

# Merleau-Ponty

## Lecture 9

# Part III Chapter 3

- Freedom

# Main themes (i)

- Back to the old trinity: freedom is to be understood  
neither by locating it within the objective  
determinism of ‘in-itself’ (‘empiricism, realism  
etc.)  
nor by treating it as the expression of a  
subjective libertarianism (‘for-itself’)  
(intellectualism, idealism etc.)

but by grounding it in our embodied *existence*

# Main themes (ii)

- Further: it's not that freedom is the Hegelian 'aufhebung' (transcendence) of determinism and libertarianism. Rather: freedom is grounded in a grasp of our *antecedent* existence, of which both determinism and libertarianism are misconceived simplifications.
- But what's not unequivocally spelled out is the relationship between our ordinary 'generalised existence' which is a necessary condition of freedom and the 'individual existence' which is the true manifestation of freedom.

## Main themes (iii)

- Special attention to Sartre and Marx.

# Structure:

- 504-7 The Sartrean position: freedom is everywhere and unlimited
- 507-14 Critical objections to the Sartrean position
- 514-25 History, Marxism and class-consciousness
- 525-7 Brief critical return to Sartre's position
- 527-30 M-P's positive account.

## re Determinism (etc.)

- Not much argument here, just a denial of fatalism with respect to one's 'objective' features (e.g. gender).
- But determinism proper is not a fatalist thesis since it allows that our own choices can make a difference, even if they are themselves determined.
- M-P does not engage with sophisticated Humean determinism.

# re Marxism

- What's more striking (in its historical context) is the critical discussion of Marxist historical/dialectical materialism (514ff.). Actions and attitudes are not determined by one's position in one's society or relation to 'relations of production'. –
- 'What makes me a proletarian is not the economic system or society considered as systems of impersonal forces, but these institutions as I carry them within me and experience them; nor is it an intellectual operation devoid of motive, but my way of being in the world within this institutional framework' (515)



# Sartrean libertarianism

- Main themes expounded (505-7)
- (i) Totalising: the life of a free being is *totally* free
- (ii) Freedom is not grounded in voluntary deliberation
- (iii) But freedom is grounded in a ‘choice’
- (iv) There are no limits to freedom

# Sartre himself:

- re (i) (total freedom)

(BN 444) ‘since freedom is identical with my existence, it is the foundation of ends which I shall attempt to attain either by the will or by passionate efforts’.

cf. (BN 564) my fundamental project is ‘the choice of myself as a totality in these circumstances’

- re (ii) (freedom not voluntary deliberation)

(BN 450-1) ‘Voluntary deliberation is always a sham ....  
When I deliberate the chips are down’

- re (iii) (Freedom as ‘choice’)

(BN 461-2) ‘the fundamental act of freedom is discovered  
.... it is a choice of myself in the world’. But ‘we must  
insist on the fact that the question here is not of a  
deliberate choice .. but because it is the foundation of all  
deliberation’

cf (BN 479) ‘the choice is that by which all foundations and  
reasons come into being ... It is absurd as being beyond  
all reasons’

- (iv) (No limits to freedom)

‘human reality encounters resistance and obstacles which it  
has not created, but these resistances and obstacles have  
meaning only in and through the free choice which human  
reality is’ (BN 489).

# M-P's objections

- (i) If all actions are free, then 'free action' excludes nothing, including coercion. Freedom needs to be identifiable against a background from which is largely absent (507).
- (ii) If voluntary deliberation is an illusion, then there's no such thing as a free choice (508), since such a choice is one that is grounded in one's appraisal of one's situation.
- (iii) There cannot be a Sartrean 'original choice' which grounds all reasons. For choices presuppose antecedent commitments, motivations etc. which are not now being chosen: 'choice presupposes a prior commitment and ... the idea of an initial choice involves a contradiction' (509)
- (iv) There are limits to freedom: we need to distinguish here between the 'general intentions' of people, by reference to which the obstacles on mountains are identified, and my particular 'express intentions' (511) which do not give meaning to these obstacles which may well obstruct my freedom to climb the mountain.

# Are these objections decisive?

- Points (ii) and (iii) are crucial: the Sartrean ‘original choice of a fundamental project’ is a myth (borrowed from Kant), and we need to reinstate voluntary deliberation as the paradigm of free choice.
- M-P’s solution: replace the Sartrean original choice with the motivations inherent in our ‘generalised existence’, which is not chosen; and then locate freedom in the more-or-less reflective appraisal of these motivations in voluntary deliberation which constitute the exercise of individual, personal, freedom.

# ‘Generalised existence’

- ‘We therefore recognize, around our initiatives and around that strictly individual project which is oneself, a zone of generalised existence and of projects already formed, significances which trail between ourselves and things and which confer upon us the quality of man, bourgeois or worker.’ (523)

# Two components

- (i) ‘spontaneous evaluations’ (512) of embodied existence (cf. Gestalt figures)
- (ii) Habits developed through the ‘sedimentation of our life’ (513)

These habits can (perhaps) be blown away; but – probably – they won’t change (513-4).

Self-deception can readily strike here – cf. Sartre on ‘giving up’ his smoking habit (BN 596-7)

# Further criticism of Sartre

- In the context of his discussion of social theory, M-P alludes to Sartre's account of one's being-for-others which is not how one is 'for-oneself'. (520-1)
- M-P's objection is that in order for an experience such as hearing another behind my back I must already conceive of that other as someone capable of taking a view of me, i.e. as a conscious being like myself. Hence there is a tacit presumption of intersubjectivity even in Sartre's conception of the one's alienated being-for-others.



## M-P's conclusion here:

- Sartre's conception of 'the-other-as-object is nothing but an insincere modality of others'.  
(521) But, he goes on: our experience involves a 'double anonymity' (521)? We are
- (i) 'anonymous in the sense of absolutely individual' &
- (ii) 'anonymous in the sense of absolutely general'
- What does this mean?

# M-P's positive claims re social theory

- M-P's main claim here is that 'class-consciousness' is the experience of 'difficulties and constraints' (516) (and comfort and privilege?) which is 'lived through in ambiguity' (517).
- This experience needs to be placed in the context of individual 'existential projects' (518); and it is only when there is a crisis in which the underlying relationships of power and exploitation become manifest that there is any likelihood of 'the free act which destroys' these relationships (517).

# M-P's positive claims re the achievement of freedom

- (i) In its most general way: freedom is the power 'to begin something else'
- (ii) M-P emphasises that this freedom is not the sartrean absolute choice ex nihilo; instead 'its power of perpetually tearing itself away finds its fulcrum in my universal commitment in the world' (526) (Analogue with doubt? Doubt only makes sense in a context in which there are grounds for doubt which are not themselves doubted).
- (iii) So: we exist both within situations to which we are committed, and with the capacity to step back from these commitments; and the crucial fact is that 'we exist in both ways at once' (527).

# So what is freedom?

- It is the capacity to take control of one's life through choices made in the light of voluntary deliberation (contra-Sartre).
- But that capacity is rooted in motivations which are not then chosen, but which belong to one's 'generalised existence'
- And we never become completely 'detached': on the contrary today's free commitments become tomorrow's unchosen motivations. cf. the discussion of 'personal' existence on pp. 96-7 &
- 'Man taken as a concrete being is not a <free> psyche joined to an <unfree> organism, but the movement to and fro of existence which at one time allows itself to take corporeal form and at others moves towards personal acts' (101)

# The final model

- The hero who risks all – esp. his embodied existence – for the sake of another.
- Freedom here is completely setting aside one's ordinary existence in the pursuit of one's end:  
  
'Your act is you' (530).

