From Heroism to the Politics of Dialogue

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Introduction

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the French phenomenological philosopher, often mentions heroism in his works. However, his meaning of heroism is different from previous types of heroism. Therefore, this poster presentation defines heroism according to Merleau-Ponty.

Heroism (until the Modern Age)

In Sens et non-sens, Merleau-Ponty states that heroism is always present. Yet, according to him, its meaning has been changed by his contemporaries. The following are previous types of heroism, as shown by Merleau-Ponty.

1) Until the Modern Age, the hero was thought to be a representative of the will of God who was present in the world. However, by the time of philosophers such as Hegel and Nietzsche, people were unable to believe in transcendent existence outside of the living world.

2) For Hegel, a hero (under the older definition) was the protector of the world and the hero created (through his actions) new laws and moralities that the following era would recognize as the truth. In other words, this hero did what the history of the world wanted and he sacrificed himself for the future.

However, such an antiquated type of heroism was no longer the belief for Merleau-Ponty and his contemporaries since they no longer believed that there were pre-established harmonies and an ideal direction for future society in the present world.

3) For Nietzsche, the hero did not care about God and the rational flow of history and this type of heroism regarded the ruler. However, it was impossible to dominate absolutely after the hero’s death.

Heroism (Merleau-Ponty and his contemporaries)

People do not believe in such antiquated types of heroism, but they still believe in heroism. Merleau-Ponty considers how the meaning of the hero has changed by focusing on the hero as an actual human being. In Phénoménologie de la perception, Merleau-Ponty explains his theory of human nature by presenting humans as existing or être au monde. Such existence in physical form has certain implicit and unachieved meanings about the world, especially in the relationship between the world and the physical body that can move, express, and think. Due to such a link, a human can comprehend others and establish friendships through individual efforts. Ideally, a hero, as a part of this world, assumes his and others’ situations, and never betrays his comrades. Such a human is the hero according to Merleau-Ponty and his contemporaries.

Concretely, facing a crisis or even his death, for what hero attempts to fulfill this mission? With a clear goal, it is easy to serve, but if it is not clear, then does he not regard the significance of his own death? The sacrifice, his practice is not for what history wants (Hegel), not for Thanatos (Nietzsche), not for service futile. He sacrificed himself in order to present and prove to himself and others what he and his comrades believe (for example freedom, equality) are true.

Conclusion

This poster presentation first classified the antiquated types of heroism according to Merleau-Ponty and then defined heroism as presented by Merleau-Ponty and his contemporaries.

In addition, in Sens et non-sens, Merleau-Ponty also often mentions politics. I think that focusing on the relationship between the hero and others is helpful when studying how Merleau-Ponty considered the relationship political between a leader and masses of people. In the scene of policy making, to become a hero, to be trusted by masses of people, a leader has to assume his and others’ situations, and he has to continue dialogue with the world and others. Because he as a human is not the representative of the will of God nor the representative of history.

Reference

Merleau-Ponty, Phénoménologie de la perception (1945), Gallimard, coll. «Tel,” 2005
Merleau-Ponty, Sens et non-sens (1948), Gallimard, 1995