

The Power of Life -- Comments on Sense and Nonsense by Maurice Merleau-Ponty

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Abstract: Philosophy is the product of human reason and the spiritual behavior of thinking about the essential dimension of the world. When rational thinking tries the best to explore the whole meaning of existence, the existence of the world as a whole has lost its sense of wholeness and deep experience at the mercy of such rational knowledge. It has become a cold object only for understanding and thinking. Merleau-Ponty believes that philosophy is not a pure and blameless act of knowledge, and that the world is not a soulless object. Philosophy should not only be an onlooker, but also provide a positive attitude towards life, respect individual experience to re-examine the world planned by reason and knowledge which lacks its truth.

1. Introduction

The publication of *Sense and Nonsense* fills the gap in the research of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy and enriches the understanding his philosophy from his works. This collection of 13 essays by Merleau-Ponty is an experimental text of Merleau-Ponty 's attempt to reconcile three theoretical sequences: philosophy, existentialism and Marxism. It consists of three chapters: works, ideas and politics.

The first chapter contains four articles: Cezanne's Doubt, Fiction and Metaphysics, A Scandalous Author, The Film and The New Psychology. There are five articles in the second chapter: The Hegel 's Existentialism, Existential Debate, The Metaphysical Man, Concerning Marxism, Marxism and Philosophy. In the third chapter, there are four articles: War Has Begun, For the Sake of Truth, Faith and Sincerity, and Man, the Hero. However, in these thirteen articles, Merleau-Ponty always holds the attitude that human nature is a fact that has no boundary, and the world that human nature faces also has no limit. Philosophy cannot fully explain these problems, and the constant disputes between art and politics, principle and faith further show that there is no ready answer for the truth and nothingness of the world. Only by constantly updating the dimension of our own experience can we understand the truth that the world tries to convey to us.

In other words, the thought experiment that Merleau-Ponty did in this book is a philosophical view that tries to integrate the analytic theory with the real-life experience. It shows a rational attitude, a metaphysical understanding. It is just that Merleau-Ponty does not give readers a sorting out of the rational theme and metaphysical topic from the perspective of philosophy history. Instead, he is only elaborating on a kind of existent reason that strives to resist the world as a whole and causality. It is not only a complex theory that mediates artistic purity, philosophical discourse, principle discourse and social phenomena, but also a strong heroic philosophy of life. Therefore, the understanding to the thought genealogy of the book should start from art, take philosophy and principle discourse as the intermediary, and take society and humanity as the end point.

2. The Depth of the Art World

An art work is not an interpretation or an imitation, but an act of deep reproduction of the existence of a ready-made world. A painting or a poem does not change the direct stipulation as a human being in social and moral meanings. However, art allows us to re-experience the self-nature of life, to encounter the real and profound karma. The value of art is that it quietly changes our rigid attitude towards life with its silent care. All this about the nature of art which can't be told by words,

is concentrated in the analysis of Cezanne and his paintings in Merleau-Ponty's book. Cezanne's Doubt is Merleau-Ponty's famous treatise on paintings, and also the first article in *Sense and Nonsense*. For Merleau-Ponty, Cezanne's life and character cannot be measured as negative. Morality does not touch the real thing at all, but only exposes vulgarity and shallowness. These encounters become the thought start of Cezanne as an artist and the beginning of resistance to life. So, Cezanne's doubt is not a social critique, and it has nothing to do with skepticism or cartesian cogito. Merleau-Ponty believes that Cezanne's doubt is the deep doubt from the heart directly after experiencing the test of life without any external things and specific purposes to interfere. This doubt is not a low-level catharsis, and it has nothing to do with the behavioral and comprehension difficulties caused by specific problems of reason, knowledge, politics, philosophy, emotions, etc. These are, on the contrary, the restraint that Cezanne wants to avoid. He "has clearly been trying to avoid the ready-made options that others have suggested to him". Merleau-Ponty believes that the problem Cezanne wants to solve is the imbalance between what he actually feels and what already exists. Cezanne wants to combine rationality, experience, knowledge, intuition and other rational and irrational phenomena in his paintings, creating a transparent art world, so that modern people and indifferent souls can regain the understanding of the origin of human nature. Cezanne's doubt is not questioning, but the creation and resistance started with questioning, which is the powerful resistance of pure mind to the world. This is What Merleau-Ponty wants to say by analyzing Cezanne's paintings. He also holds the same view in the part of this paper that discusses films and novels. Frames of films and description of novels are not simple records, but one of the ways that the subject tries to have a deep dialogue with the world to get a close sense of existence.

3. Defending Existentialism

In the history of philosophy and the popular impression, existentialism is more like an emotion than a philosophical proposition. It is like a cry of petite bourgeoisie filled with indignation. Merleau-Ponty, a philosopher famous for the philosophy of perception, defended existentialism to some extent, especially the existentialism represented by Sartre in his book *Sense and Nonsense*. A Scandalous Author and Existential Debate are counterattacks for Sartre to his critics. However, Merleau-Ponty does not see himself as an existentialist. He just justified the injustice imposed on existentialism out of affection and his own academic needs.

According to Merleau-Ponty, Sartre's existentialism is by no means an idle moan. Sartre is a real person who loves life and literature. With his actions and enthusiasm, He showed the world a French intellectual, social activist, writer, philosophy. Merleau-Ponty points out that Sartre's existentialism never deluded people into self-depravity. On the contrary, Sartre's existentialism was born for people to take responsibility, to tear the sense of random in the world, and to turn things that have no reason into the sensible reality conforming to purposiveness, for all people who love life. If there must be existentialism, then the concept with passion and freedom of loving the world and loving human beings is the real essence of existentialism.

