Unity and before Unity: on the two types of “Pure Experience”.

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William James’s concept of “pure experience” has often been suggested as one of the important moment for Kitaro Nishida to establish his concept of “pure experience”. But the different points of them and the meanings of this difference have not been thoroughly examined hitherto. Though, this difference seems to induce some important issues concerning mind-body problem and the existence of ego. So, we’d like to survey the similarities of their notions of “pure experience” briefly in the beginning, and then proceed to see their difference and the meanings of this difference to examine those problems.

1) The Similarities and Differences between the Two Kinds of “Pure Experience”

Between their “pure experience”, several similarities have been pointed out. Pure experience may be apparently vague and slippery concept for us. So, it might be better for us to point out what is not pure experience. For example, it has been pointed out that they both deny following insistence. “(i) Experience is a complex of several moments, (ii) the subject of experience is a single person (to say in other words, experience is possible in subject-object framework in which subject sees object, and subject hears object), (iii) experience is receptive”.¹

The second denial follows that a person doesn’t precede to experience but

a person emerges from experience. This may be the most important similarity between the two kinds of Pure Experience. And another similarities, including the continuity of experience (the first denial), also have something to do with this. Lastly, the third denial has a fundamental different meaning between James and Nishida. And this difference is closely related to the following topics about the difference.

Nishida’s pure experience sometimes has been distinguished from James’ s in several aspects in spite of the similarities above indicated. According to Shizuteru Ueda, the remarkable aspect is that, in Nishida’s concept, “experience is a synthetic whole” and “experience traces to its course in direction to spontaneity.” This difference is pointed out in another words that “Nishida … comes more directly contact with the direct presence of experience” or that “we may say James is after all philosophy about pure experience, Nishida is philosophy of pure experience”. So, the directness of experience is more emphasized in Nishida. But in this paper, we will regard this difference as appearing from the distinction whether they regard the essence of this reality as a unity or something which still cannot be called even a unity. On this standpoint, the view regarding experience as a unity is already a idealization or a view influenced by an idealistic thought. So, this unity is a kind of abstraction of what is not still a unity. This issue is the theme of this paper.

Before considering about this problem, we should confirm James and Nishida’s motives to establish each thought. To research this topic, we’d like to focus on the concept “stream of thought” of James in the first place. Because not only has it largely influenced on his later concept “pure experience”, but also “stream” and “pure experience” are almost alike in

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2 Ueda,S. op.cit.,p.76.
3 Ueda,S. op.,cit.,p,119.
4 Ueda,S. op.,cit.,p.120.
essential points concerning mind and matter, or implication of consciousness and its object. Then we’d confirm Nishida’s pure experiences in his early thought, and proceed to examine the character of pure experience in relation to the problem of ego, unity and subject-object distinction.

2) The Difference Concerning Mind and Matter

First, we should confirm their motives to establish each concept. James’s concept “the stream of thought” which had largely influenced his latter concept “pure experience” was in a certain respect developed from the psychological and philosophical arguments in 19th Century. Among these arguments, two issues seem to be important to develop this concept. According to the chapter VI “The Mind-Stuff Theory” in *The Principles of Psychology*, there is the question at what point in the evolutionary process the inner life of creature has been generated. This is not only a problem found in the thought of James but also has something to do with one of the fundamental problem of philosophy in general. If there is a special point, then lifeless materials and their certain motions should generate inner experience by certain way of complexity.

“Everyone admits the entire incommensurability of feeling as such with material motion as such. ‘A motion became a feeling!’ — no phrase that our lips can frame is so devoid of apprehensible meaning.”

Another reason why the “stream” has come to be proposed is found in the problem how can two ideas become one idea. To solve this, we are obliged to set up a transcendental subject to bind them or to assume that our consciousness is undividable succession in the beginning. Otherwise, we are obliged to assume a substance like a unchangeable soul to solve this question.

