The Potentiality of Empathy with Others in Competitive Sport: A Suggestion from Nishida’s ‘Pure Experience’ and ‘I’ and ‘Thou’

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This paper inquires into the possibility to connect athletes from the sense of empathy that athletes could have for each other. For this purpose, the potentiality of empathy has been interpreted from the notion of ‘pure experience’ which Kitaro Nishida (1870-1945) developed. Empathy is considered as a bodily and interactive communication between the self and the other, and means we are to assume an event has occurred on the other (object) as well as on the self (subject). But this framework to understand empathy formally as the relation between subject and object seems to have some methodological limitations. Nishida attempts to overcome this theoretical difficulty in western thought by introducing ‘pure experience’ into the issue of identifying subject with object. According to Nishida, while a person remains within his/her individual experience, he/she would be still a subject in relation to an object, i.e. he/she cannot transcend the limitation of western dualism. But we can recognize the potentiality of perceiving the other at the physical level, i.e. empathy, according to Nishida’s notion of ‘pure experience’ as transcendental conception. In this paper individual athletics and interpersonal athletics have been set as examples. For example, a Judoka is required to react to the opponent’s attack as swiftly as possible. In that moment he/she could perceive the opponent’s state at the corporeal level regardless of his/her (moral) consciousness. We could find the possibility of understanding others and solidarity in sport by inquiring about the role empathy plays in such situations.

Keywords: experience, individual and interpersonal athletics, subject and object

1. Introduction

The founder of Judo, Jigoro Kano (1860-1938), advocates the ideal of ‘mutual prosperity for self and others’. In order to assume that athletes confronting each other realize that ideal through competitive sports, we have to find out the possibility to connect athletes in some way. I will inquire about the possibility for this from a sense of empathy that athletes could have for each other. Generally speaking cooperative work brings to fruition human connection and shared experiences with others. A typical instance is the cooperative play among members of the same side of a team sport. In team sports, we can see the probability of human connection or the experience of empathy among team members in these sort of activities. But, do individual or interpersonal athletics not provide a shared experience?

It would be meaningful to explore how opponents could share that experience with each other. If we could find the possibility of empathy between opposing athletes, this will bring additional meaning and potentiality to these athletic pursuits.

Oftentimes, the athletes will praise each other’s efforts after the competition (mutual recognition). They seem to share something. This essay aims at inquiring how empathy could emerge between athletes of interpersonal athletics, for example a football match, or more individual events, as in a race, when opponents attempt to vanquish the other.

Kano’s background as an educator was Eastern thought, and we know that Kitaro Nishida (1870-1945) was a pioneer of modern philosophy in Japan. Nishida developed a unique philosophical stance based on Eastern thought, especially Zen. We can
expect to find out about the potential of what empathy holds from his philosophical work. Previous studies related to the philosophy of physical education and sport related to Nishida are as follows: ‘The creative elements in the creative world’ (Kondo, 1967: p. 100), ‘poiesis’ (Nagai, 1983: p. 112), ‘place of absolute nothingness’ (Abe, 1984: p. 87, Abe, 1987: p. 45), ‘action intuition’ (Takamatsu, 2007), and ‘pure experience’ (Yamaguchi, 1987).

Takamatsu (2007) points that reference to Nishida’s notion of ‘action intuition’ has not been made by previous studies of the philosophy of sport and physical education (p. 126), and explores the possibility that it can be set as a perspective to describe experience in sports activities. Accordingly, he comments that, “we can notice having the experience to see things actively which action intuition implicates ... in this experience, seeing and acting are coincident with each other, simultaneous and integrated” (p. 136). What Takamatsu finds out from Nishida is that the feature of observing objects by a performing agent in sport lies in seeing those actively. It means that the suggestion by Nishida that observing objects is not possible without an acting body in how we go about recognizing things is applicable to sports activities as well. Sport, which is marked by movement certainly brings us a deeper experience than everyday life, in which we often ‘passively’ wait and see objects.

As to pure experience, Yamaguchi (1987) deals with it as a state of being sensitive as she explains the experience of wonder in sport. But as her comments focus on showing a mixture of subjectivity and objectivity, it is necessary to delve into the relationship between the self and the other, that is, the sharing of experience with others or empathy.

2. Procedure

To seek the potential for empathy among athletes, the following issues are considered. 1) the meaning of empathy, 2) the issue of the difference between the self and the other, 3) the issue of basic connection between the self and the other person, and 4) applying those issues to the situation of competitive sports. Issue number two is discussed taking a cue from ‘I and Thou’ to which Nishida refers, and regarding the third issue Nishida’s conception of ‘pure experience’ is introduced.

