

THE IMPORTANCE OF SELF-KNOWLEDGE IN PHILOSOPHY OF MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY AND KITARŌ NISHIDA

Andrius Tamoševičius¹

Abstract

The question of self-knowledge is not new; many great thinkers used to raise that question, but none of them took it in that way as it has to be taken. Briefly, none of them looked at self-knowledge as at the important kind of knowledge. However, they gave prominence to otherworldly laws, e. g. Plato conceived the nature of things as depending upon their participation in the ideas; Cartesian philosophy presupposes the legitimacy of mind-body dualism and the principle of «clear» and «distinct» ideas; Kant, who had clarified the notion that any cognition begins within experience, however he goes beyond it and turns his look into the synthetic unity of things. Philosophical projects of M. Merleau-Ponty and K. Nishida let us speak first of all about the subject and show that self-knowledge is more fundamental than the objective conceptual cognition. To ground this we have to get ourselves back into the field of experience and find the pre-reflexive plane yet without subject/object dichotomy. This lets justify the importance of self-knowledge as the primal source of all concepts, propositions and reason.

Keywords: Merleau-Ponty, Nishida, flesh, chiasma, basho, consciousness, experience.

The importance of self-knowledge in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's and Nishida Kitarō's philosophy

Even if, as far as we know it, philosophical issue of self-knowledge is not new, unfortunately, this problem has never been treated as an important one. If we look into historical pages of the Western thought we will find the whole tradition as an effort to explain the world in terms of transcendent reality, whether this reality is understood to be a metaphysical or ideal being, or some physical set of events or particles. Such a way to think means to make a rationalistic step beyond the sensible world and find absolute truth in the virtual plane of reason. Many great thinkers from Plato till Kant did so and so does the modern science. It does not matter whether it is the «Ideas», «Synthetic unity of things» or the theory of «Big bang». All this, I sincerely believe, is nothing more

¹ Andrius Tamoševičius – a second grade PhD student (philosophy) at Lithuanian Culture Research Institute.

than speculations which, paradoxically, for thousands of years were considered to be the first kind of knowledge.

This paper leads to the opposite direction. I am going to argue that self-knowledge or knowledge of the second kind is more fundamental than the objective conceptual cognition of the world. The path we are going to take lies in the philosophical projects of M. Merleau-Ponty and K. Nishida. The works of these authors are crucial in this essay for the very simple reason – these works, first and foremost, speak about the subject and open a quite new horizon for a critical interpretation of our classical epistemology. Merleau-Ponty and Nishida instead of asking: *how can the object be known?* point to another question: *how does the knower become the knower?*

To answer this we have to follow the lines of Merleau-Ponty's and Nishida's texts and get ourselves back into the field of the direct experience where there is a possibility to approach the pre-reflexive world yet without subject/object dichotomy, but as an active communion with the world where the body plays the first role as a freely moved totality of sense organs. That would allow us to understand the self as being embedded in and supported by the field of direct experience which always goes ahead language and the rational dualistic logic. Such a notion lets justify the importance of self-knowledge as the primal source of all concepts, propositions and reason.

In order to do so, we definitely need to clarify couple of things. First of all, what has to be done is to reveal few main titles of Merleau-Ponty's philosophical conception – *chiasma* and *flesh*. After this we have to stop at Nishida's concept of *basho* and make a short analysis of it. All in all, we are going to compare those two positions and ground the importance of self-knowledge in the context of the tradition of Zen.

The meaning of *Chiasma* and *Flesh* in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's philosophy

This section I would like to begin with the reference to Merleau-Ponty's essay *Everywhere and Nowhere* in *Signs*:

«It is a matter in going to search the truth or salvation in what falls short of science or philosophical awareness, or of dragging chunks of mythology as such into our philosophy, but of acquiring – in the presence of these variants of humanity that we are so far from – a sense the theoretical and practical problems our institutions are faced with, and of rediscovering the existential field those problems were born and that their long success has led us to forget»².

What kind of existential field do we have to rediscover? What do we have to remember? Those are the questions we are going to answer in order to understand the concepts of *chiasma* and *flesh*. I'll start with

² Merleau-Ponty M. *Everywhere and Nowhere*. In: *Signs*. Transl. R. McCleary, Northwestern University press, 1964, 139.

short review of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy to exclude any misapprehensions here.