“In short, the two separate ideas can never by any logic be made to figure as one and the same thing as the ‘associated’ idea”. … The separate ideas

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exist, they (spiritualists) say, but affect a third entity, the soul. This has the ‘compounded’idea, if you please so to call it; and the compounded idea is an altogether new psychic fact to which the separate ideas stand in the relation, not of constituents, but of occasions of production.”

For above reasons, “stream” must amount to a fundamental reality, which has both mental and material aspect as its attributes at once, and which is one whole reality involving each ideas as its undividable moments.

Kitaro Nishida attained his concept of pure experience in his earlier thought in the course of theorizing his own worldview by referring various thoughts of western philosophers including James. The remarkable characters of his concept are “succession”, “before separating subject and object”, “a sole reality”, which are similar to the concept of experience in James. But the characteristic of Nishida’s pure experience is its strong emphasis on “unity”. And he had an idea to regard not only a personal consciousness but also a whole universe as one undividable reality. He has acquired this view by conferring German Idealism and eastern thoughts. But these characters have been formulated not only by philosophical arguments but also by intuitional insight influenced by Zen-Buddhistical worldview.

“All people believe that there is a fixed, unchanging principle in the universe and that all things are established according to it. This principle is the power that unifies consciousness; it is not possessed by mind or matter but establishes them. It is independent and self-sustaining, and it does not vary according to time, space, or the person — it does not change under any circumstances.”

It is true that, in principle, Nishida’s “pure experience” is the place from which subject and object and even consciousness and material are divided.

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6 James, W. op. cit., p.163.
But this “power” or its “independent and self-sustaining” character are not accurately found in James’s pure experience. In the case of James, the unity is relative and each part of the stream has possibility to become a center of unifying motion. And this unifying something is not an entity which is to be added to the stream. On the contrary, Nishida had an aspect to intuit, before detail examination, an unobservable something which runs through the whole nature from primitive creatures to human beings from the beginning. And afterwards the differentiation in the unity takes place. At this point, there seems relatively small concern in him about mind-body problem which James continued to have in the process attaining his “stream of thought” from the beginning, or there has been no trouble about this problem in Nishida.

“Nature as a truly concrete reality does not come into being without having a unifying activity. Nature therefore possesses a kind of self, too. The various forms, variations, and motions a plant or animal expresses are not mere unions or mechanical movements of insignificant matter; because each has an inseparable relationship to the whole, each should be regarded as a developmental expression of one unifying self.”

Here we see the words “unifying activity” or “self”, but in somewhat intuitive way or unconditioned form. These concepts are attained as a preoccupied conclusion from the idea of his pure experience and not from concrete analysis or from inductive form of examine about mind-body

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Nishida, K. op.cit., p.70. And Nishida reached this intuition with influence from Hegel’s absolute idealism or Chinese thought Rì (reason). It is true that James has also studied such kind of worldview from, for example, Emerson’s thought. But, this transcendental or monistic tendency seems to be more directly expressed in Nishida than in James. Actually, James’s panpsychism is symbolically called “pluralistic panpsychism” in which spiritual realities need not to be “absolute” but are in “moderate” intimacy. (Lamberth, D. (1999), p.194.) From this point of view, the problem of the relation between the unity of a person and of universe may enlarge in Nishida.
problem. And the relation between “unifying activity” of a person and that of universe is not so clear. Moreover, in Nishida there is no argument how two ideas become one idea or how plural unities become one unity. Nishida might solve this problem by insisting that reality doesn’t unite but they only differentiate. But, if so, why this differentiation makes out each concrete unite experience or ego is still not so clear. And this unclarity also influences on the ontological problem about ego. So, we can find a some kind of leap between his intuition and concrete analysis concerning the sole reality such as “unifying self”.

3) The Difference Concerning Ontological Problem about Ego

The next main difference is concerning their views about ego. And it is also related to the arguments about “stream” or “unifying activity”. So this second difference reflects the viewpoints as what they regard the essential state of consciousness. As for James, what is indicated in ‘ego’ or ‘I’ is essentially not a different entity from the continuity of ‘stream’.

