

Merleau-Ponty and the puzzle of illusion.

In this lecture I'll be focusing upon perception. Perception, as defined in the Oxford English Dictionary is a Late Middle English noun originating in the Latin *percipere*, the verb to perceive. What do we mean when we say we perceive something? Perception can mean: the state of being or process of becoming aware or conscious of a thing specifically through any of the senses. It can also mean the intuitive or direct recognition of a moral, aesthetic, or personal quality e.g. the truth of a remark, or the beauty of an object. A perception is the result of perceiving and we can also think of it as the dictionary defines, as a mental image or conception of a person or thing. But in terms of the Philosophical definition of perception the dictionary states it is 'the action of the mind by which it refers its sensations to an external object as their cause.'¹ Further, the psychological definition of perception is that of the 'neurophysiological processes, including memory, by which an organism becomes aware of and interprets external stimuli'.² Considering the last definition, we have a straightforward definition of perception as a series of causes and effects that finally give us an awareness and interpretation of external stimuli. If the mechanics of our body and brains follow this cause and effect however, why do they make mistakes in certain strange instances such as

Well, the issue of illusions is important philosophically because it causes problems when trying to establish what we might know for certain to be true in the world. Obviously truth and certainty can be two different things. I may be certain that, further up ahead upon a tarmac road I see water. It's not until moving closer whereupon the water effect is destroyed that we can perhaps accept that our eyes were deceived. Even then we might still feel we were absolutely certain of having seen water upon the road. So it seems that truth and certainty are not quite the same thing in sensory experience. It's because of this that Descartes considered sensory experience to be disqualified from being something that we could consider a fundamental truth. Descartes famously thought that if a straight stick could appear bent in water the sceptic could argue that what we see cannot be relied upon as truthful. For Descartes then, foundational truths about existence and the world on top of which all other knowledge rested, couldn't include things we may feel certain about but which turned out to be untrue.

Descartes' method of doubt or pre-emptive scepticism thus leads eventually to what he considered to be the only indubitable proposition of the Cogito: I think therefore I am. The Cogito, or the prioritization of thought, is the basis of the position of Rationalism, Idealism and as Merleau-Ponty calls it in his *Phenomenology of Perception*, Intellectualism. The Cogito is the basis of the position of Rationalism, Idealism and as Merleau-Ponty calls it in his *Phenomenology of Perception*, Intellectualism.

Ponty does remind us that it is the intellect or thought that is prioritized by these philosophers as being our foundational or ‘essential relation to the world’⁴.

So, as we have seen following Descartes, in Intellectualism we must consider all visual information and sensory data as potentially unreliable due to illusions. But as a result of putting a line through the senses, the subject or ‘thinking being’ in fact retreats into itself, becoming only the ‘I’ of the Cogito in the mind. It becomes cut off from the world (whatever that maybe in itself). The world is now forever out there and not in fact knowable in itself (following Kant.) We can’t even seem to have a reliable relationship with the world as subjects due to illusions.

But where does this leave Perception? Does it occupy a peculiar place somewhere in between this outside world, if it exists, and the mind? Or if perception can only be explained by referring to thought, do we explain illusions as a lack of attention of the mind, a mistake? Why then do people seem to make exactly the same mistakes in an illusion – isn’t there something going on here that is more than mere coincidence and has something to do with either our subjective makeup or the world’s or perhaps both combined? If this is possible, which logically it is, then Intellectualism has a problem having painted the subject into a corner where only the mind truly exists, as we shall see.

access to another I's thoughts. Day to day, if we followed this model we would have to maintain that other people may not really exist, perhaps a rather psychopathic world-view!

So, it seems that in using Intellectualism to describe our existence in the world, particularly in a world with other people in it, we have very much painted the subject into a corner and cut it off from being able to account for anything but its own thought.

Importantly, Merleau-Ponty doesn't follow any of the previous paths I am describing in dealing with visual experience. By doing this he tries to avoid the problem of intersubjectivity described above and reach a more convincing description of our experience of the world we live in.

