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Monserrat Crespin Perales

**Paradoxical Utterances: An Approximation about Nishida's Use  
of Heraclitus' Fragments in *An Inquiry into the Good* (1911)**

**ABSTRACT:** The paper discusses the use of Heraclitus' ideas in Nishida Kitarō early work, *An inquiry into the Good* (1911), in order to show how both thinkers, distant in time and philosophical tradition, coincide in present the formative process of reality, defending a common principle that impulses the process (named *logos* and “pure experience”). It also discusses how these principles can be feasible strategies to escape from a substance-based ontology, but resulting in linguistic paradoxical assertions, able to show the possibility for an identity of opposites.

**KEYWORDS:** Nishida Kitarō, Heraclitus, Japanese philosophy, Pre-Socratics, opposites, principle of contradiction

One of the most fertile paradigms of philosophy consists in defend an absolute principle able to subsume the flux of reality in an immobile and immutable scheme. That is, subordinate “mutability” in an immovable and self-explicative structure. This philosophical strategy prefigures the predominant dualistic vision of reality, but, maybe, at the cost of silencing the unresolved problem of change and continuity. Heraclitus is contemporaneous of the naturalist pre-Socratics (Tales, Anaximander, Anaximenes). They gave an entity to diverse fundamental principles (water, the *apeiron*, wind) in order to subsume and explain multiplicity within unity. Heraclitus is exceptional when he describes reality paradoxically: his fragments insinuated that language is a tool limited to explain the totality and multiplicity of the flux of reality. Heraclitus' ideas point at the contradictory structure of reality. It seems that this contrariety can be explained only using linguistic forms equally contradictory. Twenty-six centuries after, the Japanese philosopher Nishida Kitarō (1870-1945) tried to give an answer to the same essential question, “What is reality?”, in his book *An Inquiry into the Good* (1911), and discerned about knowledge, the problem of change, unity and order, opposition and conflict. To expose what he understands by true reality and what defines the formative mode of reality, Nishida exposes that reality manifests itself in an independent and self-sufficient way. He conceptualizes

these characteristics of reality under the notion of “pure experience” (*junsui keiken*-純粹經驗).

From the epistemological side, Nishida defends that the subject must “catch” true reality and not reduce it to mere reflection, analysis or linguistic expression of what reality is. These indirect actions do only transform reality in a sign of a sign: “We must realize the true state of this reality with our entire being rather than reflect on it, analyze it, or express it in words”.<sup>1</sup> Nishida assumes that the subjective access into the meaning of true state of reality cannot be based on mere re-presentation. “Representative logic” is an abstract receptacle that helps us to give expressive “form” to our experience (differentiating and dividing the world), but the content that we communicate to others with words cannot exhaust the infinite complexity of reality. Nishida’s epistemological perspective implies the recognition of the conditioned faculties of the subject. The subject knows things but from an indirect experience (reflective) that classifies pure experience (the whole flux of reality) inside categorical structures. Instead, with his notion of “pure experience” (a state previous to reflective, perceptive or linguistic judgments), Nishida defends an alternative to conceptual discriminations. He postulates the necessity of comprehending what is “common” in reality, in a similar way that Heraclitus did. This comparison can help to clarify the consistence of the “common” unifying principle of reality as well as the function of the different particular entities (including the subject itself).

For Nishida the formative process of reality consists in: 1) Reality manifests itself in an “implicit” way; 2) The content of the real is being developed through differentiation; 3) The process of development and differentiation of the real always tends to infinite actualization and completion. But, if he is defending the “implicit” manifestation of all reality, strictly, something that is “implicit” cannot be a manifestation at all. However, we considerate that, here, for Nishida, “implicit” means what is not yet expressed but can be express. The impulse of the possible expression of the multiple contents of reality resides within the “implicit” aspect. That is, the indeterminate flux of reality is able to develop what in fact already possess (content). Then, the second argument in Nishida’s explanation consists in affirm that the real can develop its contents due differentiation. Differentiation is the expression of the content of the real. The first implicit process of development and differentiation becomes

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<sup>1</sup> Nishida, Kitarō, *An Inquiry into the Good*; ABE, Masao, IVES, Christopher (Transl.), New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1990. In *Complete works of Nishida Kitarō (Nishida Kitarō Zenshū)* [西田幾多全集]; Vol. 1: *Zen no Kenkyū* [善の研究] Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1965, pp. 3-200. From now on, it will be indicated English translation and, in brackets, Japanese text citation as NKZ1.

