

## *Handout 3° lesson 'Philosophy of perception'*

### **Part 1: The Body**

#### **EXPERIENCE AND OBJECTIVE THOUGHT The problem of the body**

1. Our perception ends in objects, and the object once constituted, appears as the reason for all the experiences of it which we have had or could have. For example, I see the next-door house from a certain angle, but it would be seen differently from the right bank of the Seine, or from the inside, or again from an aeroplane: the house itself is none of these appearances: it is, as Leibnitz said, the geometrized projection of these perspectives and of all possible perspectives, that is, the perspectiveless position from which all can be derived, the house seen from nowhere. But what do these words mean? Is not to see always to see from somewhere? To say that the house itself is seen from nowhere is surely to say that it is invisible! Yet when I say that I see the house with my own eyes, I am saying something that cannot be challenged; I do not mean that my retina and crystalline lens, my eyes as material organs, go into action and cause me to see it; with only myself to consult, I can know nothing about this. I am trying to express in this way a certain manner of approaching the object, the 'gaze' in short, which is as indubitable as my own thought, as directly known by me. We must try to understand how vision can be brought into being from somewhere without being enclosed in its perspective. (Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, London-New York, Routledge 2002, p. 77-78)

2. to look at an object is to inhabit it, and from this habitation to grasp all things in terms of the aspect which they present to it. But in so far as I see those things too, they remain abodes open to my gaze, and, being potentially lodged in them, I already perceive from various angles the central object of my present vision. Thus every object is the mirror of all others. When I look at the lamp on my table, I attribute to it not only the qualities visible from where I am, but also those which the chimney, the walls, the table can 'see'; but back of my lamp is nothing but the face which it 'shows' to the chimney. I can therefore see an object in so far as objects form a system or a world, and in so far as each one treats the others round it as spectators of its hidden aspects and as guarantee of the permanence of those aspects. Any seeing of an object by me is instantaneously reiterated among all those objects in the world which are apprehended as co-existent, because each of them is all that the others 'see' of it. Our previous formula must therefore be modified; the house itself is not the house seen from nowhere, but the house seen from everywhere. The completed object is translucent, being shot through from all sides by an infinite number of present scrutinies which intersect in its depths leaving nothing hidden. (Ibid p.79)

3. What we have just said about the spatial perspective could equally be said about the temporal. If I contemplate the house attentively and with no thought in my mind, it has something eternal about it, and an atmosphere of torpor seems to be generated by it. It is true that I see it from a certain point in my 'duration', but it is the same house that I saw yesterday when it was a day younger: it is the same house that either an old man or a child might behold. It is true, moreover, that age and change affect

it, but even if it should collapse tomorrow, it will remain for ever true that it existed today: each moment of time calls all the others to witness; (Ibidem)

4. The present still holds on to the immediate past without positing it as an object, and since the immediate past similarly holds its immediate predecessor, past time is wholly collected up and grasped in the present. The same is true of the imminent future which will also have its horizon of imminence. But with my immediate past I have also the horizon of futurity which surrounded it, and thus I have my actual present seen as the future of that past. With the imminent future, I have the horizon of past which will surround it, and therefore my actual present as the past of that future. Thus, through the double horizon of retention and protention, my present may cease to be a factual present quickly carried away and abolished by the flow of duration, and become a fixed and identifiable point in objective time. [...] If I conceive in the image of my own gaze those others which, converging from all directions, explore every corner of the house and define it, I have still only a harmonious and indefinite set of views of the object, but not the object in its plenitude. In the same way, although my present draws into itself time past and time to come, it possesses them only in intention, and even if, for example, the consciousness of my past which I now have seems to me to cover exactly the past as it was, the past which I claim to recapture is not the real past, but my past as I now see it, perhaps after altering it. Similarly in the future I may have a mistaken idea about the present which I now experience. Thus the synthesis of horizons is no more than a presumptive synthesis, operating with certainty and precision only in the immediate vicinity of the object. (Ibid p.80)

