

THE THEORY OF THE BODY IS ALREADY A THEORY OF PERCEPTION

Our own body is in the world as the heart is in the organism: it keeps the visible spectacle constantly alive, it breathes life into it and sustains it inwardly, and with it forms a system. When I walk round my flat, the various aspects in which it presents itself to me could not possibly appear as views of one and the same thing if I did not know that each of them represents the flat seen from one spot or another, and if I were unaware of my own movements, and of my body as retaining its identity through the stages of those movements. I can of course take a mental bird's eye view of the flat, visualize it or draw a plan of it on paper, but in that case too I could not grasp the unity of the object without the mediation of bodily experience, for what I call a plan is only a more comprehensive perspective: it is the flat 'seen from above', and the fact that I am able to draw together in it all habitual perspectives is dependent on my knowing that one and the same embodied subject can view successively from various positions. It will perhaps be objected that by restoring the object to bodily experience as one of the poles of that experience, we deprive it of precisely that which constitutes its objectivity. From the point of view of my body I never see as

equal the six sides of the cube, even if it is made of glass, and yet the word 'cube' has a meaning; the cube itself, the cube in reality, beyond its sensible appearances, has its six equal sides. As I move round it, I see the front face, hitherto a square, change its shape, then disappear, while the other sides come into view and one by one become squares. But the successive stages of this experience are for me merely the opportunity of conceiving the whole cube with its six equal and simultaneous faces, the intelligible structure which provides the explanation of it. And it is even necessary, for my tour of inspection of the cube to warrant the judgement: 'there is a cube', that my movements themselves be located in objective space and, far from its being the case that the experience of my own movement conditions the position of an object, it is, on the contrary, by conceiving my body itself as a mobile object that I am able to interpret perceptual appearance and construct the cube as it truly is. The experience of my own movement would therefore appear to be no more than a psychological circumstance of perception and to make no contribution to determining the significance of the object. The object and my body would certainly form a system, but we would then have a nexus of objective correlations and not, as we were saying earlier, a collection of lived-through correspondences. The unity of the object would thus be conceived, not experienced as the correlate of our body's unity.

But can the object be thus detached from the actual conditions under which it is presented to us? One can bring together discursively the notion of the number six, the notion of 'side' and that of equality, and link them together in a formula which is the definition of the cube. But this definition rather puts a question to us than offers us something to conceive. One emerges from blind, symbolic thought only by perceiving the particular spatial entity which bears these predicates all together. It is a question of tracing in thought that particular form which encloses a fragment of space between six equal faces. But *particular form* words 'enclose' and 'between' have a meaning for us, it is because they derive it from our experience as embodied subjects. In space itself independently of the presence of a psycho-physical subject, there is no direction, no inside and no outside. A space is 'enclosed' between the order to be able to conceive the cube, we take up a position in space,

now on its surface, now in it, now outside it, and from that moment we see it in perspective. The cube with six equal sides is not only invisible, but inconceivable; it is the cube as it would be for itself; but the cube is not for itself, since it is an object. There is a first order dogmatism, of which analytical reflection rids us, and which consists in asserting that the object is in itself, or absolutely, without wondering what it is. But there is another, which consists in affirming the ostensible significance of the object, without wondering how it enters into our experience. Analytical reflection puts forward, instead of the absolute existence of the object, the thought of an absolute object, and, through trying to dominate the object and think of it from no point of view, it destroys the object's internal structure. If there is, for me, a cube with six equal sides, and if I can link up with the object, this is not because I constitute it from the inside: it is because I delve into the thickness of the world by perceptual experience. The cube with six equal sides is the limiting idea whereby I express the material presence of the cube which is there before my eyes, under my hands, in its perceptual self-evidence. The sides of the cube are not projections of it, but precisely sides. When I perceive them successively, with the appearance they present in different perspectives, I do not construct the idea of the geometrized projection which accounts for these perspectives: the cube is already there in front of me and reveals itself through them. I do not need to take an objective view of my own movement, or take it into account, in order to reconstitute the true form of the object behind its appearing: the account is already taken, and already the new appearance has compounded itself with the lived-through movement and presented itself as an appearance of a cube. The thing, and the world, are given to me along with the parts of my body, not by any 'natural geometry', but in a living connection comparable, or rather identical, with that existing between the parts of my body itself.

