



WCP 2008 Proceedings
Vol. 29 Philosophy in Asia and the Pacific: Contemporary Issues

Nishida Kitaro's First Notion of Beauty¹

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ABSTRACT Although we cannot find any Aesthetics system in the works of NISHIDA Kitarō (1870-1945), the most significant and influential Japanese philosopher of the twentieth-century, one of his central themes is the role of art and aesthetics in relation with morality and religion. His aesthetics approaches are magnificent examples of his aim to overcome the innate dualism that sustains modern epistemology and a door, apparently hidden, to a better understanding of all his speculative scheme of philosophy. This paper attempts to throw light to the importance of the first aesthetic approximation developed by Nishida eleven years before the publication of *Zen no Kenkyū* [善 の 究] (*An Inquiry into the Good*)

¹ This paper has been prepared with the support of the Departament d'Universitats, Recerca i Societat de la Informació de la Generalitat de Catalunya (AGAUR) and Fons Social Europeu. Special thanks go to The Japan Foundation and the International Research Center for Japanese Studies (Nichibunken) in Kyoto for their support and help in my whole research, to Professor SUZUKI Sadami at Nichibunken and Professor Antonio ALEGRE GORRI at Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Barcelona.

(1911) and twenty-three years before the publication of the more accurate system of aesthetics that we read in *Geijutsu to dōtoku* [芸術と道?] (*Art and Morality*) (1923). We will analyze the small essay entitled "Bi no Setsumei" [美の明?] ("An explanation of Beauty") (1900) and Nishida's first definition of beauty as *muga* [無我] (self-effacement or ecstasy).

The importance of this essay resides not only in the fact that in it we find Nishida's initial formulations about beauty and aesthetics. It represents the lost chain between the early years of his philosophical career before the publication of his first major work, *Zen no Kenkyū* (1911) and fills the blank space of other documents belonging to the philosopher early years. The first notice that we have about this document appears in the essay of Valdo H. VIGLIELMO "Nishida Kitarō: the Early Years"². Viglielmo pictures in it the physiognomy of the young Nishida and refers directly to the existence of "Bi no Setsumei" providing a scheme of its structure. The second reference can be found in the critical study that precedes the English translation of Nishida's essay done by Steve ODIN in 1987³. The third, done by YUSA Michiko in her extraordinary biography about the Japanese philosopher, explains the contrast between the philosophically eventful year that it was 1900 (for example, the year of Friedrich NIETZSCHE's death) and the uneventful that it was for Nishida. Uneventful because he was immersed in his school teaching duties and family responsibilities with no time to

² VIGLIELMO, Valdo H., "Nishida Kitarō: The Early Years", in SHIVELY, Donald H., ed., *Tradition and Modernization in Japanese culture*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1971, pp. 507-562.

³ ODIN, Steve, "An explanation of Beauty. Nishida Kitarō's Bi no Setsumei", *Monumenta Nipponica*, Vol. 42, no. 2 (summer, 1987), pp. 211-214.

write more philosophical documents than the one object of our analysis and a biographical sketch about Baruch SPINOZA⁴.

Viglielmo and Odin coincide in the importance of *Bi no Setsumei* as a key document for relocate the young Nishida. Our intention here is focus our attention in Nishida's first definition of beauty, its problems and also its originality.

To reply a question like "What is beauty?" means to fight against answers that are not completely definitive or univocal. Nishida is aware about the difficulties that questions like this throw to the thinker. For that reason, prior to determine his own position, the author delimits different perspectives to construct his own answer.

He begins the inquiry interpreting the reply that departs from the emotional perspective. From this point of view, beauty is a kind of pleasure. Nishida mentions Edmund BURKE (1729-1797) and includes him as the paradigm of the position taken by the British psychologists. Nishida considers that this current of thinking affirms that beauty gives a sense of pleasure; in fact, sustains that the so called British school considers identical beauty and selfish pleasure⁵. It is easy to see that Nishida doesn't want to explain in detail Burke's aesthetics position. But mentioning Burke as an example for a position that bases its theory of aesthetics in the synonymy between beauty and pleasure, his interpretation appears as incomplete and expressly partial.

