

Sixth lesson – Philosophy of perception

Part II - The World as Perceived

3 The Thing and the Natural World

1. A thing has ‘characteristics’ or ‘properties’ which are stable, even if they do not entirely serve to define it, and we propose to approach the phenomenon of reality by studying perceptual constants. A thing has in the first place its size and its shape throughout variations of perspective which are merely apparent. We do not attribute these appearances to the object itself, but regard them as an accidental feature of our relations with it, and not as being of it. What do we mean by this, and on what basis do we judge that form or size are the form and size of the object? What is presented to us in the case of each object, the psychologist will assert, are sizes and shapes which always vary with the perspective, and it is conventional to regard as true the size which the object has when within reach, or the shape which it assumes when it is in a plane parallel to the frontal elevation. These are no truer than any other, but since this distance and this aspect are both typical, and evolved with the help of our body, which is an ever-present guide for this purpose, we can always recognize them, and so they themselves provide us with a standard for fixing and distinguishing between fleeting appearances; for constructing objectivity, in short. The square viewed obliquely, as something roughly diamond-shaped, is distinguished from a real diamond shape only if we keep the orientation in mind, if, for example, we settle on the frontal aspect as the crucial appearance, and relate any given appearance to what it would become in this context. But this psychological reconstitution of objective size or shape takes for granted what has to be explained, namely a gamut of determinate sizes and shapes from which it is sufficient to select one as the real size or shape. We have already stated that in respect of one and the same retreating or revolving object I do not have a set of ‘mental images’ which progressively diminish in size, or become more and more distorted, and between which I make a conventional choice. In so far as I account for my perception in these terms, to that extent I am already introducing the world with its objective shapes and sizes. (Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, London-New York, Routledge 2002, p. 348-349)

2. The appearance is misleading and in the literal sense an appearance only when it is indeterminate. The question how there come to be true shapes or sizes, or objective or real ones, amounts to asking how there are, for us, determinate shapes. And there are determinate shapes like ‘a square’ or ‘a diamond shape’, or any actual spatial configuration, because our body as a point of view upon things, and things as abstract elements of one single world, form a system in which each moment is immediately expressive of every other. A certain way of directing my gaze in relation to the object signifies a certain appearance of the object and of neighbouring objects. In all its appearances the object retains invariable characteristics, remains itself invariable and is an object because all the possible values in relation to size and shape which it can assume are bound up in advance in the formula of its relations with the context. What we are affirming in the specific being of the object, is in reality a *facies totius universi* which remains unchanged, and in it is grounded the equivalence of all its appearances and the identity of its being. In following out the logic of objective size and shape, we should, with Kant, see that it refers to the positing of a world as a rigorously interrelated system,

that we are never enclosed within appearance, and that, in short, the object alone is able fully to appear. (Ibid p. 350-351)

3. Like the scientist, Kant takes the results of this pre-scientific experience for granted, and is enabled to ignore them only because he makes use of them. When I contemplate before me the furniture in my room, the table with its shape and size is for me not a law or rule governing the parade of phenomena, and an invariable relationship: it is because I perceive the table with its definite shape and size that I presume, for every change of distance or orientation, a corresponding change of shape and size, and not the reverse. Far from its being the case that the thing is reducible to constant relationships, it is in the self-evidence of the thing that this constancy of relationships has its basis. For science and objective thought, an apparently small object seen a hundred yards away is indistinguishable from the same object seen ten yards away at a greater angle, and the object is nothing but the constant product of the distance multiplied by the apparent size. But for me the perceiver, the object a hundred yards away is not real and present in the sense in which it is at ten yards, and I identify the object in all its positions, at all distances, in all appearances, in so far as all the perspectives converge towards the perception which I obtain at a certain distance and with a certain typical orientation. (Ibidem)