Because "Man exists in the world by virtue of it, intervening in a physical situation and social situation. It is both an affirmation and a limitation of freedom." There is no fatalism or mechanical necessity. All you have depend on your own decisions, which is the only truth of human beings as the subject. If you are not sure about this perceptual freedom, not to give full play to your own initiative to the maximum, to understand other people and the spread of the world, you will not be able to experience the bump given by the whole to individuals. Then there is no existential understanding. It is, at most, a meaningless moan to life and a negative attitude to existence. So, in another essay in his book, *The Metaphysical in Man*, Merleau-Ponty argues that philosophical thought must be involved in the real life. Without the participation of life experience and specific disciplines, philosophy becomes empty talk. However, life experience and discipline construction will be nothing more than rhetoric without enough deep understanding. Only by allowing the subject to operate fully between the facts can we understand the nature and wonder of individuals, of others, of the society and of history.

4. Concerning Marxism

Comparing with the view of Marxism in *The Adventure of Dialectics*, He holds a targeted Marxism view in the book *Sense and Nonsense*. In *Concerning Marxism*, Merleau-Ponty expounds his Marxism view by commenting on Thierry Maunier's view of Marxism. Thierry Maunier misread Marxist historical materialism as economic determinism and interpreted Marxism in a racist way. Merleau-Ponty refuted this extremely wrong view of Marxism. Merleau-Ponty argues that "the greatness of Marxism lies not in its treatment of the economy as the primary or sole cause of history, but rather in its treatment of cultural history and economic history as two Abstract aspects of a unique process."

That is to say, Merleau-Ponty regards Marxism as a systematic theory to explain history, whose value lies in both the equal value of culture and economy, and recognizing that civilization is a process of interaction between spiritual and material factors, in which the social and national characteristics of different civilizations are formed. Merleau-Ponty thinks that the talk about social problems without the changes in material conditions and interest mechanisms will become meaningless. As the social existence that sees material and benefit as the anteriorly basis, Marxism has a farsighted view in this respect. In response to Thierry Maunier's tendency to read Marxism in a racist way, Merleau-Ponty points out that the class struggle theory advocated by Marxism is not a tool to justify racial superiority. "The secret of Leninism," he said, "lies in its success in establishing communication between the masses and the leaders, between the working class and its consciousness."

Since this is a theory and method that can effectively solve social communication problems and establish benefit mechanism, it should not be regarded as an excuse of racism. Marxism recognizes the general course of history as well as individual effort. In *Marxism and Philosophy*, Merleau-Ponty responded to the misunderstanding of Marxist theory by French Marxists at that time. Merleau-Ponty points out that these misconceptions are the result of a shallow, thoughtless, bombastic stance. For Merleau-Ponty, Marxism is not the so-called mechanical materialism, nor is it the ideological indoctrination that eliminates the value of human nature. "Marxism's view of human society, especially economic society, cannot be subject to eternal laws such as those of classical physics." Merleau-Ponty points out that the real Marxism thinks that the operating mechanism of human society is not "an eternal mechanical process, but a two-way process of the subject selection and object follow. Especially for economic problems, Marxism thinks that the choices of humans have both invariability and variability, and around the practice of the choices has formed the totality which we must face and explain. Marxist theory is a social critical theory that understands the tendency of things to happen, and cannot be regarded as a kind of empty implication without vitality and individual will."

5. The Choices of Humans

If man is the subject, and only the subject, the only thing that can prove the sense of subject is the choice. When humanity is exposed to the urgency of the present situation and the certainty of the coming future, we will create our truth and presence by choice. In the third part of *Sense and Nonsense*, Merleau-Ponty discusses the attitude of French society towards war, the relationship between faith and life, and the phenomenon of hero worship before and after the second world war. The key is not the complexity and solution of these empirical problems. As a philosopher, Merleau-Ponty has always been concerned about how the most direct sense and choices of human beings are reflected in the world. From the perspective of Merleau-Ponty, whether it is faith or politics, war or worship, people are eager to find a way to settle themselves and reconcile with their opponents through choices. But there is no real way out of this inconsistency between both sides. This transcendental inconsistency means that man is doomed to bear the weight of the unsolved truth as a whole. The only truth that constitutes human history and society is the endless conflict and settlement process between morality and ethic, belief and interest. So, "in the age of belief, humans believe that a ready-made outline of destiny can be found in all things, and in the age of

unbelief, who can avoid those questions, and who can give another answer?”

6. Conclusion

The causes and effects can't be explained thoroughly by reason. The world still exists as it is. The answers can't be completely told by philosophy, thinking continues day after day. The search for sense and the thinking result of nonsense constitute the textual paradox of sense and nonsense and run through it. This research paradox, from the perspective of Merleau-Ponty's thought genealogy, is not only the promotion of Phenomenology of Perception whose philosophy only stays in the physical dimension, but also the necessary transition for Merleau-Ponty to form his ontology in the future. Most importantly, in addition to the academic dimension of the book, Merleau-Ponty's thinking also shows that if life has a transcendental causality, overcoming the ready-made sense of causal chain and finding a way of life belonging to each one is not only the career of philosophers, but also the proposition of life to everyone.

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