

A Conversation with Nishida: The Fruit

The master stands by the counter in his sparse kitchen, holding a fruit in each hand. He seems to be judging their weight, one with respect to the other, shifting each hand in turn up and then down again. Before I can ask the obvious question, he speaks, not moving, his back remaining towards me.

“As I know you cannot contain your childish curiosity – a trait that I fear I shall never train out of you – I seek to defy a cliché: I am attempting to compare apples and oranges.”

That would explain the fruit, I thought. “That is a very old, and rather unhelpful cliché,” I remark. “While it’s true that each is a distinct fruit, they are quite comparable, depending on the basis of comparison. They each share the quality of weight—that’s one way to compare them. They both have colour; that’s another way. Each can taste sweet or tart, so flavour is, again, a common attribute between them.” I count off on my fingers. “Both can be juiced, only one is typically made into a pie, apples tend to go to jellies, oranges to marmalade, smoothness or roughness of the peel, and the relative thickness of each. There are countless ways

to compare apples and oranges.” I take a deep breath, completing the recitation.

“All true, and yet all irrelevant,” begins Nishida in his cryptic way. “The true comparison is found in observing the transformation of one into the other. What remains and what changes, how great is the apparent difference with how small an alteration in substance—from those come the revelation of the innate similarity between the two.”

“So you are going to wait until the apple changes into an orange – or vice versa – to discover the truth in this lesson?” I shake my head and turn to leave the room. “You’ll be left with a mess of rotten, decomposing fruit long before that happens.”

“Indeed.” Nishida turns to face me. “And then they will both have transformed, one into the other, and we shall have our answer. Yes, you are learning. You are learning, but sometimes, you do not realize the lesson.”

“You’re right about that. How do we understand the nature of the apple, or the orange, and how they compare to one another, by waiting for them to rot into mush?”

“It is not for us to understand their natures; their natures belong to them—“

“To the fruit,” I say flatly.

“Yes. The nature of each fruit belongs to the fruit and to the fruit alone. The fruit believes it is an apple or an orange and so it is. As it decays, the outward appearance and the inward flavour transform so that the fruit can no longer recognize itself as the conception it previously held. But when it meets its counterpart – the other decaying fruit – they each see themselves in the other and a common place of recognition comes into existence.”

“*Basho*. Yes, I got that—well, at least for people. I don’t know that Nishida Kitaro particularly contemplated the fundamental problems of fruit philosophy.” I give the master a rather sardonic look.

“Fruit. People. Trees. Rivers. Rocks. It matters not. What matters is the recognition, and the subsequent transformation through *basho*. A completely new form is possible when there is an intrinsic sameness, a unity of fundamental being, and a willingness to release one’s conception of an old form.”

I think hard on this one—conception – *self*-conception – as it relates to one’s transformation. “Conception—or belief that the old *form* is, in fact, one’s fundamental nature...” My sentence trails off as I realize the difference between image and intrinsic nature. “A person’s identity is not determined by external appearances—”

“Unless...” Nishida interrupts.

“Unless?”

“Unless,” he repeats, matter-of-factly.

“Unless.” I pause, thrown deep into the Nishida’s well of philosophical unattachment. Of course! “Unless he is attached to the external appearance.” I grab the orange from my teacher’s hand and tear into its peel. “Strip away the external aspects to which the essence is attached, and you can begin to transform how the internal regards itself.”

“Precisely.” Nishida reaches for a knife and begins to slice the apple into a bowl. He takes the peeled orange and breaks it into segments, placing them in the bowl as well. “And when the external appearances and identity attachments are completely removed, and the orange and apple are placed in new relationship,

the entire entity changes. Very simple, yet not always so obvious.”

I take two forks from the drawer, and hand one to Nishida.

“I still say we can best compare them on the basis of flavour.”

“Yes, and you need your strength to complete your work.

Which reminds me, how *is* that thesis of yours coming along?”

“By now? Almost done.”