4. The living body itself appears when its microstructure is neither excessively nor insufficiently visible, and this moment equally deter mines its real size and shape. The distance from me to the object is not a size which increases or decreases, but a tension which fluctuates round a norm. An oblique position of the object in relation to me is not measured by the angle which it forms with the plane of my face, but felt as a lack of balance, as an unequal distribution of its influences upon me. The variations in appearance are not so many increases or decreases in size, or real distortions. It is simply that sometimes the parts mingle and become confused, at others they link up into a clearly articulated whole, and reveal their wealth of detail. There is one cul minating point of my perception which simultaneously satisfies these three norms, and towards which the whole perceptual process tends. If I draw the object closer to me or turn it round in my fingers in order 'to see it better', this is because each attitude of my body is for me, immediately, the power of achieving a certain spectacle, and because each spectacle is what it is for me in a certain kinaesthetic situation. In other words, because my body is permanently stationed before things in order to perceive them and, conversely, appearances are always enveloped for me in a certain bodily attitude. (Ibid p.352)

5. We are predisposed to believe that we have here different arrangements of a perception of colour which is in itself invariable, different forms conferred upon one and the same sensible material. In fact, we have different colour-functions in which the alleged material disappears completely, since the act of patterning is effected through a change in the sensible properties themselves. It is particularly true that the distinction between the lighting and the object's own colour is not the outcome of any intellectual analysis, or the conferment of notional meanings on a sensible material, but a certain organization of colour itself, the arrival at a structure lighting thing lighted, which we need to describe in greater detail, if we are to understand the constancy of a thing's 'own' colour. (Ibid p.357)

6. There is, then, a 'logic of lighting' or again a 'synthesis of lighting', a compossibility of the parts of the visual field, which may well be specified in disjunctive propositions, as when the painter tries to justify his work to an art critic, but which is primarily experienced as the consistency of the picture or the reality of the spectacle. What is more, there is a total logic of the picture or the spectacle, a felt coherence of the colours, spatial forms and significance of the object. A picture in an art gallery, when seen at an appropriate distance, has its internal lighting which confers upon each patch of colours not only its colour value, but also a certain representative value. Seen at too close quarters it falls under the prevailing lighting of the art gallery, and the colours 'then no longer act in a representative manner, and no longer present us with the image of certain objects, but act as so much daubing on a canvas'. If, on looking at a mountain scene, we adopt a critical attitude and isolate part of the field, then the colour itself changes, and this green, which was meadow green, when taken out of its context, loses its thickness and its colour as well as its representative value. A colour is never merely a colour, but the colour of a certain object, and the blue of a carpet would never be the same blue were it not a woolly blue. The colours of the visual field, as we earlier saw, form an ordered system round a dominant which is the lighting taken as a level. We now begin to see a deeper meaning in the organization of a field: it is not only colours, but also geometrical forms, all sense-data and the significance of objects which go to form a system. Our perception in its entirety is animated by a logic which assigns to each object its determinate features in virtue of those of the rest, and which 'cancel out' as unreal all stray data; it is entirely sustained by the certainty of the world. In this way we finally see the true significance of perceptual constancies. The constancy of colour is only an abstract component of the constancy of things, which in turn is grounded in the primordial constancy of the world as the horizon of all our experiences. (Ibid p. 364-365)

7. The phenomenon of constancy is a general one. It has been found possible to speak of a constancy of sounds, temperatures, weights, and indeed data which are in the strict sense tactile, a constancy itself mediated by certain structures, certain 'modes of appearance' of phenomena in each of these sensory fields. The perception of weights remains the same whatever the muscles called into play, and whatever their initial position. When an object is lifted with the eyes closed, its weight is no different, whether or not the hand carries an extra weight (and whether this weight exerts pressure on the back of the hand or a pull on the palm) —whether the hand is free or is fastened in such a way that the fingers work alone—whether one or more fingers perform the task—whether the object be raised with the hand or the head, foot or teeth—and finally whether the object is lifted in the air or in water. Thus the tactile impression is 'interpreted' in the light of the nature and number of the parts of the body brought into play, and even of the physical circumstances under which it appears; thus do impressions, in themselves highly variable, such as pressure on the skin of the forehead and on the hand, mediate the same perception of weight. It is impossible here to suppose that the interpretation rests on any explicit induction, and that, in the previous experiment, the subject was able to measure the incidence of these different variables on the actual weight of the object. (Ibid p.365-366)

