

Merleau-Ponty

Lecture 5

Perception and the Body

M-P's phenomenological account of perception (i)

- Back to 'actual experience' (66)
- Sensation is intentional (248): just rudimentary perception
- Perception gives meaning to what is perceived (40)
- Appearances as neither 'inner' (consciousness), nor 'outer' (things)

Relational (?)

Ways things and their properties appear to us

M-P's phenomenological account of perception (ii)

- Importance of conception of 'phenomenal field'
- 'Horizon' of experience (hidden sides etc.) (28)
- A Priori/Empirical inseparable (256)
- Irreducibility of cultural meanings (27)

Broader themes

(i) Scientific realism

- Perception is not (just?) a ‘natural’ fact (241) (as ‘empiricism’ supposes)
- Why? Because (i) it gives ‘meaning’ to what is perceived
 - (ii) it has a constitutive role
- Separate: anti-reductive thesis - from: anti-naturalist thesis
- Difficult issue of realism re: properties vs. perception-dependent meanings

Broader themes

(ii) The Body (248-9)

- Because perception contributes meaning etc, it has a ‘subject’
- But the subject is not the rational thinker (as ‘intellectualism’ supposes)
- Instead, for M-P, the subject is one’s ‘body’.
- More to come on this; but note here –
connections between perception and action: hence unity of senses and synaesthesia (266)
- bodily axes for perception
- ‘anonymity’ of perception – ‘one’ sees (250)

Broader themes

(iii) 'pre' –

- Perception as 'pre-scientific' (68)
- Perceived world as 'pre-objective' (14)
- Subject of perception as 'pre-personal' (242)
- cf. Heidegger 'vor' -

Final challenges

- How far can ‘cognitive science’ comprehend M-P’s insights?
- Is phenomenology compatible with a broad-minded ‘scientific’ understanding of the mind?
- What is the status of psychology? Science – or Philosophy? (12, 58-9, 68)
cf. Wittgenstein, Ryle

The 'Impersonal' Body

- Body as quite generally 'inborn complex'
- Habits and the impersonal
- Freedom and the intermittent 'tides' of personal existence
- Saint-Exupery fn. 20,21 – compare final page.
- 'Existence' as bodily dialectic of habit and spontaneity.

The body and perception

- Body-image
- Spatiality
- Body as: being-in-the-world
- Perspectival space vs. objective space
- Transformations
 - action/movement
 - but morbidity

Schneider

- Goldstein (and Gelb)
- Abstract vs Concrete movements
- Matrix of habitual action vs objective setting
- Body: phenomenal vs. objective
- ‘reckoning with the possible’

Beyond causal and intellectual analysis

- Abstract/concrete vs. Mind/Body
- Illness and consciousness
- The task: neither reduction nor subsumption
- Power of living in new worlds
- ‘Intentional arc’ (p. 157)

‘Motor intentionality’

- ‘I can’ not ‘I think’
- Husserl: fn 54 p. 140
- Body as vehicle of being-in-the-world
- Against representations
- Body image as ‘system’ (body schema?)

Extending the body

- Using a probe
 - Driving a car
 - Wearing a high hat (?); shoes?
 - Bodily habits
- the organist

Final conclusions

(i) The body as the source of meaning (170)

- Useful summary:
- (i) Empiricism inadequate
- (ii) Rationalism seems better
- (iii) but it cannot account for ‘the variety of experience, ... the contingency of contents’
- So: ‘Bodily experience forces up to acknowledge an imposition of meaning which is not the work of a universal constituting consciousness’

Final conclusions

(ii) The body as subject of perception:

- ‘by thus remaking contact with the body and with the world, we shall also rediscover ourself, since, perceiving as we do with our body, the body is a natural self and, as it were, the subject of perception’ (239)