“explicit” once it is actualized: become a different and singular entity. So then, we find that Nishida postulates, using a quite similar nomenclature with the heraclitean difference between *Logos* (universal) and *logos* (particular), that the whole structure of reality is been shown in the interplay of Reality (universal)/reality (particular entities). The Universal-Reality operates and develops itself in particular entities. This “operational” process of Reality is been manifested in discrete entities. But, in what consists the active principle that impulses the development of the content of the Universal Reality? Nishida says that what impulses the activity of true reality, that is, guides the self-development, is a “peerless entity” (*yuiitsu no mono*-唯一の者): “The activity of true reality is the self-development of a peerless entity”<sup>2</sup>. The activity of true reality consists in a kind of organized process that unfolds this “peerless entity”. By “peerless entity” it seems that Nishida is thinking about an active unifying guide of reality that is not exactly divisible (nor it is composed by) two principles. But we can “think” it (reflect on, judge about) as divisible, because we need to structurally differentiate in order to conventionally explain the “multiplicity” that we experiment first as indeterminate (a pure and continuous flux). The conventional binary structures transform “pure experience” in “indirect” experience. In Nishida's view, we can understand erroneously this process of differentiation in considering that the conventional divisions are essential entities. For him, the division of the world into dual distinctions (subject/object, internal/external, active/passive, material/spiritual, etc.) only accomplish an explicative and ordenative role. And this role cannot be confused with the true form of reality.

At this point, Nishida searches a philosophical reference to reinforce his own conceptualization. And the philosopher finds in Heraclitus' ideas about reality a philosophical partner:

People usually think that fixed material things exist as facts. An actual fact, however, is always an event. As the Greek philosopher Heraclitus said, all things flow and nothing stops [*Alles fließt und nichts hat Bestand*]<sup>3</sup>. Reality is the succession of events that flow without stopping.<sup>4</sup>

This fragment of Heraclitus is connected with Plato's interpretation of heraclitean philosophy in his dialogue *Cratylus* (402a). Plato seems to misrepresented Heraclitus intention expressed at the fr. 91 (“For, it is impossible to step twice in the same river”) because he only emphasizes “movement” and “change” and does not indicate the importance of

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 53 (NKZ1: p. 66).

<sup>3</sup> Heraclitus fragment appears in the original in German language without indication of the source.

<sup>4</sup> Nishida, *op. cit.*, p. 54 (NKZ1: p. 66).

“permanence” and “identity”, equally important in Heraclitus ideas. Nishida’s citation is problematic because is not easy to discern if he accepted or not this platonic interpretation. But is evident enough that he is accepting that “everything flows” (*panta rei*). It seems, though, that when Nishida affirms that “Reality is the succession of events that flow without stopping” reduces reality to the simple movement and change, the “becoming”. Although it seems that Nishida accepts the platonic emphasis on change, does not misinterpret Heraclitus in the same way. Considering the elements of Nishida’s definition, is clear that: Reality is a succession (a series of) composed by “events” (*koto*-事); The events “flow”, and the flow of reality runs without stopping.

