

Merleau-Ponty

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Introduction

- ▶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) Franse fenomenologisch filosoof
 - ▶ Phenomenology of Perception (1945)
 - ▶ The Visible and the Invisible (1968)
- ▶ Wij lezen:
 - ▶ M-P, *The primacy of perception*
 - ▶ Carman, *Sensation, judgement and the perceptual field*
- ▶ Plan
 - ▶ Kritiek op empiricisme en intellectualisme
 - ▶ the subject
 - ▶ the perceived thing and the world
 - ▶ Intersubjectivity and the other self

Empiricism en intellectualisme

- ▶ Empiricisme
 - ▶ 'Sensations or qualia as primitive building blocks of perceptual experience' (Carman, p. 51)
 - ▶ Voorbeelden: Berkeley, Hume, Russell, Carnap, ...
- ▶ Intellectualisme:
 - ▶ 'Perceptual content is itself constituted, not just organized or affected, by acts of judgment' (Carman, p.51)
 - ▶ Voorbeelden: Descartes, Kant, ...
- ▶ Empiricisme en intellectualisme?

If I chance to look out of the window onto men passing in the street, I do not fail to say, on seeing them, that I see men? and yet, what do I see from this window, other than hats and cloaks, which cover ghosts or dummies who move only by means of springs? But I judge them to be really men, and thus I understand, by the sole power of judgment that resides in my mind, what I believed I saw with my eyes. (Descartes, M2)

Kritiek op empiricisme

We observe at once that it is impossible, as has often been said, to decompose a perception, to make it into a collection of sensations, because in it the whole is prior to the parts – and this whole is not an ideal whole. (M-P, p. 15)

- ▶ Kritiek op atomisme (vgl Gestaltpsychologie)
- ▶ Deel 1 van “Phenomenology of Perception” (Corman) meer kritiek op empiricisme
 - ▶ sensation: ‘the concept of sensation corresponds to nothing in our experience’ (PP) (vgl. met Husserl), ‘is incoherent, because it is meant to serve two incompatible functions’
 - ▶ ‘constancy hypothesis’: ‘strict correlation between stimulus en sensation immediately confronts a plethora of counterexamples’
 - ▶ ‘association and memory’: ‘appeals to such cognitive operations are doomed to both obscurity and circularity (‘presuppose the very perceptual significance they were supposed to explain’)

Kritiek op intellectualisme

*Thus I should not say that the unseen sides of objects are simply possible perceptions, nor that they are necessary conclusions of a kind of analysis or geometrical reasoning. It is not through an intellectual synthesis which would freely posit the total object that I am led from what is given to what is not actually given; that I am given, together with the visible sides of the objects, the invisible sides as well. **It is rather a practical synthesis: I can touch the lamp, and not only the side turned towards me but also the other side; I have only to extend my hand to hold it.***

... What prohibits me from treating my perception as an intellectual act is that an intellectual act would grasp the object other as possible or as necessary. But in perception it is 'real' ...

'What intellectualist theories of perception fail to acknowledge is the embodiment and situatedness of experience, for they reduce perceptual content to the free-floating cognition of a disembodied subject' (Carman, p.65)

Het subject

*It is not accidental for the object to be given to me in a “deformed” way, from the point of view that I occupy. That is the price of its being “real”. The perceptual synthesis thus must be accomplished by the subject, which can both delimit certain perspectival aspects in the object, the only ones actually given, and at the same time go beyond them. **The subject, which takes a point of view, is my body as the field of perception and action** – in so far as my gestures have a certain reach and circumscribe as my domain the whole group of objects familiar to me.*

‘The notion of a primal interrelation, what M-P would later call the ‘intertwining’ or ‘chasm’ of body and the world, serves as an antidote to the abstractions of pure receptivity and pure spontaneity that have dominated traditional philosophy of mind . . . Perception [is] neither a passive registration of stimuli nor a radically free initiation of mental acts, but [is] the way in which the body belongs to its environment, the essential interconnectedness of sensitivity and motor response’ (Corman, p.68)

The perceived thing

Perception is here understood as a reference to a whole which can be grasped, in principle, only through certain of its parts or aspects. The perceived thing is not an ideal unity in the possession of the intellect, like a geometrical notion, for example; it is rather a totality open to a horizon of an indefinite number of perspectival views which blend with one another according to a given style, which defines the object in question.

Perception is thus paradoxical. The perceived thing is itself paradoxical; it exists only in so far as someone can perceive it. I cannot even for an instant imagine an object in itself. As Berkeley said [...] I thus cannot conceive a perceptible place in which I am not myself present. But even the places in which I find myself are never completely given to me; the things which I see are things for me only under the condition that they always recede beyond their immediately given aspects.

Paradox of perception: immanence and transcendence

Thus there is a paradox of immanence and transcendence in perception. Immanence, because the perceived object cannot be foreign to him who perceives; transcendence, because it always contains something more than what is actually given.

[. . .] if we reflect on this notion of perspective, if we reproduce the perceptual experience in our thought, we see that the kind of evidence proper to the perceived, the appearance of “something” requires both its presence and its absence.

*The accusation of contradiction is not decisive, **if the acknowledged contradiction appears at the very condition of consciousness***

The world

Finally the world itself, which is the totality of perceptible things and the thing of all things, must be understood not as an object in the sense the mathematician or the physicist give to this word,— that is a kind of universal law which would cover all the partial phenomena or as a fundamental relation verifiable in all— but as the universal style of all possible perceptions.

‘Perception is not a science of the world,. . . it is the background from which all acts stand out, and is presupposed by them’ (PP)

Intersubjectivity

If I consider my perceptions as simple sensations, they are private; they are mine alone. If I treat them as acts of the intellect, if perception is an inspection of the mind, and the perceived object an idea, then you and I are talking about the same world, and we have the right to communicate among ourselves because the world has become an ideal existence and is the same for all of us – just like the Pythagorean theorem. But neither of these two formulas accounts for our experience. If a friend and I are standing before a landscape . . . There are not two numerically distinct worlds plus a mediating language which alone would bring us together. . . . The thing imposes itself not as true for every intellect, but as real for every subject who is standing where I am.

The other self

From the depth of my subjectivity I see another subjectivity invested with equal rights appear, because the behaviour of the other takes place within my perceptual field. I understand this behaviour, the words of another; I espouse his thought because this other, born in the midst of my phenomena, appropriates them and treats them in accord with the typical behaviours which I myself have experienced.

Just as my body, as the system of all my holds on the world, founds the unity of the objects which I perceive, in the same way the body of the other – as the bearer of symbolic behaviour and of the behaviour of true reality– tears itself away from being one of my phenomena, offers me the task of a true communication, and confers on my objects the new dimension of intersubjective being or, in other words, of objectivity.