

Aesthetic Self-Creation and the Betweenness of the Visible: Nishida, Watsuji and Merleau-Ponty

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Many philosophers are searching for an ethics that will explain how individual autonomy and social solidarity are mutually dependent. To develop such an account, we need to rearrange modern ideas about self and the place of actual life in nature. Immanuel Kant's idea of the self as free must be preserved, but we must drop his mid-modern claim that personal agency and freedom depend primarily on a dimension of intellect that is removed from visible interactions with others. We must preserve the idea that beliefs about self and others must be anchored, in part, in the evidence of nature provided by our senses; but we abandon the modern practice of defining "nature" exclusively in terms of our scientific understanding of objects and processes, since this leads to the thought that the individual person is biologically or socially conditioned and not self-determining. One way forward is to find a new interpretation for the freedom of the self by using a model of self-creation obtained from the aesthetic life of the working poet or painter. The effort to develop philosophies of self-creation through an analysis of the practices of poetry or painting is evident in Nishida Kitaro's *Art and Morality* (1924) and in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Eye and Mind* (1960). More recently, Nishimura Takuo has called for a philosophy of aesthetic education that would affirm the compatibility of self-education, the aestheticization of the subject and community purpose. Patricia Jensen and David Kolb ask us to change our idea of conversation from one of rational exchange to that of communion, where the intermingling of self with others — or the "mutuality of life with life" — facilitates a primal connection with nature and a sense of being fully alive; they write that our poets are best suited to describe this relation of communion. The task of immediate interest here is to explore and assess the claim that the life of poet and painter provides a model for self-creation that will help us describe how the freedom, unity and uniqueness of the self depend on the place of social interaction.¹

Any investigation of the notion of aesthetic self-creation must take into account the debates that surround Richard Rorty's remarks on the proper direction of postmodern society. Rorty favors a community based on the lifestyle of the creative poet who accepts the contingency of selfhood, not the life of the philosopher who hopes to find some inner foundation essential to each person that would give us a common goal. After rejecting Kant's idea of a rational self unified by some invisible "I" or transcendental ego, Rorty substitutes a different idea of self: an on-going collection of contingent but equally valuable experiences, none of which provides a stable,

¹ Nishida Kitaro, *Art and Morality*, trans. David Dilworth and Valdo H. Viglielmo (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1973); Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Eye and Mind*, ed. Galen A. Johnson, trans. Michael B. Smith (Evanston: Northwestern, 1993); Nishimura Takuo, "The Aesthetic and Education in the Kyoto School: Monomori Kimura's Theory of Expression," in *Concepts of Aesthetic Education: Japanese and European Perspective*, eds. Imai and Charles Wulf (Munster: Waxmann, 2007), p. 74 ; Patricia J. Jensen and David Kolbe, "Conversation as Communion: Spiritual, Feminist, Moral, and Natural Perspectives," in *Conversational Learning. An experiential Approach to Knowledge Creation*, eds. Ann C. Baker, Patricia J. Jensen, and David Kolb (Westport: Quorum Books, 2002), pp. 15-16, 28.

primordial or pre-experiential foundation for the rest. Within this ever-changing flow of experiences that entails the contingency of the self, the “strong poet” creates an original and idiosyncratic life by strength of will, where the end product is a work of art that is to be evaluated in the future by a wider audience of individuals.² But as Richard Shusterman notes, many problems arise when the poet’s actual practice of self-creation is defined entirely in terms some stream of contingent experiences. If there is no foundational or primordial element belonging to a “true self” and no intrinsic “self-nature” whatsoever, then there is no place within the self’s actual life in nature from which one experience or narrative can be selected as more or less authentic than any other. On Rorty’s account, the poetic practice of self-creation would seem to be guided merely by arbitrary selection of some additional contingent experiences, by personal taste or some feeling of the moment, or else by approval from an audience of others who become the ultimate taste-makers.³ Nishimura suggests that this kind of postmodern account, which interprets self-creation in terms of the construction of experiences, of is unable to affirm some stable place within the self that would be the source of self-existence and the mutual interaction of individuals.⁴ Rorty himself advances the stronger conclusion that *no* philosophy will ever let us join the quest for self-creation with a principle of shared effort and social justice; the best we can hope for is a free society that lets individuals be aestheticist creators of their own private tastes.⁵

Despite Rorty’s doubts, we must redouble our effort to find a model of self-creation within the artistic life of the poet, so that we develop an ethics of aesthetic existence. The obstacle for us today is not that self-creation and social solidarity can never be joined by some philosophy; instead, the problem is that accounts such as Rorty’s are *not postmodern enough*. I would argue that Rorty cannot join self-creation with an originating place of social solidarity, because he still adheres to late-modern conventions. First, he seems to uphold the standard idea that the individual person must actively take, make and create experiences. Second, he appears to accept the pragmatist thesis, circulated for more than a century now, that the conjunctive flow of one’s own experiences includes no “bedding” or unifying ground that persists through the flow of experiences. Thus, he seems left with no vocabulary for any stable element of self-existence, beneath and between ever-changing experiences, that might be the basis for a principle of social justice. Our present-day task is to persevere until we find a postmodern account that *does* name some primordial element of self-creation — outside concepts but within practical life — that guarantees both the individual person’s freedom and also participation in everyday life with others.

The aim of this essay is to investigate practices of artistic creation by poet and painter, so that we may find some foundation of self-creation that is continuous with the place of communion with others. To sketch one possible avenue for joining self with the place of social interaction, I move

² Richard Rorty, *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 26, 40.

³ Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000), pp. 237, 246, 249.

⁴ Nishimura Takuo, “The Aesthetic and Education in the Kyoto School,” p. 74. The opposition between self-creation and social Solidarity that concerns Rorty arises for, Nishimura as the opposition between self-creation and the social purpose of education.

