*Seventh lesson – Philosophy of perception*

**Part III**:

Being-for-Itself and Being-in-the-World

## 1 Cogito

1. I am thinking of the Cartesian cogito, wanting to finish this work, feeling the coolness of the paper under my hand, and perceiving the trees of the boulevard through the window. My life is constantly thrown headlong into transcendent things, and passes wholly outside me. The cogito is either this thought which took shape three centuries ago in the mind of Descartes, or the meaning of the books he has left for us, or else an eternal truth which emerges from them, but in any case is a cultural being of which it is true to say that my thought strains towards it rather than that it embraces it, as my body, in a familiar surrounding, finds its orientation and makes its way among objects without my needing to have them expressly in mind. This book, once begun, is not a certain set of ideas; it constitutes for me an open situation, for which I could not possibly provide any complex formula, and in which I struggle blindly on until, miraculously, thoughts and words become organized by themselves. A fortiori the sensible forms of being which lie around me, the paper under my hand, the trees before my eyes, do not yield their secret to me, rather is it that my consciousness takes flight from itself and, in them, is unaware of itself. Such is the initial situation that realism tries to account for by asserting an actual transcendence and the existence in itself of the world and ideas. (Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, London-New York, Routledge 2002, p. 429)

2. A thought really transcended by its objects would find them proliferating in its path without ever being able to grasp their relationships to each other, or finding its way through to their truth. It is I who reconstitute the historical cogito, I who read Descartes' text, I who recognize in it an undying truth, so that finally the Cartesian cogito acquires its significance only through my own cogito, and I should have no thought of it, had I not within myself all that is needed to invent it. It is I who assign to my thought the objective of resuming the action of the cogito, and I who constantly verify my thought's orientation towards this objective, therefore my thought must forestall itself in the pursuit of this aim, and must already have found what it seeks, otherwise it would not seek it. We must define thought in terms of that strange power which it possesses of being ahead of itself, of launching itself and being at home every where, in a word, in terms of its autonomy. Unless thought itself had put into things what it subsequently finds in them, it would have no hold upon things, would not think of them, and would be an 'illusion of thought'. (Ibid p.432)

3. The act whereby I am conscious of something must itself be apprehended at the very moment at which it is carried out, otherwise it would collapse. Therefore it is inconceivable that it should be triggered off or brought about by anything whatsoever; it must be causa sui. To revert with Descartes from things to thought about things is to take one of two courses: it is either to reduce experience to a collection of psychological events, of which the I is merely the overall name or the hypothetical

cause, in which case it is not clear how my existence is more certain than that of any thing, since it is no longer immediate, save at a fleeting instant; or else it is to recognize as anterior to events a field and a system of thoughts which is subject neither to time nor to any other limitation, a mode of existence owing nothing to the event and which is existence as consciousness, a spiritual act which grasps at a distance and compresses into itself every thing at which it aims, an 'I think' which is, by itself and without any adjunct, an 'I am'. 'The Cartesian doctrine of the cogito was therefore bound to lead logically to the assertion of the timelessness of mind, and to the acceptance of a consciousness of the eternal: experimur nos aeternos esse. Accordingly eternity, understood as the power to embrace and anticipate temporal developments in a single intention, becomes the very definition of subjectivity. (Ibid p. 432-433)

4. What remains to be understood precisely is the way the world comes to belong to the subject and the subject to himself, which is that cogitatio which makes experience pos sible; our hold on things and on our 'states of consciousness'. We shall see that this does not leave the event and time out of account, but that it is indeed the fundamental mode of the event and Geschichte, from which objective and impersonal events are derived forms, and finally that any recourse we have to eternity is necessitated solely by an objective conception of time. (Ibid p.435)

5. When Descartes tells us that the existence of visible things is doubtful, but that our vision, when considered as a mere thought of seeing is not in doubt, he takes up an untenable position. For thought about seeing can have two meanings. It can in the first place be understood in the restricted sense of alleged vision, or 'the impression of seeing', in which case it offers only the certainty of a possibility or a probability, and the 'thought of seeing' implies that we have had, in certain cases, the experience of genuine or actual vision to which the idea of seeing bears a resemblance and in which the certainty of the thing was, on those occasions, involved. (Ibid p.436)

