Handout 4° lesson 'Philosophy of perception'

4 THE SYNTHESIS OF ONE'S OWN BODY

1. The analysis of bodily space has led us to results which may be general ized. We notice for the first time, with regard to our own body, what is true of all perceived things: that the perception of space and the per ception of the thing, the spatiality of the thing and its being as a thing are not two distinct problems. The Cartesian and Kantian tradition already teaches us this; it makes the object's spatial limits its essence; it shows in existence partes extra partes, and in spatial distribution, the only possible significance of existence in itself. But it elucidates the perception of the object through the perception of space, whereas the experience of our own body teaches us to embed space in existence. Intellectualism clearly sees that the 'motif of the thing' and the 'motif of space'1 are interwoven, but reduces the former to the latter. Experi ence discloses beneath objective space, in which the body eventually finds its place, a primitive spatiality of which experience is merely the outer covering and which merges with the body's very being. To be a body, is to be tied to a certain world, as we have seen; our body is not primarily in space: it is of it. Anosognosics who describe their arm as 'like a snake', long and cold, do not, strictly speaking, fail to recognize its objective outline and, even when the patient looks unsuccessfully for his arm or fastens it in order not to lose it, he knows well enough where his arm is, since that is where he looks for it and fastens it. If, however, patients experience their arm's space as something alien, if generally speaking I can feel my body's space as vast or minute despite the evidence of my senses, this is because there exists an affective presence and enlargement for which objective spatiality is not a suf f icient condition, as anosognosia shows, and indeed not even a neces sary condition, as is shown by the phantom arm. Bodily spatiality is the deployment of one's bodily being, the way in which the body comes into being as a body. In trying to analyse it, we were therefore simply anticipating what we have to say about bodily synthesis in general. We find in the unity of the body the same implicatory structure as we have already described in discussing space. The various parts of my body, its visual, tactile and motor aspects are not simply co-ordinated. (Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, London-New York, Routledge 2002, p. 171-172)

2. I do not translate the 'data of touch' into the language of seeing' or vice versa—I do not bring together one by one the parts of my body; this translation and this unification are performed once and for all within me: they are my body, itself. Are we then to say that we perceive our body in virtue of its law of construction, as we know in advance all the possible facets of a cube in virtue of its geometrical structure? But—to say nothing at this stage about external objects—our own body acquaints us with a species of unity which is not a matter of subsumption under a law. In so far as it stands before me and presents its systematic variations to the observer, the external object lends itself to a cursory mental examin ation of its elements and it may, at least by way of preliminary approximation, be defined in terms of the law of their variation. But I am not in front of my body, I am in it, or rather I am it. Neither its variations nor their constant can, therefore, be expressly posited. We do not merely behold as spectators the relations between the parts of our body, and the correlations between the visual and tactile body: we are ourselves the unifier of these arms and legs,

the person who both sees and touches them. The body is, to use Leibnitz's term, the 'effective law' of its changes. (Ibid p.173)

3. What unites 'tactile sensations' in the hand and links them to visual perceptions of the same hand, and to perceptions of other bodily areas, is a certain style informing my manual gestures and implying in turn a certain style of finger movements, and contributing, in the last resort, to a certain bodily bearing. The body is to be compared, not to a physical object, but rather to a work of art. In a picture or a piece of music the idea is incommunicable by means other than the display of colours and sounds. (Ibid p.174)

4. Just as we saw earlier that motor habit threw light on the particular nature of bodily space, so here habit in general enables us to under stand the general synthesis of one's own body. And, just as the analysis of bodily spatiality foreshadowed that of the unity of one's own body, so we may extend to all habits what we have said about motor ones. In fact every habit is both motor and perceptual, because it lies, as we have said, between explicit perception and actual movement, in the basic function which sets boundaries to our field of vision and our field of action. Learning to find one's way among things with a stick, which we gave a little earlier as an example of motor habit, is equally an example of perceptual habit. (Ibid p. 175)

