

The Transcendental Aesthetic Revisited

I want to compare Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology of space as found in *The Phenomenology of Perception* with Kant's critical study of space in the *Transcendental Aesthetic* (1955). It would require a major book to thoroughly canvas the issue. Here I present in the first few pages of this essay, my version of what I take to be Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology of space. I then examine some crucial passages in the Kant's *Transcendental Aesthetic* to show the affinities and oppositions between the two thinkers. I focus entirely on space and leave time out.

The implication of Merleau-Ponty's assertion in the *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962) that "the most important lesson which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction" is that he breaks away from pure phenomenology and attempts to establish an existential analysis of consciousness (xiv). The *Phenomenology of Perception* shows why each of us can say, "The world is not what I think but what I live through. I am open to the world, I have no doubt that I am in communication with it..." (xvi).

My visual consciousness, for example, is the visual modality of my being-in-the-world. This can be so because my living body (*le corps vecue*) is not merely an organism. My living body is not an opaque part of what we may call in other contexts the "real" world, i.e., the physical world. Hence scientific knowledge of the physics of light, and of what occurs in my eye/brain physiologically, tells me nothing about vision, about what seeing is, though it may tell me a great deal about what interferes with it. I should point out that the way I present Merleau-Ponty's position is skewed to my own ontological concerns, though he himself later recognized in *Le Visible et L'Invisible* (1964) that he did not know it then, but what he was doing in the *Phenomenology of Perception* was ontology.

The natural attitude, which regards the world as existing just the way it appears is naïve. Merleau-Ponty's critique of the natural attitude shows that the world appears the way it does appear due to the perceiving entity which makes it appear. But what I make appear, what I make visible for example by seeing it, is what has always seemed and now seems to me to be the actual real world around me in depth and in color. The natural attitude is always with us. To critique it is among other things to recognize that my seeing the world is not something that happens to me, rather my visual consciousness is a singular activity, it is the visual disclosure of my surrounding world. A robust working out of these assertions is beyond the scope of a single book, much less an essay.

Let us concentrate on one of the features of visual space which seems unequivocally objective from the natural attitude but can, on appropriate reflection, be considered purely subjective. I refer to the up and down of everyday normal experience of the "real world" as having above and below, up and down. Knowing that the earth is a sphere, I can imagine a line drawn through the center of my body and coming out of my head going in a direction determined by where I was standing on the earth. If I were standing up in Antarctica my above would be in the opposite direction to the above I would experience if I were standing at the North Pole. Since no matter where I am standing on

the earth I am standing up, and yet up would be a different direction if I were standing elsewhere on the earth. I may conclude that there is no up and no down in itself. However, for me and during my whole life, and for all humans and animals, few things are so real about the visual space I experience as its up and its down. Visual space seems to be nothing more nor less than visual encounter with the surrounding world. My seeing, opens up the world I am involved in, not merely one I can perceive as being up and own, but one I that I must contend with. But that up and own is not merely perceptual. My airplane has to *come down* in order to land. Up and downs, aboves and belows are as real as my visual life. They are neither objective nor subjective, but as Merleau-Ponty says, they are existential.

Objective space (physical world space) has no up and down, however. If it be granted that it is objective space that is disclosed by the conscious seeing body, above and below are unequivocally not disclosed. They are not found, but are brought into being by the act of visual and existential consciousness of the world. Up and down are not life long illusions. I am not deceived if I confidently assert that I know which way is up. Up and down are integral to my visual life, integral to my visual existence, to my visual being-in-the-world. Moreover visual consciousness not only has an up and down, but an over here and over there—it is *depth* perception. Visual consciousness is then fully, robustly spatial. One could say that visual spatiality is a *real condition* for the possibility of any visual experience, and not, as Kant would have it, a mere transcendental condition for that possibility.

Now, what I perceive visually is beyond my physical body, yet it would be fundamentally misleading to say that visual space is external to the perceiving being. To say that visual space is external would imply that it is external to something, and this could be the case only if there were a single uniform space within which visual space and some other space (presumably objective space) could lie side by side and be external to each other. My visual being-in-the world is not in the world or alongside the world. Kant (1955), recognizing this in his own way, believes it supports his contention that there is only one space and that it is the space which is the sensuous form of all phenomena (25). Physical, world space is for him an "intellectual monstrosity."