6. But if this constituting power is not a myth, if perception is really the mere extension of an inner dynamic power with which I can coincide, my certainty concerning the transcendental premises of the world must extend to the world itself, and, my vision being in its entirety thought about seeing, then the thing seen is in itself what I think about it, so that transcendental idealism becomes absolute realism. It would be contradictory to assert both that the world is constituted by me and that, out of this constitutive operation, I can grasp no more than the outline and the essential structures; I must see the existing world appear at the end of the constituting process, and not only the world as an idea, otherwise I shall have no more than an abstract construction, and not a concrete consciousness, of the world. Thus, in whatever sense we take 'thought about seeing', it is certain only so long as actual sight is equally so. When Descartes tells us that sensation reduced to itself is always true, and that error creeps in through the transcendent inter pretation of it that judgement provides, he makes an unreal distinction: it is no less difficult for me to know whether or not I have felt some thing than it is to know whether there is really something there, for the victim of hysteria feels yet does not know what it is that he feels, as he perceives external objects without being aware of that perception. (Ibid p.437)

7. The ‘interpretation’ of my sensations which I give must necessarily be motivated, and be so only in terms of the structure of those sensations, so that it can be said with equal validity either that there is no transcendent interpretation and no judgement which does not spring from the very configuration of the phenomena—or that there is no sphere of immanence, no realm in which my consciousness is fully at home and secure against all risk of error. The acts of the I are of such a nature that they outstrip themselves leaving no interiority of consciousness. Consciousness is transcendence through and through, not transcendence undergone—we have already said that such a transcendence would bring consciousness to a stop— but active transcendence. The consciousness I have of seeing or feeling is no passive noting of some psychic event hermetically sealed upon itself, an event leaving me in doubt about the reality of the thing seen or felt. Nor is it the activation of some constituting power superlatively and eternally inclusive of every possible sight or sensation, and linking up with the object without ever having to be drawn away from itself. It is the actual effecting of vision. (Ibid p.438)

8. And yet is not the case of perception a special one? It throws me open to a world, but can do so only by outrunning both me and itself. Thus the perceptual ‘synthesis’ has to be incomplete; it cannot present me with a ‘reality’ otherwise than by running the risk of error. It is absolutely necessarily the case that the thing, if it is to be a thing, should have sides of itself hidden from me, which is why the distinc tion between appearance and reality straightway has its place in the perceptual ‘synthesis’. It would seem, on the other hand, that con sciousness comes back into its rights and into full possession of itself, if I consider my awareness of ‘psychic facts’. (Ibid p.439)

9. I can accomplish the cogito and have assurance of genuinely willing, loving or believing, provided that in the first place I actually do will, love or believe, and thus accomplish my own existence. If this were not so, an ineradicable doubt would spread over the world, and equally over my own thoughts. I should be for ever wondering whether my ‘tastes’, ‘volitions’, ‘desires’ and ‘ventures’ were really mine, for they would always seem artificial, unreal and unfulfilled. But then this doubt, not being an actual doubt, could no longer even manage to confer the absolute certainty of doubting. (Ibid p.445)

10. If I try to verify my perception of the ash-tray, my task will be endless, for this perception takes for granted more than I can know in an explicit way. Similarly, if I try to verify the reality of my doubt, I shall again be launched into an infinite regress, for I shall need to call into question my thought about doubting, then the thought about that thought, and so on. The certainty derives from the doubt itself as an act, and not from these thoughts, just as the certainty of the thing and of the world precedes any thetic knowledge of their properties. It is indeed true, as has been said, that to know is to know that one knows, not because this second order of knowing guarantees knowledge itself, but the reverse. I cannot reconstruct the thing, and yet there are perceived things. In the same way I can never coincide with my life which is for ever fleeing from itself, in spite of which there are inner perceptions. (Ibid p.445-446)