3. About Empathy

When we notice another person’s feelings, we can know that there are several processes that are transmitting all of a sudden, or alternatively we understand the other person’s feelings consciously. The former is called ‘emotional empathy’ which shares feelings rather automatically, and the latter is called ‘cognitive empathy’ which is about intentional feelings that accompany reflective thought. In the case of cognitive empathy, a cognitive process would play a significant role in addition to the process of emotional empathy (automatic empathy). Specifically, when one guesses or imagines the other’s experience consciously or introspectively, what takes important role is not only the cerebral limbic system (Anterior Insular Cortex, Anterior Cingulate Cortex, or the Amygdala) which is the nerve center of emotional processing, but also such mental activities of the temporoparietal association area as perspective taking or the activities inside of frontal cortex and temporoparietal cortex relate to mentalizing (Fukushima, 2009: pp. 209-210).

Cognitive empathy is the active and intellectual process which comprehends the other person through knowing his/her situation or listening to his/her story. And this empathy has a potential to not always correspond to the other’s state of affairs, as it entails an intentional surmising, i.e. a guess or supposition. On the other hand, emotional empathy is a passive and sensory process as if one got someone’s feeling from his/her expression. In this regard, a question still remains as to whether the self can experience an event in another person (e.g. suffering or pain) since empathy is an event that occurs on the self who observes the other person. This experience is from his/her own experience.

4. Differentiation between the self and the other

We have no other choice than to answer that the self cannot experience what the other experiences entirely as long as the self and the other confront each other as independent existence. Even if one states that he/she can comprehend the other’s feelings as if they were his/her own. After all, he/she only thinks so and it is uncertain whether he/she can perceive another person’s feelings in actuality. And solipsism postulates that it is impossible to communicate with others. To be able to understand
others is only an assumption like that or the assertion of a conviction. We must say that empathy (whether cognitive or emotional) remains at the level of an event within the self.

So, here we would like to move to review Nishida’s notion of ‘I’ and ‘Thou’ in order to examine the relationship between the self and the other. What does Nishida think about the connection between ‘I’ and ‘thou’? Does he think that there is an unbridgeable gap between ‘I’ and ‘thou’? Nishida comments about ‘I’ and ‘Thou’ as follows.

‘I’ is ‘I’ by acknowledging ‘thou’, and ‘thou’ is ‘thou’ by acknowledging ‘I’. ‘Thou’ is at the bedrock of ‘I’, ‘I’ is at the bedrock of ‘thou’. ‘I’ connects to ‘thou’ via ‘I’’s bedrock, ‘thou’ connects to ‘I’ via ‘thou’’s bedrock. We communicate internally with each other because we are absolutely others each other (Nishida, 1987: p. 307).

Although ‘thou’, for ‘I’, is considered as the absolutely other, what does it mean to communicate with ‘thou’ (or ‘I’) via the bedrock of ‘I’ (or ‘thou’) when ‘thou’ is the absolute other for ‘I’? Analyzing this by shifting from a moment to another moment, Nishida sees that a moment shifts to another moment not by any intermediary, but by a self-denying which is hidden deep in the bedrock of the self (Nishida, 1987: p. 307). This shift should be seen as the immediate one in connection with intuition. According to Nishida, the true intuition is not a state which the subject and the object, like Noema, are united nor the union of the seeing agent and the seen object. But “the state of intuition must be that the one becomes immediately another one, or the one shifts to another one from inside of the self, … the one, from a Noesis perspective, is the whole” (Nishida, 1987: pp. 308-309). In this intuition, the ‘I’ limits the range of the self by including the denial that the shifting includes. If knowing ‘I’ by myself had the implication of intuition, Nishida thinks, there must be something considered as intuition in that ‘I’ knows ‘thou’ (or ‘thou’ knows ‘I’) as a direct human relationship (Nishida, 1987: p. 317).

Since ‘I’ and ‘thou’ acknowledge the absolute other in each bedrock and shift to each absolute other, ‘I’ and ‘thou’ are to be the absolute other’s and can shift to each other internally. So ‘I’ (or ‘thou’) knows ‘thou’ (‘I’) through the reflection of each personal act. That is, ‘I’ and ‘thou’ know each other by responding to an act to another act (Nishida, 1987: p. 318). Nishida considers that ‘I’ finds the other person in the bedrock of ‘I’, and confronts the other mediated by absolute denial.

5. The capability of fundamental communication between the self and the other

However, can we agree with his explanation about this fundamental connecting between the self and the other person? The key issue probably is ‘internal communication’ about which Nishida says that “we communicate internally with each other because we are absolutely different from each other”.

