

BEING FREE IN THE REAL WORLD

AN INITIAL ETHICAL DIALOGUE

BETWEEN NISHIDA KITARŌ

AND JEANNE HERSCH



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*Although they come from different cultural backgrounds, Nishida Kitarō and Jeanne Hersch share a commitment to reaffirming the essential nature of everyday experience of the self in the world, rather than relying solely on abstract intellectual theory. This common stance opens the way for a meaningful ethical dialogue. A comparison between Nishida's *An Inquiry into the Good* and Hersch's writings from the late 1920s to the early 1940s reveals that their views on reality and freedom intersect significantly, despite ultimately reaching contrasting conclusions about the role of distinction in human activity. From there, the author identifies key ethical insights that emerge from the similarities and differences between these two philosophers, concluding that human beings must exercise their freedom in accordance with their natural personal tendency to make distinctions and incarnate in concrete forms—a necessity for genuine ethical engagement with reality in daily life.*

WELL BEFORE the publication of his early works, it is clear from Nishida Kitarō's letters and diary that his main interest lay in an ontology that, on the one hand, would immediately prove to be ethical—naturally holding together the reality and human life—and, on the other, could encompass the immediate nondual experience of Buddhism and Daoism (Fongaro 2017, 233–4). In a letter of 1907, while working on the first essays that would constitute *An Inquiry into the Good*, Nishida declares his intention to build his philosophy on the reality of the mind rather than on abstract theory (Yusa 2002, 89). In another letter from 1902, he is even more explicit, criticizing Western ethics for its tendency to sacrifice experience deeply in the human heart in favor of intellectual pursuit and artificial constructs: “people forget the ground on which they stand” (Yusa 2002, 74). In this regard, a few lines from his diary dated 3 March 1901 offer a powerful image: “Under a dimly lit lamp, all the family members gathered and dined. The scene was inexpressibly charming. The utmost human happiness does not belong to ‘high places,’ nor does

it exist in ‘natural scenery,’ but in ‘ordinary, everyday life.’ The moon was beautiful and bright. Took a walk at night” (Yusa 2002, 65). In a nutshell, Nishida wanted to thoroughly understand Western logic in order to formulate an alternative logic that could restore importance to the knowing, feeling, experiencing self of ordinary consciousness (Heisig 2001, 52).

Nishida’s critique of Western philosophical perspective—particularly its tendency to sacrifice ordinary experience in favor of intellectual analysis—is certainly well-founded. However, it is equally true that within the varied Western philosophical tradition, we can identify movements that share at least partially Nishida’s central concerns and could enter into dialogue with them. For instance, from the very beginnings of philosophy, women philosophers have approached key philosophical issues by enhancing the role of the senses, emotions, and our connection with the world (Waithe 1995). In particular, some of the leading women philosophers of the twentieth century were inspired by the cognitive failure that Kant describes in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and sought to work out possible solutions that could revive a more lived search for meaning, reclaiming the bodily dimension and the need to give concrete form to our ideal values as a benchmark for reason (Tarantino 2018, 26).

Among these twentieth-century women philosophers, Jeanne Hersch developed a philosophical approach particularly sensitive to the link between ethical experience and reality in ordinary life. Although freedom is the central category on which her entire philosophical path is based, the beginning of this path is marked by her encounter with matter and its mute presence. At the age of five, persistently questioning the real existence of the things around her, Hersch’s father invited her to place her hand on the household stove to ascertain their reality. This was Hersch’s first philosophical experience: an early confrontation with Kant’s cognitive failure, a helplessness in the face of a reality that undoubtedly *is there*, but offers no intellectual certainty about the essence of Being. From this experience, Hersch sought a way out of the *impasse* that can be experienced in daily life. She did so by trying to preserve the intuition arising from our encounter with reality from the hardening of abstract concepts, as demonstrated by her early interest in Bergson. Only later, thanks to Jaspers, did Hersch discover freedom as a gift, an avenue to overcome cognitive failure through existential decisions and their embodiment in the real world.¹

Given their shared original concern with reaffirming the essentiality of the self’s everyday experience in the world over purely intellectual abstraction, this article aims to initiate a dialogue on ethics between Nishida and Hersch. Certainly, this

1. I describe in more detail this early philosophical experience of Hersch and its implications in Severini 2019, 227–9.

is an ambitious goal: on the one hand, Hersch, faithful to Jaspers' teaching on the limits and finitude of human beings, reclaims the Latin meaning of *existence* as *ex-sistere*, the emergence of a subject who makes decisions² and is thereby distinguished from everything else. On the other hand, Nishida developed his paradigm in an attempt to overcome precisely the subject-object dualism inherited from Kant, a dualism that also grounds Hersch's philosophy. He navigated between the Scylla and Charybdis of monism and dualism, consistently challenging all forms of dualism from his first work to his last (Kopf 2004, 75–6). Such a dialogue on ethics cannot be exhausted in a few pages. My goal in this article is to clarify the most evident points of contact offering common ground for pursuing this dialogue, as well as the precise point at which the two philosophers diverge. The rest must be addressed in a more extensive future work.

