

Handout 2° lesson ‘Philosophy of perception’

2 ‘association’ and the ‘projection of memories’

1. Once introduced, the notion of sensation distorts any analysis of perception. Already a ‘figure’ on a ‘background’ contains, as we have seen, much more than the qualities presented at a given time. It has an ‘outline’, which does not ‘belong’ to the background and which ‘stands out’ from it; it is ‘stable’ and offers a ‘compact’ area of colour, the background on the other hand having no bounds, being of indefinite colouring and ‘running on’ under the figure. The different parts of the whole—for example, the portions of the figure nearest to the background—possess, then, besides a colour and qualities, a particular significance. The question is, what makes up this significance, what do the words ‘edge’ and ‘outline’ mean, what happens when a collection of qualities is apprehended as a figure on a background? But once sensation is introduced as an element of knowledge, we are left no leeway in our reply. A being capable of sense-experience (*sentir*)—in the sense of coinciding absolutely with an impression or a quality—could have no other mode of knowing. That a quality, an area of red should signify something, that it should be, for example, seen as a patch on a background, means that the red is not this warm colour which I feel and live in and lose myself in, but that it announces something else which it does not include, that it exercises a cognitive function, and that its parts together make up a whole to which each is related without leaving its place. Henceforth the red is no longer merely there, it represents something for me, and what it represents is not possessed as a ‘real part’ of my perception, but only aimed at as an ‘intentional part’. (Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, London-New York, Routledge 2002, p. 15-16);
2. The fact is that a shape is not only the sum of present data, for these latter call up other complementary ones. When I say that I have before me a red patch, the meaning of the word patch is provided by previous experiences which have taught me the use of the word. The distribution in space of the three points A, B and C recalls other comparable distributions, and I say that I see a circle. Nor does the appeal to experience gained affect the empiricist thesis. The ‘association of ideas’ which brings past experience into play can restore only extrinsic connections, and can be no more than one itself, because the original experience involved no others. Once consciousness has been defined as sensation, every mode of consciousness will have to derive its clarity from sensation. The word circle, or the word order, could only signify, in the earlier experiences to which I refer, the concrete manner in which our sensations distributed themselves before us, a certain *de facto* arrangement, a way of sensing (*sentir*). (Ibid p. 17);
3. ‘How could I have failed to see that these pieces of wood were an integral part of the ship? For they were of the same colour as the ship, and fitted well enough into its superstructure.’ But these reasons for correct perception were not given as reasons beforehand. The unity of the object is based on the foreshadowing of an imminent order which is about to spring upon us a reply to questions merely latent in the landscape. It solves a problem set only in the form of a vague feeling of uneasiness, it organizes elements which up to that moment did

not belong to the same universe and which, for that reason, as Kant said with profound insight, could not be associated.' (Ibid p. 20);

4. How could the evocation of memories come about unless guided by the look of the strictly visible data, and if it is thus guided, what use is it then, since the word already has its structure or its features before taking anything from the store house of memory? Obviously it is the analysis of illusions which has lent credence to the 'projection of memories', and which follows roughly this sketchy reasoning: illusory perception cannot rest upon 'present data', since I read 'deduction' when the word printed is 'destruction'. (Ibid p. 23);
5. In short, it is a mistake to think that with the 'projection of memories' we are bringing into perception some mental activity, and that we have taken up a position opposed to that of empiricism. The theory is no more than a consequence, a tardy and ineffective correction of empiricism, accepting its postulates, sharing the same difficulties and, like empiricism, concealing phenomena instead of elucidating them. The postulate, as always, consists in deducing the given from what happens to be furnished by the sense organs. For example, in the illusion of proofreaders, the elements actually seen are reconstituted according to the eye movements, the speed of reading and the time needed for the retinal impression. Then, by subtracting these theoretical data from total perception, the 'recollected elements' are obtained which, in turn, are treated as mental entities. Perception is built up with states of consciousness as a house is built with bricks, and a mental chemistry is invoked which fuses these materials into a compact whole. Like all empiricist theories, this one describes only blind processes which could never be the equivalent of knowledge, because there is, in this mass of sensations and memories, nobody who sees, nobody who can appreciate the falling into line of datum and recollection, and, on the other hand, no solid object protected by a meaning against the teeming horde of memories. We must then discard this postulate which obscures the whole question. The cleavage between given and remembered, arrived at by way of objective causes, is arbitrary. When we come back to phenomena we find, as a basic layer of experience, a whole already pregnant with an irreducible meaning: not sensations with gaps between them, into which memories may be supposed to slip, but the features, the layout of a landscape or a word, in spontaneous accord with the intentions of the moment, as with earlier experience. It is at this stage that the real problem of memory in perception arises, in association with the general problem of perceptual consciousness. We want to know how, by its own vitality, and without carrying complementary material into a mythical unconscious, consciousness can, in course of time, modify the structure of its surroundings; how, at every moment, its former experience is present to it in the form of a horizon which it can reopen—'if it chooses to take that horizon as a theme of knowledge'—in an act of recollection, but which it can equally leave on the fringe of experience, and which then immediately provides the perceived with a present atmosphere and significance. (Ibid p. 24-25)
6. Once again the empiricist can always build up, with psychic atoms, near equivalents of all these structures. But the inventory of the perceived world given in the following chapters will increasingly show it up as a kind of mental blindness, and as the system least able to give an inclusive account of experience as it is revealed to us, while on the other hand reflection embraces empiricism's subordinate truth and assigns to it its proper place. (Ibid p.29);

