

OCEAN JOURNEY – BETWEEN HORIZONS

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Abstract: Could it be that there is pure thinking and that sensuous experience comes, as it were, afterwards? Or is it like the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty says: that we can only think about the world that we are a part of, the only world we know? That what is given *a priori* and what is given as an experience exist at the same time?

“I abandon myself to it and plunge into its mystery, it ‘thinks itself within me’, I am the sky itself as it is drawn together and unified, and as it begins to exist for itself; my consciousness is saturated with this limitless blue,” writes Merleau-Ponty. This essay discusses the act of in-the-world-being experienced in dense moments during a voyage that lets us return to the ‘things themselves’. In the following it will be examined how the moment in a given situation captures a way to knowledge, how the relation of knower to known, subject to object, always take place in a specific situation.

How is sensuous experience related to questions of: what is knowledge, what is experience, perception? What part does the perceived moment play in transferring knowledge by experiencing? Can we talk of a knowledge of discovery, an articulating rather than a confirming knowledge?

Keywords: knowledge, sensuous experience, Merleau-Ponty, in-the-world-being, discovery, phenomena

INTRODUCTION

In order to understand the complex nature of knowledge Husserl claimed that we had to return to the phenomena themselves. He wanted to think ‘before’ science in the sense that we should not be influenced by what it had taught us. To reach the foundation of philosophy before the language of the natural sciences gets a firm grip on philosophy. It is a will to reach into the nexus of meaning in the phenomena, in our contact with them. French philosopher Merleau-Ponty returned to the body and sensual experience as the center for consciousness in his reading of Husserl. Sensuous experience as a way to knowledge was something that already Aristotle spoke about.

The return to the phenomena also lets us return to poetry or any creative act. The unique mode of existing expressed by their properties

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brings us our in-the-world-being through our senses, through perception, language and art. Things as they appear to us in experience and the meaning things have in our consciousness reflects Merleau-Ponty's particular view of 'being in a situation', a relation always take place in a situation, in relation to an embodied, perceptual body.

To travel puts one in a situation where one sees anew. To be put in a situation can help to understand the complexity of in-the-world-being and how it is rooted in sensory experience.

"For the senses communicate with each other [...] If I try to shut myself up in one of my senses and, for instance, project myself wholly into my eyes, and abandon myself to the blue of the sky, soon I am unaware that I am gazing and, just as I strive to make myself sight and nothing but sight, the sky stops being 'a visual perception' to become my world of the moment."¹

In his text Merleau-Ponty points to how the possibility of connecting our inner landscape with outer surroundings is given, being there before us. The possibility to encounter the world, to sense it 'being all wrapped up in it' is already there. Sensory experience does not come after the perceptual act, it is a part of perception. The wish to name the green, lush trees 'green' does not come out of an analytical act; it springs out of an in-the-world-being and from a will to communicate. It is language born out of sensory experience, out of necessity, out of an encounter with the landscape and, from this the beginning of knowledge, before forming a world of Ideas. This is a way of thinking existence as something in-the-world-being, not outside the world itself but, as Merleau-Ponty states; we cannot think outside the world, we only can think of the world that we are a part of – the only world we know.

In the following text it is examined how dense moments in a given situation makes us return to the phenomena themselves during two voyages, the first to the deep American South and the Delta landscape surrounding the Mississippi river, the second to the coastline of the American New England. A journey between the opposites of red hotness and blue tranquility captures a way to knowledge and how the relations of knower to known, of subject to object, always take place in a situation.

¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2009). *Phenomenology of Perception*, London and New York : Routledge, p.262.

THE RIVER

Vicksburg, Mississippi, USA:

The sweet smell of moldering leaves and juicy, light green, lush trees, mockingbirds, chattering, whistling, trilling; an eagle sailing on upwind, the voice of a playing child. So, the river, huge in its slow movements, the landscape painted with pastel chalks in a haze through the horizon. The river surface wiped with a floating soup of flesh tint, green umber and baby blue reflections of the sky above. On the bridge that spans the river, the murmur of heavy traffic, a river of cars constantly speeding over the bridge.

It is as if the white blue sky was about to eat the steel blue color of the bridge lattice, an overwhelming heat, all encompassing, humid, like nothing else experienced before. The river floats like melting silver, eaten by the white-hot sun. A tug boat moves endlessly slowly up the river in the flood of silver, endlessly slow, infinitely strong pushing its cargo in front of it without hesitation, without giving up.

Mockingbirds arrow back and forth over the sky, squabbling. The river constantly moves downstream with its relentless movement, the tug boat, moving up streams with its heavy carriage, infinitely decisive. The tenacious, intense movement of the river meets the resistance of the tug boat taking its cargo up streams, moving so slowly, persistent, yet reaching its distance.

