Henry Somers-Hall
Henry.somershall@gmail.com

Merleau-Ponty and Depth

Introduction

Last week, we looked at Deleuze's criticisms of the metaphysics implied by thermodynamics. Deleuze's claim was that thermodynamics gave an accurate account of the dissipation of physical systems (roughly), but that this was only a 'partial truth'. Thermodynamics ultimately develops the notion of the heat death of the universe because it is solely concerned with already constituted systems. Deleuze's claim was that when we include the other moment of the truth of the physical world, the constitution of physical systems, then the idea that the universe can be seen as 'running down', or that differences are ultimately cancelled, no longer holds. The aim of much of the rest of the chapter is to explain how this process of constitution takes place. In order to do so, Deleuze turns to Merleau-Ponty's analysis of depth in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, and in 'Eye and Mind', where he argues for the centrality of a field of depth in explaining the individuation of physical systems. Merleau-Ponty's claim is that rather than depth being derived from a pre-existing field of spatiality, depth is responsible for the constitution of a field of space, as well as the objects we find within it. Now, this analysis mirrors a similar analysis Deleuze provides in chapter two of *Difference and Repetition* in terms of time. There, Deleuze presented a sequence of three syntheses responsible for the constitution of space. These were habit (taken from Hume), memory (taken from Bergson), and the pure form of time or eternal return (taken from Nietzsche). Here, we once again have three syntheses. The first of these is roughly associated with thermodynamics, but also with the incongruent counterparts argument, and with Merleau-Ponty's conception of the gestalt form in perception. The second with Merleau-Ponty's account of depth, and the third once again with the eternal return. We can therefore (I think) say that the pure form of time is also the pure form of spatiality itself.

The First Synthesis

If we are to explain the constitution of systems, then, Deleuze claims, we cannot do so *within* space or extensity. Rather, we need to explain the genesis of space as well as the systems it contains. Deleuze's basic point is that space and time are ways in which a subject relates to a world. Thus, following a relatively Kantian model of perception, the intuition of time is given *to* a subject. As such, an account of the emergence of the subject within time is rendered impossible. Deleuze makes a similar point here about space. So long as space is seen purely as an 'anticipation of perception', (DR 231/291) the subject will be seen as given. With the subject comes the constituted realm of qualities, as well as 'the high and the low, the right and the left, the figure and the ground' (DR 229/288) as structures that show themselves for a subject. In providing this list, Deleuze highlights the fact that we do encounter differences within perception (or, rather, in more technical terms, diversity).

The first example (the high and the low) is, I think given by thermodynamics, and the claim that it is differences that are responsible for the properties we find in the world around us, thus, properties are generated by differences between localisations of high and low intensity.

The second example, the right and the left, comes from Kant. We saw this at the beginning of the course in terms of Kant's inner differences presented by the argument from incongruent counterparts, which emerged due to the impossibility of taking account of handedness within a purely conceptual determination of objects. As we also saw, incongruent counterparts were intimately connected to the notion of space. Thus, while a triangle and its mirror image may have been incongruent on a two dimensional plane, if we add a third dimension, they become congruent again, in that we can then flip it over.

The final example, the figure and the ground, is from Merleau-Ponty's own work. In the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty makes the claim that "a figure on a background is the simplest sense-given available to us", and as such "is the very definition of the phenomenon of perception."[i] That is, rather than the world consisting either of objects, or of disconnected atoms of sense-data, Merleau-Ponty makes the claim that a moment of difference is essential to the nature of perception. The essential moment of perception is not, therefore, a single element, but rather a relation between a figure and its background. Thus, a red dot is not perceptible against a red background, but more than this, our perception is fundamentally contextual, and so the significance of any element cannot be discerned without relating it to the field of entities of which it is a part. Merleau-Ponty bases this claim on the results of Gestalt psychology. It's this final form of difference that leads us towards the conception of depth.

These three examples form what we could call the first synthesis of space. In each case, we have the constitution of a difference within space that relies on the relation of elements. These elements in themselves are lacking in significance, but only achieve significance by being brought into relation with one another. The question, as with the material we looked at in the intro to DR, will be, what is the ground of this difference?

For those of you who have looked at chapter two, we can draw a further parallel between the structure of thermodynamics and the three syntheses. The first of the syntheses of time is the synthesis of habit. Habit gives a certain directionality to time, in that it understands the past as a series of particular occurrences, and relates to the future as a general horizon. When we looked at the notion of entropy last week, we noted that the system of differences of intensities constituted an arrow of time. This arrow moved from particular, ordered systems to generalised, disordered systems. This directionality from the particular to the general forms a rough analogue of the first temporal synthesis of habit.

The Second Synthesis

The second spatial synthesis will give an account of how a horizon of intensive depth constitutes the qualities and localised intensities presupposed by thermodynamics. This synthesis can be equated with the synthesis of memory. Finally, just as there was a third synthesis of time in terms of the pure intensity of the eternal return, there is a third spatial synthesis of pure depth as intensity.