5. The gaze gets more or less from things according to the way in which it questions them, ranges over or dwells on them. To learn to see colours it is to acquire a certain style of seeing, a new use of one's own body: it is to enrich and recast the body image. Whether a system of motor or perceptual powers, our body is not an object for an 'I think', it is a grouping of lived-through meanings which moves towards its equi librium. Sometimes a new cluster of meanings is formed; our former movements are integrated into a fresh motor entity, the first visual data into a fresh sensory entity, our natural powers suddenly come together in a richer meaning, which hitherto has been merely foreshadowed in our perceptual or practical field, and which has made itself felt in our experience by no more than a certain lack, and which by its coming suddenly reshuffles the elements of our equilibrium and fulfils our blind expectation. (Ibid p.177)

5 THE BODY IN ITS SEXUAL BEING

6. Our constant aim is to elucidate the primary function whereby we bring into existence, for ourselves, or take a hold upon, space, the object or the instrument, and to describe the body as the place where this appropriation occurs. Now so long as we considered space or the things perceived, it was not easy to rediscover the relationship between the embodied subject and its world, because it is transformed by its own activity into the intercourse between the epistemological subject and the object. Indeed the natural world presents itself as existing in itself over and above its existence for me; the act of transcendence whereby the subject is thrown open to the world runs away with itself and we find ourselves in the presence of a nature which has no need to be perceived in order to exist. If then we want to bring to light the birth of being for us, we must finally look at that area of

our experience which clearly has significance and reality only for us, and that is our affective life. Let us try to see how a thing or a being begins to exist for us through desire or love and we shall thereby come to understand better how things and beings can exist in general. (Ibid p.178)

7. The objective world plays less and less directly on the keyboard of 'ele mentary' affective states, but their value remains nevertheless as a pos sibility of pleasure and pain. Apart from experience of pleasure and pain, of which there is nothing to be said, the subject stands out by his power of representation, and affectivity is not recognized as a distinct ive form of consciousness. If this conception were correct, any sexual incapacity ought to amount either to the loss of certain representations or else to a weakening of the capacity for satisfaction. We shall see that this is not the case. (Ibid p.179)

8. Erotic perception is not a cogitatio which aims at a cogitatum; through one body it aims at another body, and takes place in the world, not in a consciousness. A sight has a sexual significance for me, not when I consider, even confusedly, its possible relationship to the sexual organs or to pleasurable states, but when it exists for my body, for that power always available for bringing together into an erotic situation the stimuli applied, and adapting sexual conduct to it. There is an erotic 'comprehension' not of the order of understanding, since understand ing subsumes an experience, once perceived, under some idea, while desire comprehends blindly by linking body to body. Even in the case of sexuality, which has nevertheless long been regarded as pre eminently the type of bodily function, we are concerned, not with a peripheral involuntary action, but with an intentionality which follows the general flow of existence and yields to its movements. (Ibid p.181)

9. Thus sexuality is not an autonomous cycle. It has internal links with the whole active and cognitive being, these three sectors of behaviour displaying but a single typical structure, and standing in a relationship to each other of reciprocal expression. Here we concur with the most lasting discoveries of psychoanalysis. Whatever the theoretical declara tions of Freud may have been, psychoanalytical research is in fact led to an explanation of man, not in terms of his sexual substructure, but to a discovery in sexuality of relations and attitudes which had previously been held to reside in consciousness. Thus the significance of psycho analysis is less to make psychology biological than to discover a dialectical process in functions thought of as 'purely bodily', and to rein tegrate sexuality into the human being. A breakaway disciple of Freud shows, for example, that frigidity is scarcely ever bound up with anatomical or physiological conditions, but that it expresses in most cases a refusal of orgasm, of femininity or of sexuality, and this in turn expresses the rejection of the sexual partner and of the destiny which he represents. It would be a mistake to imagine that even with Freud psychoanalysis rules out the description of psychological motives, and is opposed to the phenomenological method; psychoanalysis has, on the contrary, albeit unwittingly, helped to develop it by declaring, as Freud puts it, that every human action 'has a meaning',4 and by making every effort to understand the event, short of relating it to mechanical circumstances. (Ibid p. 182-183)