8. Tactile experience, on the other hand, adheres to the surface of our body; we cannot unfold it before us, and it never quite becomes an object. Correspondingly, as the subject of touch, I cannot flatter myself that I am everywhere and nowhere; I cannot forget in this case that it is through my body that I go to the world, and tactile experience occurs 'ahead' of me, and is not centred in me. It is not I who touch, it is my body; when I touch I do not think of diversity, but my hands rediscover a certain style which is part of their motor potentiality, and this is what we mean when we speak of a perceptual

field. I am able to touch effectively only if the phenomenon finds an echo within me, if it accords with a certain nature of my consciousness, and if the organ which goes out to meet it is synchronized with it. The unity and identity of the tactile phenomenon do not come about through any synthesis of recognition in the concept, they are founded upon the unity and identity of the body as a synergic totality. (Ibid p. 369)

9. The sensory 'properties' of a thing together constitute one and the same thing, just as my gaze, my touch and all my other senses are together the powers of one and the same body integrated into one and the same action. The surface which I am about to recognize as the surface of the table, when vaguely looked at, already summons me to focus upon it, and demands those movements of convergence which will endow it with its 'true' aspect. (Ibid p. 370)

10. The thing is inseparable from a person perceiving it, and can never be actually in itself because its articulations are those of our very existence, and because it stands at the other end of our gaze or at the terminus of a sensory exploration which invests it with humanity. To this extent, every perception is a communication or a communion, the taking up or completion by us of some extraneous intention or, on the other hand, the complete expression outside our selves of our perceptual powers and a coition, so to speak, of our body with things. The fact that this may not have been realized earlier is explained by the fact that any coming to awareness of the perceptual world was hampered by the prejudices arising from objective thinking. The function of the latter is to reduce all phenomena which bear witness to the union of subject and world, putting in their place the clear idea of the object as in itself and of the subject as pure consciousness. It therefore severs the links which unite the thing and the embodied subject, leaving only sensible qualities to make up our world (to the exclusion of the modes of appearance which we have described), and preferably visual qualities, because these give the impression of being autonomous, and because they are less directly linked to our body and present us with an object rather than introducing us into an atmosphere. But in reality all things are concretions of a setting, and any explicit perception of a thing survives in virtue of a previous communication with a certain atmosphere. We are not 'a collection of eyes, ears and organs of touch with their cerebral projections.... Just as all literary works . . . are only particular cases of the possible permutations of the sounds which make up language and of their literal signs, so qualities or sensations represent the elements from which the great poetry of our world (Umwelt) is made up. (Ibid p. 373-374)

11. The perceiving subject must, without relinquishing his place and his point of view, and in the opacity of sensation, reach out towards things to which he has, in advance, no key, and for which he nevertheless carries within himself the project, and open himself to an absolute Other which he is making ready in the depths of his being. The thing is not all of a piece, for though the perspective aspects, and the ever-changing flow of appearances, are not explicitly posited, all are at least ready to be perceived and given in non positing consciousness, to precisely the extent necessary for me to be able to escape from them into the thing. When I perceive a pebble, I am not expressly conscious of knowing it only through my eyes, of enjoying only certain perspective aspects of it, and yet an analysis in these terms, if I undertake it, does not surprise me. Beforehand I knew obscurely that my gaze was the medium and instrument of comprehensive perception, and the pebble appeared to me in the full light of day in opposition to the concentrated darkness of my bodily organs. I can imagine

possible fissures in the solid mass of the thing if I take it into my head to close one eye or to think of the perspective. It is in this way that it is true to say that the thing is the outcome of a flow of subjective appearances. And yet I did not actually constitute it, in the sense that I did not actively and through a process of mental inspection posit the interrelations of the many aspects presented to the senses, and the relations of all of them to my different kinds of sensory apparatus. We have expressed this by saying that I perceive with my body. The visual thing appears when my gaze, following the indications offered by the spectacle, and drawing together the light and shade spread over it, ultimately settles on the lighted surface as upon that which the light reveals. (Ibid p. 380)