⁵ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, irony and solidarity*, p. xiv.

dialectically through passages of interest by Nishida Kitaro, Watsuji Tetsuro, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. First, I consider Nishida's *Art and Morality*, where the unity, uniqueness and aesthetic horizon of the self are related in helpful ways. This text also presents the *will* as the foundation within the self that brings unity to the train of experiences; it is a central point within consciousness that is free in that it does not belong to the objective causes and effects observed in nature. But the individual person's will is an act of consciousness; so, Nishida's text does not yet give us a clear account of how the life of artistic creation would bring the self *outside* consciousness so that it joins with nature and an existing place of interaction between persons. Nishida corrects this problem in an influential way with *Fundamental Principles of Philosophy* (1934), where self-existence depends on an awareness of a place that resists mind in an absolute way; this place is also the site of personal interaction with others. But this switch, in which self-existence depends on the place of the social world and not on a self-determining mind, gives rise to new questions. Nishida is careful to affirm that the self does not determine from within itself the place of self-existence and social determination; but it seems to me that more can be done to name the medium or foundation within the self that enables the individual person to observe the unity of self-existence and social interaction.

In section two, I argue that Watsuji Tetsuro takes up this question of the medium of self-emplacement. He proposes a foundation that unites self-existence and intimate social interactions; he refers to a *betweenness*, a *subjective spatiality* between mind and objective physical existence, that displays visible gestures used by individual persons to communicate expressively with each other. Watsuji holds that this primordial spatiality is co-present during perceptions of visual objects but impossible to perceive in the form of natural objects or relations. This language of visible spatiality opens up exciting avenues of inquiry relevant to self-creation: it gives more detail on the way in which an awareness of self-existence may reveal the medium of social relations. Hence, he takes us closer to a possible foundation within the self that may support an ethics of aesthetic existence; indeed, I discuss the way scholars use Watsuji's notion of betweenness to denote a primordial space of poetic immediacy that is a visible interval between forms. But some concerns persist: Does his language of *subjective spatiality* manage to situate a person outside mind and within a place of self-existence that is co-dependent with practical activity in nature? More importantly, Watsuji denies that the self contains any source within itself that can be the foundation of moral purpose; hence, it may be argued that his ethics of betweenness does not quite give us the entire account of mutual dependency that we need today. It seems that social solidarity determines but is not so clearly determined by the self's creation of an authentic self-existence.

To augment Watsuji's notion of betweenness, I move to Merleau-Ponty's use of the term "visible", which denotes an element that is essential to the self and the self's openness to its own place in nature. He uses the terms "whole of the visible" and "total visible" to name a self-evident medium that enables the self to think of itself as a composite of thinking and a place that displays the natural world. For Merleau-Ponty, the whole of the visible observed by the painter is a corporal but non-objective element that serves as an exemplar of the painter's own embodiment. Finally, I close with the claim that these three philosophers, taken in combination, signal the emergence of language that will enable us to explain how the practice of poetry or painting leads the individual

person to an awareness of a place that reveals the co-dependency of the free self's own authentic existence and participation in the place of social interaction.

Nishida: Unity of the Self, Artistic Creation and Place

Nishida Kitaro's writings provide a fruitful starting point for the philosophy of self-creation and the aesthetic attitude that is the basis of the poet's life. His remarks in *Art and Morality* point to a convincing network of relations that would connect a unifying foundation of the free self with the aesthetic life of the practicing poet and painter. His subsequent discussion in *Fundamental Principles of Philosophy* grounds self-existence in the place where acting individuals determine each other in the socio-historical world. Thus, these two philosophical works by Nishida present the two poles or standpoints that we seek to unify here: the free self of aesthetic self-creation and the acting individual in the place of social interaction. In this section, the question of interest is whether Nishida's late philosophy provides the vocabulary we need to name a place or medium within the self that will *join* his earlier account of the free self's artistic life together with his later descriptions of the place of self-existence that is the socio-historical world.

With *Art and Morality*, Nishida claims that the self can be regarded in two ways: it is concrete and unchanging, as well as a stream of changing mental acts and experiences. That which does not change and that which changes must be one, at least in some manner of description.⁶ This is a promising philosophical step, since he proposes to name some part of the self that will give unity and coherence to the stream of experiences. This opens up the prospect of interpreting self-creation as a relation internal to the self between transient experiences of particular things and an awareness of some foundational element; the aim is to notice some additional element to the self, so that the self will no longer be regarded as a mere bundle of contingent experiences. Clearly, Nishida hopes to describe a unifying foundation within the self that is *free* and independent of the changing thoughts and experiences of things. What part of the self then does Nishida point to as basic or foundational? How does he relate such a foundational element to the self's aesthetic attitude or the horizon of artistic creation?

For Nishida, the standpoint of perception, experience and sensation cannot serve as foundation that unifies acts of consciousness. Acts of seeing and hearing are self-creative, in that they are not purely acts of intellect or conceptualization. But he concludes finally that perception is incapable of unifying the self, since a person cannot be said to be unique and free when taking up the standpoint of perception. Why not? He seems to give at least two reasons. First, he claims that impulsive consciousness and perception are "kinds of unselfconscious consciousness." Impulsive consciousness is not yet individual consciousness belonging to a certain individual; "[i]t is nothing more than the material that constructs individual consciousness...it can become the material of anybody's consciousness." Similarly, perceptive awareness is non-conscious and not yet consciousness belonging to a unique individual; hence, perception can not be the basis for the self's awareness of its uniqueness. It cannot sustain our idea of that one person or self is unique and

⁶ Nishida Kitaro, *Art and Morality*, p. 9.

unlike any other. Second, we cannot take impulsive consciousness as the basis of our idea of the self; for if we tried to do so, then the self of the individual would “be nothing more than a unity superimposed from without...there would be no difference from conceiving of their being some material force in its background in order to unify the content of experience.” In like manner, if we were to regard perception as the foundation for a free self, then we would be attempting to describe the self by appealing to something imposed from without and the self would not be free. Whatever is caused by powers outside the self cannot be the basis of the self’s own awareness of its freedom. In short, the self is aware of itself, as free, unified, unique, and belonging to a one certain individual, only if these traits are given to the self through something internal to the self.⁷