10. Must we then say, con versely, that the sexual phenomenon is merely an expression of our general manner of projecting our setting? But the sexual life is not a mere reflection of existence: an

effective life, in the political and ideo logical field, for example, can be associated with impaired sexuality, and may even benefit from such impairment. On the other hand, the sexual life may, as in Casanova's case for example, possess a kind of technical perfection corresponding to no particularly vigorous version of being in the world. Even though the sexual apparatus has, running through it, the general current of life, it may monopolize it to its own advantage. Life is particularized into separate currents. If words are to have any meaning, the sexual life is a sector of our life bearing a special relation to the existence of sex. There can be no question of allowing sexuality to become lost in existence, as if it were no more then an epiphenomenon. For if we admit that the sexual troubles of neurotics are an expression of their basic drama in magnified form, it still remains to be seen why the sexual expression of the drama is more immature, more frequent and more striking than the rest; and why sexuality is not only a symptom, but a highly important one. (Ibid. p.184)

11. The body's rôle is to ensure this metamorphosis. It transforms ideas into things, and my mimicry of sleep into real sleep. The body can symbolize existence because it realizes it and is its actuality. It sustains its dual existential action of systole and diastole. On the one hand, indeed, it is the possibility enjoyed by my existence of discarding itself, of making itself anonymous and passive, and of bogging itself down in a scholastic. In the case of the girl just discussed, the move towards the future, towards the living present or towards the past, the power of learning, of maturing, of entering into communication with others, have become, as it were, arrested in a bodily symptom, existence is tied up and the body has become 'the place where life hides away'. (Ibid p.190)

12. Understood in this way, the relation of expression to thing expressed, or of sign to meaning is not a one-way relationship like that between original text and translation. Neither body nor existence can be regarded as the original of the human being, since they presuppose each other, and because the body is solidified or generalized existence, and existence a perpetual incarnation. What is particularly important, is that when we say that sexuality has an existential significance or that it expresses existence, this is not to be understood as meaning that the sexual drama is in the last analysis only a manifestation or a symptom of an existential drama. The same reason that prevents us from 'reducing' existence to the body or to sexuality, prevents us also from 'reducing' sexuality to existence: the fact is that existence is not a set of facts (like 'psychic facts') capable of being reduced to others or to which they can reduce themselves, but the ambiguous setting of their inter-communication, the point at which their boundaries run into each other, or again their woven fabric. There is no question of making human existence walk 'on its head'. There is no doubt at all that we must recognize in modesty, desire and love in general a metaphysical significance, which means that they are incomprehensible if man is treated as a machine governed by natural laws, or even as 'a bundle of instincts', and that they are relevant to man as a consciousness and as a freedom. Usually man does not show his body, and, when he does, it is either nervously or with an intention to fascinate. He has the impres sion that the alien gaze which runs over his body is stealing it from him, or else, on the other hand, that the display of his body will deliver the other person up to him, defenceless, and that in this case the other will be reduced to servitude. (Ibid p.192-193)

13. In other words, there is in human existence no unconditioned possession, and yet no fortuitous attribute. Human existence will force us to revise our usual notion of necessity and contingency, because it is the transformation of contingency into necessity by the act of taking in hand. All that we are, we are on the basis of a de facto situation which we appropriate to ourselves and which we ceaselessly transform by a sort of escape which is never an unconditioned freedom. There is no explanation of sexuality which reduces it to anything other than itself, for it is already something other than itself, and indeed, if we like, our whole being. Sexuality, it is said, is dramatic because we commit our whole personal life to it. But just why do we do this? Why is our body, for us, the mirror of our being, unless because it is a natural self, a current of given existence, with the result that we never know whether the forces which bear us on are its or ours—or with the result rather that they are never entirely either its or ours. There is no outstripping of sexuality any more than there is any sexuality enclosed within itself. No one is saved and no one is totally lost. (Ibid p.198)