5. The whole life of consciousness is characterized by the tendency to posit objects, since it is consciousness, that is to say self knowledge, only in so far as it takes hold of itself and draws itself together in an identifiable object. And yet the absolute positing of a single object is the death of consciousness, since it congeals the whole of existence, as a crystal placed in a solution suddenly crystallizes it. We cannot remain in this dilemma of having to fail to understand either the subject or the object. We must discover the origin of the object at the very centre of our experience; we must describe the emergence of being and we must understand how, paradoxically, there is for us an in-itself. In order not to prejudge the issue, we shall take objective thought on its own terms and not ask it any questions which it does not ask itself. If we are led to rediscover experience behind it, this shift of ground will be attributable only to the difficulties which objective thought itself raises. Let us consider it then at work in the constitution of our body as object, since this is a crucial moment in the genesis of the objective world. It will be seen that one's own body evades, even within science itself, the treatment to which it is intended to subject it. And since the genesis of the objective body is only a moment in the constitution of the object, the body, by withdrawing from the objective world, will carry with it the intentional threads linking it to its surrounding and finally reveal to us the perceiving subject as the perceived world. (Ibid p.82-83)

## **1 THE BODY AS OBJECT AND MECHANISTIC PHYSIOLOGY**

6. The definition of the object is, as we have seen, that it exists *partes extra partes*, and that consequently it acknowledges between its parts, or between itself and other objects only external and

mechanical relations, whether in the narrow sense of motion received and transmitted, or in the wider sense of the relation of function to variable. Where it was desired to insert the organism in the universe of objects and thereby close off that universe, it was necessary to translate the functioning of the body into the language of the *initself* and discover, beneath behaviour, the linear dependence of stimulus and receptor, receptor and *Empfinder*. It was of course realized that in the circuit of behaviour new particular forms emerge, and the theory of specific nervous energy, for example, certainly endowed the organism with the power of transforming the physical world. (Ibid p.84)

7. It follows that the 'sensible quality', the spatial limits set to the percept, and even the presence or absence of a perception, are not de facto effects of the situation outside the organism, but represent the way in which it meets stimulation and is related to it. An excitation is not perceived when it strikes a sensory organ which is not 'attuned' to it. The function of the organism in receiving stimuli is, so to speak, to 'conceive' a certain form of excitation.<sup>8</sup> The 'psychophysical event' is therefore no longer of the type of 'worldly' causality, the brain becomes the seat of a process of 'patterning' which intervenes even before the cortical stage, and which, from the moment the nervous system comes into play, confuses the relations of stimulus to organism. The excitation is seized and reorganized by transversal functions which make it resemble the perception which it is about to arouse. I cannot envisage this form which is traced out in the nervous system, this exhibiting of a structure, as a set of processes in the third person, as the transmission of movement or as the determination of one variable by another. I cannot gain a removed knowledge of it. In so far as I guess what it may be, it is by abandoning the body as an object, *partes extra partes*, and by going back to the body which I experience at this moment, in the manner, for example, in which my hand moves round the object it touches, anticipating the stimuli and itself tracing out the form which I am about to perceive. I cannot understand the function of the living body except by enacting it myself, and except in so far as I am a body which rises towards the world. Thus exteroceptivity demands that stimuli be given a shape; the consciousness of the body invades the body, the soul spreads over all its parts, and behaviour overflows its central sector. But one might reply that this 'bodily experience' is itself a 'representation', a 'psychic fact', and that as such it is at the end of a chain of physical and physiological events which alone can be ascribed to the 'real body'. Is not my body, exactly as are external bodies, an object which acts on receptors and finally gives rise to the consciousness of the body? Is there not an 'interoceptivity' just as there is an 'exteroceptivity'? Cannot I find in the body message-wires sent by the internal organs to the brain, which are installed by nature to provide the soul with the opportunity of feeling its body? Consciousness of the body, and the soul, are thus repressed. The body becomes the highly polished machine which the ambiguous notion of behaviour nearly made us forget. (Ibid p.86-87)

8. There is, then, a certain consistency in our 'world', relatively independent of stimuli, which refuses to allow us to treat being-in-the-world as a collection of reflexes—a certain energy in the pulsation of existence, relatively independent of our voluntary thoughts, which prevents us from treating it as an act of consciousness. It is because it is a preobjective view that being-in-the-world can be distinguished from every third person process, from every modality of the *res extensa*, as from every *cogitatio*, from every first person form of knowledge—and that it can effect the union of the 'psychic' and the 'physiological'. (Ibid. p.92)

9. The body is the vehicle of being in the world, and having a body is, for a living creature, to be involved in a definite environment, to identify oneself with certain projects and be continually

committed to them. In the self-evidence of this complete world in which manipulatable objects still figure, in the force of their movement which still flows towards him, and in which is still present the project of writing or playing the piano, the cripple still finds the guarantee of his wholeness. But in concealing his deficiency from him, the world cannot fail simultaneously to reveal it to him: for if it is true that I am conscious of my body via the world, that it is the unperceived term in the centre of the world towards which all objects turn their face, it is true for the same reason that my body is the pivot of the world: I know that objects have several facets because I could make a tour of inspection of them, and in that sense I am conscious of the world through the medium of my body. It is precisely when my customary world arouses in me habitual intentions that I can no longer, if I have lost a limb, be effectively drawn into it, and the utilizable objects, precisely in so far as they present themselves as utilizable, appeal to a hand which I no longer have. (Ibid. p.94-95)