What is movement? We have to answer it in a Heideggerian mode. What is not motion? What is motionless? Motionless is death, it is stillness, it is a frozen movement. Motion can be slow, repeated, ongoing in stillness, motion in stillness that is the image of the river. In motion motionless, towards the ocean, at this very moment, now.

So, if the sad condition of our lives is that at first we are given our lives, and then, at each moment, with every breath, we are losing it, the inner image of the tug boat, pushing its cargo up the stream is the inner image of changing our conditions of life, through the mobilization of all of our forces, we can change the route of our life destiny.

The Mississippi river is the only river in the world that can change its course overnight; it constantly changes the surrounding delta, man trying to keep it in place with levels. Different patterns are drawn by the river in the soil being in constant motion, in constant change. The river is first and foremost a possibility of movement like the former railway or the highway today. Thoughts, music, man traveling on the river, it connects points in space.

This moment, a travel with no end, no consummation, no goal. Always on-going. Towards what, for whom and how? And, us, man so finite, traveling towards an end, termination, consummation. And so....?

The ocean, infinite yet finite. Always in movement. Always in rest. Always these two. At the same time? On the way towards and yet just always there. Always the same. Always different. Different yet the same. A chiasmic opening ...against what, for whom? A voyage, on the road, to nowhere. A blue voyage towards the horizon. A blue horizon in being-to-the world. On the way, in movement, in stillness. At last, at last moving. At last, at last stillness.. Immovable. Completely and utterly immovable set in motion. In the blue. Bluer. Bluest. Blue.

Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA:

Three o'clock tea, the white and blue pattern on the porcelain, soft voices, the smell of white roses in a vase, a well-kept after garden. This is a room for those who are not courageous, not capricious, not travelers in space, no wanderers. A subtle rain flowing slowly across the window pane and I long for another view of a green, slow river changing lives of people and a river boat carrying its cargo up streams, with all its power, up streams, with an inner peace and self-confidence. I can do this, I can cope.

The tug boat carries its incredible heavy cargo going up streams. It says now to the upheaval of motion, it says there is nothing but the constant way to life, a continuous, infinite movement.

Drinking afternoon tea and oblivion in the blue room where time is being suspended. And yet the riverboat brought these white and blue, flowered curtains, this thin white and blue patterned porcelain to this location. Maybe it also brought the white roses here. But this is no escape, life goes on.

Life moves like the tug boat, persistent up streams. And the river is like a melting flood of silver and the sun is eating all shapes. The boat makes its way in a stream of melting silver, almost vanishing in the light.

Thrown into the world with all my senses, I try to focus only on my gaze. As in communion I become part of the sky and the sky becomes a part of me. Blue is now longer a color to me. I am the blue, my body welcomes the blue being a part of it, writes Maurice Merleau-Ponty

about sense perception in his *Phenomenology of Perception*.² Be at home and find significance in the world.

THE OCEAN

Gloucester, Massachusetts, USA:

The smell of the ocean, salt water, seaweed, seagulls, the big white boat, the wind, sunny, sound of waves against the boat side, the boat pushes out, expectation in the air.

Embark the boat from Gloucester, the boat shines white, the seagulls floats in the air, the steel blue ocean in front of me, and the waves rolling back and forth, back and forth. Nothing is seen at the horizon. The sky blue meets the surface of the ocean and they melt together in one, only, blueness. "I abandon myself to it and plunge into its mystery, it 'thinks itself within me,' I am the sky itself as it is drawn together and unified, and as it begins to exist for itself; my consciousness is saturated with this limitless blue."³

Hour after hour the wind comes towards the skin, a light breeze and the repetitive movement of the waves under me. The boat pushes forward in a moment of eternity moves in a moment of total stillness, an upheaval of time, this calmness being headed towards, but never reaching, forever and ever.

In another landscape: The straight, endless road, the exhausting heat, the dazzling sunlight, the mirage over the road way making it wet and slippery, an illusion, mile after mile in this self-glowing green ocean of corn, a landscape where man is nothing due to proportion. Mile after mile in a constant pace and you feel as if you were not moving at all. A journey in flatness, in the hot frying pan of the Delta landscape of the American South.

Blues music heard on the car radio, time has stopped, cornfields as far as one can see, to the end of the horizon, to the end of the world.

Heading forward hour after hour, and still this calmness, being headed towards...but never reaching - hour after hour, mile after mile.

The wind coming towards the body of the boat, the forward movement of the boat engine and the rolling force of the waves seems to upheave the force forward, floating in a state of equilibrium, moving in stillness.

² *Ibidem*, p.248.

