

Merleau-Ponty

Lecture 8

Part III Chapter 2 Temporality

- ‘Temporality’ is M-P’s characterisation of the fact that our existence is ‘temporal’. i.e. has the temporal dimensions: past/present/future.
- For M-P: to understand time properly, we have to start from temporality. Not the other way round.

Background introduction to the philosophy of time

- McTaggart
- A-series – past/present/future
- ‘Tensed’ conception of time
- B-series – dates + earlier/simultaneous/later
- ‘Tenseless’ conception of time
- Which is the more fundamental?
- Metaphysics? or Epistemology?

A-series

- Tensed
- ‘Subjective’
- ‘Indexical’ – ordered around ‘now’. i.e. the present.

The present

- ‘Ambiguity’ between temporal meaning (‘now’) and ‘presence’ of consciousness.
- But: what’s happening *now* is what’s simultaneous with *this* very thought.
- i.e. what’s (temporally) present is what is simultaneous with *this* thought, the thought that is (experientially) present to me.

Change

- A-series: what is present, was future and will be past.
- So change is inherent in time.
- ‘The passage of time’ future, present, past.

B-series (i)

- Temporal order of events – earlier/simultaneous/later
- ‘Dates’ as reference points
- regular phenomena as measures – e.g. earth’s rotation (daily & yearly); or vibration of atoms as measured by lasers.

B-series (ii)

- No temporal change
- Represent time as a spatial dimension
- But: no commitment to determinism, or to time as ‘instants’
- This is the physical conception of time
- Theory of relativity: space-time as fundamental

B-series (iii)

- But what of change? motion?
- Same object, but different properties (e.g. locations) at successive times
- e.g. think of a falling object.
- Problem: what of merely relational changes?

The 'direction' of time

- A-series: given by the order of experience
past – present – future
- B-series: connects with causation
effects occur later than causes ...
- Why?
2nd law of thermodynamics?

A vs. B?

- Each can accommodate the other
- But which is fundamental?

Epistemology

- A-series is fundamental for agency and experience
 - e.g. knowing when my wife's birthday is
 - noticing that the rain has stopped
- So: A-series is fundamental for epistemology.

Metaphysics

- Here the B-series looks stronger
- How can 'presence' be metaphysically basic?
- There's nothing *metaphysically* special about the present

Back to M-P

- Clearly an A-series theorist
- B-series would be a conception of time as 'constituted' – so not fundamental.
- 'Events' are individuated by reference to an observer (477).
- So events are not 'objective'; i.e. B-series of events is tacitly subjective, i.e. based on A-series order of experience.

Passage of time (477-8)

- Slightly confused discussion, as if ‘passage’ might be taken to be objective.
- From a subjective standpoint: illusion of flow, as if one were observing the flow of a river.
- Better: think of oneself in a boat passing down the river.
- Nice comparison with seeing a landscape from the window of moving train (487).
- But this is just what the B-series theorist says about change.

Understanding time

- Memory as ‘direct’ (non-inferential) contact with the immediate past (480); or ‘transparent’ experience of past (485).
- Two issues here:
 - (i) perception of motion requires perception of what’s (just) past at the time of the perception.
 - (ii) How far is memory perception-like in presenting the past to us? Or is memory (esp. ‘experiential memory’ – e.g. memory of doing something - inherently a fallible representation of the past (492)?
- M-P doesn’t clearly address (ii).

Experience and temporality

- M-P is primarily concerned to emphasize the way in which consciousness has a ‘constituting’ role: i.e. it’s inherent in consciousness that both our consciousness and what we are conscious of are experienced as temporal:
 - memory- past
 - perception – present
 - intention – future
- This ‘temporalisation’ of consciousness (493) is fundamental to time.
- But it’s not a matter of giving a reflective, temporal, meaning to experience: instead the ‘bestowal of sense’ here is an aspect of the fundamental ‘operative intentionality’ (486)

Husserl, Kant, Sartre

- (i) M-P says that his position is inspired by Husserl – he affirms Husserl’s talk of the ‘protentions’ and ‘retentions’ which give our present experience its temporal horizon. (483-4)
- (ii) M-P interprets Kant’s thesis that time is the form of inner sense as suggesting that there is a transcendental ego beyond time which constitutes an empirical, temporal, self (495-6). Actually not Kant’s view; and M-P provides no analogue of Kant’s key argument that connects subjective temporality with the objective causal order (2nd Analogy).
- (iii) M-P rejects Sartrean view that time is an implication of our ‘spontaneity’ and capacity for ‘nihilation’; on the contrary, he holds, it is our temporality which is fundamental to these capacities. (497)

Idealism, Realism, and 'Being-in-the-World' (497-503)

- Final attempt to place his own position in comparison with idealism and realism
 - (i) 498-9 Idealism is right to think that sense (meaning, significance) is 'bestowed', not discovered. But this bestowal of sense isn't a matter of a non-empirical, transcendental, subject beyond experience; instead it is the 'operative' intentionality of an embodied subject whose existence is correlative with his world.
 - (ii) 499-500 This embodied subject 'projects' a world which is inherently 'subjective'. So this world is neither 'a chance conglomeration of parts' (= realism), nor 'the working of a controlling Thought on an indifferent matter'; instead it is: 'the primordial unity of all our experiences and one goal of all our projects' (500)

Time and presence

- M-P then applies this line of thought to time (500-1)
- He infers that 'time' manifests 'a unique structure which is *presence*' (500), and that this gives us the bond between 'time-subject' and 'time-object' (500)
- His thought seems to be that because the temporality of 'subjective' experience is inseparable from the temporality of the objects of experience, we get here a phenomenon which is both antecedent to the subject/object distinction, but also a basis for it.

‘The myth of presence’

- If that is M-P’s position then he looks to be a primary target for Derrida’s critique of ‘the myth of presence’.
- Derrida likes to emphasize the importance of ‘intertemporality’, the way in which the present self identifies itself by reference to its identity with a past self. M-P shows some awareness of this on p. 495.

Objective Body and Objective Time

- On 502 M-P tries to argue against realist metaphysics, against the conception of objective time that is there anyway.
- The argument is partly an odd, and unpersuasive, appeal to the limits of understanding.
- But there is also a comparison (501-2) with conceptions of the body. Just as the objective conception of the body is derived from the richer conception inherent in our grasp of ourselves as embodied agents (‘phenomenal body’), the realist’s objective time is, in effect, derived from the richer conception of temporality (i.e. ‘phenomenal time’, though M-P doesn’t use the phrase).

- This comparison is interesting and revealing.
- There is something to be said for M-P's phenomenal/objective distinction re: the body. In part it expresses an 'emergentist' view about human life.
- But one can't really make sense of a similar view about time: I don't see how to make sense of the view that temporality is an emergent phenomenon, with objective time as an abstracted aspect of it.
- It seems to me better to combine a realist, B-series, metaphysics of time with a 'subjectivist', A-series, epistemology of temporality.