

## DO WE SEE THE THINGS THEMSELVES?

Although Merleau-Ponty did not leave us a discursive argument proving that in perception we “reach” the things themselves, he did leave many indications as to how such an argument could be made. Our objective is to take up these indications, in order to develop such an argument, and finally to corroborate the conclusions of the argument with evidence from contemporary research on the psychology of perception.

For example, on various occasions Merleau-Ponty indicated that Husserlian transcendental idealism, although not the ultimate vantage point, is a “route that has to be followed”.<sup>1</sup> We will follow that route by applying the phenomenological reduction, in the form of a retort argument. Applying the reduction will enable us to show how the traditional sceptical arguments of the rationalists and empiricists appear to presuppose, without ever recognising it, that the subject who takes up the arguments, is not an isolated consciousness who only “represents” to himself an external world, but rather one which is in “direct” contact with the world and with its transcendence, such that this world and this transcendence are in themselves what they are for him. In other words, by applying the reduction we can show how the reflecting philosopher can come to recognise himself as the constituting consciousness of transcendental idealism. The flaw of this transcendental idealism proves to be its inability to recognise other subjects with whom I share the same world. The recognition of this flaw enables us to argue that the ultimate subjectivity is not the constituting consciousness of transcendental phenomenology, but rather intersubjectivity, or more precisely intercorporeality.<sup>2</sup>

The reduction is generally presented as a suspension of an uncritical belief shared by both rationalists and empiricists that the world and the perceptual processes of the perceiver are “outside of”, or numerically distinct from, consciousness, such that the subject has no direct access to the real world, or in fact to his own perceptual processes, such that he needs to represent these to himself, in the form of ideas or images. From the scientific perspective, for example, given the structure of the eye, the retina, and the effects of light on the retina, it is inconceivable that we could perceive the transcendent thing. Light passing through the lens produces only an image on the retina, and any experience of being directly present to the object, can only be an illusion. The perception of the object *must* involve at some level an interpretation or processing of retinal information.

The reduction is a suspension of the belief in this numerical, absolute distinction between consciousness and the world and would embrace therefore a suspension of the traditional uncritical attitude toward the scientific perspective, and in particular toward the way in which the scientific perspective is assumed to prevail over all other perspectives. What the reduction teaches us is that the question of whether in perception we reach the world itself cannot be answered through a simple deduction from metaphysical assumptions about the nature of the subject and the world, or from what is deemed possible or impossible, that it can only be answered through an appeal to experience and evidence corroborating that experience.

#### THE REDUCTION AS RETORT ARGUMENT

Husserl argued that this traditional way of conceiving reality was absurd, and that by suspending our belief in such a reality we lose nothing.<sup>3</sup> It is absurd because if it were metaphysically impossible for me to have a direct encounter with the real or with my own perceptual acts in the world, how could I ever know what it is for something to be real. How could I ever have interpreted correctly or incorrectly the alleged signs of "transcendence". And without this knowledge the problem of solipsism would not even be intelligible to me.<sup>4</sup>

If it were true, as Descartes argues, that I am unable to distinguish the dreamt world from the real world, from where could I derive my idea of the real? Perhaps I've only had dreams of dreaming and dreams of being awake and perhaps my understanding of the distinction was acquired in a dream, in which case I would only know the difference between dreamt reality and dreamt dreams. If I am to understand Descartes' claim, I need to understand the distinction between real dreams and real reality. The dream argument places me in a vicious circle because by accepting its conclusion I am accepting that I could never know what it was that I had accepted.

If ever I can claim to know the difference between what it is for something to be part of the dreamt world and for something to be part of the real world, it can only be because I have made contact with the real world, and that this contact did not itself presuppose "representations" and their "interpretation", a contact in which I come face to face with the transcendent world itself, such that at that moment it does not transcend me, but is in itself what it is for me. At that moment, I can no longer envisage a metaphysical distinction between what is "for me" and what is "in itself", and for me, the real and this contract would have to be whatever they are for me.

Similarly, in empiricism, if it were metaphysically impossible for me to have a direct encounter with anything other than subjective entities like representations, how could I ever know what it is for something to be “outside” of my mind, as Berkeley puts it? How could I ever be able to interpret the alleged signs of an object’s being outside?<sup>5</sup> Could I picture to myself an object’s lying outside my mind as somebody else could witness it? If I were always confined to representations of reality, all I could represent to myself would be representations. Before this “picture” could teach me what it is for something to lie outside of my mind, I would have to think of it as representing a possible situation in the world, a situation which lies outside of my mind. In other words, I need to represent to myself an outside world, in order to exploit my powers of representing an “outside” to myself.