3 *'Attention' and 'judgement'*

7. The discussion of traditional prejudices has so far been directed against empiricism, but in fact it was not empiricism alone that we were attacking. We must now show that its intellectualist antithesis is on the same level as empiricism itself. Both take the objective world as the object of their analysis, when this comes first neither in time nor in virtue of its meaning; and both are incapable of expressing the peculiar way in which perceptual consciousness constitutes its object. Both keep their distance in relation to perception, instead of sticking closely to it. This may be shown by studying the history of the concept of attention. It is deduced, in empiricist thinking, from the 'constancy hypothesis', or, as we have explained, from the priority of the objective world. Even if what we perceive does not correspond to the objective properties of the source of the stimulus, the constancy hypothesis forces us to admit that the 'normal sensations' are already there. (Ibid. p. 30)
8. Empiricism cannot see that we need to know what we are looking for, otherwise we would not be looking for it, and intellectualism fails to see that we need to be ignorant of what we are looking for, or equally again we should not be searching. They are in agreement in that neither can grasp consciousness in the act of learning, and that neither attaches due importance to that circumscribed ignorance, that still 'empty' but already determinate intention which is attention itself. Whether attention gets what it wants by ever-renewed miracles or whether it possesses it in advance, in both cases silence is maintained over the production of the object. Whether it be a collection of qualities or a system of relationships, no sooner does it exist than it must be pure, transparent, impersonal—not imperfect—a truth for one moment of my life and of my knowledge as it emerges into consciousness. Perceptual consciousness is confused with the exact forms of scientific consciousness and the indeterminate does not enter into the definition of the mind. In spite of the intentions of intellectualism, the two doctrines, then, have this idea in common that attention creates nothing, since a world of impressions in itself or a universe of determining thought are equally independent of the action of mind. (Ibid p. 33)
9. The criticism of these prejudices, on the other hand, allows the world of colours to be perceived as a secondary formation, based on a series of 'physiognomic' distinctions: that between the 'warm' and 'cold' shades, that between the 'coloured' and the 'non-coloured'. We cannot compare these phenomena, which take the place of colour in children, to any determinate quality, and in the same way the 'strange' colours seen by a diseased person cannot be identified with any colour of the spectrum. The first perception of colours properly speaking, then, is a change of the structure of consciousness, the establishment of a new dimension of experience, the setting forth of an a priori. (Ibid p.34-35)
10. The miracle of consciousness consists in its bringing to light, through attention, phenomena which re-establish the unity of the object in a new dimension at the very moment when they destroy it. Thus attention is neither an association of images, nor the return to itself of thought already in control of its objects, but the active constitution of a new object which

makes explicit and articulate what was until then presented as no more than an indeterminate horizon. At the same time as it sets attention in motion, the object is at every moment recaptured and placed once more in a state of dependence on it. It gives rise to the 'knowledge bringing event', which is to transform it, only by means of the still ambiguous meaning which it requires that event to clarify; (Ibidem)

11. This passage from the indeterminate to the determinate, this recasting at every moment of its own history in the unity of a new meaning, is thought itself. 'The work of the mind exists only in act.' The result of the act of attention is not to be found in its beginning. If the moon on the horizon appears to me no bigger than at the zenith, when I look at it through a telescope or a cardboard tube, the conclusion cannot be drawn that in free vision equally its appearance is invariable. This is what empiricism believes, because it is not concerned with what we see, but with what we ought to see, according to the retinal image. It is also what intellectualism believes because it describes de facto perception according to the data of 'analytic' and attentive perception, in which the moon in fact resumes its true apparent diameter. The precise and entirely determinate world is still posited in the first place, no longer perhaps as the cause of our perceptions, but as their immanent end. If the world is to be possible, it must be implied in the first adumbration of consciousness, as the transcendental deduction so forcibly brings out. And that is why the moon on the horizon should never appear bigger than it is. Psychological reflection, on the contrary, makes us put the world of the exact back into its cradle of consciousness, and ask how the very idea of the world or of exact truth is possible, and look for its first appearance in consciousness. When I look quite freely and naturally, the various parts of the field interact and motivate this enormous moon on the horizon, this measureless size which nevertheless is a size. Consciousness must be faced with its own unreflective life in things and awakened to its own history which it was forgetting: such is the true part that philosophical reflection has to play, and thus do we arrive at a true theory of attention. (Ibid p.36)