What does Nishida offer instead as the foundation or center *within* the free self that gives unity to the self? The foundation of the self is the act of consciousness that underlies all other acts of consciousness: the *will*. Why does Nishida select the will as foundation? He does so since he seeks something within the self that will unify what are usually experienced as polar opposites: mind and natural objects. For Nishida, we can at times think of ourselves as unified by some objective center outside of us; and we can at other times think of the self as bringing unity to the world from a specific center that changes from moment to moment with respect to consciousness. But when we take up the perspective of the self, we think of ourselves neither as determined from without nor as constantly changing within: “For the self to move things, things must be within the self, and for things to move the self, the self must be within things. Thus the act of the will presupposes a standpoint that surpasses the limits of both words — things and mind — and unifies them.”⁸ Nishida selects will, an act of consciousness, as the foundation of the self, since he holds that there is nothing observable in nature that can give the self an awareness of itself as free and unique; he defines “nature” in terms of the causal relations and objects of experience that are constructed and understood by the natural sciences.⁹ In other words, we must think of the self as some center that unifies acts of consciousness and material things known to the natural sciences; we must not think of the self as simply one or the other.

Without deciding yet whether the will, an act of consciousness, can serve as a suitable foundation for the self, we can still appreciate Nishida’s description of the role and mediating independence that must belong to such a foundation. Nishida explains that the standpoint required for unity is within the objective world, which is not an end in itself opposed to the self. The objective world exists as a means of the self’s realization of itself. The “true self” fuses what is objective *with* itself: “That which stands in opposition to the self is the self itself...That which moves the self must be the self, the self must actualize the self from within itself.”¹⁰ Before continuing on, I wish to assert that this requirement — that the self’s awareness of its own actuality depends upon some element within the dimension of the self — is still viable for us today. In effect, Nishida gives us a vocabulary for specifying what we mean today by “self-creation”; it

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 112-113.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

is the self's ability to create an awareness of itself as unique, free, unified, and actual. Therefore, when we use the term "self-creation," we mean that the self is able to take a perspective upon itself or to observe itself. We do not mean that the self merely adds to its stock of experiences of things. If we ever manage below to describe some way in which the self finds evidence of a foundation *within* the self, then we can begin to speak of a unifying "true self" that displays the self's own uniqueness to the self.

In *Art and Morality*, the aesthetic horizon is experienced in the dimension of the free self. According to Nishida, the artist works from the basis of the completely free self, not from instinct on the inside or from biological or physical forces on the outside that might be constructed intellectually by the scientist.¹¹ Each of us is truly creative as an artist in the horizon of the free will, after we pass through cognitive consciousness or perceptions of natural objects. Although it is not compelled by instinct, the will still acts from the inside in an *unconscious* way, at least in the sense that it cannot be experienced as an empirical object. Once it is no longer restricted to consciousness of cognitive thinking or experiences of objects, the will operates within the self and can be observed in the aesthetic standpoint. The relation between the foundation of the self and the creation of art is a close one: "In art, the self becomes free spirit. This means that it transcends the plane of consciousness in general. In the plane of consciousness in general, the objective world becomes a construction of the self; by transcending this plane, the self becomes wholly free and creative."¹² To put this another way, the practice of art enables the self to become free and creative, since self-consciousness is no longer restricted to acts of cognitive experience or to an intellectual understanding of material conditions. The result is a self-consciousness that is deeper than the one that can be obtained through consciousness of our own conceptual understanding of things; for in cases of aesthetic expression, the content of consciousness arises as the free self and "attains to a unique individuality."¹³ So, artistic practice has an important role: art discovers the life of the self not within nature (i. e. not within nature as it is understood by the natural sciences) but within the background of nature. It releases the self from thinking of itself as causally conditioned. Through artistic practices, the self can transform self-consciousness from the utilitarian understanding that regards persons as parts of the physical world; instead, the self can return by way of aesthetic creativity to a spiritual life and to an active dialectical unity of the internal and the external.¹⁴ Again, we may accept Nishida's promising claim here that aesthetic creativity is a path for acquiring a consciousness of oneself as free, unique, and midway between the internal and the external.

Nishida uses his model of artistic practice, where the self attains unique individuality and spiritual life, to interpret Shelly's making of the poem "To a Skylark." The relation of self-creation and the aesthetic horizon is clear: "the poet's description of nature is not merely an objective description of nature, but a reflection of the person of the poet."¹⁵ For Nishida, the artistic practice that transforms the actual skylark and moon into verse is not the mere expression of the spirit of

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 72.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 45-46.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

the skylark and the moon. In creating the poem, the poet becomes a medium of the self that enters deeply within itself.

Shelly's famous poem "The Skylark"...is not the expression of the spirit of the bird, but of Shelly himself. Moreover, such a heightened feeling is precisely the essence of Shelley himself and also the substance of a profounder nature. True reality is not the content of the universal concept, but the specific content of feeling and the will. Shelley himself was simply this kind of medium of the self. Shelly's true self-consciousness entered deeply into the creation.¹⁶

According to Nishida's interpretation of the art of creating poetry, Shelley walks among hedges one evening and expresses later on the unity of self and nature that is mediated by the depths of the self. This passage gives evidence of the specific content that Nishida cites as the essence of the self: Shelley is merely a medium for feeling and the will that enter into the creation of the poem. Moreover, for Nishida, the awe that Shelley was stuck with, while facing the infinity of space in the boundless expanse of the blue sky, is a result of the self's own consciousness of its acts of consciousness: "True reality is an infinite internal continuity of acts. The infinite greatness and depth that we feel in reality is a projection of the depths of the self itself."¹⁷ It seems that the foundational content projected from the depths of the self is *feeling* and the experience of infinite continuity provided by the will. The result is a personal feeling that differs from the feeling that arises from a utilitarian cognition of nature.

While Nishida's account of freedom, uniqueness, and artistic creation remain helpful, his candidate for the foundation of the self — the *will* — is unworkable. If the foundation of the self is merely the will (i.e. the act of all acts of consciousness), then the self remains consciousness through and through. If this is so, then Nishida does not explain how the self is aware, from within itself, that it is connected to what is both outside intellect and within the natural world of daily life. In effect, his account in *Art and Morality* leaves us with a free self of aesthetic creativity that becomes conscious of itself as various acts of consciousness. He does not explain how the self is aware, from the depths of itself, that it has actual existence in everyday life with others.