12. The perceiving body does not successively occupy different points of view beneath the gaze of some unlocated consciousness which is thinking about them. For it is reflection which objectifies points of view of perspectives, whereas when I perceive, I belong, through my point of view, to the world as a whole, nor am I even aware of the limits of my visual field. The variety of points of view is hinted at only by an imperceptible shift, a certain 'blurred' effect in the appearance. If the successive outlines are really distinguished from each other, as in the case of my driving towards a town and looking at it only intermittently, there is no longer a perception of the town, for I find myself suddenly confronted by another object having no common measure with its predecessor. (Ibid p.384)

13. My experiences of the world are integrated into one single world as the double image merges into the one thing, when my finger stops pressing upon my eyeball. I do not have one perspective, then another, and between them a link brought about by the understanding, but each perspective merges into the other and, in so far as it is still possible to speak of a synthesis, we are concerned with a 'transition-synthesis'. It is particularly true that my present vision is not restricted to what my visual field actually presents to me, for the next room, the landscape behind that hill and the inside or the back of that object are not recalled or represented. My point of view is for me not so much a limitation of my experience as a way I have of infiltrating into the world in its entirety. When I see the horizon, it does not make me think of that other landscape which I should see if I were standing on it, nor does that other landscape make me think of a third one and so on; I do not visualize anything; all these landscapes are already there in the harmonious sequence and infinite unfolding of their perspectives. (Ibidem)

14. The synthesis of horizons is essentially a temporal process, which means, not that it is subject to time, nor that it is passive in relation to time, nor that it has to prevail over time, but that it merges with the very movement whereby time passes. Through my perceptual field, with its spatial horizons, I am present to my surrounding, I co-exist with all the other landscapes which stretch out beyond it, and all these perspectives together form a single temporal wave, one of the world's instants. Through my perceptual field with its temporal horizons I am present to my present, to all the preceding past and to a future. And, at the same time, this ubiquity is not strictly real, but is clearly only intentional. Although the landscape before my eyes may well herald the features of the one which is hidden behind the hill, it does so only subject to a certain degree of indeterminacy: here there are meadows, over there perhaps woods, and, in any case, beyond the near horizon, I know only that there will be land or sea, beyond that either open sea or frozen sea, beyond that again either earth or sky and, as far as the limits of the earth's atmosphere are concerned, I know only that there is, in the most general terms,

something to be perceived, and of those remote regions I possess only the style, in the abstract. (Ibid p. 385-386)

15. The experiences of other people or those which await me if I change my position merely develop what is suggested by the horizons of my present experience, and add nothing to it. My perception brings into co-existence an indefinite number of perceptual chains which, if followed up, would confirm it in all respects and accord with it. My eyes and my hand know that any actual change of place would produce a sensible response entirely according to my expectation, and I can feel swarming beneath my gaze the countless mass of more detailed perceptions that I anticipate, and upon which I already have a hold. I am, therefore, conscious of perceiving a setting which 'tolerates' nothing more than is written or foreshadowed in my perception, and I am in present communication with a consummate fullness. (Ibid p.395)

4 The other and the human world

16. I am thrown into a nature, and that nature appears not only as outside me, in objects devoid of history, but it is also discernible at the centre of subjectivity. Theoretical and practical decisions of personal life may well lay hold, from a distance, upon my past and my future, and bestow upon my past, with all its fortuitous events, a definite significance, by following it up with a future which will be seen after the event as foreshadowed by it, thus introducing historicity into my life. Yet these sequences have always something artificial about them. It is at the present time that I realize that the first twenty-five years of my life were a prolonged childhood, destined to be followed by a painful break leading eventually to independence. If I take myself back to those years as I actually lived them and as I carry them within me, my happiness at that time cannot be explained in terms of the sheltered atmosphere of the parental home; the world itself was more beautiful, things were more fascinating, and I can never be sure of reaching a fuller understanding of my past than it had of itself at the time I lived through it, nor of silencing its protest. The interpretation which I now give of it is bound up with my confidence in psychoanalysis. Tomorrow, with more experience and insight, I shall possibly understand it differently, and consequently reconstruct my past in a different way. In any case, I shall go on to interpret my present interpretations in their turn, revealing their latent content and, in order finally to assess their truth-value, I shall need to keep these discoveries in mind. (Ibid p. 403-404)