At the beginning of the course, we saw how for Merleau-Ponty, it was the forgetfulness of the perspectivism of our experience that led us to posit a world of objects. Within this world, objects were understood in terms of their relationships with other objects, that is, the distances they held to their surroundings. As such, we cannot explain the nature of constituted objects without also

explaining the possibility of these distance relations: we need an explanation of space. In this regard, Merleau-Ponty's analysis of depth is central. We can now move on to look at the concept of depth in Merleau-Ponty's work. Beginning with the alternative approach, Descartes relates the concept of depth to representation. The Cartesian subject seeing himself in a mirror, according to Merleau-Ponty's interpretation, does not see himself, but rather an image impressed on the retina. With painting, this view reaches its most extreme point. The figure represented in a painting is a necessary deformation of that which it is supposed to stand for. "It is only a bit of ink put down here and there on the paper" (EM, 170). In order for the painting to represent the object, it is necessary that square shapes take on the form of rectangles, circles take on the form of ovals. In this case, the operation of seeing a painting is conceived of as an intellectual operation, that of reading, the work as if it were a text. The painting provides the cues with which to reconstruct a three-dimensional representation from the lines of projection and relation of forms present within the image. Thus, by recognizing that certain forms are both present, but obscured by one another within the picture, we are able to "see a space where there is none" (EM, 172). Depth therefore for Descartes is a third dimension that is generated from those present. Going further, for the Cartesian, there is no true concept of depth as "another man, situated elsewhere— or better, God, who is everywhere—could penetrate [the objects'] hiding place and see them openly deployed" (EM, 173). Depth is in this sense a relative concept. Such an approach leads to the perspectival painting techniques of the Renaissance, taking their cue from Euclidean geometry, with its attempt to artificially generate perspective. As Merleau-Ponty points out, the focus on brass etchings in Descartes' work on optics is indicative of this approach. In order for depth to be considered in this way, objects have to be conceived of as outside one another, with solid boundaries. The Cartesian approach therefore mirrors the approach of atomism in science that Bergson attacked. As Merleau-Ponty makes clear, it is a conception of space that makes Descartes' approach possible. "Space remains absolutely in itself, everywhere equal to itself, homogenous; its dimensions, for example, are interchangeable" (EM, 173). As with classical physics, the perspectivism of the Renaissance attempted to "bring an end to painting" (EM, 174), regardless of the fact that even with the geometry used by the perspectival school, there was no absolute answer to how the structure of the field of vision was to be constructed.

Merleau-Ponty's claim about this form understanding of depth is that, while it recognises the perspectival nature of our experience, this perspectivism ultimately sees perspective as a subjective feature of our representations of an objective and pre-existing spatiality:

> What I call depth is in reality a juxtaposition of points, making it comparable to breadth. I am simply badly placed to see it. I should see it if I were in the position of a spectator looking on from the side, who can take in at a glance the series of objects spread out in front of me, whereas for me they conceal each other—or see the distance from my body to the first object, whereas for me this distance is compressed into a point...For God, who is everywhere, breadth is immediately equivalent to depth. (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 255)

While representation attempts to derive the field of depth from the two given dimensions, thus characterising depth itself as an axis of extended space, Merleau-Ponty reverses this procedure. That is, rather than seeing depth as derived from the given dimensions, he sees it as that by which the given dimensions of extensity are given to us. Depth is not merely breadth seen from another angle, but rather as something different in kind that, by making possible a field of autonomous but

interrelated objects, also makes possible the system of extensive distances taken as foundational by representation.

> Once depth is understood in this way, we can no longer call it a third dimension. In the first place, if it were a dimension, it would be the first one; there are forms and definite planes only if it is stipulated how far from me their different parts are. But a *first* dimension that contains all the others is no longer a dimension, at least in the ordinary sense of a *certain relationship* according to which we make measurements. Depth thus understood is, rather, the experience of the reversibility of dimensions, of a global "locality"—everything in the same place at the same time, a locality from which height, width, and depth are abstracted, of a voluminosity we express when we say that a thing is *there*. (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 180)

As Merleau-Ponty notes, this primordial depth here is no longer simply a 'container' for objects and qualities which are found within it. A consequence of this is that the genesis of quality and the genesis of space can no longer be seen as two separate projects: 'We must seek space and its content *as* together,' (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 180)