Nishida addresses this problem in a radical way with *Fundamental Principles of Philosophy*.

He abandons the will as the source of self-actualization; instead, he writes that the individual person moves from consciousness to an awareness of self-existence through contact with a place of socio-historical interaction conducted by acting individuals who determine each other. To become aware of personal existence, the individual person must go outside conceptual consciousness to a place where the self is able to see itself in itself. Nishida makes the point: "Self-consciousness exists at the point where the self sees itself in itself. It exists at the point where the place [*basho*] is self-determining."¹⁸ This is a most valuable improvement, since Nishida takes us

¹⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 81-82.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 83.

¹⁸ Nishida Kitaro, *Fundamental Principles of Philosophy*, trans. David Dilworth (Tokyo: Sophia University, 1970), p. 44. For a more on advantages and difficulties with Nishida's *The Fundamental Principles of Philosophy*, see my essay, " 'Place of Nothingness' and the Dimension of Visibility: Nishida, Merleau-Ponty and Huineng," in *Merleau-Ponty and Buddhism*, eds. Jin Y. Park and Gereon Kopf (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2009), pp. 155-179.

closer to a philosophy that would explain how the self is aware of itself as existing in the place of social interaction and not merely as acts of consciousness. He helps us advance toward a philosophy in which self-actualization and interaction with others are mutually dependent, since he states that the individual, as consciousness, cannot be an ultimate but must rather have the meaning of being the determination of “place.”¹⁹

But this advance raises some concerns. When he describes the dialectical unity of the mutual negation of self and society, Nishida emphasizes the determination of the individual: “the mutual opposition and determination of individuals is the determination of place, i. e. of the individual, i. e. of the universal. The individual only exists relative to other individuals.” Is this proposed place of self-existence determined *entirely* from *outside* the self then? What of his earlier claim that the self must actualize itself from within itself? Nishida anticipates this question: his answer is that the self does not submerge entirely within objectivity, since action in the socio-historical world “must at the same time mean the subjectification of objectivity, i.e. the seeing of the self in things.”²⁰ Yet, we may still ask: what then is the *medium* of the self through which the individual (e. g. the self of the poet) observes for itself and from within itself that it exists, as more than mere consciousness, in the place of the concrete world where individuals personally determine each other? This question becomes more pressing, when Nishida cites the opposition of individuals to describe the place outside consciousness (i.e. the world of true reality) that determines the self that acts freely. The world of true reality determines from its own depths the free self of the acting individual; yet, in this determination “the person disappears into the depths of the absolute.”²¹ My question here is whether more can be added to Nishida’s account. How does the individual acquire the awareness, for itself and from within itself, that it has a place of its own in the self-determining world of social interactions?

Watsuji: Betweenness and Visible Gestures as Home Ground

With *Rinrigaku*, Watsuji takes up the question of the existence of the human being, the *sonzai* of *ningen*, and the medium of practical connection between self and other. He writes in more detail about the ground that enables the self to determine for itself that it has an existence in a place outside its own intellect and understanding. Watsuji is explicit about his aim: “What is at stake here is the taking of a first step toward self-awareness.” The pre-objective character of Watsuji’s approach to ethics is evident in his advice that we should write from the standpoint of the self and ask how the self is able to observe its own experiences of others. My question here is whether Watsuji’s language for the medium of authentic self-awareness between person and person is sufficient to explain how the aesthetic life of artistic creation returns the individual to a foundation of the self that actually displays the inseparability of self and community.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 46. For another statement of this concern, see Nishimura Takuo, “The Aesthetic and Education in the Kyoto School: Motomori Kimura’s Theory of Expression,” p. 74: “Where do we locate” the other “for the individual subject?”

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

Watsuji describes the medium of the self, when he uses the term “emptiness” to refer to an in-betweenness that joins person to person. He follows Nishida, in part, by stating that the self-existence of the individual person depends on a medium that stands opposed to intellect, ego-consciousness and perceptual consciousness of natural objects. Watsuji goes on to describe this place of emptiness in terms of the socio-historical world. Instead, awareness of self-existence depends on the individual’s own awareness of a *pre-objective* ground of “betweenness” (*aidagara*) that consists of a “subjective spatiality” of visible gestures. This subjective spatiality is a medium for mutual expression and interconnection between practically existing individuals, such as I and Thou. This pre-objective spatiality between persons is prior to our perceptual experience of empirical objects: “the betweenness of person to person is something beyond intentionality.”²² The mediating subjectivity of spatiality that characterizes the existence of the individual human being is clearly a basic space that cannot be reduced to our experiences of the physical world, or of nature, as the natural sciences describe it: “it is not so much that *ningen sonzai* is constructed in space as that space comes to be found in the field of subjective *ningen sonzai*. From this viewpoint we can argue that subjective extendedness constitutes basic space.”²³ This step brings us closer to our goal of developing an interpretation for self-creation. Watsuji’s philosophy begins to describe some dimension of space by which the self acquires an awareness of its own interaction with others in everyday practice outside consciousness. According to Watsuji, space has been treated, in the history of philosophy, merely as a problem of objective knowledge; hence, “space has always been explored in connection with physical bodies or their motion and never in connection with the activity of the human subject itself.”²⁴ This primordial space that is essential to the individual’s own self-existence is not identical with the physical objects or space-time events that the individual person experiences. However, the individual person can always choose at any time to re-engage cognition in order to perceive the physical conditions or determinate events, instead of the medium of betweenness that displays them.

Watsuji’s discussion of the term “betweenness” suggests quite clearly that this subjective spatiality is *visible*. The relationship between individual and individual (teacher and student, child and parent, lodger and host) that occurs through the medium of “betweenness” is “regarded as occurring right before our eyes.”²⁵ This spatiality or betweenness for expressive gestures is also a visible medium that facilitates the possibility of bodily contact as one person draws near to visit friends: “Bodily connections are always visible whenever betweenness prevails, even though the manner of connection may differ.”²⁶ This visible medium of pre-objective spatiality is “the essential characteristic of human beings.”²⁷ If my reading is correct, it is possible to argue that Watsuji *does* seem to find something in the horizon of perception, namely, the primordial spatiality of “betweenness” that is not perceived in the form of any event for which there is an empirically

²² Watsuji Tetsuro, *Watsuji Tetsuro’s Rinrigaku, Ethics in Japan*, trans. Yamamoto Seisaku and Robert E. Carter (Albany: State University of New York, 1996), p. 33.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

known cause.