“It is impossible to discover any verifiable features in personal identity which this sketch does not contain, impossible to imagine how any transcendent non-phenomenal sort of an Arch-Ego, were he there, could shape matters to any other result, or be known in time by any other fruit, than just this production of a stream of consciousness each ‘section’ of which should know, and knowing, hug to itself and adopt, all those that went before…”

This also applies to the relation between pure experience and ego. From the standpoint of “stream”, what seems to be ego should be generated from the region of it in some way. This means that each ego is not independent or transcendental something. And it can be induced from this insistence, for example, that I and You are not only able to have the common contents of

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9 James, W. op.cit., p.322.
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consciousness but also able to remove the formal distinction between the two. The difference of the two persons should be essentially the difference of the content of stream and not the difference of what is unobservable and cannot be involved in that content.

“In that perceptual part of my universe which I call your body, your mind and my mind meet and may be called conterminous. Your mind actuates that body and mine sees it; my thoughts pass into it as into their harmonious cognitive fulfillment; your emotions and volitions pass into it as causes into their effects.”

“On the principles which I am defending, 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.”

These statements concern with the thought of James that there is no distinct subjective point which is qualitatively transcendent from the “stream of thought”. This view agrees with the opinion that the emergence of subject rests on the reflective knowledge about the past experience and on the experience’s separation into the knowing part and known part. In another word, in the pure neutral state or the before reflective state, it cannot be said that this state is my ego or another ego which is different from me.

“To be ‘conscious’ means not simply to be, but to be reported, known, to have awareness of one’s being to be added to that being; and this is what happens when the appropriative experience supervenes…. It (a feeling) is, indeed, ‘mine’ only as it is felt as mine, and ‘yours’ only as it is felt as yours. But it is felt as neither by itself, but only when ‘owned’ by our two several remembering experiences, just as one undivided estate is owned by several heirs.”

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11 James, W. op.cit., p.39.
12 James, W. op.cit., pp.65-6.
On this opinion, ego is emerging from “reported” or “known” etc., so it is turned out to be one variant of the stream. In other words, experience itself or feeling itself is still before consciousness, and in so far as, experience cannot be named “I” or “you” or some other concrete things. Moreover, it also cannot be determined that this experience is a unity or made of plural moments.

Up to this point, there is no logical difficulty. But the mysterious character of ego may still remain, because of the fact that ego seems to have no time extension and that we can never go to the back of it, so we can never objectify it. It is true that James insists no logical difficulty of his explanation, but he dose not insist that he solved “an ontological difficulty” completely. Concerning this problem, Nishida has the opinion that even pure experience has some kind of entity in its ground, and such entity is called “unifying reality (touitsuteki arumono)”. This reality performs the transcendentality of ego and this opinion is characteristic of his thought.

“Like any organic entity, a system of consciousness manifests its wholeness through the orderly, differentiated development of a certain unifying reality. When a consciousness starts to emerge, a unifying activity — in the form of a feeling of inclination — accompanies it. This activity directs our attention, and it is unconscious when the unity is strict or undisturbed from without; otherwise it appears in consciousness as representations and diverges immediately from the state of pure experience.”

This standpoint is related to his opinion that while pure experience is successive and its subject and object are undivided, the essence of the experience is its “unity”. And this follows such an opinion that the function of relating experiences is performed by the “unchanging reality” which transcends time.

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13 James, W. op. cit., p.65.
14 Nishida, K. op. cit., pp.7-8.
“Because time is nothing more than a form that orders the content of our experience, the content of consciousness must first be able to arise. Otherwise we should not be able to link things sequentially and thereby think in terms of time. The unifying activity of consciousness is not controlled by time: on the contrary, time is established by the unifying activity. At the base of consciousness there is a transcendent, unchanging reality apart from time.”\(^{15}\)

From this statement, some questions may arise. Why should we distinguish the “unchanging reality” from “the content of our experience”, or why this reality must be called “unifying” activity, or what is the basis of calling it a distinguished something. These questions may be related to the distinction between experiencing reality itself and the objective description of it. And in the former state, strictly speaking, we cannot say it is a unity or plurality. And in the latter state, it seems to be a unity. We should consider this problem further by examining the essence of the transcendentality.

