Book Reviews

Glen A. Mazis

“Silence Sings as We Do When Happy”

Beginning to read Glen A. Mazis’ book is akin to an aesthetic experience. The impressions of the opening paragraphs resemble what the eminent scholar of aesthetics Hans-Georg Gadamer called the process of recognition or understanding—“so it is, it must be so.” One’s intuitive feeling for the work of Merleau-Ponty is confirmed and expanded: of course, it contains an ethics and it must be an ethics that necessarily has to evolve around silence, imagination and the poetic.

In his book Merleau-Ponty and the face of the world, Mazis shows how an ethics is present just under the surface in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy. He provides us with a foundation of ethics based on Merleau-Ponty’s work and the book is a thorough examination of how ethics originates from the depths of perception. Mazis shows how a radical openness in perception involves perception of the depths of the world and the silent gestures made by its physiognomy. This openness to silence is not to be thought of as listening to an absence of sound, but rather as an opening where I am attentive to how silence sings the world. To speak of gestures made by our surroundings emphasizes the chiasmic relationship between individual and surrounding that is developed in the writings of Merleau-Ponty, and to be attentive to this silence is to allow oneself to participate in this chiasmic relation, Mazis argues. It is the foundation of being which nevertheless all too easily remains hidden from us.

Mazis discusses this chiasmic relation as the foundation of a compassionate ethics. He describes how the ethics found in the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty is formed by a movement that differs from a Cartesian philosophy of ethics. The ethics drawn from Merleau-Ponty is not found in a sense of pure reason...
as an Absolute. It is rather a result of perception and the transformation of self through embodied inter-subjectivity that can evolve as compassion, a contact with the depths of the world. This, Mazis contends, is in contrast to Levinas’ ethics which has its ground in a vertical ascent to a higher state of rationality that is created in the meeting with the other. Though both Levinas’ and Merleau-Ponty’s ethics are socially founded, the movements created by the relation to others happen in different directions: down into a felt compassion with others in Merleau-Ponty’s ethics, and up towards a transcendental ethical duty in Levinas’ ethics. The ethics developed from Merleau-Ponty is thus never ending, but must be seen as a continual and contextual process of affective connection.

In answering the question of how and on what foundation this process takes place, Mazis connects the perceptual depths and the chiasmic relation between beings that evolves at the core of perception. This embodied intersubjectivity, that is the result of listening to the silent gestures of the world, is not a relation that ties us together in sameness, but instead a connection where both persons play a part in the unfolding of each other while at the same time retaining difference. The experience of self is therefore an experience both of myself and the other as co-existing and co-constituting a world, and Mazis shows how this concurrent existence of sameness and difference is the foundation of true compassion. The affective bond has roots in the perceptual intertwining of the other, the world, and me, which must be the basis for any ethics that concerns the care and regard for something other than myself.

This development of an ethics originating from the pre-reflective encounter with our surroundings is very well formulated, and provides us with an interesting insight to the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty and to how ethics is immanent in his theory of perception. A theory of ethics must also contain a practical aspect for it not to be an unworldly abstraction and Mazis uses the concept of imagination, as formulated by Merleau-Ponty, as a way of connecting the idea of an ethics rooted in perception with lived lives that involve, among other things, language. He conceptualizes imagination as the medium through which the symbolic of different past moments is connected and revealed in a way that makes them resonate with each other in the light of the present and the multiple possible futures. Temporality, as we know, plays part in perception, and Mazis provides the reader with an interesting discussion of the relation between imagination and temporality, and how these experiential features are involved in an ethics of perceptual depth. Following Merleau-Ponty’s use of Proust, Mazis seeks to show how the depths of silence can move beyond itself into language while still retaining access to the latent and pre-reflective sense in perception. Language enmeshed with silence can take us