William LaFleur's comments on *Rinrigaku* lend support to the interpretation that Watsuji's ethics does balance two sides of human existence: the individual and the social. As LaFleur puts it, the person is both individual and social, "because, according to Watsuji, the individuated dimension of existence 'empties' into the social dimension and, conversely, the social dimension 'empties' into the individuated one."²⁸ LaFleur argues persuasively that Watsuji makes deliberate use of the word "emptiness" (Japanese, *ku*), which is commonly used in East Asia to stand for the notion of *sunyata* set down by Nagarjuna. It is Nagarjuna who claims that no particular thing can originate or exist in and of itself prior to others; if things exist then they always originate dependently and mutually with all other things.²⁹ The notion of co-dependence that LaFleur traces back to Nagarjuna does seem to work as a legitimate tool that helps us interpret Watsuji's writings. Consider, for example, the following remarks by Watsuji:

What I have described as a human being's existence as betweenness is that which renders individuals and societies capable of occurring in their reciprocal relations...Neither one nor the other has "precedence"...In so far as individuals and society are already established, then society consists of relations among the individuals constituting it, and individuals are individuals only with society.³⁰

This passage implies that, the spatiality constituting the I's own existence is the same spatiality within which the Thou must arise for this I. The self-consciousness of the other cannot be transmitted to me through the field of self-consciousness alone; for if it were, there would be no interconnecting visible gestures between self and other. The face to face conversation between two persons would become a mere meeting of minds. The practical activity that connects self and other can be established nowhere else than in the subjective space that is the mediating ground for visible expressions and gestures. Again, the spatiality of the subject (i.e. the human being's own existence) is the visible ground for the possibility of mutual interaction. The spatiality of the subject's self-existence is a standpoint for the self to create expressive gestures and identities.

Watsuji's notion of betweenness is already used to day to interpret artistic practice and to evaluate the creations of poet and painter. LaFleur argues that Watsuji is a consistent thinker who applies the same notion of "emptiness" and co-dependent origination, to aesthetics as well as ethics. To support this conclusion, LaFleur quotes for us Watsuji's remarks on three different artistic practices: ink painting, linked verse, and the tea ceremony. In the case of ink painting, Watsuji writes that harmony of composition results from the production of a "relationship between the void on the canvas where nothing is painted — a wide and deep space — and the dark silhouette of the sparrow." LaFleur takes this to mean that the art of ink painting in China and Japan conveys "the *underlying relatedness* of things."³¹ Second, Watsuji regards *renga*, the art of

²⁸ William LaFleur, "Buddhist Emptiness in the Ethics and Aesthetics of Watsuji Tetsuro," *Religious Studies* 14 (June 1978): 242, 244.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 244.

³⁰ Watsuji Tetsuro, *Watsuji Tetsuro's Rinrigaku, Ethics in Japan*, trans. Yamamoto Seisaku and Robert E. Carter (Albany: State University of New York, 1996), p. 102

³¹ LaFleur, "Buddhist Emptiness in the Ethics and Aesthetics of Watsuji Tetsuro," p. 247.

linked verse, as successful only if the group creation becomes “a bond between one person and another” and “only when there is the concrete realization of a dialectic and unity between the individual person and the body of poetry composers.”³² Third, Watsuji writes in regard to *cha-no-yu*, the tea ceremony, that there is an artistic accomplishment only when “the guests who have come into the tea room actually live together with what is going on in the ceremony.”³³ Given these three examples, it is reasonable to conclude, as LaFleur does, that Watsuji’s evaluation of a particular artistic practice depends on how well the maker creates an awareness of the mutual dependency of self-existence and the bond between person and person. Indeed, Watsuji’s claim about the tea ceremony – it is a practice for having guests actually live together – is deeply meaningful, when we join it with his articulation of betweenness in *Rinrigaku*.

We can use Watsuji’s notion of betweenness and subjective spatiality to explain how poets, filmmakers, architects, and art audiences participate in self-creation through an awareness of self-existence. The opportunity is quite clear, when we substitute Watsuji’s term “emptiness,” which refers to a visible spatiality that is the medium of the individual person’s self-existence, for Nishida’s earlier term “will,” which refers to the act of all acts of consciousness. By making this substitution, we arrive at an improved account of the way in which the making of a poem, such as “To a Skylark,” promotes self-creation and the awareness of the mutual dependency of self and others in nature. By using Watsuji’s account of betweenness to analyze the artistic practice of poetry, we can assert that feeling within the depths of the self is a by-product (not in itself the end purpose) of the poet’s coming as a guest and living together with bird and sky in the visible spatiality of betweenness that is also the basis of the actuality of the poet’s own existence. Furthermore, Richard Pilgrim argues that Watsuji’s aesthetics of betweenness and emptiness, as interpreted by LaFleur, can be regarded as an account of *ma*, a profound interval, gap, or opening that is noticeable as the space between walls or the pause between notes. Pilgrim claims that *ma* is a spatial betweenness, conveyed in such arts as film and architecture. To support this link between artistic practice and the presentation of *ma*, he quotes Kathy Geist, who writes that Ozu Yasujiro’s films sometimes foreground space in a purely artistic way that contributes nothing to narrative. Geist claims that such spaces are sometimes dominant, even though they have “no place in the cause/effect chain.”³⁴ Given his acceptance of LaFleur’s interpretation of Watsuji, Pilgrim clearly implies that Watsuji’s notion of betweenness can help us interpret statements of the contemporary architect Isozaki Arata, who claims that *ma* is the expectant stillness created when a person enters into a vacant space and nature is transformed.³⁵ So, it can be argued that Watsuji’s notion of betweenness is already available for use by scholars who may wish to describe how the aesthetic life of artistic practice leads to noticing and presenting the ground of human existence

³² *Ibid.*, p. 249.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 249.