More specifically, to achieve my goal, I will first clarify that in this article I focus solely on *An Inquiry into the Good*, since Nishida himself, in a prefatory note added in 1936 for the new edition of the work, affirms that while his language has evolved and his thinking has become more articulate, it nonetheless remains in continuity with the views he had already expressed in this early work (Nishida 1990, 9). Despite the simplicity and occasional naivety of certain passages when compared to his mature writings, I consider *An Inquiry into the Good* suitable for the preliminary investigation proposed here, as it allows us to grasp Nishida's original interests through language that is clearer than that of many later texts. By comparing *An Inquiry into the Good* with the ideas developed by Hersch between the late 1920s to the early 1940s, I show that Nishida and Hersch share several premises concerning the nature of reality and freedom, but arrive at opposite conclusions about the role of distinction within the dynamics they describe in their respective philosophical trajectories. It is precisely the reflection on distinction that appears to be the point at which Nishida and Hersch diverge. This point is crucial, as it invites reflection on human activity as one of abstraction, with all its potential and its dangers. In the conclusion, I highlight the principal ethical insights that emerge from this initial investigation into the similarities and differences between Nishida and Hersch. Among these insights, I consider particularly decisive the conception of freedom as a capacity to be exercised from within our natural tendency: a freedom that distinguishes and incarnates this tendency in concrete forms, ultimately returning to the initial stage of everyday life to evaluate our activity of incarnation.

2. In this regard, it is worth noting that the essence of decision in Hersch, moving again from the Latin etymology, *de-caedere*, focuses on the act of separating (Chello 2007, 75).

Points of Contact between Nishida and Hersch. Being *Free to* in a Familiar Reality

Gustav Fechner said that one morning, while relaxing in a chair in the Rosenthal in Leipzig, he gazed in the bright sunlight at a spring meadow with fragrant flowers, singing birds, and flitting butterflies and became engrossed in what he called the perspective of the daytime, in which truth is things just as they are, as opposed to the colorless and soundless perspective of night found in the natural sciences. I do not know what influenced me, but since long ago I have had the idea that true reality must be actuality just as it is and that the so-called material world is something conceptualized and abstracted out of it (Nishida 1990, XXXIII).

Nishida introduces *An Inquiry into the Good* with these evocative lines, which can be compared with equally evocative lines written by Hersch in *L'illusion philosophique*, to clearly grasp that there is something in common between the two philosophers:

I look at a waterfall. There are several ways of looking at it. It can appear to me as a force.... It can appear to me as an aesthetic spectacle.... It may appear to me as the symbol of a thought of mine, a desire of mine, a dream of mine. It may finally, losing all autonomy, become a reflection of my soul and a part of myself, the passion or despair that drags me along. In all these cases, it remains close and understandable to me.... But it can also appear to me in another way. Watching it fall, I suddenly see it in itself, naked, stripped of my feelings.... It becomes prodigiously unknown and incomprehensible.... I have no contact with this enormous indifference. I see the compact, opaque thickness of matter, into which my gaze cannot enter.... An abyss has opened between life, close and comprehensible, and inaccessible matter. For at this point falls the prejudice, which we derive from science, according to which it is matter that is comprehensible first, and life later.... As if being able to measure is enough to understand. (Hersch 2005, 35–6)

For both Nishida and Hersch the most original and intimate experience we have of reality is an enveloping familiarity in which we are immediately close and unified with things through the feelings they arouse in us, while the scientific gaze intervenes only later with its own abstractions, isolating us in a night in which we can measure precisely but without truly understanding, now separated from sounds, colors, and impressions. The reality described by these two philosophers has two features in common: it is always a concrete experience, and in it, subject and object meet without being able to do without each other.

Regarding the second feature, Nishida states clearly at the very beginning of *An Inquiry into the Good* that *pure experience* is a state in which subject and object are completely unified in one's own state of mind, because seeing a color or hearing a sound precede the thought that the color or sound is an external object or the judgment about that color or sound (Nishida 1990, 3–4). Nishida bases his entire first work on this idea of pure experience, adding that reality does not exist apart from the facts of such pure experience (Nishida 1990, 15), so reality as it is coincides with consciousness in the present. To him, the crack that Hersch also speaks of³ is created when the unity is broken and a present consciousness enters into a relation with other consciousnesses, generating meanings and judgments and leading to a departure from reality as it is (Nishida 1990, 9). Hersch's definition of reality is virtually identical to Nishida's: "Here we will define reality as anything that has a present presence in consciousness" (Hersch 2006, 4).⁴ Although she often speaks of *I* and *not-I*, using language far removed from that with which Nishida would express himself, she nonetheless agrees with the idea that separating subject and object in thought or action inevitably entails a perversion and a departure from reality (Hersch 2006, 23). For Hersch, the subject must accept that they cannot do without materiality because the subject is *condemned* and at the same time *devoted* to material creation (Hersch 2006, 184); only by becoming *the other* can they ascertain what they themselves is and thus strive for a deeper unity (Hersch 2006, 115).⁵

Regarding the first feature, Hersch concludes that reality is constituted by the relationship between subject and object, rather than either of the two terms taken individually or their simple sum (Hersch 2006, 12). Against the abstract concepts produced by science—such as that of *pure matter*—Nishida states that in real nature everything "is a concrete fact with its own special characteristics and significance" (Nishida 1990, 70). So both Hersch and Nishida agree that reality is by no means something neutral and objectively aseptic, but rather a relationship, a concrete encounter, that takes on meaning: those who reduce reality to a set of measurable data have understood nothing about the living world. Nishida takes this a step further, in that his conception of reality also influences his conception of truth, which he regards as close to the real of concrete experience, thus an individual, actual, concrete truth, at the antipodes of the abstraction of universal scientific truth.⁶ Surely, Hersch's conception of truth is different from Nishida's, but

3. It is worth noting that, in the Italian translation, Fongaro uses the word *frattura* (Nishida 2017, 59), bringing this passage from Nishida closer to the creation of the abyss in the example of Hersch's waterfall, although perhaps calling the crack Nishida speaks of an "abyss" would be overstating the case.

