

Merleau-Ponty

Lecture 11

The Intertwining – the chiasm

- Chapter 4 of *The Visible and the Invisible*

Background

- ‘Intertwining’ = *Entrelacs* (‘Interlacing’ might be better)
- connects with Husserl’s *Verflechtung*
- Basic thought: - internal connectedness (e.g. mind and body, mind and language)
- Chiasm: Greek letter ‘chi’ = (roughly) ‘X’

The Visible and the Invisible (VI)

- M-P's project after *PhP* – 'The Prose of the World'
- Broadly: if *PhP* is (in part) about the role of perception in the constitution of 'visible' objects, then *PW* was to be about the role of language the constitution of 'invisible' truths. But when M-P got stuck into it, he felt he needed to rework the earlier account of perception.

Early chapters:

- Ch. 1 ‘Reflection & interrogation’
- Critical discussion of ‘philosophy of reflection’ = ‘intellectualism’
- ‘What will always make of the philosophy of reflection not only a temptation but a route that must be followed is that it is true in what it denies, that is, the exterior relation between a world in itself and myself ...’ (p. 32) (= ‘realism’)
- ‘But does it conceive properly the natal bond between me who perceives and what I perceive?’ (i.e. don’t move to idealism).

- The fundamental intertwining
- ‘My access to a universal mind via reflection, far from finally discovering what I always was, is motivated by the intertwining of my life with the other lives, of my body with the visible things, by the intersection of my perceptual field with that of the others ..’ (p. 49) (Is there anything new here?)

- Ch. 2 ‘Interrogation and Dialectic’
- This ch. is an interesting and effective critical discussion of Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*. Back to the same conclusion:
- ‘We do not have a consciousness constitutive of the things, as idealism believes, nor a preordination of the things to consciousness (as realism believes) ... we have with our body, our senses, our look, our power to understand speech and to speak, *measurants* to Being’ (p. 103)
- Ch. 3 ‘Interrogation and Intuition
- - critical discussion of Bergson

So what's new?

- The very idea of 'intertwining' etc. is not new:
 - what's central to *PhP* is the thesis of our bodily being-in-the-world;
 - in particular M-P emphasises the central role of the body:
 - 'the body image is a way of stating that my body is in-the-world' (115)
 - '.. we are in the world through our body, and ... we perceive the world with our body' (239)

Instead: a series of new themes

- (i) recalibration of the phenomenal/objective distinction
- (ii) emphasis on the sense of touch
- (iii) theme of ‘reversibility’
- (iv) puzzling conception of the world as ‘flesh’

Phenomenal/Objective

- In *PhP* priority is clearly assigned to the ‘phenomenal’ as compared with the ‘objective’ – esp. the ‘phenomenal body’ as compared with the ‘objective body’.
This manifests the priority of ‘lived experience’ over ‘detached judgment’
But: it does introduce a new subject/object distinction.
- In *VI M-P* seeks to reinterpret and rebalance the distinction:
 - (a) the phenomenal body/objective body distinction is reinterpreted as a distinction between the body *sentant* and the body *senti* (sensing/sensed) (*VI* 138)
 - (b) this distinction is then taken to be one between two sides of the same coin which is both sensing and sensed.

Sensing, sensed/sensible

- The connection here between phenomenal and ‘sensing’ is direct; but the interpretation of ‘objective’ as ‘sensed’ or ‘sensible’ (M-P uses both terms) needs more thought. What’s sensed (e.g. seen, touched) is an ‘object’ – the object of sight etc. But it need not be thought of as wholly ‘objective’, i.e. independent of us.

- So the new distinction isn't quite the old one: rather, what's in the first instance sensed/sensible is the (phenomenal) world. Hence the distinction between the 'sensing' body and the 'sensed' body is the distinction between the 'phenomenal ('subject') body' and the body as an aspect of the 'phenomenal ('object') world'.
- And the detached, scientific, conception of the objective is more or less completely dropped from the discussion here.

Touch as the paradigmatic sense

- Although M-P starts ch. 4 by discussing sight, he describes sight as ‘palpating’ visible things (*VI* 131, 133) – as if we somehow ‘fingered’ things by looking at them. Plainly this is metaphorical (though some ancient theories of vision – esp. Democritus & Plato - involved something of this kind; contrast Aristotle) – but the metaphor implies that sight is to be understood by reference to touch. So what’s special about touch?

‘while <my hand> is felt from within, <it> is also accessible from without, itself tangible, for my other hand for example, if it takes its place among the things it touches ...Through this crisscrossing within it of the touching and the tangible, its own movements incorporate themselves into the universe they interrogate, are recorded on the same map as it. ’ (*VI* 133).

Touching and touched

- So there are two phenomena here:
 - (a) touching things – which reveals their material tangibility
 - (b) touching oneself – which reveals one's own material tangibility, including the tangibility of the hands which touch.
- (b) deepens (a): for it indicates that it is one's own tangibility that makes it possible for one to sense the tangibility of things.

Reversibility

- Phenomenon (b) is what M-P calls the ‘reversibility’ of touch (*touchant/touché*): the hands which touches can be touched – and vice-versa.
- In *VI* M-P makes much of this phenomenon of reversibility: it is, he says (p. 155) the ‘ultimate truth’.
- In *PhP* he had also noted it (p. 106), but did not make much of it.