³ *Ibidem*, p.249.

Indianola, Mississippi, USA:

In a former warehouse, walls being of corrugated sheet metal, eating 'Tamalis' rolled in their corn leafs with spicy brown sauce, sweet and spicy beans, coleslaw and the taste of ice cold water. Outside at the lawn a young girl dances with a scarf, reminiscent of a Greek vase painting, a boy throwing a ball while using the strength of his whole body in the pitch, the sun touching upon his arm. Drinking a glass of chardonnay in the evening's warm wind, smell of warm dusty soil and a sweet scent of blossom, the sun going down at the caramel pink, pastel sweet sky, the bluesman playing his harmonica, me sitting on the grass, all of us in this moment being one with culture that keeps us from slipping into nothingness.

Merleau-Ponty articulates this kind of intensified lived experience: "... a man who finds himself thrown into it, and who in every sense of the word, is 'wrapped up in it'."⁴

CONCLUSION

Intensified, experienced moments and memory-images are mixed, presence and absence enhance one and other in the above presented text from a travel diary. Common to both is a being-experience through the senses. The philosopher Jim Jakobsson speaks in this context of "knowledge as discovering"⁵ an articulating rather than a confirming knowledge.

"From the moment that experience- that is, the opening on to our *de facto* world is recognized as the beginning of knowledge, there is no longer any way of distinguishing a level of *a priori* truths and one of factual ones, what the world must necessarily be and what it actually is. The unity of the senses, which was regarded as an *a priori* truth, is no longer but the formal expression of a fundamental contingency; the fact that we are in the world-the diversity of the senses, which was regarded a given *a posteriori*, including the concrete form that assumes in a human subject, appears necessary to this world, to the only world

⁴ *Ibidem*, p.255.

⁵ Jim Jakobsson (1996). "Husserl och Heidegger – från väsensåskådning till varaförståelse", in ed. Alexander Orłowski & Hans Ruin, *Fenomenologiska perspektiv, studier i Husserls och Heideggers filosofi* [Phenomenological Perspectives, Studies in the Philosophy of Husserl and Heidegger] Stockholm : Thales, p.121.

which we can think of consequentially; it therefore becomes *a priori* truth.”⁶

In what Husserl calls the simple beholding lays the everyday sensual experience. This simple beholding is a new possibility to consider what knowledge is and an unutilized possibility for phenomenology, a new model for the understanding of the practical and the emotive that is not based in a theoretical model of understanding.⁷

Sensuous experience reveals the essence of a thing as in Merleau-Ponty’s example with the lemon where its qualities as the yellow color, the experience of coldness when touching and the acidic taste are qualities that constitute its being. These qualities are experienced emotionally and contribute to how we shape the meaning – in this way the experience of the lemon is reflected back to our own body and the understanding of one’s own being. For Heidegger this understanding of being is revealed through our cares, in everyday acts, with e.g. the lemon, when we touch, taste, and see it. Similarly when we make use of the lemon⁸ e.g. when cooking. Such an everyday understanding of being is often expressed through art, is a foundation for creating architecture, as well as an intensified moment during a travel reveals the connection between essence (what) and being (to).

The epistemological question of how we can get away from our concept of the object and experience the object itself dissolves in the self’s intentionality toward something that we see ‘as something’. In the intentionality of the intensified moment we reach the things in themselves, their what-being, or essence, something that is dependent of our ability to relate to phenomena, what Merleau-Ponty calls ‘our openness to the world’.

Seeing anew can then be compared with the gaze of the child, who sees something for the first time. But, not only sees but touches, gets to know, receives knowledge of, through his everyday acts. The care of the living puts us in contact with being. In Merleau-Ponty’s thinking the dichotomy between subject and object is cancelled since we are part of a relational belonging with the world that he calls ‘flesh’. For Heidegger it is our care about the world and our acts in it

⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *op. cit.*, pp.256-257.

⁷ Jim Jakobsson, *op. cit.*, p.120.

⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, (2002) *The World of Perception*, London . Routledge, pp.45-49.

that shapes this understanding and belonging⁹. This can be compared with Merleau-Ponty's term 'spatiality of situation', how meaning is shaped through our acting in space. With this thinking the subject/object dichotomy is cancelled since the self can only understand itself through relating itself to the world similarly to self-understanding being a part of understanding the world. This mediation takes place through the senses since I have a body and with it I am present-in-the-world. This bodilyness is, I would say, a part of our thinking. Consciousness is situated in the body, sensual experience is in this way the road to knowledge. But here is also a bi-directionality: The world, experienced as a situation, 'thinks itself' through us.

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⁹ Jim Jakobsson, *op. cit.*, p.120.



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