In his theory of aesthetics⁶, Burke fought against the classic and rationalist aesthetics schemes and defended the reverse position in comparison with the one that can be found on the illustrated period.

⁴ YUSA, Michiko, *Zen & Philosophy. An Intellectual Biography of Nishida Kitarō*; Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press, 2002, p. 62.

⁵ NISHIDA, "Bi no Setsumei", in ODIN, "An explanation of Beauty. Nishida Kitarō's Bi no Setsumei", p. 215.

⁶ See BURKE, Edmund, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*; Edited with an Introduction and Notes by Adam Phillips, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998.

That is, he defended the non-rational and non-willful character of the perception of beauty. For Burke, the perception of beauty consists more adequately in being a type of quality directly experienced by our senses than something similar to perceive proportion or harmony. In order to save the always researched objectivity, Burke considers that the perception of something beautiful is a kind of common sense quality. More than make equal beauty and pleasure, Burke would defend a synonymy between beauty and a social common sense where subjects share parallel instincts and reactions in front of artistic manifestations. Be it as it may, Burke and the so-called British psychologists are the medium that Nishida uses for maintain that although beauty is a kind of pleasure, to define beauty only in these terms is not the adequate way and not the complete one. Not all pleasures, as he says, give us aesthetic pleasure. If it is true that aesthetic perception give us pleasure, the contrary direction, that pleasures relates always to something beautiful, is not adequate at all. So, the point of view that departs from the emotional aspect cannot be maintained or not in its totality.

In fact, we can accept that beauty is a kind of pleasure, but we have to try to define its limits. We cannot define, as we have seen, beauty only as pleasure but we cannot deny that is a pleasure too. For that reason, Nishida looks for what makes beauty a "particular" pleasure.

For that sake, he quotes the book of Henry Rutgers MARSHALL's (1852-1927) *Pain, pleasure, and aesthetics: an essay concerning the psychology of pain and pleasure, with special reference to aesthetics* (1894)⁷. The reference of Marshall's essay is not only important because Nishida uses it to try to delimitate the kind of pleasure that beauty is,

⁷ MARSHALL, Henry Rutgers, *Pain, pleasure, and aesthetics: an essay concerning the psychology of pain and pleasure, with special reference to aesthetics*; London, MacMillan, 1894. There is an available digitalized copy of this book thanks to the University of Toronto at Canadian Libraries in the following internet address: URL: <http://www.archive.org/details/painopleasureanda00marsuoft>

but also because there is a link between Marshall's theory and, again, psychologist thesis. We see the influence of the psychologist current only taking into account the title of Marshall's work and its reference to a "psychology of pain and pleasure". This psychological standpoint is clearer when we see how Marshall⁸ mentions that the father of modern psychology and representative figure of pragmatism, William JAMES (1842-1910), omits to analyze the existent unity between aesthetics, pain and pleasure in his decisive book *The Principles of Psychology* (1890)⁹.

Marshall explains in the "Preface" that his intention is to develop the existent relation between aesthetics and hedonics¹⁰. His central thesis appears in the Chapter III entitled "The Field of Aesthetics"¹¹. Accepting that the treatment of aesthetics is a branch of hedonics (or a science of pleasure), he thinks that what remains untouched is the necessary discrimination between pleasures in general and aesthetic pleasures. For that sake Marshall affirms that aesthetic pleasures are "relatively permanent in revival"¹² while other pleasures in general are not perdurable in time and memory.

Nishida cites the categories established by Marshall to differentiate between pleasures. As per Marshall's classification, aesthetic pleasure remits to *stable pleasure* while other pleasures in general are *non-stable pleasures*. It is important to notice that even though Nishida accepts Marshall's corrective thesis and agrees in some extent with this hypothesis that differentiates between aesthetic pleasure and pleasures of other kind, the Japanese philosopher still considers that Burke's and

⁸ MARSHALL, *Pain, pleasure, and aesthetics*; Preface, p. vi.

⁹ We have to remember that Nishida borrow his notion "pure experience" (*junsui keiken*) from William James.

¹⁰ MARSHALL, *Pain, pleasure, and aesthetics*; Preface, p. v.

