Public Space and Political Public Sphere—The Biographical Roots of Two Motifs in my Thought[1]

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Permit me first to confess to my discomfiture at the request that I should relate in plain terms something instructive about my life and personal experiences. President Inamori's request to prizewinners is "Please, talk about yourself"—"Tell us how you overcame hardships, what your guideline was when standing at the crossroads of your life." I am thereby addressed as an author, teacher, and intellectual who is accustomed to communicating with readers, students, and listeners. So, you might well ask, why should someone who leads a comparatively public life be at all disconcerted when expected to talk about himself? But that would be to overlook the fact that in general the life of a philosopher is rather poor in external events. And philosophers themselves feel more comfortable in the theoretical domain. So please allow me to begin by explaining my inhibitions when it comes to talking about private matters by offering you a theoretical remark on the relationship between the private and the public.

It helps to distinguish here between two types of public and publicity. In today's media society, the public sphere serves those who have gained celebrity as a stage on which to present themselves. Visibility is the real purpose of public appearances. The price that stars pay for this kind of presence in the mass media is the conflation of their private and public lives. The intention behind participation in political, literary, or scholarly debates or any other contribution to public discourse, by contrast, is quite different. Here reaching agreement on a particular topic or clarifying reasonable dissent takes priority over the self-presentation of the author. This public is not a space of viewers or listeners but an arena in which speakers and interlocutors exchange questions and answers. Rather than everyone else's gaze being focused on the celebrity, an exchange of opinions and reasons takes place. In discourses that focus on issues of common concern, participants turn their backs on their private lives. They have no need to talk about themselves. The line between public and private spheres does not become blurred but instead the two domains complement each other.

This kind of objectivity may explain why when philosophers deliver historical lectures on Aristotle or Thomas Aquinas or Kant they generally limit themselves to stating only the bare biographical facts of when these thinkers were born, lived, and died. Even stormy episodes in the lives of these philosophers—one need only think of Plato's visits to Syracuse—take a back seat to their ideas and arguments. The lives of philosophers are not the stuff of legends. What they leave behind is at best a new and often enigmatic set of thoughts formulated in a unique language with which later generations continue to struggle. Indeed, in our field we treat those thinkers as "classics" whose works have remained contemporary for us. The ideas of such a classical thinker are like the molten core beneath a volcano that has deposited biographical rings of hardened lava. The great thinkers of the past whose works have stood the test of time impress this image upon us. By contrast, we, the many living philosophers—who are in any case more professors of philosophy—are merely the contemporaries of our contemporaries. And the less original our ideas are, the more they remain bound to the context from which they emerged. At times, indeed, they are no more than an expression of the biography from which they spring.

On my seventieth birthday, my students honored me with a *Festschrift* that bore the title *Die Öffentlichkeit der Vernunft und die Vernunft der Öffentlichkeit*—"The public sphere of reason and the reason of the public sphere." The title is not a bad choice, because the public sphere as a space of reasoned communicative exchanges is the issue that has concerned me all my life. The conceptual triad of "public space," "discourse," and "reason," in fact, has dominated my work as a scholar and my political life. Any such obsession has biographical roots. I suspect that four experiences may have had some bearing on this theoretical interest. Following my birth and during early infancy I was exposed to the traumatic experience of a series of surgeries (1)—as it happens, experiences of illness or physical handicap can be found in the biographies of many philosophers; second, from the time when I was just starting school, I recall experiencing difficulties in communicating and humiliations connected with my handicap (2); third, during my adolescence I was deeply influenced by my generation's experience of the break in world history marked by the year 1945 (3); and, finally, in the course of my adult life I have been disturbed by the political experience of the painfully slow liberalization of German postwar society and culture and its repeated setbacks (4). Allow me to elaborate in turn on these conjectures concerning links between theory and biography.

I

I shall begin with my early childhood, with an operation that I underwent directly after I was born. I do not believe that this surgery, as one might suppose, enduringly shook my faith in the world around me. However, that intervention may well have

awakened the feelings of dependence and vulnerability and the sense of the relevance of our interactions *with others*. At any rate, the social nature of human beings later became the starting point for my philosophical reflections. There are many species of animals that live socially. Indeed, the primates, our closest relatives, live in hordes and families, though they lack the complex kinship systems first invented by *Homo sapiens*. It is not forms of social existence as such that set human beings apart from other species. To grasp what is special about the social nature of humans we need to translate Aristotle's famous characterization of man as a *zoon politikón*, quite literally: man is a political animal, that is, an animal that exists *in a public space*. To be more precise, human beings are animals that, by virtue of being embedded from the outset in public networks of social relationships, first develop the competences that make them into persons. If we compare the biological features of newborn mammals, we observe that no other species enters the world as immature and as helpless as we do. Nor is any other animal dependent for so long a period of rearing on the protection of the family and a public culture intersubjectively shared with conspecifics. We humans learn *from one another*. And this is only possible in the public space of a culturally stimulating milieu.