3) The Transcendentality of Ego and “Stream”

If we accept Nishida’s above statement literally, we may regard the unifying reality as somehow different from the successive stream. In this statement, Nishida’s concept of transcendental subject is influenced by the fact that the more mind acquires spontaneity or will, the more it differs from mere passive experience, in one aspect. This spontaneity is considered to create causal relations from itself and to lead cognitive framework. In this spontaneity, the essential reason why this subject is distinguished from the stream seems to be its characteristic quality. But what is this quality? It seems that the main problem about transcendentality exists in this difficulty to answer this question about this quality by language. Because even the “stream” can work spontaneously.

\(^{15}\) Nishida,K. op.cit., pp.60-1.
On the other hand, James will insist that the “knowing” character of stream performs the role of the fundamental character of ego, and whether this character is transcendental or not is not a important issue, so long as it has such function. From this point of view, the difference between this stream’s character and the transcendental ego will be abolished in their primordial forms. It is true that, apart from ego’s intentional activity, stream itself has no intention and subject-object distinction, but the impossibility of self-reflection also applies to the tip of intentional act of ego which cannot be reflected. And at this tip the transcendental ego and stream seems to have no difference, although their intentional tendencies are not necessarily the same.

However, stream does not seem to relate different experiences very positively which are separated by time and does not seem to “unite” them perfectly as ego does. This is a fundamental frame which makes two experiences relate. And James and Nishida differs in how to regard this function of “stream”. The reason why this difference occurs seems that the “stream” of James is in itself fundamentally not active nor passive and therefore is able to be called only “that”, while Nishida’s pure experience makes much of its “unity” and “will”.

But what is the basis of emerging this difference? It seems that, they both explain pure experience from inner glance and outer glance, and the difference occurs from how they choose to use these two glances. From completely inner glance, there should be no distinction between unity and plurality etc. For example, D.Lamberth distinguishes “Metaphysical” sense and “phenomenological” sense of pure experience and regards the former as “objective” and the latter as “subjective”.

“Pure experience objectively taken is a discrete bit functioning in a system (or collectivity) of pure experiences that make up an ever growing and changing world. Subjectively, or phenomenologically, the closest thing to a “pure” experience for James is, however, the ever moving now, “the that which is not yet any definite what, tho ready to be all sorts of what; full both
of oneness and of manyness”\textsuperscript{16}

In this strictly subjective or inner sense, it is meaningless to call pure experience unity or mosaic. Moreover, in this sense, all dichotomies must disappear, and we cannot call it by any predicate. This applies to phenomenological meaning of pure experience whether it is regarded unity or mosaic from objective point of view. Lamberth also points out “the ontological indeterminacy (or ambidextrousness) of his fundamental category “experience” relative to the mind/matter, mental/physical split.”\textsuperscript{17}

So, following this opinion, even a unifier doesn’t exist in pure experience in the first place. If so, why Nishida insisted the importance of the unifier deliberately? One reason may be that he thought it necessary to fix a reality which brings the whole into existence whether it may be a person or a universe.

“Even psychology constructs the self as the unifier of consciousness. Seen from the perspective that consciousness is the sole true reality, the self is the unifier of reality. Although the self as unifier is regarded in psychology as a separated reality from that which is unified, such a self is simply an abstract concept. In fact, there is no self apart from things — our self is the very unifier of the universe.”\textsuperscript{18}

In this passage, self is not explained as an entity transcendent reality from experience nor concrete contents of it. But this tendency to suppose something unifying the whole is characteristic to him, though it may not be regarded as an independent substance apart from the whole.