4. All the quotations from this book are my translations.

5. In this regard, Hersch calls "romantic betrayal" the exaltation of the will of the self at the expense of its relation to the datum and realization in it (22–3).

6. In this regard, some lines from Nishida prove relevant and deserve to be quoted in their entirety: "There are various arguments about what truth is, but I think truth is that which comes closest to the most

the *metaphysical truth* on which she grounds human existence in *L'illusion philosophique*, “comparable to a true act rather than a true explanation” (Hersch 2005, 44), again refers back to the idea that a meaningful experience is deeper than any objective, impersonal explanation, an idea shared by Nishida.

The concrete experience of the bond between spirit and the external world in the reality just described is the background to the conception of freedom proposed by Nishida and Hersch. In this regard, Nishida writes some very clear lines:

The kind of will described by those who argue for the freedom of the will—a will that is totally without cause or reason—does not exist. Such a contingent will would not be felt to be free; rather, it would be felt to be oppressive. When we function for a certain reason, that is, from the internal character of the self, we feel ourselves to be free. And we feel most free when the cause of a motive emerges from the most profound internal character of the self. The reason behind the will, however, is not a mechanical cause as described by determinists. Our spirit contains a law governing its activity, and when spirit functions in accordance with its own law, it is truly free. Freedom thus has two possible meanings: (1) being totally without cause, that is, fortuitous or contingent, and (2) having no external restrictions and therefore functioning of and by oneself. The latter indicates autonomous⁷ freedom, and this is the freedom of the will. (Nishida 1990, 98)

Again, the similarities between the two philosophers can be noted by quoting a passage from Hersch dealing with the same issue:

You say *necessity* at the moment when I was going to say *freedom*.... If we have in front of us a bag containing red balls and white balls and we draw, without looking, a red one, are we free? I don't think so. Chance or a multiplicity of things caused my hand to grab a red ball. If now I look in the bag and I am indifferent to pull out a red ball or a white one, I find myself a little closer to freedom; so, if I pull out a red ball to mend a sock, because a red one will be seen better in a white

concrete facts of experience. Truth is sometimes said to be universal but if by this one means abstract commonality, then what one is designating is actually far removed from truth. The culmination of truth is the most concrete, direct facts that synthesize various facets of experience. These facts are the basis of truth, and truth is something abstracted and constructed out of them. Though truth lies in unity, the unity is not a unity of abstract concepts. True unity lies in direct facts. Perfect truth pertains to the individual person and is actual. Perfect truth therefore cannot be expressed in words, and such things as scientific truth cannot be considered perfect truth. The standard of truth is not external, for it lies in our state of pure experience. To know the truth is to be congruent with this state” (Nishida 1990, 26).

7. It is worth noting that, in the Italian translation, Fongaro uses the word *necessaria* (Nishida 2017, 133), which is exactly the same word used by Hersch.

sock, I am even closer to freedom, because I have reasons to draw the red ball. I approach freedom progressively, to the extent that there are reasons. And in the end, when I find myself faced with two paths, one of which is that of temptation, the other that of duty, if I choose the first, I do not call it a choice of freedom, because I have the impression of giving in. (Hersch, Dufour-Kowalska, Dufour 2006, 76–9)⁸

Three points of contact deserve to be analyzed in these two dense passages. The first is the distinction between what contemporary debate has called *freedom from* and *freedom to*.⁹ As Hersch points out, confusing freedom with arbitrariness and thinking that being free means doing whatever we want is the most basic philosophical mistake one can make when reflecting on freedom (Hersch, Dufour-Kowalska, Dufour 2006, 79). *Freedom from* obstacles that significantly compromise our choices is certainly a necessary but not sufficient condition for making free choices, because we also need to be *free to* show our most original and deepest nature. Nishida clearly states that we function according to a certain, imparted motive that we cannot produce freely, and he confirms what Hersch has already said about *temptation*, arguing that we feel *compulsion* when we function in opposition to such a motive. Great care must be taken not to confuse the absence of constraints or limits with the ultimate freedom, for true freedom is rather synonymous with the systematic development of consciousness (Nishida 1990, 25). For both Nishida and Hersch, the more we decide in accordance with our own law, the more we can call ourselves free; the more freely we decide, the more we follow the necessity of our own law.¹⁰

The second point of contact concerns exactly this systematic development of consciousness, which can also be traced in Hersch's early reflections. In *Les images dans l'oeuvre de M. Bergson*, she speaks of "free and necessary organic development" that is accomplished according to a law internal to the subject, giving the

8. Hersch's conclusion explicates the coincidence of the ultimate freedom with necessity: "One can, however, take a further step. Antigone really cannot motivate her decision, as it refers to the transcendence of unwritten laws. She does so because, metaphysically, she cannot act otherwise. We all know, at one time or another, this kind of situation, in which we would like with all our good will to justify an action but we feel we cannot do it because the deep 'reasons' are unspeakable and go beyond all reason. When it becomes absolute, freedom coincides with necessity and we are entirely present in it" (Hersch, Dufour-Kowalska, Dufour 2006, 80). Hersch gives the same example in *Mensch sein: Freiheit oder Willkür* (Hersch 1982, 2–3).

9. The distinction between these two types of freedom can be traced at least back to Kant, but in the heart of the twentieth century it has been widely debated, especially within the context of political and social philosophy (but evidently it also has relevant ethical implications). To explore this issue further, see Carter (2022).