6 THE BODY AS EXPRESSION, AND SPEECH

14. We have seen in the body a unity distinct from that of the scientific object. We have just discovered, even in its 'sexual function', intention ality and sense-giving powers. In trying to describe the phenomenon of speech and the specific act of meaning, we shall have the opportun ity to leave behind us, once and for all, the traditional subject-object dichotomy. The realization that speech is an originating realm naturally comes late. Here as everywhere, the relation of having, which can be seen in the very etymology of the word habit, is at first concealed by relations belonging to the domain of being, or, as we may equally say, by ontic relations obtaining within the world.1 The possession of language is in the first place understood as no more than the actual existence of 'verbal images', or traces left in us by words spoken or heard. Whether these traces are physical, or whether they are imprinted on an 'unconscious psychic life', is of little importance, and in both cases the conception of language is the same in that there is no 'speaking sub ject'. Whether the stimuli, in accordance with the laws of neurological mechanics, touch off excitations capable of bringing about the articula tion of the word, or whether the states of consciousness cause, by virtue of acquired associations, the appearance of the appropriate ver bal image, in both cases speech occurs in a circuit of third person phenomena. There is no speaker, there is a flow of words set in motion independently of any intention to speak. The meaning of words is considered to be given with the stimuli or with the states of conscious ness which it is simply a matter of naming; the shape of the word, as heard or phonetically formed, is given with the cerebral or mental tracks; speech is not an action and does not show up the internal possibilities of the subject: man can speak as the electric lamp can become incandescent. Since there are elective disturbances which attack the spoken language to the exclusion of the written one, or vice versa, and since language can disintegrate into fragments, we have to conclude that it is built up by a set of independent contributions, and that speech in the general sense is an entity of rational origin. The theory of aphasia and of language seemed to be undergoing complete transformation when it became necessary to distinguish, over and above anarthria,* which affects the articulation of the word, true aphasia which is inseparable from disturbances affecting intelligence—and over and above

automatic language, which is in effect a third person motor phenomenon, an intentional language which is alone involved in the majority of cases of aphasia.(Ibid p.202-203)

15. In fact we shall once again see that there is a kinship between the empiricist or mechanistic psychologies and the intellectualist ones, and the problem of language is not solved by going from one extreme to the other. A short time ago the reproduction of the word, the revival of the verbal image, was the essential thing. Now it is no more than what envelops true denomination and authentic speech, which is an inner process. And yet these two conceptions are at one in holding that the word has no significance. In the first case this is obvious since the word is not summoned up through the medium of any concept, and since the given stimuli or 'states of mind' call it up in accordance with the laws of neurological mechanics or those of association, and that thus the word is not the bearer of its own meaning, has no inner power, and is merely a psychic, physiological or even physical phenomenon set alongside others, and thrown up by the working of an objective causality. It is just the same when we duplicate denomination with a categorial operation. The word is still bereft of any effectiveness of its own, this time because it is only the external sign of an internal recognition, which could take place without it, and to which it makes no contribu tion. It is not without meaning, since behind it there is a categorial operation, but this meaning is something which it does not have, does not possess, since it is thought which has a meaning, the word remain ing an empty container. It is merely a phenomenon of articulation, of sound, or the consciousness of such a phenomenon, but in any case language is but an external accompaniment of thought. In the first case, we are on this side of the word as meaningful; in the second we are beyond it. (Ibid. p 205)