Needless to say, I can no longer remember that first operation on my cleft palate. But when I had to undergo a repeat of the operation at the age of five—in other words, at a time that I remember clearly—it undoubtedly sharpened my awareness of the deep dependence of one person on others. At any rate, this heightened sensitivity to the social nature of human beings led me to those philosophical approaches that emphasize the intersubjective constitution of the human mind—to the hermeneutic tradition that originated with Wilhelm von Humboldt, to the American pragmatism of Charles Sanders Peirce and George Herbert Mead, to Ernst Cassirer's theory of symbolic forms, and to Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophy of language.

The intuitive sense of the deeply rooted reciprocal dependence of one person on another finds expression in an image of "the human being's place in the world." Such paradigms define our everyday self-understanding, though sometimes they also define the conceptual parameters for entire scientific disciplines. I have in mind the image of a subjectivity that one must imagine as a glove turned inside out in order to reveal the structure of its fabric woven from the strands of intersubjectivity. Inside each individual person, we find a reflection of the external social world. For the individual mind is imbued with structure and content by locking into the "objective" mind of the intersubjective interactions of *intrinsically* socialized subjects. The individual does not encounter his social environment in the same way that the bare organism encounters its natural environment, namely, as something interior that demarcates itself from the outer world through an osmotic barrier. The abstract juxtaposition of subject and object, of inside and outside, is misleading here, because

the organism of the newborn infant first develops into a person when it enters into social interaction. The infant becomes a person by entering the public space of a social world that receives him with open arms. And this public domain of the jointly inhabited interior of our lifeworld is at once inside and outside.

In the process of growing up, the child is able to form the *inner* centre of a consciously experienced life only by *externalizing* herself through communicatively constituted interpersonal relations. Even in expressions of its most personal feelings and its most intimate excitations, an ostensibly *private* consciousness thrives on the impulses it receives from the cultural network of *public*, symbolically expressed, and intersubjectively shared categories, thoughts, and meanings. Surprisingly, though, in the cognitive sciences today we are witnessing a renaissance of the misleading Cartesian image of the monadic, recursively self-enclosed consciousness that stands in an opaque relation to the organic substrate of its brain and its genome.

It never made sense to me to regard self-consciousness as an original phenomenon. Do we not first become aware of ourselves in the gaze of another person? In your gaze, as that of the second person who speaks to me as a first person, I become aware of myself not only as a conscious subject but also as a unique *individual*. The subjectifying gaze of others possesses an individuating power.

II

So much for the paradigm within which my research moves. The approach to the philosophy of language and the kind of moral theory that I developed within this framework may have been inspired by two experiences I had as a schoolboy: first, that other people did not understand me very well (a) and, second, that they responded with annoyance or rejection (b).

(a) I remember the difficulties I encountered when I tried to make myself understood in class or during break while speaking with my nasal articulation and distorted pronunciation of which I was completely unaware. I had left the haven of family life and its familiar surroundings and had to find my feet in an "anonymous" domain. Failures of communication direct our attention to an otherwise unobtrusive intermediary world of symbols that cannot be grasped like physical objects. Only when communication fails do we become aware of the medium of linguistic communication as a shared stratum without which individual existence would also be impossible. We invariably find ourselves within the element of language. Only someone who speaks can remain silent. Only because we are inherently connected with one another can we feel lonely or isolated.

Philosophers have never been especially interested in the power of language to forge a community. Ever since Plato and Aristotle, Western philosophers have preferred to analyze language as a medium of *representation* rather than of communication. They studied the logical form of statements we use to refer to objects and to represent states of affairs. But language is primarily there for the purposes of communication, after all, a process in which each person can take a "yes" or a "no" position on the validity claims of others, and thereby *reach agreement* about something in the world. We make use of language for communicative more than for purely cognitive purposes. Language is not the mirror of the world, but makes the world accessible to us. In so doing, it shapes our view of the world in a particular way. Something like a worldview is inscribed in language. Fortunately, this prior knowledge that we acquire with a specific language is not fixed once and for all. Otherwise, we could never learn anything really new in our dealings with the world and when talking with others about it. And what holds for theoretical languages also holds in everyday life, namely, that we can revise the meaning of predicates or concepts in the light of the experiences that they facilitate.