First of all, he takes the vital step of deciding that he **won't dismiss visual experience as simply unreliable**. He does not just cross off visual experience as knowledge or view it as inadequate to the truth. In fact his approach is far more subtle. His brilliance is in realising that illusions, far from being the problem which forces us to invalidate visual experience, are a vital clue to solving the crippling problems of the Intellectualist subject which is confined to thought having forsaken the world and its own place in it.

So how does Merleau-Ponty go about validating visual experience and

the aforementioned philosophical description of perception in intellectualism. These two positions approach perception from opposite ends. However, as we will now see, they both have to grapple with the problem of explaining how illusions can occur and it is this that Merleau-Ponty catches them out on.

Lets take empiricism first.

Science starts by ‘taking the objective world as being given,’⁶ that is, scientists don’t sit there in their labs wondering if the world even exists. They start with the assumption it does so they can begin their physical experiments. As with science in general the empirical reading of perception is one of causation. The (given) world ‘passes on to the sense-organs messages which must be registered, then deciphered’ says Merleau-Ponty. The sense organs and the brain then work causally to recreate the ‘original text’.⁷ The important point to understand here is that this causal model of perception assumes ‘a point by point correspondence and constant connection between stimulus and elementary perception’.⁸ This all sounds fine until we reach the irritating niggles of an illusion.

Here’s the question: If the empiricist sensible is the ‘immediate effect of external stimulus’⁹ what causes us to see an illusion? The empiricist argument runs something like this: in an illusion there seems to be a lack of ‘constancy’ between sensation and appearance. We should be sensing

chunks or ‘qualia’ and second, by concluding that these qualia or specific chunks of sensation must be ‘modified by effects of association or memory’.¹⁰ Sounds possible. But what if an annoying skeptic interjects and asks: “But which memories? Are you claiming that everyone has the same associations and memories which affect what they see in the Muller-Lyer illusion making each and every person see the lines as different lengths? What sort of memories are these by the way? Childhood ones? Adult ones? How can everyone be coming to the same conclusion in an illusion when they each have varying experiences and therefore varying memories and associations that come from within each of their individual lives?”

Here we see the skeptic has hit upon a major problem for the empiricist. The problem is that realistically there are a ‘plethora of counter-examples’¹¹ of possible memories or associations in different people that might be responsible as the root cause for making them see an illusion. However, there is simply no way to argue which associations or memories are more likely to be the cause than others making it perhaps impossible to explain why everyone sees the illusion the same way.

Even if we conclude that ‘prolonged practice’ or ‘rest’¹² would bring the Muller-Lyer results in line with each other (excuse the pun!), Merleau-

we are truthfully **describing** our experience as Phenomenology aims to do. Both the first and later experiences are valid in a description of experience and so they must be given equal consideration.

So where is empiricism going wrong with its theory of perception? Well, Merleau-Ponty highlights two ideas: the idea of visual context or background and the empiricist idea of determinate qualia. If we look at the Muller-Lyer illusion, empiricism considers that we are receiving it in the form of determinate visual chunks or qualia. A quale is assumed by empiricism to be a 'fully developed or determinate'¹³ piece of information. It can be isolated because it is a determinate chunk and can thus theoretically be considered without contextual meaning. But Merleau-Ponty gets us to ask if this assumption about the way we see is even possible. Consider this...if we only received determinate qualities as objects of consciousness, we would not have an indistinct edge to our visual field when looking around. Essentially on the Empiricist qualia model then, anything indeterminate couldn't theoretically exist in the visual field because it is not determinately measurable. Peripheral vision would necessarily have to be a void in order to account for perception only being comprised of 'determinate' qualities.

Merleau-Ponty also questions whether a qualia is even genuinely measurable in tests of visual perception. Take a look at these squares for

So, the more we reflect, the more we realize it's in fact impossible **in the experience of perception or when imagining the act of perceiving to conceive of an object** without a background of some sort. And this background always has an effect on the object being perceived. Merleau-Ponty's point is that a background/object relationship is a kind of fundamental unit of perception that cannot be broken down any further and this is an idea he takes from Gestalt psychology.