17. Just as nature finds its way to the core of my personal life and becomes inextricably linked with it, so behavior patterns settle into that nature, being deposited in the form of a cultural world. Not only have I a physical world, not only do I live in the midst of earth, air and water, I have around me roads, plantations, villages, streets, churches, implements, a bell, a spoon, a pipe. Each of these objects is moulded to the human action which it serves. Each one spreads round it an atmosphere of humanity which may be determinate in a low degree, in the case of a few footmarks in the sand, or on the other hand highly determinate, if I go into every room from top to bottom of a house recently evacuated. Now, although it may not be surprising that the sensory and perceptual functions should lay down a natural world in front of themselves, since they are prepersonal, it may well seem strange that the spontaneous acts through which man has patterned his life should be deposited, like some

sediment, outside himself and lead an anonymous existence as things. The civilization in which I play my part exists for me in a self evident way in the implements with which it provides itself. If it is a question of an unknown or alien civilization, then several manners of being or of living can find their place in the ruins or the broken instruments which I discover, or in the landscape through which I roam. The cultural world is then ambiguous, but it is already present. I have before me a society to be known. An Objective Spirit dwells in the remains and the scenery. How is this possible? In the cultural object, I feel the close presence of others beneath a veil of anonymity. (Ibid p.405)

18. But this is precisely the question: how can the word 'I' be put into the plural, how can a general idea of the I be formed, how can I speak of an I other than my own, how can I know that there are other I's, how can consciousness which, by its nature, and as self-knowledge, is in the mode of the I, be grasped in the mode of Thou, and through this, in the world of the 'One'? The very first of all cultural objects, and the one by which all the rest exist, is the body of the other person as the vehicle of a form of behaviour. Whether it be a question of vestiges or the body of another person, we need to know how an object in space can become the eloquent relic of an existence; how, conversely, an intention, a thought or a project can detach themselves from the personal subject and become visible out side him in the shape of his body, and in the environment which he builds for himself. The constitution of the other person does not fully elucidate that of society, which is not an existence involving two or even three people, but co-existence involving an indefinite number of consciousness. Yet the analysis of the perception of others runs up against a difficulty in principle raised by the cultural world, since it is called upon to solve the paradox of a consciousness seen from the outside, of a thought which has its abode in the external world, and which, therefore, is already subjectless and anonymous compared with mine. What we have said about the body provides the beginning of a solution to this problem. The existence of other people is a difficulty and an outrage for objective thought. (Ibid p. 406)

19. The body of another, like my own, is not inhabited, but is an object standing before the consciousness which thinks about or constitutes it. Other men, and myself, seen as empirical beings, are merely pieces of mechanism worked by springs, but the true subject is irrepeatable, for that consciousness which is hidden in so much flesh and blood is the least intelligible of occult qualities. My consciousness, being co-extensive with what can exist for me, and corresponding to the whole system of experience, cannot encounter, in that system, another consciousness capable of bringing immediately to light in the world the background, unknown to me, of its own phenomena. There are two modes of being, and two only: being in itself, which is that of objects arrayed in space, and being for itself, which is that of consciousness. (Ibid p.407)

20. If, for myself who am reflecting on perception, the perceiving subject appears provided with a primordial setting in relation to the world, drawing in its train that bodily thing in the absence of which there would be no other things for it, then why should other bodies which I perceive not be similarly inhabited by consciousnesses? If my consciousness has a body, why should other bodies not 'have' consciousnesses? Clearly this involves a profound transformation of the notions of body and consciousness. As far as the body is concerned, even the body of another, we must learn to distinguish it from the objective body as set forth in works on physiology. This is not the body which is capable of being inhabited by a consciousness. We must grasp again on visible bodies those forms of

behaviour which are outlined there and which appear on them, but are not really contained in them. (Ibid p.409)