Incidentally, my speech impediment may also explain why I have always been convinced of the superiority of the written over the spoken word. The written form disguises the taint of the spoken word. I have tended to judge my students less by their contributions to discussions during seminars, no matter how intelligent they were, than by their written work. And as you see, to this day, I still shy away from speaking without a script in public, to the detriment of my listeners. This retreat into the precision afforded by the written word may also have led me to a theoretically important distinction. In *communicative action*, we proceed naïvely, as it were, whereas in *discourse* we exchange reasons in order to assess validity claims that have become problematic. Rational discourse borrows this reflexivity from the written word, that is to say, from the published article or the scholarly treatise, because discourse is designed to include everyone concerned and to create a third platform on which all pertinent contributions are heard. It is supposed to ensure that the unforced force of the better argument prevails.

(b) This view of things helped me to process another biographical experience in theoretical terms, namely, the insults in the form of the more or less harmless acts of discrimination that many children suffer in the schoolyard or street if they are different from the others. Today, globalization, mass tourism, worldwide migration, in fact the growing pluralism of worldviews and cultural life forms, have familiarized us all with such experiences of exclusion and mar-

ginalization of outsiders and minorities. Each of us can now imagine what it means to be a foreigner in a foreign country, to be regarded as different by others. Such situations awaken our moral susceptibilities. For morality is a device woven with the threads of communication to shield the particular vulnerability of individuals socialized through communication.

The deeper the process of individuation shapes the inner life of a person, the deeper she becomes entangled toward the outside, as it were, in an ever denser and more fragile network of relationships of reciprocal recognition. In the process, she exposes herself to the risk that reciprocity will be *denied*. The morality of equal respect for everyone is designed to absorb such risks. For it is designed to abolish discrimination and to facilitate the inclusion of the marginalized in the network of reciprocal recognition. Social norms capable of founding such a universal solidarity even among strangers depend on general approval. We must engage in discourse if we are to develop such norms. For moral discourses allow all those concerned an equal say. They enjoin each participant to adopt the perspectives of the others when deliberating on what is in the equal interest of all. In this way, the parties to the discourse learn to incorporate each other's interpretations of themselves and of the world into their own.

III

Thus far, I have spoken about personal motifs deriving from my childhood. They may have opened my eyes to the intersubjective constitution of the human mind and the social core of our subjectivity, as well as to the fragility of communicative forms of life and the fact that socialized individuals are in need of special protection. Yet it was the caesura of 1945 that first led to the eye-opening experience for my generation without which I would hardly have ended up in philosophy and social theory. Overnight, as it were, the society in which we had led what had seemed to be a halfway normal everyday life and the regime governing it were exposed as pathological and criminal. Through this experience, the confrontation with the legacy of the Nazi past became a fundamental theme of my adult political life. My interest in political progress, spurred by this concern with the past, became focused on conditions of life that escape the false alternative between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, "community" and "society." What I have in mind are, as Brecht puts it, "friendly" forms of social interaction that neither surrender the gains in differentiation of modern societies nor deny the dependence of upright individuals on one another—and their reciprocal reliance upon one another.

World War II came to an end a few months before my sixteenth birthday. There followed four years of alert adolescence until the foundation of the Federal Republic of Germany and the beginning of my university studies in the summer of 1949. I had, in the German phrase, *"die Gnade der späten Geburt,"* the "good fortune to be born late." I was old enough to have witnessed the fundamental changes marked by the end of the Third Reich at a morally impressionable age, yet young enough not to have been incriminated by its criminal practices. My generation had not been old enough to serve in the army. We did not have to answer for choosing the wrong side and for political errors and their dire consequences. After the revelations concerning Auschwitz, nothing could be taken at face value. What we had experienced as a more or less normal childhood and adolescence now transpired to be everyday life in the shadow of a rupture in civilization. Without having done anything to deserve it, my cohort had the opportunity to learn without reservation from the Nuremberg war crimes trials, which we followed on the radio. We made Karl Jaspers's distinction between collective guilt and collective liability our own and took very seriously the responsibility for the consequences of a regime that had been supported by the mass of the population.