So if determinate qualia can't describe perception then do we fair any better if instead of starting from the world as given as in Empiricism, we start from thoughts as a given as in Intellectualism? Can a subject of pure thought or mind eliminate the issue of illusions?

Intellectualism, as we have seen with Descartes, mistrusts the world as a given or as forming any foundation of truth. It holds that only the fact *I think* is what proves my existence. This means that the intellectualist subject or the I that we speak of in the cogito is responsible for 'constituting everything',¹⁴ as Merleau-Ponty observes. So all of this subject's experiences are constituted through its consciousness. Merleau-Ponty goes on to point out that consciousness for intellectualism 'eternally possesses the intelligible structure of all its objects'.¹⁵ For those readers of Kant here, this will be familiar for it is the structure the Transcendental subject. This is the inverse of the empiricist position

So how does intellectualism account for perception and illusion? First of all, this position uses the idea of the subject's attention to explain how we constitute what we see. Whether what we see exists or not is not the point. The structure of the Transcendental subject that we all have as minds guarantees we all interpret what we see the same way. But illusion on this model remains problematic. If perception is attention on the part of the mind then what is going on in illusions? Is our attention a bit randomly rubbish sometimes meaning we make random mistakes? Well, for a 'consciousness which includes all objects'¹⁷ and all experience there cannot logically be a form of inattention or a lesser inattention used to explain the mistake we make with our perception when encountering illusions. Why?

Merleau-Ponty explains by taking the example of the moon on the horizon appearing bigger than at its zenith. In intellectualism we don't 'analyze the act of attention as a passage from indistinctness to clarity'¹⁸. Instead, the illusion of the moon being bigger at the horizon is simply 'assigned...a subordinate place,'¹⁹ and the view of the moon when measured which reveals our mistake 'expresses all that' the previous incorrect perception 'was trying to communicate.'²⁰ The effect this has is of inexplicably rendering the first perception of the illusion as having no significance other than an unexplainable step on the way to the 'real

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 131. (4th ed., p. 131) ²¹ Cf. Section 11, p. 131.

sets limits to an object.²² There is no room at all in the intellectualist consciousness for indeterminacy of judgment at all.

Now, when we think about it, this description of consciousness seems wildly inaccurate when compared to our normal experience of the world. There are many experiences every day where we are unsure about a judgment. Take driving a car. When we edge out of a side road onto a main road we have to be sure about the speed of the traffic we are about to join. It may perhaps take only milliseconds to judge oncoming traffic speed but nonetheless we need a little time to form our judgments. We may also peer carefully at the road for indistinct tiny shapes in the distance that could be an oncoming motorbike or cyclist. If a pedestrian attempts to cross the side road in front of our car, we first notice them from the indistinct movement we see in our peripheral vision at a time when our full attention is not directly focused on them. To get a better view we move our head and focus our eyes upon them. Are we to say that we are not in fact conscious during these indistinct moments of experience simply because our attention is not fully focused on the object at the time? This would seem ridiculous as in fact we know that these indistinct experiences are vital in comparing how much information we have with the next moment when we perhaps move our head or get nearer to something to get a clearer view.

physically in a world, Merleau-Ponty's use of Gestalt psychology which uses the idea that the object/background pairing is an irreducible unit of perception, certainly reveals this incompatibility of empiricist and intellectualist accounts with our own experience of perceiving the world thus giving enormous weight to his position.

However, Merleau-Ponty builds on this in an incredibly novel and original way, a way that no philosopher had done before him. How? Merleau-Ponty sees there is one thing we must notice about the above descriptions of perceiving traffic or people in the street and the basic enterprise of going about the world. The vital constant in all of these descriptions, even where illusions are concerned, is the business of *trying to get a clearer view*. What's so important about this? It is perhaps something that we take for granted on a day to day basis, but we use our bodies to achieve this clearer view. We walk closer to someone we think we may recognize on the street. We wait at a stationary viewing point for a few moments at a junction to check whether that indistinct movement in the distance is in fact the cyclist we suspect it to be. It is this very indistinct nature of a perception then leads us to move our bodies or wait until a moving object is closer to our body in order to get what Merleau-Ponty calls an 'optimum' grasp perceptually upon the object we are looking at.

one's compatriot where the expressions of their face are much easier to see and their voice much easier to hear.