10. Cobb summarizes effectively: "An act we experience as free, then, is one that we experience as an accurate expression of who we are, and its freedom consists precisely in this expressive character, not in the absence of causal conditions" (Cobb 1998, 274).

example of the development of a plant from seed (Hersch 2001, 141).¹¹ Although this passage contains a criticism of Bergson, De Vecchi rightly points out that Hersch will always remain faithful to the idea of freedom as organic development (De Vecchi 2008, 28). So for both Nishida and Hersch, the necessity of manifesting our own law in our free decisions is determined by a seed that is in us from birth, and which we must take good care of if we want our life to sprout luxuriantly and bear fruit. Nishida gives special attention to these person's internal qualities, which constitute the motivating force and a unifying reality from within, both in conscious conceptions and unconscious feelings (Nishida 1990, 53). Such *individuality* is something that begins to act at the moment a person is born and develops in accordance with various experiences until death, and that everyone can actualize¹² regardless of natural talents or life circumstances: "Just as everyone has a different face, everyone possesses unique characteristics that cannot be imitated by others" (Nishida 1990, 137).

At this point, Nishida poses a legitimate question: if being free means acting in accordance with one's nature, why is only the will free and everything else considered necessary? The answer to this question constitutes the third point of contact between Nishida and Hersch. Nishida states that the occurrence of a phenomenon in the natural world is determined strictly by a particular set of circumstances, according to a blind necessity, whereas the phenomena of consciousness do not simply arise; we are conscious of them, namely, we are conscious that taking something includes the possibility of not taking it, and this is because consciousness is never controlled by other things. Even when we decide to follow necessary laws, nothing forces us to do so (Nishida 1990, 98). Hersch finds the perfect definition to sum up this insight of Nishida's: *to want fully* (Gagnebin 1950, 292). We are free when we do something not because we are compelled by external forces, but because we want it; we want *that* precise possibility among several that always present themselves to our autonomous nature: "Conduct therefore is not generated from without, but from within" (Nishida 1990, 99). Of course, we are ultimately free when our free decisions follow our own nature. Consciousness is free not because it acts without reasons, but precisely because it knows good reasons. And, the more we advance in knowledge, the more we have good reasons to choose among possibilities, the freer we can be. "If we go even farther and realize the unavoidable reason for the situation, then the oppression turns into freedom" (Nishida 1990, 99).

Before concluding, two clarifications appear necessary. The first concerns Nishida and his reference to individuality: he states that the highest good is for our

11. Nishida gives the same example of the development of a plant from seed in Nishida (1990, 17–18).

12. It should be noted that *actualization* is a key concept also in Hersch's thinking, especially in *L'être et a forme*.

spirit to develop its various abilities and to achieve and display its innate nature just as a bamboo plant or a pine tree does (Nishida 1990, 125), but then adds that this actualization advances from the small-scale development of individuality to a culmination in the large-scale unified development of all humankind and the world (Nishida 1990, 142–3). The second clarification concerns Hersch, who does not go so far as to achieve a profound unification as Nishida does, but still values the harmony with and the essential nature of what is *outside the self*, stating that freedom should not be conceived as an affirmation of the self *against* external, material or social obligations, because the external world is an instrument of freedom rather than an obstacle (Gagnebin 1950, 292).

In conclusion, Nishida's and Hersch's considerations of freedom appear to be perfectly in continuity with their considerations of reality: the link between spirit and world, and the concrete experience of the dynamics associated with consciousness, are confirmed as indispensable. Regarding the link between spirit and world, Nishida conceives of a deeper unification than Hersch, but undoubtedly, for both, the systematic development of our own law takes place in intimacy with what is outside of the self in a relationship that, as it matures, reveals new possibilities, occasions, and reasons for being free. Regarding the concrete experience of the dynamics related to consciousness, Hersch has certainly dealt with it more than Nishida, and the processes of *giving form* and *incarnation* analyzed extensively in *L'être et la forme* are a pillar of her philosophical path. But even Nishida does not fail to emphasize several times that true freedom is functioning and being active from the internal character of the self (Nishida 1990, 163), it is an action that aims to create an objective result in the world of facts (Nishida 1990, 136). What is clear from this initial analysis is the importance of approaching the issues addressed by also reasoning in concrete and practical terms—reasonable though not purely logical—and valuing the experience of the encounter between our spirit and the world it inhabits, rather than stifling their relationship by separating them sharply.

The Distance between Nishida and Hersch: Distinction as Differentiation or Giving Form

Returning to Hersch's example of the waterfall, the crack that is created in matter's surface and its being mute marks the beginning of the distinction between subject and object, and with it the possibility of beginning to exist. She calls it a *philosophical problem*: “Will I examine it or escape it?... Will I decide, or let it take me? Will I go to the end, will I affirm that I am, or will I erase myself and suppress the wrinkle that has been made on the surface of that world that hitherto went by itself?’ So: ‘Will I face things or will I cease mixing with them? Will I be or will I not be?’” (Hersch 2005, 25). Having emerged from the *state of matter* (Hersch 2005, 26), in

which the absence of distinction offered no alternative, the subject's consciousness can distance itself for the first time from its object, and, observing that object from this detached position, such subject's consciousness can finally conceive of different possibilities and begin to use its freedom to decide on the being or non-being of its existence. Now that the problem is posed, it is no longer possible to return to the previous state and postpone the decision, because to postpone is already choosing not to be. To be, the subject must create themselves by isolating themselves and opposing matter (Hersch 2005, 38).