When Heraclitus threads together the contrast of “what is the same” and “what is different”, he does it using the metaphoric images of the river or the flow. He formulates the problem of change stating that particular “waters” are in constant change while the “river” as a whole remains the same. The unity of the river depends on the regularity of the flux of its constitutive waters. Now, knowing Nishida’s definition of reality, it seems that postulates a unity of all what is real (reality as a serial succession of events) that depends on the regularity of its constitutive parts (the successive events). In a serial process, events succeed interrelating one to another. There is a basic conjunction: the union of events that compose such single succession. The succession, as Nishida affirms, flows constantly but the change is regular. This regularity marks the element that maintains reality as unified, in equilibrium. And it is possible to say that this element corresponds with the unifying principle named “peerless entity” or “pure experience”. According to that, if we remember that Heraclitus established *Logos* as the precept of regularity-in-changes, we can also affirm that Nishida needs as well a precept for this regularity-in-changes. Along *An Inquiry into the Good*, from a very subjectivist position, Nishida describes this precept as pre-reflective consciousness that is intuitive, common and universal.

Following Suzuki Sadami’s interpretation of Nishida’s *An Inquiry into the Good*, is possible to agree with him when sees this work as an example of the importance of “vitalism” during Taishō Era (1912-1926) in Japan. As professor Suzuki defends, for modern Japanese philosophers “Life” can be the essence of the world and the underlying “flux of life”.<sup>5</sup> Adding the importance of the

<sup>5</sup> Suzuki, Sadami, *The Concept of “Literature” in Japan*; Kyoto: International Research Center for Japanese Studies, 2006, p. 237. Susuki affirms that the vitalist current in Nishida’s philosophy is the result of his acceptance of German Idealism, specially Fichte’s ideas and his concept of “intellectual intuition”, that is, the absolute spontaneity of the “I” and the activity of this “I”, combined with *Zen* Buddhism and the philosophy of Wang Yangming (1472-1529). Nishida refers to WANG Yangming at the third part of the book when he talks about the

influence of Heraclitus ideas in Nishida's early work, life-centrism is being completed with the possible analogy between Heraclitus' *Logos* and Nishida's pre-reflective, common and universal "pure experience".

Now, it is possible to say that both thinkers negate a substantiality that is compelled to divide reality in oppositional categories. They search the unity of what appears as "multiple" "in" the world. The defence of regularity responds to the common necessity of demonstrating that there is a unifying principle that impulses reality. And that reality, for that reason, is impulsively dynamical. But, how is it discursively possible to relate the unity with multiplicity? It is necessary to reconcile variety in harmonic accordance, as it does Heraclitus: "They do not comprehend how a thing agrees at variance with itself; it is an attunement turning back on itself, like that of the bow and the lyre". Hyppolitus, *Refutatio omnium haereseun*, IX, 9.<sup>6</sup>

Nishida expresses a very similar need of reconciliation and concordance within the formative process of reality. He does it when affirms that, at the core of the process, we find a reciprocity between unity and mutual opposition or contrariety. And he does it citing, for second time in the book, Heraclitus: "In the establishment of reality, then, both a unity at the base of reality and mutual opposition or contradiction are necessary. Heraclitus said that strife is the father of all things-reality is established by contradictions. Red things come into being in opposition to things that are not red, and things that function are established in opposition to things that function reciprocally. When these contradictions disappear, reality disappears as well. On a fundamental level, contradiction and unity are simply two views of one and the same thing. Because there is unity there is contradiction, and because there is contradiction there is unity."<sup>7</sup>

With this new indirect citation of Heraclitus fragments<sup>8</sup>, Nishida affirms that to say that something has certain determinate "identity", unity needs the interposition of an equal movement of contrariety. Nishidian and Heraclitean philosophical perspectives consider that reality (dynamical flux that does

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identity of knowledge and action.

<sup>6</sup> Fr. LXXVIII (D 51) in Khan, Charles H., *The art and thought of Heraclitus. An edition of the fragments with translation and commentary*; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, p. 65.

<sup>7</sup> Nishida, op. cit., p. 56 (NKZ1: pp. 68-69). This citation can be seen as the seed for Nishida's mature development of the idea of "absolutely contradictory self-identity".