10. Now as an advent of the impersonal, repression is a universal phenomenon, revealing our condition as incarnate beings by relating it to the temporal structure of being in the world. To the extent that I have 'sense organs', a 'body', and 'psychic functions' comparable with other men's, each of the moments of my experience ceases to be an integrated and strictly unique totality, in which details exist only in virtue of the whole; I become the meeting point of a host of 'causalities'. In so far as I inhabit a 'physical world', in which consistent 'stimuli' and typical situations recur—and not merely the historical world in which situations are never exactly comparable—my life is made up of rhythms which have not their reason in what I have chosen to be, but their condition in the humdrum setting which is mine. (Ibid p.96)

11. The fusion of soul and body in the act, the sublimation of biological into personal existence, and of the natural into the cultural world is made both possible and precarious by the temporal structure of our experience. Every present grasps, by stages, through its horizon of immediate past and near future, the totality of possible time; thus does it overcome the dispersal of instants, and manage to endow our past itself with its definitive meaning, re-integrating into personal existence even that past of all pasts which the stereotyped patterns of our organic behaviour seem to suggest as being at the origin of our volitional being. In this context even reflexes have a meaning, and each individual's style is still visible in them, just as the beating of the heart is felt as far away as the body's periphery. (Ibid p.97-98)

12. the psycho-physical event can no longer be conceived after the model of Cartesian physiology and as the juxtaposition of a process in itself and a cogitatio. The union of soul and body is not an amalgamation between two mutually external terms, subject and object, brought about by arbitrary decree. It is enacted at every instant in the movement of existence. We found existence in the body when we approached it by the first way of access, namely through physiology. We may therefore at this stage examine this first result and make it more explicit, by questioning existence this time on its own nature, which means, by having recourse to psychology. (Ibid p.102)

## 2 THE EXPERIENCE OF THE BODY AND CLASSICAL PSYCHOLOGY

13. In its descriptions of the body from the point of view of the self, classical psychology was already wont to attribute to it 'characteristics' incompatible with the status of an object. In the first place it was stated that my body is distinguishable from the table or the lamp in that I can turn away from the latter whereas my body is constantly perceived. It is therefore an object which does not leave me. But in that case is it still an object? If the object is an invariable structure, it is not one in spite of the changes of perspective, but in that change or through it. It is not the case that ever-renewed perspectives simply provide it with opportunities of displaying its permanence, and with contingent ways of presenting itself to us. It is an object, which means that it is standing in front of us, only because it is observable: situated, that is to say, directly under our hand or gaze, indivisibly overthrown and re-integrated with every movement they make. (Ibid p.103)

14. I can see my eyes in three mirrors, but they are the eyes of someone observing, and I have the utmost difficulty in catching my living glance when a mirror in the street unexpectedly reflects my image back at me. My body in the mirror never stops following my intentions like their shadow, and if observation consists in varying the point of view while keeping the object fixed, then it escapes observation and is given to me as a simulacrum of my tactile body since it imitates the body's actions instead of responding to them by a free unfolding of perspectives. My visual body is certainly an object as far as its parts far removed from my head are concerned, but as we come nearer to the eyes, it becomes divorced from objects, and reserves among them a quasi-space to which they have no access, and when I try to fill this void by recourse to the image in the mirror, it refers me back to an original of the body which is not out there among things, but in my own province, on this side of all things seen. It is no different, in spite of what may appear to be the case, with my tactile body, for if I can, with my left hand, feel my right hand as it touches an object, the right hand as an object is not the right hand as it touches: the first is a system of bones, muscles and flesh brought down at a point of space, the second shoots through space like a rocket to reveal the external object in its place. In so far as it sees or touches the world, my body can therefore be neither seen nor touched. What prevents its ever being an object, ever being 'completely constituted'<sup>1</sup> is that it is that by which there are objects. (Ibid p.105)