Reading Merleau-Ponty's opus magnum *Phenomenology of Perception* (*Phénoménologie de la perception*, 1945) and other researches we can easily notice a critical position against rational thinking, especially against that which was represented by Hegel and his developed conceptual ideology to build up the «Science of the Experience of Consciousness» which would be able «to liberate itself from this phenomenality and it can only do that by turning against it»³. The science of true knowledge, what means nothing else but the objective knowledge, must liberate itself from variability of the sensible world and, according to Hegel, «advance itself to definite conceptions of hidden meanings of nature»⁴. The closer look at Merleau-Ponty's analysis of the phenomenon of perception tells us something different. It says that sensual perception is characterized by a clear and coherent location of things, by harmonious co-existence between them which makes a particular thing to assume its normality, its form and shape, its inherent relation with other things. We are not able to perceive a formless thing, something that might be called «a pure sensation», because such a perception would offer nothing to be given to any perception. A really homogeneous area opens nothing to be perceived, because «the pure impression is, therefore, not only undiscoverable, but also imperceptible and so inconceivable as an instant of perception»,⁵ – says Merleau-Ponty.

The thing opening itself in the field of perceptual experience cannot be reduced or defined as a particular invariant with its own static qualities which has never been observed by the naked eye, because it exists only in the realms of «pure sensation», except, of course, those cases when the microscope or the method of introspection is invoked. But this exclusive methodology to approach the world does not reveal the clearness which could be expected. Conversely, it confuses even more and involves into a total senselessness; after all, it does not bring us any closer to the qualitative and meaningful world – the uniqueness and authenticity of living moments of *here* and *now*. The real colors of the world vanish against the background of infinite sets of numbers: billions of light years to the past, billions of stars in the sky above, billions of galaxies in the universe – these are the obscene numbers among which, according to somebody, *raison d'être* should someday be found.

I will state that Merleau-Ponty did not believe this story. He was the thinker who sought to see the world through his own eyes, but not through the glasses of objective theories. We are living bodies and always conscious bodies. To be conscious means to stay in the incessant intentional relation with the world. So now we have to turn our analysis

³ Hegel G.W.F. *The Phenomenology of Mind*, Dover Philosophical Classics, 2003, 46.

⁴ Hegel G.W.F. *The Philosophy of History*, New York: Dover Publication Inc. 1956, 238.

⁵ Merleau-Ponty M. *Phenomenology of Perception*, Transl. C. Smith, London/ New York: Routledge, 1962, 4.

in search for consciousness, because, as soon it is shown, conscious and intentional being comes before any other being whatever it could be. It comes before the reason that means before anything what has a name. Merleau-Ponty finds that speaking of consciousness we can not find it either in the exterior processes or in the interior stuff of the mind. The very appearance of the world must be seen not through the standpoint of dualistic logic, but through the moment of the birth of the norm in the direct experience. Consciousness according to Merleau-Ponty «is the identity of the external and the internal and not the projection of the internal in the external; it is not the outcome of some circulation of mental states in themselves, neither is it an idea»⁶.

We should realize, that in the flow of perception the world is not given to us as an orbicular universality; when we see colors or hear sounds it is impossible to determine the limits of senses; we are able just to identify the brightness or dimness of green as far as this green is in addition with other colors, shades, illumination and the rest of conditions. Also we can not ignore the background which highlights a percept. All these qualities compose the field of phenomena where every phenomenon changes one over the other and allow to say that our perception is based not on the copying world text, but more than that – constituting it through those changes of phenomena.

But how can this constitution possibly be done if the consciousness was found in nowhere? Merleau-Ponty claims that the theory of body is already the theory of perception, because «our own body is in the world as the heart is in the organism: it keeps the visible spectacle constantly alive, it breathes life into it and sustains it inwardly, and with it forms a system»⁷. It must be said, that the philosopher understands the body as the very heart of human existence and treats it more like the creation of art than the mechanistic apparatus. Body is the locus of everything that exists for us, because the only possible way of our existence is caused by our own body. We see the things from the position of our body, we have the directions due to the body, and let it be hypothesis *ad hoc* – our verbal language belongs to the body as well. To be precise – the embryo of verbal language lies in the bodily language expressed by gesture.