All these necessities are quietly decided upon by the body long before any analytical assessment might be made. We also explore with our bodies. We might turn the paper with the Muller-Lyer illusion on with our hands so that we can see it on its side for example. This can sometimes make it easier to see the lines as the same length. The whole point to understand here is that our bodies improve our grasp of what we perceive. We are not just existing in the world as minds.

This embodied perception that sees from a particular place in the world clearly does not constitute all objects equally and from all angles all at the same time or instantaneously. Our bodies move about in a spatial world, a world that has depth, a world that has thickness meaning things can be walked around and about, only **gradually** revealing and unfolding their different aspects through time. For example if we look at a cube, each view from each new position is different from the last and none could be said to be the truest or most correct. Is the mathematical equation for the three dimensional cube the truest then because it takes account of its full structure? Can we really say this abstraction is truer than the actual cube of three dimensions in question that we experience? But the mathematical description is surely not less true than the object as it describes all of it?

together or 'compossible impossibles'²³ that Merleau-Ponty believes describes everything we experience and abstract, about the world.

Although the idea of 'compossible impossibles' does not try to prove logically that we are already existing in a world since it takes as its starting point the naïve realist view that the world already exists, we can nevertheless see that it does show how logic has severe problems when trying to account for human experience of the world. Merleau-Ponty has instead taken the fascinating step of making antinomies if you like or indeterminacies a fundamental truth of experience.

The embodied existence is in fact a radical development of Heidegger's Dasein or 'being in the world'. Merleau-Ponty's insight is to attach to Dasein's 'being in the world' a physical ontology or bodily existence of the subject. This new secret or unspoken cogito of the body doesn't dismiss analytical thought as true but simply shows that it derives from our prior foundational bodily existence and indeterminate experience in the world. For example we could measure the Muller-Lyer lines with a ruler and thus establish analytically that they are of equal length but our first bodily perception of them simply reveals a more fundamental truth:

true ignorance means we cannot learn, and inversely that if we know something then we must always have known everything anyway. There is no way to jump from no knowledge to complete knowledge. Well, Merleau-Ponty holds these two extremes are simply abstracted from the real states of affairs that we experience and perceive as embodied subjects. Essentially he holds that we have partial information about the lines already but not all the information. We can see they have extra arrow parts on the end and so we might compare the lines by measuring them just to make sure as we know the context may affect our judgment to a greater or lesser degree. In conclusion, Merleau-Ponty is saying that indeterminacy and uncertainty are positive concepts in life and our embodied experience of the world, which is in fact a patchwork of overlapping viewpoints and abstractions which can conflict.

For this reason, artists are very important for Merleau-Ponty. When Cezanne painted pictures that tried to tie together the different viewpoints of an object, he was trying to ‘join the aimless hands of nature’²⁴ with its plethora of physical objects in space that can be viewed from infinite different angles. For Merleau-Ponty, Cezanne is revealing in his paintings the compossible impossible nature of our embodied experience of the world. As artists know as soon as they start to paint or draw from the world, there is a deep truth about being embodied: namely that you

There are many 'heres' for the body and we understand and refer to our own embodiment more than we might think. For example, if we were all mind there would be no significance or cultural understanding to the word 'here'. After all, the transcendental subject occupies no space and infinite space since it has no body. For this subject all viewpoints and distances are equal and thus equally flat. The world would have no perspective and no depth. But the tools of perspective and depth that reveal our embodiedness and which Cezanne explores as subjects in their own right, make him a kind of phenomenological artist for Merleau-Ponty, an artist who is in fact engaged in a kind of philosophy. And perhaps it is through a realization that art, science and philosophy do indeed come together in that often overlooked and ignored fleshy thickness of bodies, bodies owned by all the different people in the world, that we can better understand each other, our commonality, and our own existence.