12. Descartes lets us know that by the word 'judgement' he is thinking of the constitution of a meaning for the thing perceived which is not prior to the perception itself and which seems to emanate from it. The vital knowledge or 'natural inclination' which shows us the union of body and soul, once the light of nature has taught us to distinguish them, is a thing which it seems contradictory to guarantee by divine truthfulness; for this is after all nothing but the intrinsic clarity of the idea, and can in any case validate only self-evident thoughts. But perhaps Descartes' philosophy consists in embracing this contradiction. When Descartes says that the understanding knows itself incapable of knowing the union of soul and body and leaves this knowledge for life to achieve, this means that the act of understanding presents itself as reflection on an unreflective experience which it does not absorb either in fact or in theory. When I discover the intelligible structure of the piece of wax, I do not identify myself with some absolute thought in relation to which the wax is a mere result, I do not constitute it, I re-constitute it. 'Natural judgment' is nothing but the phenomenon of passivity. It will always be the task of perception to know perception. Reflection never lifts itself out of any situation, nor does the analysis of perception do away with the fact of perception, the thisness of the percept or the inherence of perceptual consciousness in some temporality and some locality. Reflection is not absolutely transparent for itself, it is always given to itself in an experience, in the Kantian sense of the word, it always springs up

without itself knowing whence it springs and offers itself to me as a gift of nature. But if the description of the unreflective experience remains valid after reflection and the Sixth Meditation after the Second, conversely this unreflective experience is known to us only through reflection and cannot be posited outside itself as an unknowable final stage. Between the self which analyses perception and the self which perceives, there is always a distance. But in the concrete act of reflection, I abolish this distance, I prove by that very token that I am capable of knowing what I was perceiving, I control in practice the discontinuity of the two selves, and it would seem that, in the last resort, the significance of the cogito lies not in revealing a universal constituting force or in reducing perception to intellection, but in establishing the fact of reflection which both pierces and sustains the opacity of perception. It would be quite consistent with the Cartesian intention to have thus identified reason and the human condition, and it might be held that the ultimate significance of Cartesianism is to be found here. The 'natural judgement' of intellectualism in this case anticipates the Kantian judgement which sees the birth of the individual object's meaning in the object itself, and does not see it as imposed ready made. Cartesianism, like Kantianism, would seem to have seen quite clearly that the problem of perception resides in its being an originating knowledge. (Ibid p 48-50)

13. Now, as we have seen, the perception of our own body and the perception of external things provide an example of non-positing consciousness, that is, of consciousness not in possession of fully determinate objects, that of a logic lived through which cannot account for itself, and that of an immanent meaning which is not clear to itself and becomes fully aware of itself only through experiencing certain natural signs. These phenomena cannot be assimilated by objective thought, and that is why Gestalt psychology which, like all psychology, is imprisoned within the 'self-evident truths' of science and of the world, can choose only between reason and cause, and that is why any criticism of intellectualism which it undertakes ends with the rehabilitation of realism and causal thinking. On the other hand, the phenomenological notion of motivation is one of those 'fluid' concepts which have to be formed if we want to get back to phenomena. One phenomenon releases another, not by means of some objective efficient cause, like those which link together natural events, but by the meaning which it holds out—there is a *raison d'être* for a thing which guides the flow of phenomena without being explicitly laid down in any one of them, a sort of operative reason. (Ibid p.57)

4. The phenomenal field

14. It will now be seen in what direction the following chapters will carry their inquiry. 'Sense experience'* has become once more a question for us. Empiricism had emptied it of all mystery by bringing it down to the possession of a quality. This had been possible only at the price of moving far from the ordinary acceptation of the word. Between sense experience and knowing, common experience establishes a difference which is not that between the quality and the concept. This rich notion of sense experience is still to be found in Romantic usage, for example in Herder. It points to an experience in which we are given not 'dead' qualities, but active ones. A wooden wheel placed on the ground is not, for sight,

the same thing as a wheel bearing a load. A body at rest because no force is being exerted upon it is again for sight not the same thing as a body in which opposing forces are in equilibrium. (Ibid p.60)