21. The other person is never quite a personal being, if I myself am totally one, and if I grasp myself as apodeictically self-evident. But if I find in myself, through reflection, along with the perceiving subject, a pre personal subject given to itself, and if my perceptions are centred outside me as sources of initiative and judgment, if the perceived world remains in a state of neutrality, being neither verified as an object nor recognized as a dream, then it is not the case that everything that appears in the world is arrayed before me, and so the behaviour of others can have its place there. This world may remain undivided between my perception and his, the self which perceives is in no particularly privileged position which rules out a perceived self; both are, not cogitations shut up in their own immanence, but beings which are outrun by their world, and which consequently may well be outrun by each other. The affirmation of an alien consciousness standing over against mine would immediately make my experience into a private spectacle, since it would no longer be co-extensive with being. The cogito of another person strips my own cogito of all value, and causes me to lose the assurance which I enjoyed in my solitude of having access to the only being conceivable for me, being, that is, as it is aimed at and constituted by me. But we have learned in individual perception not to conceive our perspective views as independent of each other; we know that they slip into each other and are brought together finally in the thing. In the same way we must learn to find the communication between one consciousness and another in one and the same world. In reality, the other is not shut up inside my perspective of the world, because this perspective itself has no definite limits, because it slips spontaneously into the other's, and because both are brought together in the one single world in which we all participate as anonymous subjects of perception. (Ibid p.411)

22. In the absence of reciprocity there is no alter Ego, since the world of the one then takes in completely that of the other, so that one feels disinherited in favour of the other. This is what happens in the case of a couple where there is more love felt on one side than on the other: one throws himself, and his whole life, into his love, the other remains free, finding in this love a merely contingent manner of living. The former feels his being and substance flowing away into that freedom which confronts him, whole and unqualified. And even if the second partner, through fidelity to his vows or through generosity, tries to reciprocate by reducing himself, or herself, to the status of a mere phenomenon in the other's world, and to see himself through the other's eyes, he can succeed only by an expansion of his own life, so that he denies by necessity the equivalence of himself with the other that he is trying to posit. Co-existence must in all cases be experienced on both sides. If neither of us is a constituting consciousness at the moment when we are about to communicate and discover a common world, the question then is: who communicates, and for whom does this world exist? And if someone does communicate with someone else, if the interworld is not an inconceivable in-itself and must exist for both of us, then again communication breaks down, and each of us operates in his own private world like two players playing on two chessboards a hundred miles apart. (Ibid p.416)

23. But first we need to know how it has been possible for me to posit the other. In so far as I am born into the world, and have a body and a natural world, I can find in that world other patterns of behaviour with which my own interweave, as we have explained above. But also in so far as I am born and my existence is already at work and is aware that it is given to itself, it always remains on the hither side

of the acts in which it tries to become engaged and which are for ever mere modalities of its own, and particular cases of its insurmountable generality. It is this ground of given existence that the cogito establishes; every assertion, every commitment, and even every negation and doubt takes its place in a field open in advance, and testifies to a self contiguous with itself before those particular acts in which it loses contact with itself. This self, a witness to any actual communication, and without which the latter would be ignorant of itself, and would not, therefore, be communication at all, would seem to preclude any solution of the problem of others. There is here a solipsism rooted in living experience and quite insurmountable. It is true that I do not feel that I am the constituting agent either of the natural or of the cultural world: into each perception and into each judgment I bring either sensory functions or cultural settings which are not actually mine. (Ibid p.416-417)

24. To phenomenology understood as direct description needs to be added a phenomenology of phenomenology. We must return to the cogito, in search of a more fundamental Logos than that of objective thought, one which endows the latter with its relative validity, and at the same time assigns to it its place. At the level of being it will never be intelligible that the subject should be both *naturans* and *naturatus*, infinite and finite. But if we rediscover time beneath the subject, and if we relate to the paradox of time those of the body, the world the thing, and others, we shall understand that beyond these there is nothing to understand. (Ibid p.425)