#### THE ARGUMENT FROM ILLUSIONS

In general the empiricist arguments from illusions presuppose that we can infer from a sequence of experiences that we do not perceive the world itself, that in some sense the real world must transcend the perceiver. But for a being which could only represent to itself a transcendent reality, even the past would have to be represented and at any particular moment I could have no direct contact with the entire sequence itself, but only with representations of the sequence. I will be unable to deduce anything from a present representation of a sequence of experiences if I could not think of them as being in a temporal sequence, and hence if I did not know what it was for something to be *past*. But if I am forever confined to present representations, what could “being in the past” be for me? It would be as difficult to know what it was for some event to be “past” as it would be to know what it was for something to be real. How could I know, if I did not have a contact with the past itself, if I were incapable of transcending my realm of present representations such that I could have a direct, non-inferential contact with the past event itself, where it is, in the past. The argument from illusions, rather than proving that I am confined to representations about a real world, presupposes that I am open to the very pastness of the past. The past therefore could not transcend me, it would have to be whatever it is for me.

Similarly, how can I accept Descartes’ dream argument if the argument undermines any certainty that I have that I am awake? If I am not sure that I am awake, how can I be sure that the argument is valid? Perhaps the fact that last night, while I was lying in bed dreaming, I was convinced that I was awake and standing in front of the fireplace, and the fact that right now I am

equally convinced that I am standing in front of the fireplace, might not at all imply that I could be dreaming now. Perhaps the conclusion of the argument (I could be dreaming now), only appears to follow the premises because I am asleep. Perhaps the relationship between premises and conclusion has been dreamt, produced by the dream. The dream argument has the strange ability to undermine itself, since I need to know that I am awake before I can trust my evaluation of its validity. Descartes' dream argument is either absurd or it surreptitiously exploits a certainty of being awake and in the world *which does not rely on judgements, or inferences from signs*, since the certainty that I am awake is presupposed in every act of judgement or inference. It must therefore be conceivable that I could be more sure of being awake, as a state in the world, than I am of the validity of any act of judgement or of the reliability of any "representation". It is conceivable therefore that my actual being awake and in the real world could be numerically distinguishable from what my being awake is for me. Any numerical distinction would oblige me to infer from the fact that as far as I am concerned I am awake, that I am in actual fact awake, or awake as far as others are concerned. I avoid the vicious circle only by recognising that I am a subject which has a direct contact with his own being awake, a contact unimaginable within the confines of the natural attitude. I avoid the vicious circle by accepting that this contact is whatever it is for me.

I can reveal what this contact must be in itself only in reflecting on what it is for me. I can develop a philosophy of perception by bracketing the assumptions of the natural attitude, by bracketing everything that science teaches me about perception, by bracketing any preconceived ideas about what is possible and what is not, and by returning to that contact with the world through which the "real" of the scientific world presents itself as the "real", and the past as the past. Whether or not a specific act of perception reaches the world itself cannot be deduced from metaphysical assumptions, it can only be decided on the basis of evidence.

#### ARGUMENT AGAINST THE RETORT ARGUMENT

However, even though *I* cannot assume that the real world lies beyond me or is more than what it is for me without undermining my own understanding of what it is for something to lie beyond me, isn't it possible, in principle, that I could *in fact* be confined to my own internal states. Isn't it possible, for example, for an external observer to assume that all my perceptions are confined to private data and that even though *I* may not be able to make this assumption without calling into doubt my understanding of what is being

assumed, the external observer is free to do so? Even though *I* cannot accept an argument that I am asleep at this moment without undermining the confidence I have in my ability to distinguish valid from invalid arguments, she could recognise its validity and conclude that, in actual fact, I have no genuine certainty that I am awake. Even though I cannot assume that I am confined to representations without having to concede that I might not know the difference between immanence and transcendence and hence just what it is that I have assumed, an external observer can make these assumptions about me without placing herself in a vicious circle. Isn't it conceivable that everything the phenomenologist has revealed about perception "from the inside" is merely a description of what his perception has to be for him, that it tells us nothing about what perception could be in itself, or what it could be for an external observer?<sup>6</sup> The argument against the retort argument claims therefore that, purely on the basis of internal consistency, I am not able to deduce anything about my relation with the world, and that the fact that the traditional concept of reality is absurd for me does not imply that it is absurd in itself.

#### THE PRESUPPOSITIONS OF THE ARGUMENT AGAINST THE RETORT ARGUMENT

It is clear that in her description of what is possible, the external observer would not merely be describing what is possible *as far as she was concerned*. Essential to her claim is that this situation is a possible situation even for me. If this were not implied in her argument, she would have to concede that there could be a truth about perception from within, and a truth from without, and that what we are able to assume about perception from within has nothing to do with perception as this is revealed from without. She would have to concede that philosophical research could go no further, being unable to choose between two incompatible and *incommensurable* accounts of perception. Clearly this is not something she would accept, since she assumes that the two points of view are actually concerned with the same act of perception, for she argues that the same act which *I* cannot assume to be reducible to private images can be assumed to be such from the outside. She does not accept that there is a truth about my perception from within and another from without, such that I am free to develop a philosophy of perception from within unhindered by what she has revealed is possible from without. She introduces her external perspective as an argument against my internal perspective. In some way therefore, the external observer needs to know that her point of view prevails over mine, not only for her . . . but even

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