In *Eye and Mind*, he makes the claim that the enigma of depth is one of the primary inspirations of modern painting, and takes the work of Paul Klee and Paul Cezanne as exemplary of the new project of showing 'how the things become things, how the world becomes world.' (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 181) While the Cartesian approach attempts to return the field of aesthetics to a branch of physics, it does represent an advance, in that for Descartes, the work of art relies on the production of space. This idea of the production of space is taken up by artists such as Klee, albeit with the idea of space at play no longer the Euclidean space of Cartesian (and Newtonian) physics, but rather the space of the "lines of generation" that designate something analogous to the essence of a thing. Deleuze will later refer to Klee's "nonconceptual concept" (WP, 218) as that which indicates the 'nonthinking thought' of the "people to come," where "philosophy, art, and science become indiscernible, as if they shared the same shadow that extends itself across their different nature and constantly accompanies them" (WP, 218). For Merleau-Ponty, this new concept of depth is summed up by Klee's aphorism that it is color that is the "place where our brain and the universe meet" (EM, 180), as the property of color does not rely on the solid boundaries found in the brass etchings of Descartes. Whereas the solid boundaries of the brass etching give rise to the classical conception of space, that of color gives rise to an interpenetrative space, exemplified by the late works of Cézanne. The idea of depth created by the color field differs from that of the brass etching in that the brass etching specifies depth as a third dimension, whereas for Cézanne and Klee, depth is that which binds objects to one another, as the ground through which they interpenetrate. Thus it is instead the first dimension that generates the others. Even the depth of the Cartesian geometry follows from this elementary depth. What is important to note, according to Merleau-Ponty, is that it is not color that is the dimension of depth, but depth that is the dimension of color. That is, it is the dimension of depth that "creates identities, differences, a texture, a materiality, a something— creates them from itself, for itself" (EM, 181). In the context of Klee he argues that "sometimes Klee's colors seem to have been born slowly upon the canvas, to have emanated from some primordial ground" (EM, 182). What is important about color is that it acts for Merleau-Ponty like one of the intensive qualities that Deleuze associates with the virtual. That is, color cannot be divided without being changed in nature. Thus, the primordial dimension of depth for Merleau-Ponty is an intensive

dimension. It is not color that is an intensity, but that which is more general than color, but can be captured by color's intensive nature.

This process by which a primordial depth is expressed as in the form of qualities and extensions is, for Deleuze, the second spatial synthesis. 'Depth as the (ultimate and original) heterogeneous dimension is the matrix of all extensity, including its third dimension considered to be homogeneous with the other two.' (DR 229/288) In a move that goes beyond Merleau-Ponty, he equates this non-extensive depth with intensity ('Depth is the intensity of being, or vice-versa' [DR, 231/290]). Now, we can note that while in the first, thermodynamic synthesis, intensity was localised, in this second synthesis, intensity is rather that which allows localisation to take place – it is a horizon that allows things and qualities to be constituted. It is therefore responsible for four features of the spatial world: *extensio*, as the individual distances between objects, the *extensum*, as the three dimensions of space themselves (the frame of reference for the *extensio*), *qualitas*, as milieu of intensive differences recognised by thermodynamics as responsible for the appearance of qualities, and *quale*, as these qualities themselves.

Now, just as there were three temporal syntheses, here there are three spatial syntheses. The third synthesis of time was the pure form of time, prior to its expression in habit or memory. Deleuze describes the third spatial synthesis as 'space as a whole, but space as an intensive quantity: the pure *spatium*.' (DR 230/289) While the second synthesis provides an account of the process by which intensity as depth generates the three dimensions (the explication of extensity), Deleuze notes that the fact that depth is different in kind from the dimensions it constitutes means that it is 'definable independently of extensity,' (DR 230/289) The third spatial synthesis therefore goes beyond Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological account by considering intensity independently of this process of the constitution of perspective.

Just as Deleuze equated the third synthesis of time with the Eternal Return (2.8), insofar as it presented us with the pure field of intensity that gave rise to the two modes of temporality, the third spatial synthesis is also equated with the Eternal Return. Once again, Deleuze makes the point that the Eternal Return is not to be seen as something like the Platonic doctrine of an actual circularity of time, and a concomitant replication of a prior state of affairs. Rather than the Eternal Return being the claim that 'things revolve,' (DR 241/302) as we have just seen, depth is precisely what is responsible for the constitution of things. Thus, 'things must be dispersed within difference, and their identity must be dissolved before they become subject to eternal return and to identity in the eternal return.' (DR 241/302) If we are to think the unground from which things emerge, this unground cannot be thought in terms of things without leading to an infinite regress.

These three syntheses therefore explain why for Deleuze the increase in entropy proposed by thermodynamics is a transcendental illusion. Thermodynamics notes that intensive differences that we find already constituted and located in a spatial milieu tend to equalise themselves, but such an account only gives us half the picture. What is missing is the account given by the second and third syntheses whereby the extensive magnitudes thermodynamics presupposes, and with them the systems of intensive differences, are constituted. This presupposition that extensity is already constituted in effect rules out any consideration of these syntheses, thus leading to the transcendental illusion that intensive can only be equalised, but not constituted. The thought of depth is the thought of the eternal return because it is the thought of a field of intensity that is not

cancelled by the laws of entropy. In fact, Deleuze claims that the Eternal Return is the thought of that which gives rise to the laws of nature, mirroring his analysis of repetition we looked at in the introduction. Next week, we will address an issue brought up by this third synthesis. While we may have an understanding of intensity operating within extensive space (the difference in temperature between two locations, for instance), what does Deleuze mean by intensity defined independently of extension?

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[i] Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962), pg. 4