But this statement of Nishida seems to have a still another reason. This reason may have something to do with the distinction between the direct state immanent in experience itself and the expression of it, in other words,

\textsuperscript{17} Lamberth, D. op.cit., p.58.
\textsuperscript{18} Nishida, K. op.cit. p.65.
distinction between the subjective or objective standpoint of view. Immanent in experience itself, this state is not applicable to any kind of dichotomy, so it cannot be said as I or you, existence or non-existence etc.\(^{19}\) So, pure experience is beyond any qualification in strict sense and it cannot be called even unity. In this sense, to say this experience unity is already an objective description. So, Nishida’s unity is lead from objectifying or inventing language of something which cannot be expressed by language. Moreover, his unity is influenced by transcendental apperception in German Idealism whose function is substituted for association of ideas or for transitive parts of “stream” by James. Apperception deserves of the unifying reality which is distinguished from the entire states of consciousness.

In the case of James also, there still remains an ambiguity between subjective glance and objective analysis about pure experience. For example, it is found out in his reference that pure experience is “stuff” or that his philosophy is “mosaic philosophy”.\(^{20}\) And sometimes his pure experience is regarded to be applicable to sense experience only. These opinions are due to objective explanation about what cannot be objectified. But as we have already seen, James’s pure experience is, in phenomenological meaning, applicable neither to pure sense nor static concept. Phenomenologist K.Washida says as follows.

“(Pure experience is) the original form of experience to which the reflective secondary look (or context) is still not added — by this secondary look, the

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\(^{19}\) The similarity between this kind of disappearance of dichotomy in pure experience and in Buddhistic experience of śūnyātā (emptiness) has been sometimes pointed out. For example, recently, Allan Wallace points out this similarity in ontological level and insists that, in James, there is no practical exercise as a means to attain pure experience, though he has treated many examples of religious experience in his Varieties. (Wallace,A. (2000), pp.114-5.)

\(^{20}\) James,W. op.,cit.,p.22.
situation that *I face to an object* turns out to acquire for-self structure, but this acquiring for-self structure itself is, at the same time, nothing other than *the feeling which makes such situation acquire the for-self structure* — in such case, this original form is kept whether the experience functions as a sensory perception or not.”

Strictly phenomenological meaning, pure experience must be such a reality. But in James’s description, we should find out a distinction between this phenomenological meaning and objective analysis or metaphysical definition of pure experience.

Regardless of some differences between the two thoughts of pure experience, these concepts have almost the same ground in their most fundamental forms. The warmness of “stream” and the objective unity of pure experience are both fundamental reality in universe, and they are the sources of objectifying explication. In this meaning, it is not proper to call this reality mental or material something. And this has essentially the same character with the fact that this reality rejects any dichotomy and cannot be called unity nor plurality. In this sense, there must be even no traces of substantial point of ego in this reality.

However, especially in James’s case, still another question arises, why experience as the source of subjectivity and objectivity has such ambidextrous character in its undifferentiated form in the first place. Thus the question why I exist is removed to the question why this world exists accompanied with this fundamental character. James kept this question by not asking it further.

“If anyone urge that I assign no *reason* why the successive passing thoughts should inherit each other’s possessions, or why they and the brain-states should be functions (in the mathematical sense) of each other, I reply the reason, if there be any, must lie where all real reasons lie, in the total sense or

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meaning of the world.”

And Nishida’s “unity” or “will” also doesn’t have its cause further. This fact seems to have its source in this same question. Neither of these pure experiences has ontological reason of their existence which can be explained completely with rational thinking. But this very groundlessness has a certain significance which reality in general is destined to have ultimately. Because if reality in this meaning is not applicable to any predicate or dichotomy, it will not be proper for reality to have its further ground or cause on its own. In other words, groundlessness is essential for the ultimate reality.

“The unifying activity of the will functions at the base of all reason and laws….Some people draw a distinction between the will and reason because the will is blind. But we cannot explain a direct fact; we cannot explain the intuitive principles at the base of reason. To explain is to be able to include other things in a single system. That which is the very nucleus of a unity cannot be explained; thus, it is blind.”

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