Touch and sight (i)

- In *PhP* M-P contrasts touch and sight: sight presents us the appearance of a detached visual world, but touch is irredeemably embodied and what is touched must be in contact with us –

‘In visual experience, which pushes objectification further than does tactile experience, we can, ...flatter ourselves that we constitute the world, because it presents us with a spectacle spread out before us at a distance... Tactile experience, on the other hand, adheres to the surface of our body; we cannot unfold it before us ,,,’ (p. 369)

Touch and sight (ii)

- In *VI* M-P argues that since we see the tangible properties of things, there cannot be a significant distinction here between touch and sight.
- So: ‘without even entering into the implications proper to the seer and the visible, we know that, since vision is a palpation with the look, it must also be inscribed in the order of being that it discloses to us; he who looks must not be foreign to the world he looks at’ (*VI* 134).

How so?

- M-P's suggestion is that another person can see me seeing things: and thus that via the other my seeing becomes visible, and thus of the same type as its own visible objects.
- (I don't think M-P alludes to the use of mirrors – perhaps that would be too dependent on 'technology', though reflections are commonplace – e.g. Narcissus).

The role of the other

- The other can play a role also with respect to touch: ‘the handshake too is reversible’ (*VI* 142).
- Hence, there is a fundamental ‘intercorporeity’ (*VI* 141) whereby we can sense each others senses, and thereby confirm that we share a common world (*VI* 142). This ‘intercorporeity’ is a reinterpretation of intersubjectivity.

‘Reversibility’

- So far: this phenomenon of the reversal of roles of sensing and being sensed (*sensant/senti*) is grounded in 1st person touch and then extended to 1st/3rd person cases of touch (the handshake) and sight (seeing another).
- What M-P takes from this is, first, that the senses are themselves *of* the world; their two roles are the two sides of the bodily ‘coin’. What’s not so clear is whether M-P wants also to give a second role to the tangible, visible world: whether it is also itself to be, quite generally, the other side of something that sees and touches.
- In a way that would seem mad. But we may need to come back to it.

Language

- M-P extends the reversibility of the senses to language: but his position here is unclear – he writes of speaking and hearing oneself speak as ‘a new reversibility’ (*VI* 144) but also of the reversible relation between ‘speech and what it means to say’ (*VI* 145, 154).
- This second theme is obscure: it might be taken to apply to the speaking/spoken distinction to which he does here allude (*VI* 153-4).
- But it makes most sense to bring in the role of the other: what would be suggested is that active speech is one side of a ‘bodily’ coin whose other side is being heard, and understood, by someone else. Thus reversibility here would be the reversibility of roles in a dialogue, with a distinction between ‘signifying’ and ‘signified’, and beyond this (perhaps) the speaking/spoken distinction.

‘Flesh’ (i)

- The hardest theme of this late discussion by M-P is his use of the word ‘flesh’ (*chair*) to describe the fundamental, general, category of the tangible, visible, sensible, and meaningful: ‘It is this Visibility, this generality of the Sensible in itself’, this anonymity innate to Myself that we have previously called flesh, and one knows there is no name in traditional philosophy to designate it’ ‘The flesh is not matter, is not mind, is not substance’ (*VI 139*).
- It is clear that (i) M-P has in mind here the things and qualities we see, touch etc.. – the ‘flesh’ of the world; but (ii) he uses the term ‘flesh’ because of the intimate connection between this perceived world and our senses which is revealed by the phenomenon of reversibility – ‘the reversibility which defines the flesh’ (*VI 144*).

‘Flesh’ (ii)

What is going on here?

- One aspect is simply the physical ‘flesh’ of the bodily senses, implied first by touch and then extended to the other senses. But why does that make it appropriate to think of the world as ‘flesh’ (as opposed to being, say, physical?).
- M-P seems to want to emphasize the connectedness here – as if the body’s being flesh implies that the world too must be flesh. But by itself that seems a non-sequitur.

‘Flesh’ (iii)

Here is one suggestion:

- Flesh as ‘bodily idea’ (he writes of ‘an ideality that is not alien to the flesh’ (*VI* 152)).
- We know that M-P’s approach is profoundly influenced by idealism – except that idealism’s conception of the subject is too abstract, disembodied. OK: let’s replace idealism’s abstract subject with a fleshy body.
- Then ask: what does the work in this new theory of the sensible ideas which, for the idealist, are the basis of the construction of the world? Perhaps it is the bodily ‘flesh’ of the world – its visible, tangible, qualities conceived as a bodily ‘flesh’ of things.

‘Flesh’ (iv)

Final passage (May 1960)

- ‘The flesh of the world is not *self-sensing* (*se sentir*) as is my flesh – it is sensible and not sentient – I call it flesh, nonetheless .. in order to say that it is a *pregnancy* of *Weltmöglichkeit* (possible worlds), that it is therefore absolutely not an object ...’ (VI 250).
- This gives us a conception of ‘flesh’ as *potentiality*. Our ‘flesh’ includes the interconnected potentiality for sensing and being sensed; and the sensible qualities of things likewise bring a potential – at least the potential for being sensed.

‘Flesh’ (v)

- Perhaps connect this conception of potentiality with power and agency – the tangible, visible, qualities of things give them a power to act on us.
- M-P might not like this rather Aristotelian idiom, however, since it leads smoothly into scientific inquiries into the ‘objective’ basis of these powers.