³⁴ Richard B. Pilgrim, “Intervals (*Ma*) in Space and Time: Foundations for a Religio-Aesthetic Paradigm in Japan,” *History of Religions*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (Feb., 1986), pp. 256, 260, 275. See also, Kathy Geist, “West Looks East: The Influence of Yasujiro Ozu on Win Wenders and Peter Handke,” *Art Journal* 43, no. 3 (Fall 1983): 234.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 271. See also the catalogue for the 1979 exhibit at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum in New York City: Arata Isozaki et al., *MA: Space-Time in Japan* (New York: Cooper-Hewitt Museum, n.d.), p. 14.

within which all things are mutually dependent.

Have we arrived at a philosophy of aesthetic life self-creation that explains how self-existence and living with others are mutually dependent? One question is whether Watsuji's description of betweenness is sufficient for all that we seek today: a foundation of self-existence, within the life of the practicing artist, that can unify our ideas of self-creation and social solidarity. There are at least two reasons for thinking that Watsuji's account may be strengthened by some augmentation. First, it seems to me that he may not fully explain how the individual person acquires the self-awareness that the subjective spatiality of betweenness is somehow "deeper" and more basic for the self than the perception of physical objects. I accept Watsuji's claim that physical objects are perceived within a spatiality of betweenness that is essential to the human being's existence. Watsuji persuades that the medium of betweenness is *not* reducible to the space of the world of nature as understood by the natural sciences. Nor do I question Watsuji's claim that betweenness, as spatial emptiness, is the ground of self-existence and social interaction. My question is this: What is the medium of the self that enables the individual person to acquire an awareness of subjectivity spatiality, as Watsuji describes it, such that the individual does *not* fall back into the intellectual practice of cognizing the spatiality of betweenness in the form of distinct space-time moments?

This concern about the medium of the self that displays betweenness is important: at issue is our capacity to articulate some difference between the subjective spatiality of self-existence and space-time relations perceived within it. Is betweenness the *experiencing* of a multitude of particular types of gestures and motions located in space-time? Or is betweenness observed by *emptying* human self-existence of all cognitive thinking used to experience objects and space-time measurements? The best answer may be "both". LaFleur seems to hold at times that betweenness is a set of experiences, since he takes Watsuji to be making the point that betweenness displayed by the void in an ink painting operates "to make possible a series of relationships and reciprocities," not to make concrete some metaphysical dimension labeled as "non-being."³⁶ Pilgrim, who uses "betweenness" to denote *ma*, regards *ma* in two ways: it can be "objectively located as intervals in space and time"; and yet it also gives rise to a mode of poetic awareness, where time space collapses into the present moment and a space that is "at the edge of all processes of locating things by naming and describing".³⁷ Despite the difficulty, we need to articulate this space of poetic awareness. If the non-conceptualized or "deeper" aspect of Watsuji's visible betweenness is not articulated, then our attempt to use his account to describe the life of aesthetic self-creation will suffer the same problem that troubles Rorty's model: the self will observe no element belonging to itself other than the flow of experiences.

The second reason to request more detail stems from Watsuji's claim that the awareness of self-existence in the spatiality of betweenness cannot arise from the single individual. If my reading is correct, Watsuji is making the plausible but narrower claim that the self must in a sense

³⁶ William R. LaFleur, "Buddhist Emptiness in the Ethics and Aesthetics of Watsuji Tetsuro," p. 247.

³⁷ Richard B. Pilgrim, "Intervals(*ma*)In Space and Time: Foundations for a Religio-Aesthetic paradigm in Japan," p. 256.

cease i.e. forgo perceptual consciousness, cognitive understanding and experience of particular events in order to acquire an awareness of the betweenness that is essential to both self-creation and social solidarity. But his remarks sometimes suggest a stronger claim, namely, that the self must negate its own individuality and uniqueness in order to acquire an awareness of itself as a totality that is more than intellect and ego consciousness. This stronger claim is evident in passages such as the following: “Totality is said to arise in the negation of individuality, but it is not able to appear through the negation of one individual alone. Individuals are the many, and the totality as community existence arises as the point where these many individuals become one by forsaking their individuality.”³⁸ The claim here — that an awareness of totality and mutual dependency cannot arise through one individual alone — may conflict, I believe, with our improved reading of Shelly’s “The Skylark;” for it seems to me that the poet is able to express the co-dependent origination of self, moon and sky within the visible spatiality of betweenness, even without the presence of another person. But there is an even more serious problem that arises if betweenness is not evident within the single individual. If it is not, then we may not arrive at a present-day account of self-creation that is suitable for an ethics of aesthetic existence. If Watsuji’s account implies that there is no element *within* the self that is unique, precious, irreplaceable, not to be forsaken, and an emptiness compared to consciousness of distinct objects, then there is nothing that can motivate the individual, from within the depths of the self, to come together with other individuals and to become one as a community. Watsuji emphasizes at times that awareness of betweenness is a *consequence* of an interaction when the Thou determines the I, or when one individual is determined by another. To what extent does, self-creation by the self, within the self, motivate the self to interact freely, uniquely, and in an ethical way with others? Does Watsuji note some originating basis within the self that would make the co-dependency of self-existence and social solidarity evident *to the self*?

Watsuji does ultimately claim that the standpoint of the individual or the mere self is “a standpoint of inauthenticity”.³⁹ But why? Authenticity requires the existing human being to return to the betweenness of human beings; it is a return to unity and community. If we add the implicit premise that there is nothing of intrinsic value within the self, then there would be nothing already within the self, in the *present*, that could give the individual person direction, guidance and a motive for initiating and creating social solidarity. If our aim is to depart from the egoistic self and to return to the “home ground” of the existence of the self in mutual dependency with others, then this cannot occur from the standpoint of self-actualization. Watsuji’s text suggests that authenticity is something in the direction of the future and not within the self’s own immediate existence. The question at issue is whether Watsuji’s account implies the conclusion that Rorty accepts explicitly: no philosophy will be able to describe a unifying place that joins (or explains the co-dependent origin of) self-creation and social solidarity.