Above all, body is that unsaved fortress of existence ceaselessly being assaulted by the whole world regardless to universal laws or absolute truths. The world comes into body with all its intensity which is the primal source of experience, the authentic flow of perception, flowing, first of all, through the body and only later on is being synthesized by reason. Precisely the body is the foundation and the limit of human epistemological aspirations.

The body knows itself how to move and what to do, because this body is kinaesthetic body, self moving total sum of sense organs, acting in the world, which opens up the visual, tactile and other sensory horizons. The kinaesthetic conception of body belongs to Husserl who stated that «all that is thingly-real in the surrounding world of the ego has its

⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 70.

⁷ Ibid., 233.

relation to the body»⁸. This notion was expanded by Merleau-Ponty who found that body acts by the principle of double sensations. The principle of double sensations unlocks the body that sees and can be seen, that touches and can be touched at the same time. The body operates independently from the fact that we have a language of scientific concepts such as the «central nervous system» and various «cortical areas» of the brain, which, according to the masters of this language, should determine the bodily functioning. But the body, just like the consciousness does not allow itself to be defined and reduced into activity of the brains or something else. It keeps itself away from the brackets of the mechanistic interpretations, based of interacting material particles. Body interacts, but the interaction is between the body and the living world, not between the material particles of pure sensation. The body acts in the field of phenomena, but does not exceed the logic of this field and does not model it even though it might seem like this. It is an integral part of the overall system and the only condition of our existence. The human body does not live in the world as a separate part from it but rather the world is itself corporeal and extends the body, when self's double-sensational body opens itself as a mirror of the world, through which I can see not only the exterior things in the mode of being-in-itself, but also other bodies, other beings-for-itself, which makes my own body visible for me, because «experience that keeps my world, create opportunities to make me realize right next to me, opening up my world interiority which can also be seen in another gesture resembling myself»⁹. This means not to see in the outside as the others see the contour of the body, but especially «to be seen by the outside, to exist within, to emigrate into it, to be seduced, captivated, alienated by the phantom, so that the seer and the visible reciprocate one another and we no longer know which sees and which is seen. It is this visibility, this generality of the sensible in itself, this anonymity innate to myself that is called *flesh*. It is not a fact or a sum of facts. It is the primal scene of human existing which has no name in any kind of philosophy»¹⁰. Merleau-Ponty called it *flesh*.

Conceiving the body as the one with double sensations lets us open another important term – *Chiasma*. We had found the body as a *flesh* after which there is nothing we can say more. *Chiasma* as well as the *flesh* is the line or the boundary which marks the difference between the world of human culture and the world of wild being. That what was just called *Chiasma* or the boundary of wild being can be expressed in these few words: *Chiasma* is the invisible condition for visible which is possible only through the body as a *flesh*. Such a condition is the fundamental condition for conscious being. Again try to listen to how Merleau-Ponty describes consciousness: it is the identity of the internal

⁸ Husserl E. *Ideas, Second Book*, The Hague, Boston, Lancaster: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1983, 61.

⁹ Merleau-Ponty M. *The Prose of the World*, Transl. J. O'Neill, Evanston: North Western University press, 1973, 137.

¹⁰ Merleau-Ponty M. *The Visible and the Invisible*, Transl. A. Lingis, Evcinston: Northwestern university press, 1968, 131.

and the external, it is the moment of the birth of norm from the chaotic movement. The moment which makes the percept to come into perception is crucial, because it enforces not only perception to be possible, but also makes the reason to speak, when we stand face to face with the silence of wild being, covered by the boundary of *Chiasma*.

This lets us justify the importance of self-knowledge as of the really true knowledge which comes from and is in incessant relation with our body – the actual condition of our existence, witnessing the humans fate which is the fate «of a being who is born, that is, once and for all has been given to himself as something to be understood»¹¹. Here we avoid the interference of dualistic logic which for many years had been the most important thing for many great minds of the West. In active communion with the world, as I already told this, body belongs only to the world, is the part of it, no matter which world we have in mind – natural world or the world of culture. Both of them come in perception by the same natural conditions, firstly, through the body or embodied subject and only then reason finishes the job which always, unfortunately, means only insufficiency of clearness.