<sup>8</sup> Khan, op. cit., p. 67: Fr. LXXXII (D 80): One must realize that war is shared and Conflict is Justice, and that all things come to pass (and are ordained?) in accordance with conflict. Origen, *Contra Celsum*, VI, 42. and p. 67: Fr. LXXXIII (D 53): War is father of all and king of all; and some he has shown as gods, others men; some he has made slaves, others free. Hyppolitus, *Refutatio omnium haereseun*, IX, 9, 4.

not stop) is composed by particular events that are mutually opposed. In fact, Nishida wants to express the equilibrium of reality: the regularity that gives an order to the world and is maintained if there are two opposed movements sustained in tense harmony. The core of the feasible convergence of the philosophical search of both Heraclitus and Nishida, resides in that they tried to express an alternative ontology. One alternative that does not give a limitative explanation about continuity-in-change or continuity-in-discontinuity. Heraclitus unifies pairs (life-death, vigil-sleep, youth-senility, etc.) expressing that these “events” “are” and “are not” the same thing at the same time.<sup>9</sup> There is a similar intention in Nishida’s citation above.

Few authors have connected Heraclitus ideas with Nishida’s philosophy. Robert E. Carter does when, citing Philip Wheelwright study of Heraclitus, says that: “The most characteristic difficulty in Heraclitus’s Philosophy lies in the demand which it makes upon its hearers to transcend the “either-or” type of thinking and recognize in each phase of experience that a relationship of “both-and” may be present in subtle ways that escape a dulled intelligence [...] To him nothing is exclusively this or that; in various ways he affirms something to be both of two disparates or two contraries; leaving the reader to contemplate the paradox, the full semantic possibilities of which can never be exhausted by plain prose statements.”<sup>10</sup>

Carter indicates the analogy between Wheelwright lecture of the linguistic form that Heraclitus needs (“A is A” and at the same time “A is No-A”: both-and) and the analogy of this expression with correlatively contraries at Nishida’s philosophy.<sup>11</sup> This question clarifies the possibilities of an explanation of reality beyond ordinary language (“plain prose”) and, of course, beyond dualist structures. As it is clear enough, the main obstacle is the principle of contradiction. This logical rule teaches us that is impossible to say that a thing

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<sup>9</sup> Ibidem, p. 71: Fr. XCIII (D 88): The same [...]: living and dead, and the waking and the sleeping, and young and old. For these transposed are those, and those transposed again are these. Plutarch, *Cons. ad Apoll.*, 10.

<sup>10</sup> Wheelwright, Philip, *Heraclitus*; Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1959, pp. 91-92, cited in CARTER, Robert E., *The Nothingness Beyond God. An Introduction to the Philosophy of Nishida Kitarō*; St. Paul, Minnesota: Paragon House, 1997, p. 24.

<sup>11</sup> It is possible to say “correlatively contraries” because Nishida refers to the oppositional elements that must be understood as contraries and correlatives at the same time. We find the same idea in another Japanese philosopher, Nishida’s disciple and critic, Tanabe Hajime (1885-1962): “The reason is that, dynamically speaking, opposites are always correlative; one can only exist because its opposite also exists. That is to say, dynamic opposition is marked by the fact that even though – or rather, precisely because – opposites are contradictory and incompatible, they require one another” en Tanabe, Hajime, *Philosophy as Metanoetics* (1946); Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986, pp. 67-68.

“is” and “is not” at the same time. The problem appears when this regulative and logical law goes beyond the strict semantic framework and is seen as the base for an ontological view that is preponderantly dualist and defends an irreducible substance<sup>12</sup>. Apparently, the principle of contradiction would destroy the viability of paradoxical expressions of Heraclitus<sup>13</sup> and Nishida. But their proposal tries to demonstrate something different: contradiction does not consist in an irreconcilable and oppositional affirmation and negation, but in maintaining the “midst” space between, which maintains the dynamical character of reality:

The fundamental mode of reality is such that reality is one while it is many and many while it is one; in the midst of equality it maintains distinctions, and in the midst of distinctions it maintains quality.<sup>14</sup>