11. It is true that it seems necessary to concede my absolute coincidence with myself, if not in the case of will and feeling, at least in acts of ‘pure thought’. If this were the case, all that we have said would appear to be challenged, so that, far from appearing as a mere manner of existence, thought

would truly monopolize us. We must now, therefore, consider the understanding. I think of the triangle, the three-dimensional space to which it is supposed to belong, the extension of one of its sides, and the line that can be drawn through its apex parallel to the opposite side, and I perceive that this line, with the apex, forms three angles the sum of which is equal to the sum of the angles of the triangle, and equal, moreover, to two right angles. (Ibidem)

12. Just as the localization of objects in space, according to Kant himself, is not merely a mental operation, but one which utilizes the body's motility, movement conferring sensations at the particular point on its trajectory at which those sensations are produced, so the geometer, who, generally speaking, studies the objective laws of loca tion, knows the relationships with which he is concerned only by describing them, at least potentially, with his body. The subject of geometry is a motor subject. This means in the first place that our body is not an object, nor is its movement a mere change of place in object ive space, otherwise the problem would be merely shifted, and the movement of one's own body would shed no light on the problem of the location of things, since it would be itself nothing but a thing. There must be, as Kant conceded, a 'motion which generates space' which is our intentional motion, distinct from 'motion in space', which is that of things and of our passive body. But there is more to be said: if motion is productive of space, we must rule out the possibility that the body's motility is a mere 'instrument' for the constituting consciousness. If there is a constituting consciousness, then bodily movement is movement only in so far as that consciousness thinks of it in that light; the constructive power rediscovers in it only what it has put there, and the body is not even an instrument in this respect: it is an object among objects. There is no psychology in a philosophy of con stituting consciousness. (Ibid p.450)

13. Yet if I question myself on time or the experience of death, which were implied in my words, there is nothing clear in my mind. This is because I have tried to speak about speech, to re-enact the act of expression which gave significance to the words 'dead' and 'time', to extend the brief hold on my experi ence which they ensure for me. These second or third order acts of expression, like the rest, have indeed in each case their convincing clarity, without, however, ever enabling me to dispel the fundamental obscurity of what is expressed, or to eliminate the distance separating my thought from itself. Must we conclude from this that, born and developed in obscurity, yet capable of clarity, language is nothing but the obverse of an infinite Thought, and the message of that Thought as communicated to us? This would mean losing contact with the analysis which we have just carried out, and reaching a conclusion in conflict with what has been established as we have gone along. Language tran scends us and yet we speak. If we are led to conclude from this that there exists a transcendent thought spelt out by our words, we are supposing that an attempt at expression is brought to completion, after saying that it can never be so, and invoking an absolute thought, when we have just shown that any such thought is beyond our conception. (Ibid p.455-456)

14. The phenomenon of language, in the double sense of primary fact and remarkable occurrence, is not explained, but eliminated, if we duplicate it with some transcendent thought, since it consists in this: that an act of thought, once expressed, has the power to outlive itself. It is not, as is often held, that the verbal formula serves us as a mnemonic means: merely committed to writing or to memory, it would be use less had we not acquired once and for all the inner power of interpret ing it. To give expression is not to substitute, for new thought, a system of stable signs to which unchangeable

thoughts are linked, it is to ensure, by the use of words already used, that the new intention carries on the heritage of the past, it is at a stroke to incorporate the past into the present, and weld that present to a future, to open a whole tem poral cycle in which the 'acquired' thought will remain present as a dimension, without our needing henceforth to summon it up or reproduce it. (Ibidem)