15. Sense experience, on the other hand, invests the quality with vital value, grasping it first in its meaning for us, for that heavy mass which is our body, whence it comes about that it always involves a reference to the body. The problem is to understand these strange relationships which are woven between the parts of the landscape, or between it and me as incarnate subject, and through which an object perceived can concentrate in itself a whole scene or become the imago of a whole segment of life. Sense experience is that vital communication with the world which makes it present as a familiar setting of our life. It is to it that the perceived object and the perceiving subject owe their thick ness. It is the intentional tissue which the effort to know will try to take apart. With the problem of sense experience, we rediscover that of association and passivity. (Ibid p.61)
16. So, 'sensation' and 'judgement' have together lost their apparent clearness: we have observed that they were clear only as long as the prejudice in favour of the world was maintained. As soon as one tried by means of them, to picture consciousness in the process of perceiv ing, to revive the forgotten perceptual experience, and to relate them to it, they were found to be inconceivable. By dint of making these diff iculties more explicit, we were drawn implicitly into a new kind of analysis, into a new dimension in which they were destined to disap pear. The criticism of the constancy hypothesis and more generally the reduction of the idea of 'the world' opened up a phenomenal field which now has to be more accurately circumscribed, and suggested the rediscovery of a direct experience which must be, at least provisionally, assigned its place in relation to scientific knowledge, and to psychological and philosophical reflection. Science and philosophy have for centuries been sustained by unquestioning faith in perception. Perception opens a window on to things. This means that it is directed, quasi-teleologically, towards a truth in itself in which the reason underlying all appearances is to be found. The tacit thesis of perception is that at every instant experience can be co-ordinated with that of the previous instant and that of the following, and my perspective with that of other consciousnesses— that all contradictions can be removed, that monadic and intersubjec tive experience is one unbroken text—that what is now indeterminate for me could become determinate for a more complete knowledge, which is as it were realized in advance in the thing, or rather which is the thing itself. (Ibid p. 62)
17. This phenomenal field is not an 'inner world', the 'phenomenon' is not a 'state of consciousness', or a 'mental fact', and the experience of phenomena is not an act of introspection or an intuition in Bergson's sense. It has long been the practice to define the object of psychology by saying that it was 'without extension' and 'accessible to one person only', with the result that this peculiar object could be grasped only by means of a special kind of act, 'internal perception' or introspection, in which subject and object were mingled and knowledge achieved by an act of coinciding. The return to the 'immediate data of consciousness' became therefore a hopeless enterprise since the philosophical scrutiny was

trying to be what it could not, in principle, see. The difficulty was not only to destroy the prejudice of the exterior, as all philosophies urge the beginner to do, or to describe the mind in a language made for representing things. It was much more fundamental, since inferiority, defined by the impression, by its nature evaded every attempt to express it. It was not only the imparting of philosophical intuitions to others which became difficult—or rather reduced itself to a sort of incantation designed to induce in them experiences comparable to the philosopher's—but the philosopher himself could not be clearly aware of what he saw in the instant, since he would have had to think it, that is fix and distort it. The immediate was therefore a lonely, blind and mute life. The return to the phenomenal presents none of these peculiarities. The sensible configuration of an object or a gesture, which the criticism of the constancy hypothesis brings before our eyes, is not grasped in some inexpressible coincidence, it 'is understood' through a sort of act of appropriation which we all experience when we say that we have 'found' the rabbit in the foliage of a puzzle, or that we have 'caught' a slight gesture. (Ibid p.66-67)

18. That is why we had to begin our examination of perception with psychological considerations. If we had not done so, we would not have understood the whole meaning of the transcendental problem, since we would not, starting from the natural attitude, have methodically followed the procedures which lead to it. We had to frequent the phenomenal field and become acquainted, through psychological descriptions, with the subject of phenomena. If we were to avoid placing ourselves from the start, as does reflexive philosophy, in a transcendental dimension assumed to be eternally given, thus by-passing the full problem of constitution. We could not begin, however, our psychological description without suggesting that once purged of all psychologism it can become a philosophical method. In order to revive perceptual experience buried under its own results, it would not have been enough to present descriptions of them which might possibly not have been understood, we had to establish by philosophical references and anticipations the point of view from which they might appear true. Thus we could begin neither without psychology nor with psychology alone. Experience anticipates a philosophy and philosophy is merely an elucidated experience. But now that the phenomenal field has been sufficiently circumscribed, let us enter this ambiguous domain and let us make sure of our first steps as far as the psychologist is concerned, until the psychologist's self-scrutiny leads us, by way of a second-order reflection, to the phenomenon of the phenomenon, and decisively transforms the phenomenal field into a transcendental one. (Ibid p.73-74)