As mentioned above, also in Nishida there are cracks that break the unity of pure experience when conflicts and contradictions of various kinds arise. "Where there are conflicts and contradictions there is spirit" (Nishida 1990, 75), and as the conflict between motives become more distinct we can become more conscious of our will and mind. These moments are certainly important, for it is through them that we can progress and become more conscious. But, contrary to Hersch, in Nishida this is all directed toward the realization of an even greater unity rather than the increasing distinction of the subject from its object. Knauss is right when he states that in Nishida, "The content of pure experience is analyzed and dissected only through being the object of knowledge and reflection. In the process of unfolding, a totality becomes apparent and reflects itself in contradictions and conflicts" (Knauss 2018, 18). Nishida likens this moment of knowledge and reflection to the fall of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, a necessary phase but one destined to be overcome in view of a greater good, whereas Hersch values Eve's "sweet disobedience" and the separation that follows her act as a condition of the possibility of choosing, existing, loving (Hersch 2000, 18). Here, the paths of Nishida and Hersch separate.

For Nishida, to start from the assumption that pure experience naturally imposes itself as the most immediate state of consciousness is to assert that it is not that experience exists because there is an individual, but that an individual exists because there is experience (Nishida 1990, xxx); and it is not that the individual possesses feeling and the will, but rather that feeling and the will create the individual (Nishida 1990, 50). In a nutshell, the fact of pure experience is the alpha and omega of our thinking, and our thinking is just a wave¹³ on the surface of a great intuition, the process by which a great system of consciousness develops and actualizes itself (Nishida 1990, 16–17). However deep and great a state thinking may be, it always retains its place as only a part of pure experience. In order to understand what Nishida has said so far about individual consciousness, it is necessary

13. Once again, Nishida and Hersch are at the antipodes: for Nishida, thought is a wave destined to be reabsorbed into the ocean of a great intuition, while for Hersch it is that which digs a space for existence in the crack of matter.

at this point to specify that for him, in addition to individual consciousness there is also the consciousness of a universal system, which, at the end of *An Inquiry into the Good* he comes to call *God*. As partially mentioned earlier in this article, the activity of individual consciousness has as its ultimate goal unification with the consciousness of the universal system: “What we call the demands of reason are actually demands for a greater unity; they are demands of the universal system of consciousness that transcends the individual person, and they can even be seen as the manifestation of a great, trans-individual will. The sphere of consciousness is never limited to the individual person, for the individual is no more than a small system within consciousness” (Nishida 1990, 28). The activity of reality is the spontaneous self-development of a single entity, and the distinction between internal and external, active and passive, contradiction and unification is something that thought uses to explain this spontaneous self-development (Nishida 1990, 57). Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that, precisely because contradiction and unification are both indispensable and one would not be given without the other, our individuality is not merely a false appearance which, like a bubble, has no significance whatsoever; rather, it is part of God’s development, an offshoot of divinity (Nishida 1990, 170).

After clarifying that the consciousness of universal system precedes individual consciousness, the last passages of Nishida’s reasoning follow almost naturally from this premise. If the highest aspiration of individuality is to be unification with the universal system of consciousness, the goal to be pursued is intellectual intuition, that is, a deepening and broadening of our state of pure experience as a return to unification via differentiation:

[I]ntellectual intuition is the unifying activity in pure experience. It is a grasp of life, like having the knack of an art.... For example, when inspiration arises in a painter and the brush moves spontaneously, a unifying reality is operating behind this complex activity.... It is actually the state of oneness of subject and object, a fusion of knowing and willing. In the mutual forgetting of the self and the object, the object does not move the self and the self does not move the object. (Nishida 1990, 32)

Nishida points out that this intuition is an extremely common phenomenon: it can be achieved in the arts in which we have attained great skill and, differentiation after differentiation, we go deeper and deeper, reaching a unification in which consciousness is no longer given; but it can also be achieved in everyday life, whether the family members gather and dine under a dimly lit lamp or while relaxing in the

Rosenthal, gazing in the bright sunlight at a spring meadow.¹⁴ In these situations, all distinctions between matter and spirit are abolished, all subjective reverie is removed and the true self is shown, for the will cannot do anything as long as it is purely subjective; it can only realize itself by following objective nature: “To move water is to accord with its nature, to control people is to accord with their nature, and to control oneself is to accord with one’s own nature. Our wills are effective to the degree that they become objective.... Those without a self—those who have extinguished the self—are the greatest” (Nishida 1990, 77).¹⁵

If Nishida bases his whole path on the assumption that pure experience naturally imposes itself as the most immediate state of consciousness, Hersch asserts rather that “it is impossible to trace back beyond the fact that being is a value. It is the very fact that founds the human spirit” (Hersch 2006, 90).¹⁶ To be, the existing subject who has affirmatively and responsibly answered the *philosophical problem* must produce something concrete, in line with the concern for the world and the natural datum already retraced in Hersch; that is, they must give a subjective form to objective matter:

[N]othing is real in human consciousness without *taking form*. For consciousness there exists only a specific and limited being, there are forms.... But those who say form immediately say matter that has taken form thanks to a force that shaped it. We will define *matter* as the raw, anonymous datum that the spirit transforms into reality of

14. In this regard, it is worth noting yet another similarity between Nishida and Hersch. Nishida writes: “When we are absorbed in something the self loves, for example, we are almost totally unconscious. We forget the self, and at this point an incomprehensible power beyond the self functions alone in all of its majesty; there is neither subject nor object, but only the true union of a subject and object” (Nishida 1990, 174–5). Hersch describes something very similar, calling it a *moral paradox*: “We know from daily experience similar examples of duplicity. Thus, we establish as a principle of morality that one must do good. But we do not at all love those who do good by virtue of this principle. When we say of a person that he is good, this does not mean that he conforms to that principle of morality, but that he thinks of his neighbor, that he loves his neighbor, and that in thinking of his neighbor he performs acts that manifest his goodness. To think of his goodness would be to destroy it: one is only good by forgetting to be good” (Hersch 2006, 28).