15. We are now in a position to make up our minds about the question of evidence, and to describe the experience of truth. There are truths just as there are perceptions: not that we can ever array before ourselves in their entirety the reasons for any assertion—there are merely motives, we have merely a hold on time and not full possession of it— but because it is of the essence of time to take itself up as it leaves itself behind, and to draw itself together into visible things, into firsthand evidence. All consciousness is, in some measure, perceptual conscious ness. If it were possible to lay bare and unfold all the presuppositions in what I call my reason or my ideas at each moment, we should always f ind experiences which have not been made explicit, large-scale con tributions from past and present, a whole 'sedimentary history' which is not only relevant to the genesis of my thought, but which determines its significance. For an absolute evidence, free from any presupposition, to be possible, and for my thought to be able to pierce through to itself, catch itself in action, and arrive at a pure 'assent of the self to the self', it would, to speak the language of the Kantians, have to cease to be an event and become an act through and through: in the language of the Schoolmen, its formal reality would have to be included in its objective reality; in the language of Malebranche, it would have to cease to be 'perception', 'sentiment' or 'contact' with truth, to become pure 'idea' and 'vision' of the truth. It would be necessary, in other words, that instead of being myself, I should become purely and simply one who knows myself, and that the world should have ceased to exist around me in order to become purely and simply an object before me. (Ibid p.459-460)

16. To sum up, we are restoring to the cogito a temporal thickness. If there is not endless doubt, and if 'I think', it is because I plunge on into provisional thoughts and, by deeds, overcome time's discontinuity. Thus vision is brought to rest in a thing seen which both precedes and outlasts it. Have we got out of our difficulty? We have admitted that the certainty of vision and that of the thing seen are of a piece. Must we conclude from this that, since the thing seen is never absolutely certain, as illusions show, vision also is involved in this uncertainty, or, on the contrary, that, since vision on its own is absolutely certain, so is the thing seen, so that I am never really mistaken? The second solution would amount to reinstating the immanence which we have banished. But if we adopted the first, thought would be cut off from itself, there would no longer be anything but 'facts of consciousness' which might be called internal by nominal definition, but which, for me, would be as opaque as things; there would no longer be either inner experience or consciousness, and the experience of the cogito would be once more forgotten. (Ibid p.464)

17. Absolute Thought is no clearer to me than my own finite mind, since it is through the latter that I conceive the former. We are in the world, which means that things take shape, an immense individual asserts itself, each existence is self-comprehensive and com prehensive of the rest. All that has to be done is to recognize these phenomena which are the ground of all our certainties. The belief in an absolute mind, or in a world in itself detached from us is no more than a rationalization of this primordial faith. (Ibid p.475)

**3 Freedom**

18. Again, it is clear that no causal relationship is conceivable between the subject and his body, his world or his society. Only at the cost of losing the basis of all my certainties can I question what is conveyed to me by my presence to myself. Now the moment I turn to myself in order to describe myself, I have a glimpse of an anonymous flux, a comprehen sive project in which there are so far no 'states of consciousness', nor, a fortiori, characteristics of any sort. For myself I am neither 'jealous', nor 'inquisitive', nor 'hunchbacked', nor 'a civil servant'. It is often a mat ter of surprise that the cripple or the invalid can put up with himself. The reason is that such people are not for themselves deformed or at death's door. Until the final coma, the dying man is inhabited by a consciousness, he is all that he sees, and enjoys this much of an outlet. Consciousness can never objectify itself into invalid-consciousness or cripple-consciousness, and even if the old man complains of his age or the cripple of his deformity, they can do so only by comparing them selves with others, or seeing themselves through the eyes of others, that is, by taking a statistical and objective view of themselves, so that such complaints are never absolutely genuine: when he is back in the heart of his own consciousness, each one of us feels beyond his limitations and thereupon resigns himself to them. They are the price which we automatically pay for being in the world, a formality which we take for granted. Hence we may speak disparagingly of our looks and still not want to change our face for another. (Ibid p. 504-505)

19. Once my actions cease to be mine, I shall never recover them, and if I lose my hold on the world, it will never be restored to me. It is equally inconceivable that my liberty should be attenuated; one cannot be to some extent free, and if, as is often said, motives incline me in a certain direction, one of two things happens: either they are strong enough to force me to act, in which case there is no freedom, or else they are not strong enough, and then freedom is complete, and as great in the worst torments as in the peace of one's home. We ought, therefore, to reject not only the idea of causality, but also that of motivation. (Ibidem)