Visual existential space is the space I engender by seeing, it is the space in which I see the rainbow out there over the mountain, the space in which I see those same colors of the rainbow where sunlight is refracted through a crystal and falls on my carpet. Indeed, a careful description of actual experience, requires that I say that that patch of rainbow hue *is the color* of the carpet as long as that multicolored patch of light falls on it, and as long as there is a visual being to see the color. I see the world as up and down and in color not because the objective world is up and down and colored, but because the visual space I open up discloses the world as up and down and colored, and so on. Briefly and generically stated, my lived world is what my body-subject *makes of* the physical surrounding world by experiencing it. That squirrel over there by the tree does not depend on anyone seeing it to be what it is. But my making it appear is inseparable from its being something that appears to me. Thus it is for me a real phenomenon, something real that appears. My making it appear as it does appear to me is a function

of my species specific kind of seeing. But it appears the way it does also because of what it is in itself. This of course raises intricate questions that we cannot canvass here. Most importantly for the squirrel, and in a sense for mankind, the hunter sees prey, the squirrel watcher sees something exquisite that may need protection from hunters. The "exquisiteness" is perhaps "only" an existential reality, like up and down, but real enough to be part of my real living involvement with these sorts of appearing entities. By carefully re-reading Kant and comparing him with Merleau-Ponty on this topic I think I was able to understand both of them better. Perhaps you too will find the analysis interesting if not instructive.

The *Transcendental Aesthetic* takes up only thirty-three pages, of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, but its arguments are decisive for the whole of the *Critique*, for the whole of Kant's philosophy, and to the extent that western philosophy would not be what it is without Kant, for the whole of western philosophy. At the very beginning of the *Transcendental Aesthetic* we find this passage:

Space, is not a conception which has been derived from outward experiences. For, in order that certain sensations may relate to something outside of me, (that is, to something which occupies a different part of space from that in which I am) ... the representation of space must already exist as a foundation. Consequently, the representation of space cannot be borrowed from the relations of external phenomena through experience; but, on the contrary this external experience is itself only possible through the said antecedent representation.... Space then is a necessary representation *a priori*, which serves for the foundation of all external relations. (Ibid., 24)

It may seem to be a quibble, but I venture to say that Kant should not have spoken of a conception of space, nor of a representation of space. What he is *speaking about* is "an *a priori* sensuous form of all phenomena of external experience." This Kantian *a priori* sensuous form of all phenomena of external experience is, I would argue, far more adequately characterized not as an *a priori* form, let alone a conception or representation, but rather as what we have presented above in one of its modalities—namely visual spatiality. Visual spatiality is a singularly important part of what it is for me to be what I am—a sighted being. It is my visual-being-in-the-world.

What is surely not a quibble but a singularly important assertion by Kant, is that this space has not been derived from outward experiences. And the reason he gives for this is far reaching "in order that certain sensations may relate to something outside of me ... the representation of space must already exist as a foundation." Again, it may seem to be a quibble to say that Kant should not have spoken here of a representation of space but of whatever it is that makes it possible for there to be visual access to what is beyond my body. You may decide for yourself if it is a quibble after I take the liberty to rephrase what Kant might have said if he were willing to adopt Merleau-Ponty's existential spatiality. It would go something like this: "In order that my being may relate to something outside of me, existential spatiality must exist as a foundation. Vision can be vision of something beyond my body only if it itself is spatial. Spatial experience cannot be based on external things that we experience, but on the contrary external experience is itself only possible because there is visual existential spatiality. Individual existential

spatiality is the real condition for the possibility of experiencing what is beyond one's body."

Space is subjective for Kant. He says, "... space does not represent any property of objects as things in themselves, nor does it represent them in their relations to each other; in other words space does not represent to us any determination of objects such as attaches to objects themselves" (ibid., 25). And further down, "Space is nothing else than the form of all phenomena of the external sense, that is the subjective condition of the sensibility, under which alone external intuition is possible."

Kant insists that he is not speaking of a personal subjectivity, but of a subjectivity in general, subjectivity *uperhaupt*. That is perhaps why he can claim that it is the same space that includes geometrical objects! Thus when he tries to prove the ideality (i.e., subjectivity) of space, he has recourse to the characteristics of geometrical phenomena. "Geometry" Kant says, "is a science which determines the properties of space synthetically, and yet *a priori*." "What" he asks, "must be our representation of space, in order that such a cognition of it may be possible." He replies that it "must be found *in the mind a priori*, that is before any perception of objects,¹ consequently it must be pure, not empirical intuition" (ibid., 25). Moreover, he says "... we can represent to ourselves only one space and when we talk of diverse spaces, we mean only parts of the same space" (24). Space, is "the form of all phenomena of external objects," and the "subjective condition of sensibility." He goes on to say, "It is therefore from the human point of view only that we can speak of space, extended objects, etc. If we depart from the subjective condition, under which alone we can obtain externalization, or in other words by means of which we are affected by objects, the representation of space has no meaning whatsoever." Space as a thing in itself, he believes, is a notion that leads to all sorts of absurdities not the least of which is Berkeleyan Idealism (33). For Kant what we have called physical space (objective space) is not a viable notion.