A basis for being different from each other as the self and the other person could include each individual’s difference in perspectives. Perspective is a broadening view from one’s position; a perspective from one’s position never corresponds to the other’s perspective. What makes possible to exchange perspective between the self and the other person, however, has been found in recent neuroscience. It is the mirror neuron system.

As Iacoboni (2008) says about this mirror neuron system, “when we see someone else suffering or in pain, mirror neurons help us to read her or his facial expression and actually make us feel the suffering or the pain of the other person. These moments, I will agree, are the foundation of empathy and possibly of morality, a morality that is deeply rooted in our biology” (pp. 4-5). Thus, mirror neurons may account for the relationship between individual bodies as the foundation of empathy. While we cannot get to mirror neurons themselves and take account of them, they could be considered to be one of the elements in our bedrock. That is, the system could be considered what the other is for ourselves. But it might be insufficient to say that mirror neurons play the role of ‘internal communication’ because of the following reasons.

In the case of empathy, when we feel any suffering when seeing another person embarrassed, the perception of the other person’s suffering and the observer’s suffering are identical. But, even in the mirror neuron system, our neuron system is divided into a system within the observer’s brain and another system with the other person’s. Nevertheless, the other’s suffering and our suffering are as a unit, so to speak, in our internal experience of the conscious-
ness of empathy. If there were qualia of empathy, it might be this sense of unity. But the explanation of this by relying on the composition of the body as a neuronal system cannot approach these qualia (Sato, 2011: pp. 20-21), because mirror neurons cannot provide cognition of qualia but causes only emotional reaction to the other’s state.

Now, to understand an empathetic event, let us look at the concept of ‘pure experience’ by Nishida. This concept, which is the same as direct experience, is expressed as follows.

When one directly experiences one’s own state of consciousness, there is not yet a subject or an object, and knowing and its object is completely unified. This is the most refined type of experience (Nishida, 1990: pp. 3-4).

A key to considering empathy would be in this undifferentiated aspect of subject and object. About the confluence of the subjective with the objective, Nishida says what follows.

To me, ..., they (knowledge and love) are fundamentally the same. This activity is the union of subject and object; it is the activity in which the self unites with things. ... We can know the true nature of something only when we thoroughly eliminate our own delusions and conjectures—that is, idiosyncratic subjective factors—and thereby unite with the true nature; in other words, this is possible only when we unite with pure objectivity (Nishida, 1990: p. 173).

According to Hayashi (2011), ‘uniting with things’ indicates the state of the most refined pure experience (pure consciousness) which the paradoxical opposition/conflict between subject and object having been resolved as cleanly as possible; in ‘knowledge is love, love is knowledge’, i.e. unity of knowledge, passion and will, we show the state of pure experience (pure consciousness) in the pure object as the union of the subjective and the objective beyond the level of simple subject-object dualism (p. 33).

The union of the subjective and objective, in turn, the union of ‘I’ and ‘thou’, should be found in the state of pure experience. And it is the intuition above mentioned, more properly ‘intellectual intuition’, that brings such unity in pure experience.

Nishida (1990) calls this ‘unifying reality’, for example, he points out that “when inspiration arises in a painter and the brush moves spontaneously, a unifying reality is operating behind this complex activity” (p. 32). He considers this situation not only as a fine artistic performance, but also as all of our disciplined behavior, “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” (p. 32). We may find “simply one world, one scene” (p. 32) in competitive sports.

6. Empathy in Competitive Sports

The task here is to consider whether the phenomenon of empathy in competitive sports is to be interpreted as pure experience.

In the case of martial arts (e.g. Judo), the Judoka sometimes experiences a moment when he/she can flip down his/her opponent without all the might in his/her body. At that moment, he/she becomes unconscious and doesn’t have the awareness of flipping the opponent, nor the opponent has the awareness of having been flipped. What it seems that happens is that both bodies automatically move together. As they become nothing, their experiences are something they cannot express with words at that moment. But after having flipped the opponent decisively, they may try to articulate it or remember it. (In Japanese what takes place at the very moment of execution is called “Taiken (living experience)”, and what is afterwards reflected upon is called “Keiken (experience)”.)

In individual athletics, e.g. marathon, the runner often feels the other runner’s psychological condition or whether he/she has enough ability to keep his/her pace as if it were one’s own. It might be more evident when being undergoing hard conditions such that the self cannot discriminate between his/her physical and mental state and the other’s.