¹¹ MARSHALL, *Pain, pleasure, and aesthetics*; Chapter III, "The Field of Aesthetics", pp. 106-166.

¹² MARSHALL, *Pain, pleasure, and aesthetics*; p. 347.

Marshall's theories departure from the same psychologist or emotional point of view and arrive at the same conclusion that does not fit the complexity of the question. There is another especial characteristic that must determine the essence of beauty.

In his search of the enigma that is behind beauty, Nishida looks for the answer in the German tradition and, of course, remits to Kant. As we all know, Kant defines aesthetic judgments that refer to beauty in terms of "disinterested" attitude. The Kantian definition of the beautiful is as follows:

*Taste is the faculty of judging of an object or a method of representing it by an entirely disinterested satisfaction or dissatisfaction. The object of such satisfaction is called beautiful*¹³.

What Kant calls "disinterested satisfaction or dissatisfaction" is expressed in Nishida's words as "pleasure detached from the ego". In my opinion, the way in which Nishida conceives the disinterested satisfaction in terms of "pleasure detached from the ego" forgets the correct understanding of "disinterest" in Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790).

The notions of satisfaction or dissatisfaction used as categories to determine our faculty for judging an object by means of its representation with "disinterest", refers to the lack of any interest about the existence of the thing or object itself. That is, the disinterested attitude refers to the indifference about the existence of the object on which we apply our taste within the faculty of judgment. Kant is not regarding the detachment on subject's side and is not talking about the disappearance of the subject in the aesthetic judgment.

¹³ KANT, Immanuel, *The Critique of Judgment*; London, MacMillan, 1914, Part I "Critique of the Aesthetical Judgement", First Division "Analytic of the Aesthetical Judgement", First Book "Analytic of the Beautiful", Explanation of the Beautiful Resulting from the First Moment, p. 55.

The intention of Nishida when talks about the sense of beauty as a pleasure detached from the ego and his explanation about this kind of pleasure as a "pleasure of the moment", that is, the moment when "one forgets one's own interest such as advantage and disadvantage, gain and loss"¹⁴ pretends to connect his own notion, *muga*, that we will analyze later, as a synonymy of Kant's "disinterest". In my opinion, it is clear that to express "disinterest" as "forget one's own interest" is far away from the meaning of the Kantian proposition. Kant is not centering the disinterest in the subject attitude when perceives an object as beautiful, is talking, as mentioned before, about the disinterest of the subject about the existence or not of the object that perceives as beautiful (or ugly). IWAKI¹⁵ Ken'ichi says that if we consider that Nishida misunderstood Kant idea, our affirmation is not totally right.

Iwaki considers that we cannot say that Nishida's interpretation of Kant's "disinterest" (*Interesselosigkeit*) as the moment when "one forgets one's own interest such as advantage and disadvantage, gain and loss" is a mistaken option. This author considers that it isn't a misunderstanding precisely because Nishida understands "disinterest" from the perspective of Zen, Confucian and Taoist tradition and in doing so, he translated the German notion "*Interesselosigkeit*" with the word *mukanshin* [無關心], "indifference"¹⁶.

We can accept that Nishida had the intention of unite Kant's notion and his own position about aesthetics. And we can accept as well that the word used for translate "disinterest", that is, "indifference" (*mukanshin*), is not completely adequate and changes in some extent the

¹⁴ NISHIDA, "Bi no Setsumei", in ODIN, "An explanation of Beauty. Nishida Kitarō's Bi no Setsumei", p. 216.

¹⁵ See IWAKI, Ken'ichi, "Nishida Kitarō and Art"; in MARRA, Michael F., *A History of Modern Japanese Aesthetics*; Translated and Edited by Michael F. Marra, Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press, 2001, pp. 259-284.

¹⁶ IWAKI, Ken'ichi, "Nishida Kitarō and Art"; in MARRA, *A History of Modern Japanese Aesthetics*; p. 261.

meaning of the Kantian term. But Iwaki does not mention that Nishida is trying to adequate his own notion and interpretation (effectively strongly influenced by Eastern traditional perspectives) with the Western development. And is it clear that the pieces of this puzzle do not fit well. Being that way, Iwaki saves Nishida's interpretation of Kant's "disinterest" justifying the change of perspective from the different starting point of the intellectual traditions. But the remaining problem about the wrong understanding of Nishida remains. "Indifference" remits to a subjective state, a subjective state of apathy or indifference or, in Nishida own words, to a subjective moment where the I forgets his egotist position in front the sensation that beauty produces. Kant's position is based in the fact that what in any case forgets the subject is not his own self existence, but the existence or not of the object represented (or, better expressed, the inquiry about its existence).