15. In conclusion, these considerations allow us to add something about Nishida’s conception of truth, partially supplementing what was said earlier in this article: “Truth is not something we can produce—it is something in accordance with which we should think. We must now ask whether truth ever exists totally separate from the subject? From the standpoint of pure experience, there is no such thing as an object divorced from the subject. Truth is that which has unified our experiential facts, and objective truth is the system of representations that is most effective and most integrating. To know the truth or to accord with it is to unify our experience; it is to proceed from a lesser to a lesser to a greater unity. If we regard our authentic self as being this unifying activity, then to know the truth is to accord with this greater self, to actualize it” (Nishida 1990, 23–4).

16. Since Hersch explicitly states in the introduction of *L'être et la forme* that this book assumes an anthropomorphic perspective in which the question about being is inevitably a question about being as existence (Hersch 2006, 3), it seems clear that in this quotation from Hersch “being is a value” refers to existence, thus for the existing subject being is a value.

consciousness, into forms. We will define *hold* as the act by which the spirit takes possession of matter, giving it a form. (Nishida 1990, 4)

To exist is to take matter and give it a personal form, to impress one's own effective mark (Nishida 1990, 13) and bring something new into the world. This is the process of incarnation that constitutes the mission of the human being in Hersch (Nishida 1990, 114), something that does not aim to recompose the distinction between subject and object with a view to a deeper unification as in Nishida but rather considers this distinction as the starting point for a *philosophy of contours* (De Monticelli 2007), that sculpts ever more sharply the features of the existing subject.

L'être et la forme is a study of the ways in which forms, arising from the encounter between the existing subject and the objective world, come to constitute subjective reality, reaching results opposite to those of Nishida: on the one hand, form is opposed to any kind of totality and is a matter of *appropriation* and *exclusion*, *finiteness* and *separation*; on the other hand, the process of giving form—thought of in these terms—is necessarily based on a polarity between a passive element and an active element (Nishida 1990, 70–1), although Hersch frequently reminds us of the complementarity of these two elements. For Hersch, too, the dynamics described aim at unity, but we do not speak of the unity of Nishida's universal system, but rather of a unity so determined that it constitutes itself as a limited totality that excludes everything that remains outside of it (Nishida 1990, 75). At the end of her analysis, Hersch declares that we can define form as “any elaboration of a matter which, paradoxically, by seizing the traits of particularity and finiteness of this matter and pushing them to the extreme, transposes the datum onto a plane in which it becomes unity and totality” (Nishida 1990, 78).

In conclusion, this study of forms implies for existence that *exclusion* is the fundamental spiritual requirement of the human condition (Nishida 1990, 129). In the beginning, as we have already seen, we are so much in being that thought is impossible; with the possibility of denial begins thought, there is the possibility of existence and a return to being at a deeper level. However, to Hersch, this return to being through distinction, it is now clear, does not occur with Nishida's unification, but by asserting one's exclusive unity through our subjective forms: “When we conceive of being by means of forms, or rather, when we conceive of being as existing in forms, it is irretrievably torn from its plasticity. The exclusive character of forms is even the first tragedy, the eternal tragedy. The more plastic the form, the more plastically it closes in on itself, the more being is split. The serenity of forms destroys the serenity of being” (Nishida 1990, 128).

The study of forms in *L'être et la forme* serves Hersch to deepen the implications of the philosophical problem and its existential decisions on an even more practical level, in everyday life. Answering the philosophical problem in the affirmative

means holding the mute matter around us and giving a form to it through the original mark of our decisions, because for Hersch deciding one's metaphysical truth is not enough; one must also incarnate this truth in the world. If matter is fundamentally mute, what we decide to do with it creates an unbridgeable crack around the formed matter, because the specific form with which one has given a subjective contour to that part of matter depends on the unique freedom of a subject: something that cannot be fully explained or imitated by others. In a nutshell, Hersch's aim in *L'être et la forme* is to awaken the existing subject to an inevitable *decree of presence* (Nishida 1990, 51): on the one hand showing the exclusivity of form (enough has been said about this), and on the other hand emphasizing the extent of this decree of presence. In this regard, Hersch's decree of presence invites us to consider that "Possible freedom varies with the confidence we will have in it; the possibility of a form increases or decreases with boldness or contrition in the face of the datum. In theory there is no equal and determinate responsibility, for it can only be proportional to the part of the imagined form" (Nishida 1990, 43–4).