External perception and the perception of one's own body vary in conjunction because they are the two facets of one and the same act. The attempt has long been made to explain Aristotle's celebrated illusion by allowing that the unaccustomed position of the fingers makes the synthesis of their perceptions impossible: the right side of the middle finger and the left side of the index do not ordinarily 'work' together, and if both are touched at once, then there must be two

marbles. In reality, the perceptions of the two fingers are not only displaced, they are inverted: the subject attributes to the index what is touched by the middle finger and vice versa, as can be shown by applying two distinct stimuli to the fingers, a point and a ball, for example.¹ Aristotle's illusion is primarily a disturbance of the body schema. What makes the synthesis of the two tactile perceptions in one single object impossible, is not so much that the position of the fingers is unaccounted or statistically rare, it is that the right face of the middle finger and the left face of the index cannot combine in a joint exploration of the object, that the crossing of the fingers, being a movement which has to be imposed on them, lies outside the motor possibilities of the fingers themselves and cannot be aimed at in a project towards movement. The synthesis of the object is here effected, then, through the synthesis of one's own body. It is the reply or correlative to it, and it is literally the same thing to perceive one single marble, and to use two fingers as one single organ. The disturbance of the body image may even be directly translated into the external world without the intervention of any stimulus. In heautoscopy, before seeing himself, the subject always passes through a state akin to dreaming, musing or disquiet, and the image of himself which appears outside him is merely the counterpart of this depersonalization.² The patient has the feeling of being in the double outside himself, just as, in a lift which goes upwards and suddenly stops, I feel the substance of my body escaping from me through my head and overrunning the boundaries of my objective body. It is in his own body that the patient feels the approach of this Other whom he has never seen with his eyes, as the normal person is aware, through a certain burning feeling in the nape of the neck, that someone is watching him from behind.³ Conversely, a certain form of external experience implies and produces a certain

¹ Tastevin, Czerneck, Schilder, quoted by Lhermitte, *L'image de notre Corps*, pp. 36 and ff. Lhermitte, *L'image de notre Corps*, pp. 136-88, cf. p. 191. 'During the period of autoscopia the subject is overcome by a feeling of profound sadness which spreads outwards and into the very image of the double, which seems to be filled with effective vibrations identical with those experienced by the original person'; his consciousness seems to have moved wholly outside himself' And Menninger-Lerchenhal, *Das Truggebilde der eigenen*

Gestalt, p. 180: 'I suddenly had the impression of being outside my body.' Jaspers, quoted by Menninger-Lerchenhal, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

consciousness of one's own body. Many patients speak of a 'sixth sense' which seems to produce their hallucinations. Stratton's subject, whose visual field has been objectively inverted, at first sees everything upside down; on the third day of the experiment, when things are beginning to regain their upright position, he is filled with 'the strange impression of looking at the fire out of the back of his head'.⁴ This is because there is an immediate equivalence between the orientation of the visual field and the awareness of one's own body as the potentiality of that field, so that any upheaval experimentally brought about can appear indifferently either as the inversion of phenomenal objects or as a redistribution of sensory functions in the body. If a subject focuses for long-distance vision, he has a double image of his own finger as indeed of all objects near to him. If he is touched or pricked, he is aware of being touched or pricked in two places.⁵ Diplopia is thus extended into a bodily duplication. Every external perception is immediately synonymous with a certain perception of my body, just as every perception of my body is made explicit in the language of external perception. If, then, as we have seen to be the case, the body is not a transparent object, and is not presented to us in virtue of the law of its constitution, as the circle is to the goniometer, if it is an expressive unity which we can learn to know only by actively taking it up, this structure will be passed on to the sensible world. The theory of the body schema is, implicitly, a theory of perception. We have relearned to feel our body; we have found underneath the objective and detached knowledge of the body that other knowledge which we have of it in virtue of its always being with us and of the fact that we are our body. In the same way we shall need to reawaken our experience of the world as it appears to us in so far as we are in the world through our body, and in so far as we perceive the world with our body. But by thus remaking contact with the body and with the world, we shall also rediscover ourselves, since, perceiving as we do with our body, the body is a natural self and, as it were, the subject of perception.