So these are the points we have to remember. These are the points by which we can rediscover the existential field and all cultural problems Merleau-Ponty had in mind. Something called *flesh* and *chiasma*, something inherent to one another, is the beginning of our conscious existence that means the beginning of the individual existence in general.

Kitarō Nishida and the Concept of *Basho*

Eventually the expansion of other post-metaphysical philosophical traditions, like phenomenology or pragmatism, began to unfold the problems of consciousness as well as of the self in a much wider sense. Mature Husserl calls to break ourselves free from the prejudices of the world and maintains that phenomenology finally has correctly understood the transcendental ego as communicating subjectivity and delineated its true autonomy. The revolutionary ideas of Husserl had become well known in Japan at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th. Nishida realized that objective knowledge of what is known is more like a creative work as well as other aspects of human activity. The philosopher from Japan often argues that knowledge of the second kind or as we call self-knowledge is more fundamental than that of the first. Nishida writes:

«The term “to know” does not always signify the same act. I believe that we have to distinguish at least two fundamentally different kinds of knowledge. One is knowledge of object cognition while the other is knowledge of self-awareness»¹².

¹¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, op. cit., 404.

¹² Takushi O. On Nishida's Rationality Thesis. In: *Philosophy East and West. A Quarterly of Comparative Philosophy*. Vol. 62, № 2. University of Hawaii Press, 2012, 198.

It is important to note that self-awareness is the basic epistemological paradigm for his logic of the universal and of that what Nishida calls *basho*, the place or the field.

Nishida, as well as Merleau-Ponty, critically looked into the aspirations of Plato, Descartes or Kant to convey metaphysical shape of a human being. The Japanese philosopher disagreed with the notion that the human and the world are two different segments which are connected by the power of reason of «true» principles, however they can be named: «Ideas», «Principles of clearness and distinctness» or «The things in themselves». Nishida sought to show that such a notion is too facile and is not reflected enough, because it let us to speak about concepts through the same concepts, what flings us into a vicious circle. He was not satisfied with this and tried to inquire something, what is before the word or the way, how we engage ourselves with language. In other words, Nishida was inclined to open the third dimension of consciousness. For example, if I state something, I must be conscious of that statement. But to be conscious of the statement I already did, means to be conscious of the absolute opposite statement: if I say I am stupid I must be aware of the fact, that I am reasonable as well, because without this, the first statement would have no significance. This seems to be pretty clear. But what is important is the third dimension of consciousness which makes both of the statements to be possible. Nishida realized, that the moment I state my consciousness of something, I am already conscious of my consciousness and I am already in the field of direct experience and the flow of perception. So the question is: How does the consciousness maintain the significance of consciousness?¹³

It is needless to say that Nishida had a strong influence of the tradition of Zen. The masters of Zen remind us, that «in the very nature of Zen it evades all definition and explanation; that is to say, Zen cannot be converted into ideas, it can never be described in logical terms»¹⁴. Perception in reality never comes too close to the identity of the percept that we would not need any extension of perception any more. Perception, as a matter of fact, is the gradual process which starts from the colour of the percept, when goes through its tactical qualities, smell, taste and etc. The percept unfolds itself in its harmony with other percepts, in the co-existence between the particles which make it visible in a common set with the whole or, better to say, with the universal, which Nishida calls *basho*, the place or the field, which opens the logic of nothingness, but keeps «the particle in the internal connection with universal»¹⁵.

An important clue to Nishida's strategy to explain *basho* is provided by Noda Matoa:

¹³ Nishida K. The Unsolved Issue of Consciousness. In: *Philosophy East and West*. op. cit., 52.

¹⁴ Suzuki D.T. *Essays in Zen-Buddhism*, New York, 1961, 267.

¹⁵ Nishida, op. cit., 54.

«Nishida, while seeking the principle of the individuation in the universal, conceives the latter as a sort of material field wherein forms emerge»¹⁶.

Nishida moves toward *basho* by seeking to show the way where two different statements comes to the same thing or, in other words, he wants to avoid the subject/object dichotomy. *Basho* seems to be the place or the field as an absolute nothingness or emptiness. This notion can be better understood by short analysis of Nāgārjuna's concept of «Middle way».