There is no objective limit to our freedom from outside; it is we who determine the limits of our action, according to how much matter we decide to hold, how many traces of our existential appropriation we decide to leave behind (Nishida 1990, 56). Only we can leave these original traces, only we can give a quantity of matter that specific form, because other subjects before us have given it other forms, and other subjects after us will give it other forms. For Hersch, the human being was born to *decrystallize* the world, to break into the pure being of uniquely determined matter and initiate a diversification of the identical through their own forms (Nishida 1990, 7). She concludes with a provocation, which might invite a rethinking of Nishida's own conclusions:

If the spiritual moves away from the vocation for which it is devoted to incarnate in matter, if it is content with itself and pleased with itself, it necessarily, and increasingly, moves among undifferentiated possibilities, exempt from hierarchies that make sense only with respect to the real. Everything is leveled, everything is easy, light, interchangeable. Contradiction itself ends up simulating conciliation. There are no more laws, because a law is a condition of existence, and the spiritual has moved away from existence. Then the spiritual is lost with the law, and the "purity" of its disinterestedness becomes a consent to nothingness. It floats, it gives itself up to the flow, it is no longer a subject, it is like "everything else", and it is impossible to distinguish it from the floating of materiality. (Nishida 1990, 133)

Conclusion: A Time for Activity, a Time for Acquaintance with Things as They are in Freedom

Comparing the differences between Nishida and Hersch in order to understand how to further develop their reflections is certainly useful. However, one must at the same time avoid overlooking the importance of the crossroads where their two paths meet, especially when considering the long stretches where these paths take different directions. The similarities between Nishida and Hersch make it possible to identify at least two main insights to take the contemporary debate about ethics forward: the priority of a personal experience of reality as a relationship and encounter that takes on meaning, and the use of freedom from the necessity of our own internal law that is in us from our birth as a seed rather than from a perversion of free will as an absence of limitations that allows us to do whatever we want.

The first insight invites consideration of the need to view reality as the phenomena of subjective consciousness rather than as an objective, neutral data set that can be measured scientifically. Both Nishida and Hersch are far from asserting that the various possible scientific approaches to reality are useless and produce no benefit. However, they are undoubtedly more concerned about the risk that the meaningfulness of ordinary real experience could be diluted and dissolved by the solvent of a purely intellectual logic that too often hastily dissolves what it fails to grasp in order to be able to best apply its own categories. Even before it is measured, the world speaks to us. If it captures our attention, it is because of an experience of enveloping familiarity that creates an immediate, inexplicable bond, in which explanation is not even sought, because at that moment we are entirely absorbed in an experience in which it really does not matter who is the subject and who is the object. Only later, after distancing ourselves from this experience, might we want to analyze it, to ask how long it lasted, what physical laws determine it, what psychic processes make us perceive it that way. Whether it is a path to deeper unification or to exclusive incarnation, both Nishida and Hersch remind us that the experiencing self of ordinary consciousness is our starting point.

This insight immediately proves to be ethical because to ignore this *intuition* that occurs in everyday human life is to uproot the human being from their natural ground, significantly limiting effective reflection on their good and the dynamics that determine their actions. The experience of the real relationship that is more than the mere sum of subject and object and makes them complementary is not only the starting point of the self, but also its ending point. The differentiating dynamics of thought, at the end of their activity, aim precisely at returning to the world with deeper awareness through concrete acts. This is evident in the process of giving form and incarnation in Hersch, which, when creating cracks, is always concerned to act while preserving its own relationship of harmony with everything

outside of the self. It is also evident in Nishida's philosophy, where the goal is the creation of an objective result in the world of facts. One last detail should not be overlooked: Hersch speaks explicitly of *mute matter*, but Nishida's considerations of pure experience also confirm (and he will continue to do so in all of his later works) that it is impossible to know our object in its purity regardless of our relationship to it.¹⁷ This again confirms the inadequacy of any scientific artificial construct designed to measure data rather than relations that include subjective aspects.

The second insight seeks to shed light on an ever-present problem, that of the relationship between freedom and free will. For Nishida and especially for Hersch, who devotes the second half of her life to reflecting on the *outer conditions of liberty*,¹⁸ being able to exercise one's free will is a necessary but not sufficient condition. True freedom acts with good reasons. There is in us a law, a natural tendency that determines our uniqueness, and which we are free to follow.¹⁹ The path we are to follow is somehow already indicated, and we can feel truly free only by deciding to walk it. If we choose to ignore it, to walk it only partially or without conviction leaves us with a feeling of dissatisfaction, like having given in to temptation or not really having done enough. This is the good reason to use freedom and a very significant statement on an ethical level: there is a different seed planted in each of us, present and active from birth, whether we are aware of it or not. By paying attention to listening to ourselves and intuiting what is outside of us, to the relationship we form with it, and to the aspects that capture our attention—immediately, before any instrumental division between subject and object—we can gain clear insights into how that seed grows within us and how best to care for it.

Moreover, what distinguishes the conscious from the natural is the awareness of possibilities beyond actual events. This is especially surprising in Nishida, who hopes for the unification of the self with the consciousness of the universal system, yet cannot avoid noting the self's uniqueness within the universal system. As already mentioned, human beings have a natural tendency to follow, but they can also conceive of alternative possibilities. In their case, having a natural tendency does not guarantee that they will necessarily choose that possibility. For both Nishida and Hersch, the path of the free human being begins in the indeterminate

17. Although Nishida tries to overcome Kant's subject-object dualism, he cannot help but implicitly confirm Kant's impossibility of knowing the thing-in-itself.