Today, many take a critical view of this stance of a generation influenced by the liberation of 1945, and it is by no means something for which we can claim special credit. There is something typical of the time, almost compulsory, in the responses encountered among persons of my age, whether on the right, the centre, or the left of the political spectrum. The moral and political insights that we gained free of charge, as it were, were linked at the time with a global shift in mentality marked by the cultural opening to the West. During the Third Reich, we who had not known the Weimar Republic had grown up in a mind-numbing enclave of "fatherland" kitsch, monumentalism, and a death cult steeped in ressentiment. After 1945, the doors were opened to Expressionist art, to Kafka, Thomas Mann, and Hermann Hesse, to world literature written in English, to the contemporary philosophy of Sartre and the French left-wing Catholics, to Freud and Marx, as well as to the pragmatism of a John Dewey, whose former students decisively influenced the re-education effort in Germany. Contemporary cinema also conveyed exciting messages. The liberating, revolutionary spirit of Modernism found compelling visual expression in Mondrian's constructivism, in the cool geometric lines of Bauhaus architecture, and in uncompromising industrial design.

The cultural opening to the West went hand in hand with an analogous political opening. For me, "democracy," not liberalism of the Anglo-American variety, was the magic word. The political constructions of social contract theory, in the more popular version I was acquainted with at the time, combined with the pioneering spirit and the emancipatory promise of Modernism. All the more reason why we students felt ourselves isolated in the unchanged authoritarian setting of a postwar

society unreceptive to the emergence of the new. The continuity of social elites and cultural prejudices through which Konrad Adenauer marshaled consent for his policies was stifling. There had been no break with the past, no new beginning in terms of personnel, no change in mentality—neither a moral renewal nor a revolution of political mindset. I shared my deep political disenchantment with my wife, whom I first met during my student days. As late as the 1950s, we encountered the at once elitist and apolitical self-image of the German universities. We also encountered the baleful fusion of nationalism and anti-Semitism that had intellectually disarmed our academic teachers in 1933 or even driven them into the arms of the Nazis.

In such a climate, my left-leaning political convictions found little contact with what I was learning in philosophy courses. Politics and philosophy, these two intellectual universes, remained for a long time separate domains. They first collided one weekend in the summer semester in 1953, when my friend Karl-Otto Apel handed me a copy of Heidegger's *An Introduction to Metaphysics* fresh from the presses. Until then, Heidegger had been my most influential teacher, if only from a distance. The fame he had acquired since the 1920s was still untarnished. I had read *Being and Time* through Kierkegaard's eyes. Heidegger's fundamental ontology contained an ethics which, so I thought, appealed to the individual's conscience, to the individual's existential sincerity. And now this selfsame Heidegger had published his lectures from 1935 without any revisions or commentary. The vocabulary of the lectures reflected the idolatry of a nationalist spirit, the defiance of the World War I trenches, the collectivism of solemn yea saying. The "existence of the Volk" had unexpectedly taken the place of the "existence" of the individual person. The only way to come to terms with my incredulous outrage was to put it in writing.

"Thinking with Heidegger against Heidegger" was the title of the newspaper article that I wrote at the time, which still betrayed the devoted Heidegger disciple. My choice of quotations still reveals what upset me about Heidegger's text at the time. It was above all four things. First, there was the fatal linking of a heroic call to "creative violence" with a cult of sacrifice—the "most profound and broadest Yes to decline." Second, I was incensed by the Platonist prejudices of the German mandarin who devalued "intelligence" in favor of "spirit," "analysis" in favor of "authentic thought," and wanted to reserve the esoteric truth for "the few." I was also irritated by the anti-Christian and anti-Western sentiments directed against the egalitarian universalism of the Enlightenment. But what was really offensive was the Nazi philosopher's denial of moral and political responsibility for the consequences of the mass criminality about which almost no one talked any longer eight years after the end of the war. In the ensuing controversy, Heidegger's interpretation, in which he stylized fascism as a "destiny of Being" that relieved individuals of personal culpability, was lost from view. He simply shrugged off his disastrous political error as a mere reflex of a higher destiny that had "led him astray."