16. These considerations enable us to restore to the act of speaking its true physiognomy. In the first place speech is not the 'sign' of thought, if by this we understand a phenomenon which heralds another as smoke betrays fire. Speech and thought would admit of this external relation only if they were both thematically given, whereas in fact they are intervolved, the sense being held within the word, and the word being the external existence of the sense. Nor can we concede, as is commonly done, that speech is a mere means of fixation, nor yet that it is the envelope and clothing of thought. Why should it be easier to recall words or phrases than thoughts, if the alleged verbal images need to be reconstructed on every occasion? And why should thought seek to duplicate itself or clothe itself in a succession of utterances, if the latter do not carry and contain within themselves their own meaning? Words cannot be 'strongholds of thought', nor can thought seek expression, unless words are in themselves a comprehensible text, and unless speech possesses a power of significance entirely its own. The word and speech must somehow cease to be a way of designating things or thoughts, and become the presence of that thought in the phenomenal world, and, moreover, not its clothing but its token or its body. (Ibid p. 211)

17. Thought and expression, then, are simultaneously constituted, when our cultural store is put at the service of this unknown law, as our body suddenly lends itself to some new gesture in the formation of habit. The spoken word is a genuine gesture, and it contains its mean ing in the same way as the gesture contains its. This is what makes communication possible. In order that I may understand the words of another person, it is clear that his vocabulary and syntax must be 'already known' to me. But that does not mean that words do their work by arousing in me 'representations'

associated with them, and which in aggregate eventually reproduce in me the original ‘represen tation’ of the speaker. What I communicate with primarily is not ‘representations’ or thought, but a speaking subject, with a certain style of being and with the ‘world’ at which he directs his aim. Just as the sense-giving intention which has set in motion the other person’s speech is not an explicit thought, but a certain lack which is asking to be made good, so my taking up of this intention is not a process of thinking on my part, but a synchronizing change of my own existence, a transformation of my being. We live in a world where speech is an institution. For all these many commonplace utterances, we possess within ourselves ready-made meanings. (Ibid p. 213)

18. The identity of the thing through perceptual experience is only another aspect of the identity of one’s own body throughout exploratory movements; thus they are the same in kind as each other. Like the body image, the fireplace is a system of equivalents not founded on the recognition of some law, but on the experience of a bodily presence. I become involved in things with my body, they co-exist with me as an incarnate subject, and this life among things has nothing in common with the elaboration of scientifically conceived objects. In the same way, I do not understand the gestures of others by some act of intel lectual interpretation; communication between consciousnesses is not based on the common meaning of their respective experiences, for it is equally the basis of that meaning. The act by which I lend myself to the spectacle must be recognized as irreducible to anything else. I join it in a kind of blind recognition which precedes the intellectual working out and clarification of the meaning. Successive generations ‘under stand’ and perform sexual gestures, such as the caress, before the philo sopher makes its intellectual significance clear, which is that we lock within itself a passive body, enwrap it in a pleasurable lethargy, thus imposing a temporary respite upon the continual drive which projects it into things and towards others. It is through my body that I under stand other people, just as it is through my body that I perceive ‘things’. The meaning of a gesture thus ‘understood’ is not behind it, it is intermingled with the structure of the world outlined by the gesture, and which I take up on my own account. It is arrayed all over the gesture itself—as, in perceptual experience, the significance of the f ireplace does not lie beyond the perceptible spectacle, namely the fire place itself as my eyes and movements discover it in the world. The linguistic gesture, like all the rest, delineates its own meaning. This idea seems surprising at first, yet one is forced to accept it if one wishes to understand the origin of language, always an insistent prob lem, although psychologists and linguistics scholars both question its validity in the name of positive knowledge. It seems at first impossible to concede to either words or gestures an immanent meaning, because the gesture is limited to showing a certain relationship between man and the perceptible world, because this world is presented to the spec tator by natural perception, and because in this way the intentional object is offered to the spectator at the same time as the gesture itself. Verbal ‘gesticulation’, on the other hand, aims at a mental setting which is not given to everybody, and which it is its task to communi cate. But here what nature does not provide, cultural background does. Available meanings, in other words former acts of expression, establish between speaking subjects a common world, to which the words being actually uttered in their novelty refer as does the gesture to the perceptible world. And the meaning of speech is nothing other than the way in which it handles this linguistic world or in which it plays modulations on the keyboard of acquired meanings. (Ibid. p. 215-217)