18. See Severini 2002, 111–67.

19. Regarding the importance of following our natural tendency, it is interesting to note that in Nishida and Hersch the problem of evil in the sense of an evil natural tendency does not arise. In Nishida, the Buddhist influence leads one to immediately consider any expression of the natural tendency as good, but also in Hersch the problem of evil emerges only at the intersubjective level, when one is in danger of harming the freedom of another, whereas in reflection on the personal use of one's freedom in existence there is no possibility that the authentic embodiment of one's natural tendency could somehow be evil.

fusion of subject and object and continues through the cracks opened by the various possibilities that arise. However, what must be noted at this point is that this path is also, and above all, a progress. As mentioned earlier, the more we advance in knowledge, the more we have good reasons to choose among possibilities, and the freer we can be. This means that there is a formal direction, a common end to be reached, even if each follows their own personal path. That is why we can speak of progress: as we become more knowledgeable about our characters and our possibilities in the world, we also become more aware of our being who we are. Our zigzagging through the world is not a leisurely visit without a destination; it must be guided by a definite end—a promise—to know the seed of our own law, so that we can be free at the highest level and understand who we ought to be in order to want it fully. Being free is, first and foremost, a matter of responsibility. The timing and depth of our path of differentiation can make all the difference.

Hersch has always argued for the profound connection between freedom and responsibility, while at this stage of reflection, Cobb rightly points out, one would expect Nishida to discuss the nature of responsibility. However, such a discussion does not materialize, in line with the common Buddhist expectation that it is best to allow one's character to express itself rather than worrying about the traditional moral questions (Cobb 1998, 275–7). Here, Nishida's perspective appears to be at odds with the tragic tone used by Hersch in her study of forms. This distance of perspectives is evident in their reflections on the role of distinction in human experience. I believe that the similarities between Nishida and Hersch provide a valid premise for exploring the distance between these two philosophers, and it is from reflecting on this distance that the contemporary ethics can derive significant insights.

First, we must reconsider the strong and significant experiences that have directed to Nishida and Hersch's philosophical paths. What most captures Nishida's attention is the immediate nondual experience of the Buddhist tradition, with which he became familiar in his mid-twenties through Zen practice, combined with a natural need for clarity and rigor, typical of philosophical minds. Fascinated by the benefits of his progressive liberation from a deeply rooted ego, and critical of the Western tradition's arbitrary dogma of the distinction between subject and object, he sought to express the liberation of the self from the ego, making identity the primary principle of philosophy (Kopf 2004, 78). What most captures Hersch's attention is the powerlessness she felt in the face of a fact that cannot be doubted, but also cannot be known with certainty, an experience she had at the age of five. This led to the discovery of freedom as a gift that allows one to prevail over such an *impasse* and overcome cognitive powerlessness through decision. It is through this relationship with matter that powerlessness becomes a possibility, not an incapable fact.

In light of this, and the findings of this article, I would like to suggest that from their personal significant experiences, Nishida and Hersch valued two complementary aspects of the human being. Both conceive of the human being as free to follow their natural tendency in the deepest connection with the world, through a disciplined thought process that leads to progress. When Nishida states the need to rid oneself of everything that is purely subjective, he is simply inviting us to discard everything that our thinking has made us regard as important during its process of differentiation, but which does not truly belong to our natural tendency. At the same time, when Hersch states that the subject must isolate themselves and oppose matter, she is pointing out the importance of giving a definite form to our existence, without desiring separation or disinterest in everything external to the subject. From their common conception of the human being, Nishida valued harmony with a more universal system beyond the individual, a relationship so close that, by surrendering to it, we can express our truest depths. By shedding all subjective superstructure—useful for advancing our understanding, but also potentially diverting us from our path—we can immerse ourselves in unexpected self-discovery, remembering and expressing our deepest nature. In the everyday, when our guard is down, we can experience connection with our surroundings. Yet, this experience also speaks to us, describes us, and allows us to finally come home. On the other hand, Hersch valued the originality of a unique capacity within the most universal system: the freedom to conceive of alternative possibilities. This capacity can focus on what is absent or unknown, remain unexpressed, or it can enable us to exist. It is the responsibility to decide how much to retract out of fear and how much to give form with joy, how far to go in incarnating ourselves and offering something new to the world: not by creating *ex nihilo*, but by reworking matter in an original way, thus decrystallizing it.

Ultimately, what is the role of distinction in human experience? Providing a precise answer here seems impossible. However, the dialogue between Nishida and Hersch allows us to limit the weaknesses of one through the strengths of the other. Reducing the ability of the human subject to distance themselves from their object to a mere moment to be recomposed within a deeper unification risks denying the responsibility and innovative scope of human existence, as manifested through personal natural tendencies and the production of something new in the world. To distinguish, to give a clearly delineated form, and to say yes to one possibility and no to others are acts that appear necessary for the optimal use of one's freedom. We must never forget that there are forms that only we can incarnate, and giving them up can be tragic for the world and for our existence. It is also true that intense activity of incarnation risks overemphasizing the subject's activity at the expense of the natural conditions in which it takes place, conditions that we must always remember to conform to. These conditions should be seen as starting

points, not obstacles to overcome. At any moment, they can take us back to our innermost depths, because incarnating something that does not truly express our natural tendency can be dangerous and harmful. In summary, distinction is necessary in order to have the proper distance from our object and be able to give form to it effectively. Nevertheless, distinction can involve both the incarnation of our natural tendency and its perversion and estrangement from it. It really seems to be a matter of preserving “a link between actively thinking about things and passively being acquainted with things as they are” (Heisig 2001, 53). To distinguish means to abstract, to take responsibility for moving away from the initial state of pure experience in order to incarnate our existence more and more: not to get rid of the world, but to exist more authentically in it. And so, what the contemporary debate about ethics can derive from the distance between Nishida and Hersch is the need to incarnate our novelty into the world without ever betraying our relationship to it and to our deepest self.

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* The author wishes to acknowledge the assistance of a Grant-in-Aid for JSPS Fellows (23KF0281).