What shall we do? What more is there to say about the individual person’s own place of self-existence, so that we can affirm that self-creation and social solidarity are mutually dependent?

³⁸ Watsuji Tetsuro, *Watsuji Tetsuro’s Rinrigaku, Ethics in Japan*, p. 117.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

Let us return to Watsuji's statement that the practical behaviors and gestures in the subjective spatiality essential to the human beings existence are enacted right before one's own eyes. This suggests that the eyes literally provide evidence of some primordial medium or element within the self that reveals the mutual dependency of self-creation (or aesthetic existence) and interaction with others. Our new question is this: how do one's own eyes present some non-objective spatiality of betweenness — a medium neither mental nor physical — that enables one, as an individual, to observe that self-creation is dependent upon the same medium that displays actual life with others? One way of approaching this question is to explore Maurice Merleau-Ponty's late writings, where the painter's awareness of a non-objective element *within* the self provides an openness upon nature and others.

Merleau-Ponty: The Visible, “True-Nature” and Openness to Everyday Life

Merleau-Ponty's late writings offer us a language for the self's awareness of a foundational element within the self that is outside cognitive consciousness and within the visible place of practical interaction with others. In *Eye and Mind*, he articulates many of the same features that Watsuji develops in his ethics and aesthetics of betweenness: a pre-objective space in the depths of the self that serves as a primordial ground and visible medium for the coming-to-be and passing-away of visual perceptions of particular objects, gestures, or motions. While the similarities with Watsuji's aesthetics of emptiness are at times quite striking, there is one radical difference of great importance: Merleau-Ponty refers to a primordial dimension of visibility that is a corporeal element *within the self*, invisible to others, and non-objective. Specifically, he uses such terms as “whole of the visible,” “total visible” and “texture” to describe an originating element that gives the self an awareness of its own unique place in nature. Given that this ground of the visible is both an element within the self and also the place of interaction between self-determining individuals, we advance closer to philosophical language that can explain how self-creation (or the self's acquisition of an awareness of its own existence and uniqueness) originates co-dependently with awareness of the place of social solidarity. With this final section, I suggest that scholars may wish to combine the work of Nishida and Watsuji, who develop compelling accounts of the dialectic of mutual negation that unifies self and community, with Merleau-Ponty's idea that the painter can observe the whole of the visible as a unifying element of self-existence and one source of the self's awareness of what we may call the self's own “true nature.” I believe that the way is open to a viable account of self-creation and aesthetic existence that may interest scholars in the areas of ethics and aesthetics.

One striking feature of Merleau-Ponty's late writings is the claim that each of us able to observe our own possession of a sample of visibility that is corporeal and unique. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, he claims that the dimension of the visible is a texture or ground that never merges with cognitive understanding: “It is as though our vision were formed in the heart of the visible, or as though there were between it and us an intimacy as close as between the sea and the strand. And yet it is not possible that we blend into it...”⁴⁰ The opposition described here (or the relation of absolute negation between vision and the visible) is something that Merleau-Ponty

notices for himself and within his own cases of visual perception: “this red under my own eyes ...emerges from a less precise, more general redness, in which my gaze was caught up...[i]ts precise form is bound up with a certain wooly, metallic, or porous [?] configuration or texture...”⁴¹ In a way, the seer is possessed by this visible, which is neither mind nor object but “a *flesh* of things.” Why does Merleau-Ponty use the terms “flesh” and “flesh of things” in reference to the visible that never blends with perceptual thinking? He answers: the “whole of the visible” is a thickness of flesh that is lent by one’s own body: Merleau-Ponty refers to it as an “element” that is “midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea, a sort of incarnate principle...”⁴² The visible belongs not with the dimension of intellect but to the world of the senses and therefore to one’s own embodiment: “the thickness of flesh between the seer and the thing is constitutive for the thing of its visibility as for the seer of his [*sic*] corporeality; it is not an obstacle between them, it is their means of communication.”⁴³ Since vision never merges with the visible, the self is able to observe that its own visual perceptions of color depend on a whole of the visible that is equally an exemplar of the self’s own corporeality. Thus, the individual seer inhabits — or is constituted by — the very same visibility that is ordinarily disregarded in the interest of experiencing some particular thing (e.g. a patch of red, the angle of a gesture). Merleau-Ponty concludes from this that the individual person is “a *sensible for itself*.”⁴⁴ This is to say that during the act of seeing, one *can* and *does* look for oneself and notice the emergence of one’s own experience of particular things within one’s own whole of visibility: “That which looks at all things can also look at itself and recognize, in what it sees, the ‘other side’ of its power of looking. It sees itself seeing.”⁴⁵

The second innovation of note in Merleau-Ponty’s late philosophy is that the whole of the visible lent by the body is innate and invisible to others. It can serve, therefore, as an exemplar of both the actuality and uniqueness of the self. This point is made explicitly: “Since things and my body are made of the same stuff, vision must somehow come about in them; or yet again, their manifest visibility must be repeated in the body by a secret visibility.”⁴⁶ Thus, Merleau-Ponty’s text suggest a way for us to address the concern expressed by Nishida, who argues that the horizon of perception cannot serve as the foundation of the self, since this horizon is incompatible with a foundation that is both free and unique. Once we accept Merleau-Ponty’s claim that each one of

⁴⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Effort, trans. Alphonso Lings (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), pp. 130-131.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 131-132.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 139. Merleau-Ponty regards the texture of the visible, midway between mind and physical matter, as a totality: “the total visible is always behind, or after, or between the aspects we see of it” (p. 136). Does Watsuji give the self’s own body such a role in providing the spatiality essential to self-existence and living in practice with other persons? For Watsuji, the human body never becomes an absolutely independent individual; see Watsuji Tetsuro, *Rinrigaku*, p. 67: “in the extremity in which we examine the individual independence of a body, we reach a point at which individual independence necessarily perishes.”