15. The other 'characteristics' whereby one's own body was defined were no less interesting, and for the same reasons. My body, it was said, is recognized by its power to give me 'double sensations': when I touch my right hand with my left, my right hand, as an object, has the strange property of being able to feel too. We have just seen that the two hands are never simultaneously in the relationship of touched and touching to each other. When I press my two hands together, it is not a matter of two sensations felt together as one perceives two objects placed side by side, but of an ambiguous set-up in which both hands can alternate the rôles of 'touching' and being 'touched'. What was meant by talking about 'double sensations' is that, in passing from one rôle to the other, I can identify the hand touched as the same one which will in a moment be touching. In other words, in this bundle of bones and muscles which my right hand presents to my left, I can anticipate for an instant the integument or incarnation of that other right hand, alive and mobile, which I thrust towards things in order to explore them. The body catches itself from the outside engaged in a cognitive process; it tries to touch itself while being touched, and initiates 'a kind of reflection'<sup>2</sup> which is sufficient to

distinguish it from objects, of which I can indeed say that they 'touch' my body, but only when it is inert, and therefore without ever catching it unawares in its exploratory function. (Ibid p.106-107)

16. Finally when the psychologists tried to confine 'kinaesthetic sensations' to one's own body, arguing that these sensations present the body's movements to us globally, while attributing the movements of external objects to a mediating perception and to a comparison between successive positions, it could have been objected that movement, expressing a relationship, cannot be felt, but demands a mental operation. This objection, however, would merely have been an indictment of their language. What they were expressing, badly it is true, by 'kinaesthetic sensation', was the originality of the movements which I perform with my body: they directly anticipate the final. Finally when the psychologists tried to confine 'kinaesthetic sensations' to one's own body, arguing that these sensations present the body's movements to us globally, while attributing the movements of external objects to a mediating perception and to a comparison between successive positions, it could have been objected that movement, expressing a relationship, cannot be felt, but demands a mental operation. This objection, however, would merely have been an indictment of their language. What they were expressing, badly it is true, by 'kinaesthetic sensation', was the originality of the movements which I perform with my body: they directly anticipate the final. (Ibid p.107-108)

17. Psychologists did not realize that in treating the experience of the body in this way they were simply, in accordance with the scientific approach, shelving a problem which ultimately could not be buried. The inadequacy of my perception was taken as a de facto inadequacy resulting from the organization of my sensory apparatus; the presence of my body was taken as a de facto presence springing from its constant action on my receptive nervous system; finally the union of soul and body, which was presupposed by these two explanations, was understood, in Cartesian fashion, as a de facto union whose de jure possibility need not be established, because the fact, as the starting point of knowledge, was eliminated from the final result. Now the psychologist could imitate the scientist and, for a moment at least, see his body as others saw it, and conversely see the bodies of others as mechanical things with no inner life. The contribution made from the experiences of others had the effect of dimming the structure of his own, and conversely, having lost contact with himself he became blind to the behaviour of others. (Ibid p.109)

18. Before being an objective fact, the union of soul and body had to be, then, a possibility of consciousness itself and the question arose as to what the perceiving subject is if he is to be able to experience a body as his own. There was no longer a fact passively submitted to, but one assumed. To be a consciousness or rather to be an experience is to hold inner communication with the world, the body and other people, to be with them instead of being beside them. To concern oneself with psychology is necessarily to encounter, beneath objective thought which moves among ready-made things, a first opening upon things without which there would be no objective knowledge. The psychologist could not fail to rediscover himself as experience, which means as an immediate presence to the past, to the world, to the body and to others at the very moment when he was trying to see himself as an object among objects. Let us then return to the 'characteristics' of one's own body and resume the study of it where we left off. By doing so we shall trace the progress of modern psychology and thereby effect along with it the return to experience. (Ibid p. 110-111)

### 3 THE SPATIALITY OF ONE'S OWN BODY AND MOTILITY

19. But the notion of body image is ambiguous, as are all notions which make their appearance at turning points in scientific advance. They can be fully developed only through a reform of methods. At first, therefore, they are used only in a sense which falls short of their full sense, and it is their immanent development which bursts the bounds of methods hitherto used. 'Body image' was at first understood to mean a compendium of our bodily experience, capable of giving a commentary and meaning to the internal impressions and the impression of possessing a body at any moment. It was supposed to register for me the positional changes of the parts of my body for each movement of one of them, the position of each local stimulus in the body as a whole, an account of the movements performed at every instant during a complex gesture, in short a continual translation into visual language of the kinaesthetic and articular impressions of the moment. (Ibid p.113)

