Though Odin attributed this to Nishida's determinist notion of self, I have shown how the reductionism distorts his analysis. If Nishida did succumb to nationalism, it was not because of his being encapsulated by a determinist notion of self and society. In conclusion, the intercultural dialogue of Eastern and Western philosophy must guard against truncating the religious contributions to an understanding of self.

\[139\] Ibid., 101.