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 133, 135.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

⁴⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Eye and Mind*, in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader, Philosophy and Painting*, ed. Galen A. Johnson, trans. Michael B. Smith (Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1993), p. 124.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 125. This corporeal ground of the visible that I notice is not the same sample by which another person constructs visual perceptions belonging to individual consciousness.

us (as a seer) possesses a whole of the visible, or a total visible, that is innate, self-evident and a secret inaccessible to others, then it follows that perception (i.e. vision) is dependent upon the horizon or ground of the visible that is *within the self*. Furthermore, we can say now that the self is able to look at and literally observe the evidence of its own uniqueness in the innate token of the visible that it possesses. Since this sample of visibility is absolutely opposed to vision (i.e. it can never merge with perceptual thinking) and also innate, it is an element within the self; indeed, Merleau-Ponty introduces the idea that the self is aware of itself as a of both thinking and visibility.⁴⁷ Thus, the self is able to look at the total visible innate to itself and think of it as an element of corporeality and a pre-given spatiality for visual experiences of things in everyday life. This foundation of visibility, a total part of the element of flesh, is within the self and not a chaos of experiences: “The flesh (of the world or of my own) is not contingency, chaos, but a texture that returns to itself and conforms to itself.”⁴⁸ Since the self can observe this corporeal element within the self, we may call the whole of the visible a basis of self-creation and the self’s “true nature.” Since the visible is a non-conceptual element of corporeality, and since it comes into self-awareness through some thought, we may say that the whole of the visible innate to the self and the self’s own consciousness of it originate co-dependently.

Merleau-Ponty explicitly links this corporeal whole of its visible, midway between mind and matter, to artistic practice and the self-creation of the painter. The working painter does not merely perceive objects and relation on the outside; instead, Merleau-Ponty tells us that “it is the painter to whom the things of the world give birth by a sort of concentration or coming-to-itself of the visible.”⁴⁹ During the act of artistic practice painting, the painter is given birth, in the sense that the painter acquires a new awareness of the whole of the visible, for its own sake, as an element of the painter’s own self-embodiment. The painter no longer regards nature as a set of natural objects or relations that belong to scientific knowledge; the painter becomes aware of the whole of the visible, the self’s own “true nature,” which provides an openness to actual life in nature. Since the whole of the visible is innate and pre-objective, it has no place in the chains of cause and effect that are understood through the practices of the natural sciences. Thus, artistic practice can lead the painter to self-creation and awareness of a self-nature that is free from thoughts of its determination by material causes. There is an observable element of the self outside the causal narratives of the empirical sciences. The notion of a secret visibility uniquely displayed to the living individual (or least to any self that is a seer) enables us to strengthen yet again our interpretation of “To a Skylark.” The poet or self is able to articulate a place of betweenness, namely, the wholeness of the visible that is a basis of self-existence. We may agree with Nishida that Shelley is a medium of the self and that his true self-consciousness enters into the creation of the poem. But we may add the following: it is not necessarily the depths of feeling and the will that are projected when the poet looks at the boundless blue sky and has a feeling of infinite greatness. The poet who looks at the visible blue sky may also choose to appreciate the sky with respect for its visibility; as a result, the

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

⁴⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 146. Touch is another total part.

⁴⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Eye and Mind*, p. 141.

poet has the option of expressing how the sky, as an exemplar of the visible, gives the poet an awareness of the co-dependency of self-existence and the place of actual life with others.

Many points of convergence are available in the philosophies of Nishida, Watsuji and Merleau-Ponty. Nishida is quite rigorous in his later writings, when he states explicitly that the self *does* see itself within the place of the world of true reality where acting individuals determine each other in the socio-historical world. Yet, he is aware of the challenge: “to see the self in the self would seem to be impossible.”⁵⁰ It appears that Merleau-Ponty may give us a satisfying way to describe how the self is able to observe, from within itself, its own foundation that doubles as the place of the visible socio-historical world. We can explain how the opposites of self and place in the socio-historical world are unified within the self: the whole of the visible — one and the same ground — supports *both* the self’s awareness of its own actuality or existence outside concepts *and* awareness of the place of social interaction between individuals. Watsuji uses the notion of betweenness to explain the self’s existence and the subjective spatiality in which one person communicates gestures expressively to another. Like Watsuji, Merleau-Ponty describes a pre-objective spatiality that is a visible ground for experiencing measurable heights, speeds or distances. The corporeal principle of innate flesh outlined here (e.g. the notion of the whole of the visible) lends support to Watsuji’s valuable account; it brings another benefit as well. Since the whole of the visible is within the self, and since it must be the ground of the visible gestures in the subjective spatiality that Watsuji calls “betweenness,” it follows that the awareness of self-existence in the spatiality of betweenness *does* arise in actual practice from the place of the individual.⁵¹

Moreover, our results suggest now that totality *is* able to appear through the negation of one individual alone: the self, as poet, is able to observe that the corporeal element of the whole of the visible is a non-conceptual ground within the self that negates the thinking with which it never merges. The poet is aware of the mutual dependency of self and the place of true reality. It follows that the self may consider the whole of the visible innate to the self as a possible content for a corporeal principle of morality: self-awareness of the visibility that gives the self an exemplar of its own “true nature” may facilitate a return to the self’s home ground. Authenticity would exist already within the self’s immediate existence, and this authenticity can give guidance now in initiating and creating social solidarity. Once Merleau-Ponty describes the dimension of the visible as a whole that is within the self, then the depth of the whole of the visible becomes the ground of a betweenness that provides evidence of self-existence and continuity with the place where the self interacts with others in everyday life. The whole of the visible is the pivot that makes it possible to be aware of the co-dependency of self-existence and the place of community. Works of art expressing the whole of the visible, which is perhaps a referent for the term “*ma*,” will serve as exemplars of self-existence and of a content that may give moral guidance in the socio-historical

⁵⁰ Nishida Kitaro, *Fundamental Principles of Philosophy*, p. 44.

⁵¹ The return to the “home. ground” of the betweenness of human beings is through the self’s own immediate existence. Each unique sample of the whole of the visible actualized with the individual *sensible-for-itself* becomes the basis of authentic direction and social solidarity, no matter what other differences may be at issue in the opposition between self and other.

world of acting individuals.