20. We often see the weakness of the will brought forward as an argu ment against freedom. And indeed, although I can will myself to adopt a course of conduct and act the part of a warrior or a seducer, it is not within my power to be a warrior or seducer with ease and in a way that 'comes naturally'; really to be one, that is. But neither should we seek freedom in the act of will, which is, in its very meaning, something short of an act. We have recourse to an act of will only in order to go against our true decision, and, as it were, for the purpose of proving our powerlessness. If we had really and truly made the conduct of the warrior or the seducer our own, then we should be one or the other. (Ibid p.506-507)

21. The result, however, of this first reflection on freedom would appear to be to rule it out altogether. If indeed it is the case that our freedom is the same in all our actions, and even in our passions, if it is not to be measured in terms of our conduct, and if the slave displays freedom as much by living in fear as by breaking his chains, then it cannot be held that there is such a thing as free action, freedom being anterior to all actions. In any case it will not be possible to declare: 'Here freedom makes its appearance', since free action, in order to be discernible, has to stand out against

a background of life from which it is entirely, or almost entirely, absent. We may say in this case that it is everywhere, but equally nowhere. In the name of freedom we reject the idea of acquisition, since freedom has become a primordial acquisition and, as it were, our state of nature. (Ibidem)

22. When I say that this rock is unclimbable, it is certain that this attrib ute, like that of being big or little, straight and oblique, and indeed like all attributes in general, can be conferred upon it only by the project of climbing it, and by a human presence. It is, therefore, freedom which brings into being the obstacles to freedom, so that the latter can be set over against it as its bounds. However, it is clear that, one and the same project being given, one rock will appear as an obstacle, and another, being more negotiable, as a means. My freedom, then, does not so contrive it that this way there is an obstacle, and that way a way through, it arranges for there to be obstacles and ways through in general; it does not draw the particular outline of this world, but merely lays down its general structures. It may be objected that there is no difference; if my freedom conditions the structure of the 'there is', that of the 'here' and the 'there', it is present wherever these structures arise. We cannot distinguish the quality of 'obstacle' from the obstacle itself, and relate one to freedom and the other to the world in itself which, without freedom, would be merely an amorphous and unnameable mass. It is not, therefore, outside myself that I am able to f ind a limit to my freedom. But do I not find it in myself? We must indeed distinguish between my express intentions, for example the plan I now make to climb those mountains, and general intentions which evaluate the potentialities of my environment. (Ibid p.510-511)

23. Nothing determines me from outside, not because nothing acts upon me, but, on the contrary, because I am from the start outside myself and open to the world. We are true through and through, and have with us, by the mere fact of belonging to the world, and not merely being in the world in the way that things are, all that we need to transcend ourselves. We need have no fear that our choices or actions restrict our liberty, since choice and action alone cut us loose from our anchorage. Just as reflection borrows its wish for absolute sufficiency from the perception which causes a thing to appear, and as in this way idealism tacitly uses that 'primary opinion' which it would like to destroy as opinion, so freedom flounders in the contradictions of commitment, and fails to realize that, without the roots which it thrusts into the world, it would not be freedom at all. Shall I make this promise? Shall I risk my life for so little? Shall I give up my liberty in order to save liberty? There is no theoretical reply to these questions. But there are these things which stand, irrefutable, there is before you this person whom you love, there are these men whose existence around you is that of slaves, and your freedom cannot be willed without leaving behind its singular relevance, and without willing freedom for all. Whether it is a question of things or of historical situations, philo sophy has no other function than to teach us to see them clearly once more, and it is true to say that it comes into being by destroying itself as separate philosophy. But what is here required is silence, for only the hero lives out his relation to men and the world, and it is not fitting that another speak in his name. 'Your son is caught in the fire: you are the one who will save him.... If there is an obstacle, you would be ready to give your shoulder provided only that you can charge down that obstacle. Your abode is your act itself. Your act is you.... You give yourself in exchange. ... Your significance shows itself, effulgent. It is your duty, your hatred, your love, your steadfastness, your ingenuity.... Man is but a network of relationships, and these alone matter to him.' (Ibid p.530)