It is now time for introduce and analyze the notion that is the essential element of beauty from Nishida's standpoint. What can be defined as the forgiveness of one's own interest is what the Japanese philosopher calls *muga*. Literally, *muga* means selflessness, self-effacement and even self-renunciation. *Muga* can be considered also as the Japanese translation for the Sanskrit word *anâtman* as no-self and as ecstasy. In both cases, if we consider *muga* as an expression of no-self (forgiveness of the own self) or ecstasy (the state of soul when is plenty with a sentiment of admiration or joy; or "ecstasy" as the suspension of senses activities), the notion *muga* is more similar to the notion sublime than to the notion "disinterest". Also, if we take literally Nishida's explanation, *muga* is even closer to the sense of inspiration as a non-willful movement that makes the artist produce spontaneously, without effort, his artistic creation¹⁷ than to "disinterest".

¹⁷ In fact, Nishida affirms the identity between *muga* as the essential condition of the sense of beauty and "divine inspiration". See NISHIDA,

For Nishida *muga* is the essence or the substantial element of beauty and the best notion-tool to discriminate aesthetic pleasure from pleasures in general. It is important to notice here that Marshall talked about aesthetic pleasure as stable pleasure (permanent in memory) and Nishida is defining *muga*, the substantial element that characterizes beauty, as a "pleasure of the moment"¹⁸. So, again, we can find a reverse direction on Nishida intention to shape the essence of beauty. We say "reverse" because the philosopher does not remit to the quality of the beautiful as being persistent revival in time and memory. His purpose is to talk in terms of ecstasy, pure and direct suspension of self-reflection or self-interest forgiving the own self. The inquiry about the possibility of recall or not the sense of beauty after this "moment" remains unquestioned.

In resume we see that Nishida forces the reformulation of the Kantian sense of beauty as disinterested pleasure and establishes his own notion, *muga*, as the factor that determines the especial characteristic of the beautiful. If we try to reformulate Nishida's first definition of beauty, certainly a kind of synthesis or a juxtaposition of East-West aesthetics concepts, his definition can be re-expressed as follows:

The sense of beauty is the momentary pleasure that arises when the subject forgets its own interest and became pure no-self (*muga*).

In any case, considering the originality and importance of Nishida's early aesthetics position, it is important to retain two important ideas:

1st. Beauty as *muga* throws light to the particularities of Japanese aesthetics and the adventures and misadventures of the introduction of aesthetics as an independent field of knowledge that began with Meiji

"Bi no Setsumeï", in ODIN, "An explanation of Beauty. Nishida Kitarō's Bi no Setsumeï", p. 216.

¹⁸ NISHIDA, "Bi no Setsumeï", in ODIN, "An explanation of Beauty. Nishida Kitarō's Bi no Setsumeï", p. 216.

Era (1868-1912) intellectuals as NISHI Amane (1829-1897). It is another example of the hugest task that all of them did to construct their own aesthetics notions trying to synthesize and juxtapose West and East philosophy concepts heritage.

2nd. Beauty as *muga* can help us to a better understanding of the first important notion in Nishida's philosophy: *pure experience* (*junsui keiken*) [純? ??]. *Muga* and *pure experience* share common traits and finality.

Even though the object of this paper and the limited extension do not permit us to talk in detail about the common ground, I would like to finalize giving the opportunity to the words to express what appears as a seed in the notion *muga* later on rearranged and concretized with *pure experience*:

*When one directly experiences one's own state of consciousness, there is not yet a subject or an object, and knowing and its object are completely unified*¹⁹.

¹⁹ NISHIDA, Kitarō, *An Inquiry into the Good*; translated by Masao Abe and Christopher Ives, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1990, pp. 3-4.