19. Everything is both manufactured and natural in man, as it were, in the sense that there is not a word, not a form of behaviour which does not owe something to purely biological being—and

which at the same time does not elude the simplicity of animal life, and cause forms of vital behaviour to deviate from their pre-ordained direction, through a sort of leakage and through a genius for ambiguity which might serve to define man. Already the mere presence of a living being transforms the physical world, bringing to view here ‘food’, there a ‘hiding place’, and giving to ‘stimuli’ a sense which they have not hitherto possessed. A fortiori does this apply to the presence of a man in the animal world. Behaviour creates meanings which are transcendent in relation to the anatomical apparatus, and yet immanent to the behaviour as such, since it communicates itself and is understood. (Ibid p.220)

20. Take, for example, amnesia relating to names of colours. It is demonstrated, by sorting tests, that the sufferer from amnesia has lost the general ability to subsume colours under a category, and to this same cause is attributed the verbal deficiency. But if we go back to concrete descriptions we notice that the categorial activity, before being a thought or a form of knowledge, is a certain manner of relating oneself to the world, and, correspondingly, a style or shape of experience. In a normal subject, the perception of a heap of samples is organized in virtue of the task set: ‘The colours belonging to the same category as the model sample stand out against the back ground of the rest’, all the reds, for example, forming a group, and the subject has now only to split up this group in order to bring together all the samples which belong to it. (Ibid p.222)

21. The analysis of speech and expression brings home to us the enig matic nature of our own body even more effectively than did our remarks on bodily space and unity. It is not a collection of particles, each one remaining in itself, nor yet a network of processes defined once and for all—it is not where it is, nor what it is—since we see it secreting in itself a ‘significance’ which comes to it from nowhere, projecting that significance upon its material surrounding, and com municating it to other embodied subjects. It has always been observed that speech or gesture transfigure the body, but no more was said on the subject than that they develop or disclose another power, that of thought or soul. The fact was overlooked that, in order to express it, the body must in the last analysis become the thought or intention that it signifies for us. (Ibid p.229-230)

22. I have no means of knowing the human body other than that of living it, which means taking up on my own account the drama which is being played out in it, and losing myself in it. I am my body, at least wholly to the extent that I possess experience, and yet at the same time my body is as it were a ‘natural’ subject, a provisional sketch of my total being. Thus experience of one’s own body runs counter to the reflect ive procedure which detaches subject and object from each other, and which gives us only the thought about the body, or the body as an idea, and not the experience of the body or the body in reality. Descartes was well aware of this, since a famous letter of his to Elizabeth draws the distinction between the body as it is conceived through use in living and the body as it is conceived by the understanding. But in Descartes this peculiar knowledge of our body, which we enjoy from the mere fact that we are a body, remains subordinated to our knowledge of it through the medium of ideas, because, behind man as he in fact is, stands God as the rational author of our de facto situation. On the basis of this transcendent guarantee, Descartes can blandly accept our irrational condition: it is not we who are required to bear the responsibility for reason and, once we have recognized it at the basis of things, it remains for us only to act and think in the world.41 But if our union with the body is substantial, how is it possible for us to experience in ourselves a pure

soul from which to accede to an absolute Spirit? Before asking this question, let us look closely at what is implied in the rediscovery of our own body. It is not merely one object among the rest which has the peculiarity of resisting reflection and remaining, so to speak, stuck to the subject. Obscurity spreads to the perceived world in its entirety. (Ibid p.231-232)