We can see the cases as empathetic events. Athletes can more accurately make sense of the opposite’s physical and mental condition than spectators can. Participating in a competition as an athlete or watching it as a spectator brings us the key difference in the issue of empathy in sport. The difference in the amount of information would be brought about not only by the sense of vision, but also the sense of touch, hearing and the other senses.

Accordingly, can we consider as ‘pure experience’
in Nishida’s sense the experience of a moment in which a judoka flips an opponent successfully or when a runner feels other runners’ physical condition in marathon races? Let’s look into it more closely. As to the issue of ‘I and thou’ and ‘pure experience’ in Nishida’s work, ‘I’ and ‘thou’ confront each other without any intermediary as an independent existence, while it is as if ‘pure experience’ included those distinctions. How can this circumstance make sense when it seems to be a contradiction? Unfortunately I have not progressed to the stage where I can figure out the answer to this issue, so I shall make a hypothesis based on how Nishida develops his discussion. First, he mentioned the concept of ‘pure experience’ in his first published work ‘An Inquiry into the Good (1911)’, and started with this concept at Chapter 1 in Part I. According to the commentary by Ueda (1987), Nishida shows the emergence of an undifferentiated aspect of subject and object in front of us as a primitive ‘pure experience’, and recognizes the bedrock of true actually being there, and simultaneously our fundamental self. This self-development from the level of undifferentiated aspect of subject and object to the distinctive level between both agents is experienced as a systematic development process of actual being (i.e. self generating and self-development of ‘pure experience’), and this process is the true activity of self (p. 362). This is like embryonic fission and has a similarity to the self-generation of life. The discussion on ‘I and Thou’ first appeared in 1932, if we see it as a result of self-generation and self-development of ‘pure experience’, we could think of both agents as established or individualized ‘I’ or ‘self’. Accordingly, this relationship between ‘I and thou’ is not between already individualized I and thou but between them after a stage of pre-segmentation.

So we may be able to assume a process in athletics. Athletes in a competition begin to compete as opponents solely, but through that unifying experience, I think, they will change and confront each other as established ‘I’ and ‘thou’ again, as Nishida mentioned, and create a mutual relationship with each other. In other words, depending on the level of relationship between athletes, there is a possibility that they shift to others one another with an absolute gap. Hence, in this situation the athletes do not see the opponents as someone who cannot be comprehended absolutely, but rather they relate to them with a certain conviction that they have understood the opponents’ feelings on some level.

This conviction may correspond to what Nishida calls ‘representation’. For example, Nishida (1987) says as follows;

I said that ‘I’ and ‘thou’ belong to the material world together by virtue of having a body. The content of ‘I’’s consciousness reaches ‘thou’ as a wave motion from ‘I’’s voice to ‘thou’’s ears, but what reaches into ‘thou’ must be not just a wave motion but a representation of the content of ‘I’’s consciousness, i.e. language (p. 297).

Though Nishida replaces air vibration by language, it could be possible to interpret the words as symbols extensively. Symbol is understood as it includes relationship between a semantic content and its sign. For example, if we take an opponent’s breathing, pressure, or power as a symbol of his/her physical or mental condition, more than words these will eloquently tell a lot about his/her circumstance. Here, physical or mental condition is that content and breathing is corresponding to sign. Breathing functions as a symbol of sharing or recognizing the connection between breathing and physical/mental condition in a human relation or a certain group. And athletes (believe they) know, comprehend, or understand each other through these symbols. It can be shared only among the athletes who attend an athletics, but it cannot be shared with a person who is in the different position, like as a spectator.

### 7. Concluding remark

What is the bedrock of ‘I’ and ‘thou’ when athletes make connect with each other through symbols which are not just language? The bedrock includes negation of ‘I’ and ‘thou’, and is an absolute otherness. The term symbol here is considered as the negation of ‘I’ and ‘thou’ since the symbol is not ‘I’ nor ‘thou’ itself whether it comes from ‘I’ or ‘thou’. However, the opponent can comprehend or understand that symbol which is other than him/her. Or rather we had better say that if we comprehend or understand the opponent, it will function as symbol. This emerges between athletes, not with spectators. It is from the mutual comprehension through symbols in a level of pure experience that empathy between opposing athletes emerges.
Nishida (1987) says that what is considered as the environment around us is not just the material world but also must be the world of representation, and what is considered as the material is not just the material but has to have the significance of social and historical reality (p. 297). Then, the human body is also to be considered as having social and historical aspect, and empathy has the potential to be affected by social or historical reality. This suggests that there is a limit to explaining empathy by the mirror neuron system alone. The experience accumulated in the athlete’s body (which should bear the social and the historical) will influence the quality of empathy in competitive sports.

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