IV

This episode from my early days as a student marked the beginning of a critical inquiry into the oppressive political heritage that persisted even in German philosophy. In the years that followed, I gained a clearer understanding of the mindset shared by men such as Martin Heidegger, Carl Schmitt, Ernst Jünger, and Arnold Gehlen. In all of them contempt for the masses and the average was allied, on the one hand, with the celebration of the noble individual, the elect, and the extraordinary and, on the other, with rejection of "idle talk," the public sphere, and the "inauthentic." They elevated silence above conversation, and command and obedience above equality and self-determination. In this way, young conservative thought defined itself in sharp opposition to the basic democratic impulse that had driven us forward since 1945. This "Weimar syndrome" became a negative point of reference for me when, after graduation, I worked through theoretically my disappointment with the sluggish process of democratization in postwar Germany that was constantly beset by setbacks. Into the 1980s, the fear of a political relapse continued to spur my scholarly work, which I had begun in the late 1950s with my study *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere.*

At that time, I was working as Theodor W. Adorno's research assistant in the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research. Critical social theory offered me a perspective from which I could embed the emergence of American, French, and English democracy, and the repeated failure of attempts to establish democracy in Germany, in the larger context of social modernization. In the late 1950s, the political culture in Germany had by no means acquired definite shape. It was as yet not at all certain that the principles of a democratic order that had been imposed "from without" would become firmly lodged in the hearts and minds of German citizens. Evidently, such a change in political mentality could not occur in isolation or be simply imposed by administrative fiat. Only a vibrant and, where possible, discursive type of public opinion-formation could propel such a process.

As a consequence, I focused my theoretical attention on the political public sphere. What had always interested me about the general phenomenon of a "public space" that already arises with simple interactions was the mysterious power of intersubjectivity to unite disparate elements without eliminating the differences between them. The forms of social integration can be read off from the structures of public spaces. The constitution of public spaces reveals most clearly the anomic traits of social disintegration or the ruptures caused by repressive social relations. Does the specific type of integration in a particular society correspond to its degree of complexity? Or do public spaces betray the pathological traits of anomie or repression? In modern societies, one particular social space—namely, the political public sphere of a democratic community—acquires an especially important symptomatic role in

the integration of society. For complex societies can be normatively held together solely by civic solidarity, that is, the abstract, legally mediated form of solidarity among citizens. The process of public opinion- and will-formation alone can foster and reproduce a fragile form of collective identity among citizens who can no longer become personally acquainted. For this reason the health of a democracy can be gauged from the pulse of its political public arena.

Professors are, of course, not only scholars who are concerned with public-political issues from the viewpoint of an academic observer. They are also *participating* citizens. And on occasion they also take active part in the political life of their country as intellectuals. In the 1950s, I participated in the "Easter Marches," pacifist protests against nuclear weapons. In the late 1960s, I had to take a public stance on the student protest movement. In the 1980s and 1990s, I took part in public debates on coming to terms with the Nazi past, on civil disobedience, on the form German unification should take, on the first Gulf War, on political asylum laws, and so forth. Over the last ten years, I have taken positions on problems of European unification and on bioethical issues. And since the invasion of Iraq, which violated international law, I have been concerned with the postnational constellation and the future of the Kantian project of establishing a cosmopolitan order. I mention these activities only because I wish, in conclusion, to report briefly on what I think I have learned from my own mistakes and those of others about the role of the public intellectual in our times.

Intellectuals should make public use of the professional knowledge that they possess—for example, as philosophers or writers, social scientists or physicists—on their own initiative, without being commissioned by anyone to do so. They need not be neutral and eschew partisanship, but they should be aware of their own fallibility. They should limit themselves to relevant issues, contribute sound information and good arguments; in other words, they should endeavor to improve the deplorable discursive level of public debates. Intellectuals must walk a difficult tightrope in other respects as well. For they doubly betray their own authority if they do not carefully separate their professional from their public roles. And they should not use the influence they acquire through their words as a means to gain power, thus confusing "influence" with "political power," i.e., with authority tied to positions in a party organization or a government. Intellectuals cease to be intellectuals once they assume public office.

It is hardly surprising that we generally fail to live up to these standards; but that in no way devalues the standards themselves. For if there is one thing that intellectuals—a species that has so often attacked its own kind and pronounced its demise—cannot allow themselves, then it is to become cynical.

ENDNOTES

1   First published in German in *Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion* © Suhrkamp Verlag Frankfurt am Main, 2005. Later published in English in *Between Naturalism and Religion: Philosophical Essays*, translated by Ciaran Cronin, 11–23. Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2008. This article has been republished in the inaugural issue of *The Journal of Philosophy of Disability* with permission from Polity Press.