20. We are therefore feeling our way towards a second definition of the body image: it is no longer seen as the straightforward result of associations established during experience, but a total awareness of my posture in the intersensory world, a 'form' in the sense used by Gestalt psychology.<sup>4</sup> But already this second definition too is superseded by the analyses of the psychologists. It is inadequate to say that my body is a form, that is to say a phenomenon in which the totality takes precedence over the parts. How is such a phenomenon possible? Because a form, compared to the mosaic of a physico-chemical body or to that of 'cenesthesia', is a new type of existence. The fact that the paralysed limb of the anosognosic no longer counts in the subject's body image, is accounted for by the body image's being neither the mere copy nor even the global awareness of the existing parts of the body, and by its active integration of these latter only in proportion to their value to the organism's projects. Psychologists often say that the body image is dynamic.<sup>5</sup> Brought down to a precise sense, this term means that my body appears to me as an attitude directed towards a certain existing or possible task. And indeed its spatiality is not, like that of external objects or like that of 'spatial sensations', a spatiality of position, but a spatiality of situation. If I stand in front of my desk and lean on it with both hands, only my hands are stressed and the whole of my body trails behind them like the tail of a comet. It is not that I am unaware of the whereabouts of my shoulders or back, but these are simply swallowed up in the position of my hands, and my whole posture can be read so to speak in the pressure they exert on the table. (Ibid p.114-115)

21. When I say that an object is on a table, I always mentally put myself either in the table or in the object, and I apply to them a category which theoretically fits the relationship of my body to external objects. Stripped of this anthropological association, the word on is indistinguishable from the word 'under' or the word 'beside'. Even if the universal form of space is that without which there would be for us no bodily space, it is not that by which there is one. Even if the form is not the setting in which, but the means whereby the content is posited, it is not the sufficient means of this act of positing as far as bodily space is concerned, and to this extent the bodily content remains, in relation to it, something opaque, fortuitous and unintelligible. The only solution along this road would be to acknowledge that the body's spatiality has no meaning of its own to distinguish it from objective spatiality, which would do away with the content as a phenomenon and hence with the problem of its relation to form. (Ibid p.116)

22. Consciousness is being-towards-the-thing through the intermediary of the body. A movement is learned when the body has understood it, that is, when it has incorporated it into its 'world', and to move one's body is to aim at things through it; it is to allow oneself to respond to their call, which is made upon it independently of any representation. Motility, then, is not, as it were, a handmaid of consciousness, transporting the body to that point in space of which we have formed a representation before hand. In order that we may be able to move our body towards an object, the object must first exist for it, our body must not belong to the realm of the 'in-itself'. (Ibid p. 159-161)

23. The main areas of my body are devoted to actions, and participate in their value, and asking why common sense makes the head the seat of thought raises the same problem as asking how the organism distributes, through 'organ space', musical significances. But our body is not merely one expressive space among the rest, for that is simply the constituted body. It is the origin of the rest, expressive movement itself, that which causes them to begin to exist as things, under our hands and eyes. Although our body does not impose definite instincts upon us from birth, as it does upon animals, it does at least give to our life the form of generality, and develops our personal acts into stable dispositional tendencies. In this sense our nature is not long-established custom, since custom presupposes the form of passivity derived from nature. The body is our general medium for having a world. Sometimes it is restricted to the actions necessary for the conservation of life, and accordingly it posits around us a biological world; at other times, elaborating upon these primary actions and moving from their literal to a figurative meaning, it manifests through them a core of new significance: this is true of motor habits such as dancing. Sometimes, finally, the meaning aimed at cannot be achieved by the body's natural means; it must then build itself an instrument, and it projects thereby around itself a cultural world. At all levels it performs the same function which is to endow the instantaneous expressions of spontaneity with 'a little renewable action and independent existence'. (Ibid p.169)

24. To sum up, what we have discovered through the study of motility, is a new meaning of the word 'meaning'. The great strength of intellectualist psychology and idealist philosophy comes from their having no difficulty in showing that perception and thought have an intrinsic significance and cannot be explained in terms of the external association of fortuitously agglomerated contents. The Cogito was the coming to self-awareness of this inner core. But all meaning was ipso facto conceived as an act of thought, as the work of a pure I, and although rationalism easily refuted empiricism, it was itself unable to account for the variety of experience, for the element of senselessness in it, for the contingency of contents. Bodily experience forces us to acknowledge an imposition of meaning which is not the work of a universal constituting consciousness, a meaning which clings to certain contents. My body is that meaningful core which behaves like a general function, and which nevertheless exists, and is susceptible to disease. In it we learn to know that union of essence and existence which we shall find again in perception generally, and which we shall then have to describe more fully. (Ibid p. 170)