

# Merleau-Ponty

## Lecture 7

### Part III Chapter 1 The Cogito

- Main themes:
  - Doubt
  - Self-knowledge
  - Certainty
  - Truth and language
  - Self-consciousness

## Basic Structure

- 429-34 Kantian rationalism
- 435-39 Doubt and its limits
- 439-46 Self-knowledge
- 446-51 A priori certainty
- 451-59 Truth and language
- 459-63 Certainty and the world
- 464-73 Self-consciousness
- 473-5 The self

## Doubt

- Descartes: doubt the world, but not one's thoughts?
- M-P: no such separation is coherent (436)
- (maybe M-P overstates his claim?)
- Basic theme: consciousness as 'active transcendence' (438),
- not a separate domain (mental vs. physical)
- Hence: doubting the world is doubting one's consciousness of it.

# Love

- Is perception special?
- M-P outlines Sartre's conception of consciousness as that for which reality just is appearance (439)
- But M-P then intimates disagreement (439, bottom)
- Subtle discussion of mistaking one's own feelings e.g. love
- Basic point: feelings are often 'ambiguous' (441): 'indeterminate' would be better.
- Hence we can be mistaken about them – e.g. in the case of 'imaginary feelings' (442)

# The unconscious

- M-P takes it that mistakes about oneself don't imply an 'unconscious' (443)
- Ucs is an unwarranted hypothesis of a determinacy that is 'hidden'
- Gestaltist themes re discussion of dream-content as present but not thematised. (444)
- (But what of the earlier discussion (95-7) of repression as a way of coping with trauma, and of the results of repression).

## Self-certainty

- Is any certainty about oneself possible? (444)
- Primacy of mental acts over thoughts of them (445)
- So: there can be certainty of doubt as an act (446)
- Hence: reversal of the Cartesian cogito (446) – where my ‘existence’ is thought of as agency. (From Heidegger)

## A priori certainty?

- Does thought bring certainty – e.g. geometrical thought?
- M-P: Geometry is a matter of repeatable demonstrative constructions.
- So these are (again) ‘acts’ (447): geometrical truth isn’t a matter of Platonic essences (448)
- (Brief discussion of Platonism, formalism, constructivism – 448-9)
- Geometrical truth is grounded in perceptual synthesis (450-1)
- (No proper discussion of physical geometry)

## Language and truth?

- Tacit thesis under examination here: language as a source of a priori certain truths?
- M-P brings back the speaking/spoken distinction (452)
- Painting and creative speech.
- The 'ultimate fact': our capacity to create new truths through language (453)
- So; speech is a power of expression, and expression is everywhere creative (455)
- Hence 'linguistic truth' is either: a new creation (and not an a priori certainty), or: the repetition of a familiar old truth that has become sedimented and stored in the language.

## Being-in-the truth

- 'Truths of reason', then, are well-established patterns of language
- 'Truths of fact' concern what's evident here and now.
- No distinction in principle (458).
- Even truths of reason have their 'founding' (*fundierung*) in acts, esp. perception (458).
- Being-in-the-truth is indistinguishable from being-in-the-world (from Heidegger)

## ‘All consciousness is, in some measure, perceptual consciousness’ (459)

- A foundational thesis: all consciousness is founded upon perception.
- A kind of empiricism?
- Truth never escapes its ‘sedimentary history’ (459)
- Evidence and truth start always within the perceived world (460)
- But they do start there, although always with a margin of indeterminacy which allows for mistakes and revisions. (460-1)
- So doubt and error are always situated within the horizon of a world that is beyond doubt (463)

## From spoken to tacit cogito

- M-P’s aim: to reinstate a kind of self-consciousness that both respects the open indeterminacy of experience while also connecting experiences as one ‘subject’ (465)
- The spoken cogito – fails to acknowledge the power of expression.
- Back then to Descartes and the ‘tacit’ cogito to which D. gave expression (468-9)

## The tacit cogito

- 'Presence of oneself to oneself' (470)
- Explicit only in extreme situations (Saint-Exupery passages)
- Not objective knowledge of oneself (470)
- Nor constituting subjectivity (471)
- Perhaps a potential for connections between experiences? (471)
- Example of shared experience of a shared world (471-2)

## The self

- What then am I?
- 'I am a field, an experience ...' (473)
- - a unified and meaningful 'possibility of situations' (473)
- World and self as 'inseparable' (475)
- The world: the meaningful unity given to me in experience (474)
- The embodied self: my embodied, and thus unified, experience of the world (475)