This failure to distinguish between objective space, geometric space and existential space leads Kant into characteristic difficulties associated with his brand of critical philosophy. Thus Kant says,

... we call the rainbow a mere appearance of phenomenon [*sic*] in a sunny shower, and the rain, the reality or thing in itself; and this is right enough, if we understand the latter conception in a merely physical sense, that is, as that which in universal experience, and under whatever conditions of sensuous perception, is known in intuition to be so and so determined, and not otherwise. But if we consider this empirical datum generally, and inquire, without reference to its accordance with all our senses, whether there can be discovered in it aught which represents an object as a thing in itself (*the raindrops of course are not such, for they are, as phenomena, empirical objects*) [emphasis added, parenthesis in original], the question of the relation of the representation to the object is transcendental; and not only are *the raindrops mere phenomena* [emphasis added], but even their circular form, *nay the space itself through which they fall* is nothing in itself, but both [*sic*] are mere modifications or fundamental dispositions of our sensuous intuition, whilst the transcendental object remains for us utterly unknown. (Ibid., 30-31)

Let us concede that somehow we know that raindrops do *move* through objective space. If this is a hypothesis it is infinitely more plausible than any alternative. In any

case the raindrops do not *fall in objective space*, for there is no above and below in objective space. They *do fall in visual existential space* however. Kant's reasons for denying objective space are very complex and forceful. I have tried to skirt getting into this and I will not attempt to say much of consequence about it here, but in so far as the claim that there is no objective space implies that if the sensuous form of space ceased to exit there would be no pistons that just barely fit certain cylinders, it is just too paradoxical to warrant belief. Raindrops move under the influence of gravity toward the earth in objective space. The spatiality in which they can *fall* is one that has an above and below, it is existential space. It is a spatiality we engender by perceiving

Kant asserts that it is sensuous subjectivity that provides the condition for the possibility of external experience. However, as we have seen, he does not think of sensuous subjectivity as Merleau-Ponty does, as 'existence', i.e., as being-in-the-world, but as an *a priori* form. Even Merleau-Ponty in the *Phenomenology of Perception* does not advert to the ontology that here cries out for attention. He shows that the spatiality of visual perception is perception in depth exactly as it seems to be, and he stresses that this spatiality is one's own personal visual-being-in-the-world, and is not part of the physical world. He even proposes to call it neither 'real', i.e., physical, nor ideal, i.e., mental, and chooses to say that it is existential. However, he seems reluctant to explicitly draw attention to the fact that this *existential reality* is nothing less than a modality of *psyche, mentality, or soul*, if you like. This is a formidable affair, for it is a repudiation of 'naturalism', most versions of which on close examination turn out to be, or to be sympathetic with, some form of metaphysical materialism.

Vision, is one of the real items that humans can be concerned with and might wish to understand. I say 'item' because any other term like 'thing', 'event', 'activity', 'faculty', suggest that it is part of the rest of the physical world. I am as certain that there is vision as I am that I see. To describe it faithfully requires it to be described as spatial. Vision demands to be thought of as transcending the body. The eyes are not windows that let in the light, but lamps that shine out.

It is instructive to notice that thinking of vision as a window that lets in the light is probably even more paradoxical than thinking of it as a lamp that shines out. For if visual experience is inside the brain, if it is a pattern of neural energy that produces a kind of illusionary internal hologram, then this illusionary hologram has to be thought of as isomorphic with an *unseen world* (!) outside me. Is the space I experience illusionary, and the space I do not experience, the one outside me, the only real one?

Vision as a lamp that shines out and makes the world visible (or rather that makes it actually be seen) would presumably have to be an emergent reality, a psychic reality. The brain would remain an indispensable factor in its emergence. In this essay I speak of vision as a field of psychic force emanating from my eyes, and lighting up the world. I think this is a vast improvement over thinking of it as sense data, or impressions or representations, or as a brain sized isomorphic illusionary hologram. And I think it is a vast improvement over refusing to think about it at all, because it is allegedly beyond our ability to understand. Worst of all though is to *reduce* vision to brain states which is really to deny the existence of vision.

Moreover thinking of vision as a field of psychic force suggests all sorts of new ways of dealing philosophically with almost every thing that has to do with perception. In fact it opens the way to a reassessment of our way of thinking of all animals including ourselves, and even our way of thinking about nature. It is ironic, but to think of vision as what *it seems to be*, rather than as what philosophers have for the most part thought it to be, requires us to openly do some metaphysics, it is genuinely empirical, it is radical, it is tremendously liberating, and thought provoking. I recommend it to everyone.

Note

1. Here Kant seems to use *a priori* to mean what comes before, which is a literal meaning of the Latin, and then immediately draws implications which are associated with his usual technical sense which is to characterize necessary and universally valid propositions. There may be some real mischief done by that ambiguity, but I will not examine that here.

References Cited

- Kant, Immanuel. 1955. *The critique of pure reason*. Translated by J. M. D. Meiklejohn. In *Great books of the western world*, vol. 42. Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1962. *Phenomenology of perception*. Translated by Colin Smith. New York: Humanities Press.
- . 1964. *Le visible et l'invisible: Suivi de notes de travail*. Edited by Claude Lefort. Bibliothèque Des Idées. Paris: Gallimard.