The certainty of the principle of contradiction is been conditioned to subordinate “change” into a substantial ontological structure. Heraclitus and Nishida present an alternative and a response to what they saw as the reification of reality, as Carter shows, with “paradoxical” formulations: “In fact, does it not protect against an Aristotelian reification of some unchanging substance, a fixed “something I know not what” to which predicates are attached? Instead, paradoxical utterance [in Heraclitus and Nishida] announces that we are aware only of processes-in-experience, and that “two contrary processes are both going on all the time, and that their continual and varying tension is what makes existence and life possible”<sup>15</sup>.

In conclusion, Heraclitus and Nishida confirm the existence of what is “common” and “impulses” the formative process of reality. Heraclitus defends a principle, *Logos*, and Nishida talks about a unifying principle (“pure experience”). With these principles, both try to escape from an immutable ontology.<sup>16</sup> Precisely because *Logos* and “pure experience” recover the impulse of the formative “process” of reality with its two opposite movements, unity and multiplicity, there is no other way for them that to express continuity and change in linguistic paradoxical assertions: the midst identity of contraries. Both philosophers offer an alternative ontological perspective<sup>17</sup> to get over the

<sup>12</sup> See Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 4, 1005b, 15-20.

<sup>13</sup> Aristotle is severe with the figure of Heraclitus precisely for contravene the principle of contradiction. See Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 4, 1005b, 20-25.

<sup>14</sup> Nishida, op. cit., p. 57 (NKZ1: p. 69).

<sup>15</sup> Carter, op. cit., pp. 24-25. Bracket citation in Carter's text belongs to Wheelwright, op. cit., p. 89.

<sup>16</sup> See Putney, David, “Identity and the unity of experience: A critique of Nishida's theory of self”, *Asian Philosophy*, Vol. 1, Nr. 2, 1991, pp. 141-161.

<sup>17</sup> Jiang, Tao, “The problematic of continuity: Nishida Kitarō and Aristotle”, *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 55, Nr. 3, 2005, p. 454: “The experiential ground upon which such speculations

contradiction between dualism and monism but, at the same time, show that some obstacles of dialectical structures remain open.<sup>18</sup>

Montserrat Crespín Perales  
 Research Group ALTER  
 Open University of Catalonia  
 Barcelona – Spain  
 montse.crespin@gmail.com

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are carried out is what Nishida calls the “pure experience” wherein the conscious act is not yet differentiated from the content, nor the subject from the predicate. He calls upon us to return to this more primordial mode of experience, uncolored by substance-based ontology. In this mode, the experience itself has not yet been subjected to the objectification of thinking since objectification would involve discrimination, which disrupts that pure experience. Only through objectification does the separation between conscious act and its content, subject and predicate, take place. When there is no such separation, every moment becomes a creative moment”.

<sup>18</sup> As Windelband saw almost one century ago. Windelband, Wilhelm, *An Introduction to Philosophy* (1914); McCabe, Joseph (Transl.), London: T. Fisher Unwin Ltd., 1921, pp. 358-359: “We cannot get over the contradiction. *The dualism is the most certain of all facts, yet Henism is the most solid of all the assumptions of our philosophy of reality.* For the dialectic which would try to evade the difficulty the only logical means seemed to be the *contradictory disjunction, and the only metaphysical escape the recognition of negativity*; and it has therefore, from Proclus to Hegel, attempted the impossible with its thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. But when it thus attempts to show how, in the words of Heraclitus, the one divides itself into two and then returns to itself, *it merely succeeds with the dialectical process in defining and describing, but never in understanding and explaining.* From the very nature of the case this final problem is insoluble. It is the sacred mystery, marking the limits of our nature and our knowledge. *We must be content to remain there and to recognize that here, at this inmost point of life, our knowledge and understanding can reach no further than the other side of our being, the will. For the will the duality of value of reality is the indispensable condition of its activity. If value and reality were identical, there would be no will and no event*”. Cursive added.