«Middle way» opens up an absolute emptiness «which empties even emptiness, true emptiness (absolute nothingness) is absolute reality which makes all phenomena, all existents, *truly be*»¹⁷. *Nāgārjuna independently from the metaphysical tradition of the West and almost couple of thousands of years earlier than Husserl did an original phenomenological revolution and stated that beyond the phenomena no other reality can be detected. This means that beyond the phenomena nothing exists unless the absolute nothingness or emptiness. Hence we may say that such a notion presupposes that the starting point of perceiving the world is an actual intuition represented not by the traditional Substantia, but by Relatio.* The thing is not simply deduced by logical thing, but assumes its value through the relation which can be expressed like this: «the subject is the subject because it is related to object. The object is the object because it is related with subject»¹⁸. It tells us, that relation between subject and object goes further and insist that we should attain to a stage at which we could witness the originally none-articulated field articulating itself freely, of its own accord, and, of course, not through the dichotomizing activity of our intellect, into either the subject or the object. It is important to note that such a self's articulation opens the whole of the field where every single detail is involved and where every, not only this or that particular sphere of that, is important and means something.

Nishida claims, that existence is determined by being located in a *basho*. He gives a little of explanation of this:

«When the universal becomes a basho in which all being is located, it becomes consciousness ... behind consciousness nothing at all can be thought»¹⁹.

For Nishida true consciousness is close to what Nāgārjuna meant by absolute nothingness: it cannot be thought, it cannot be detected, it cannot be objectified. *Basho*, – says Nishida, «is the concrete standpoint of our existential emplacement, which is prior to bifurcation between subject-object, becomes explicated in terms of our embodied emplace-

¹⁶ Wargo R.J.J. *The Logic of Nothingness. A Study of Nishida Kitarō*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii's Press, 2005, 93.

¹⁷ Masao A. *Zen and Western Thought*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989, 94.

¹⁸ Toshihiko I. *Toward a Philosophy of Zen Buddhism*, Tehran: Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy, 1977, 45.

¹⁹ Wargo, op. cit., 117.

ment of the world of dialectical interactivity»²⁰. This dialectical interactivity differently to Hegel's dialectical scheme, does not deal with logic, but rather with an acting intuition based on bodily existence:

«We see the world of forms to the extent that our body is formed. Therefore, we can maintain that, without the body, where would be no self. It holds true for animals too. Therefore, the body is of the Logos character»²¹.

True intuition is not, as it is usually understood, simply one's losing oneself or things and the self becoming one. It means that the self becomes creative, that our living body becomes what it sees as well as what it does. The world becomes the self's body. This moment, I believe, is the moment revealing *basho* when the body accommodates itself or locates itself in the field of experience, wherein consciousness already exists and always stays uncatchable for our reason and for the concepts made by it. *Basho* is possible only through bodily existence which comes before the reason and maintains the significance of consciousness, what means, that living body yet without dualistic impurities is the medium of consciousness as well as that of perception.

Instead of conclusion

Nishida applied his notions of «acting intuition» and *basho* so as to grasp the essential forms of relationship between the individual and cultural world. He understood that cultural world must be understood as some kind of creative activity or that what Merleau-Ponty considered being the arising problems on the existential field. Our objective cognition is a construct which can be reconstructed any time. Those two authors realized our existence as a permanent exchange between the past and the present, matter and spirit, silence and speech, the world and us. Nishida recognized the essence of intuition in the anticipatory comprehension of the whole that was alleged to obtain in and through the expressive interpretation between the individual and the cultural world as the grounding *basho* for his existence. And it was in this sense that both philosophers upheld the creative, bodily activity as the paragon of such dialectical interpretations between the immanent and the transcendent. In this context we can draw a quite clear parallel of Merleau-Ponty's notion of *flesh* which is in a very close distance to Nishida's acting intuition and Nishida's *basho* also in very close distance to Merleau-Ponty's *chiasma*. There is no doubt that analysis of M. Merleau-Ponty and K. Nishida opens up the possibility to ground the importance of subject, which means of self-knowledge, in the presence of unchangeable condition for a human being – the prereflective plane as a foundation for all objective constructs.

²⁰ Nishida, op. cit., 49.

²¹ See *The Complete Collection of Works by Kitaro Nishida*, vol. 18, Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1953–55, 328.