



Philosophy and Politics

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Philosophy and Politics

BY HANNAH ARENDT

On February 19, 1954, Hannah Arendt wrote to Karl Jaspers that she was "in a bit of a hurry" because she was "preparing another lecture series for Notre Dame University" and that she was "deeply engulfed in the work." What follows is an edited version of the third and final part of those lectures. The entire series originally bore a subtitle, "The Problem of Action and Thought after the French Revolution." That subtitle has not been used here, as it is misleading without the first two parts of the lectures. The manuscript exists in two versions, one of which was heavily revised by Arendt. The later, revised version is published here for the first time. A brief selection from the earlier version was published in French in Cahiers du Grif in 1986.

THE GULF between philosophy and politics opened historically with the trial and condemnation of Socrates, which in the history of political thought plays the same role of a turning point that the trial and condemnation of Jesus plays in the history of religion. Our tradition of political thought began when the death of Socrates made Plato despair of polis life and, at the same time, doubt certain fundamentals of Socrates' teachings. The fact that Socrates had not been able to persuade his judges of his innocence and his merits, which were so obvious to the better and younger of Athens's citizens, made Plato doubt the validity of *persuasion*. We have difficulty in grasping the importance of this doubt, because "persuasion" is a very weak and inadequate translation of the ancient *peithein*, the political importance of which is indicated by the fact that Peithô, the goddess of persuasion, had a temple in Athens. To persuade, *peithein*, was the specifically political form of speech,

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and since the Athenians were proud that they, in distinction to the barbarians, conducted their political affairs in the form of speech and without compulsion, they considered rhetoric, the art of persuasion, the highest, the truly political art. Socrates' speech in the *Apology* is one of its great examples, and it is against this defense that Plato writes in the *Phaedo* a "revised apology" which he called, with irony, "more persuasive" (*pithanoteron*, 63B), since it ends with a myth of the Hereafter, complete with bodily punishments and rewards, calculated to frighten rather than merely persuade the audience. Socrates' point in his defense before the citizens and judges of Athens had been that his behavior was in the best interest of the city. In the *Crito* he had explained to his friends that he could not flee but rather, for political reasons, must suffer the death penalty. It seems that he was not only unable to persuade his judges but also could not convince his friends. In other words, the city had no use for a philosopher, and the friends had no use for political argumentation. This is part of the tragedy to which Plato's dialogues testify.

Closely connected with his doubt about the validity of persuasion is Plato's furious denunciation of *doxa*, opinion, which not only ran like a red thread through his political works but became one of the cornerstones of his concept of truth. Platonic truth, even when *doxa* is not mentioned, is always understood as the very opposite of opinion. The spectacle of Socrates submitting his own *doxa* to the irresponsible opinions of the Athenians, and being outvoted by a majority, made Plato despise opinions and yearn for absolute standards. Such standards, by which human deeds could be judged and human thought could achieve some measure of reliability, from then on became the primary impulse of his political philosophy, and influenced decisively even the purely philosophical doctrine of ideas. I do not think, as is often maintained, that the concept of ideas was primarily a concept of standards and measures, nor that its origin was political. But this interpretation is all the more understandable and justifiable because Plato himself was

the first to use the ideas for political purposes, that is, to introduce absolute standards into the realm of human affairs, where, without such transcending standards, everything remains relative. As Plato himself used to point out, we do not know what absolute greatness is, but experience only something greater or smaller in relationship to something else.

Truth and Opinion

The opposition of truth and opinion was certainly the most anti-Socratic conclusion that Plato drew from Socrates' trial. Socrates, in failing to convince the city, had shown that the city is no safe place for the philosopher, not only in the sense that his life is not safe because of the truth he possesses, but also in the much more important sense that the city cannot be trusted with preserving the memory of the philosopher. If the citizens could condemn Socrates to death, they were only too liable to forget him when he was dead. His earthly immortality would be safe only if philosophers could be inspired with a solidarity of their own which was opposed to the solidarity of the polis and their fellow citizens. The old argument against the *sophoi*, wise men, which recurs in Aristotle as well as in Plato, that they do not know what is good for themselves (the prerequisite for political wisdom) and that they look ridiculous when they appear in the marketplace and are a common laughing stock—as Thales was laughed at by a peasant girl when, staring up at the skies, he fell into the well at his feet—was turned by Plato against the city.

In order to comprehend the enormity of Plato's demand that the philosopher should become the ruler of the city, we must keep in mind these common "prejudices" which the polis had with respect to philosophers, but not with respect to artists and poets. Only the *sophos* who does not know what is good for himself will know even less what is good for the polis. The *sophos*, the wise man as ruler, must be seen in opposition to the current ideal of the *phronimos*, the understanding man whose

insights into the world of human affairs qualify him for leadership, though of course not to rule. Philosophy, the love of wisdom, was not thought to be the same at all as this insight, *phronésis*. The wise man alone is concerned with matters outside the polis, and Aristotle is in full agreement with this public opinion when he states: “Anaxagoras and Thales were wise, but not understanding men. They were not interested in what is good for men [*anthrôpina agatha*].”¹ Plato did not deny that the concern of the philosopher was with eternal, nonchanging, nonhuman matters. But he did not agree that this made him unfit to play a political role. He did not agree with the polis’s conclusion that the philosopher, without concern for the human good, was himself in constant danger of becoming a good-for-nothing. The notion of good (*agathos*) has no connection here with what we mean by goodness in an absolute sense; it means exclusively *good-for*, beneficial or useful (*chrésimon*) and is therefore unstable and accidental since it is not necessarily what it is but can always be different. The reproach that philosophy can deprive citizens of their personal fitness is implicitly contained in Pericles’ famous statement: *philokaloumen met’ euteleias kai philosophoumen aneu malakias* (we love the beautiful without exaggeration and we love wisdom without softness or unmanliness).² In distinction from our own prejudices, in which softness and unmanliness are rather connected with the love of the beautiful, the Greeks saw this danger in philosophy. Philosophy, the concern with truth regardless of the realm of human affairs—and not love of the beautiful, which everywhere was represented in the polis, in statues and poetry, in music and the Olympic games—drove its adherents out of the polis and made them unfit for it. When Plato claimed rulership for the philosopher because he alone could behold the idea of the good, the highest of the eternal essences, he opposed the polis on two grounds: he first claimed

¹ *Nic. Eth.* 1140 a 25–30; 1141 b 4–8.

² *Thuc.* 2. 40.

that the philosopher's concern with eternal things did not put him at risk of becoming a good-for-nothing, and, second, he asserted that these eternal things were even more "valuable" than they were beautiful. His reply to Protagoras that not man but a god is the measure of all human things is only another version of the same statement.³

Plato's elevation of the idea of the good to the highest place in the realm of ideas, the idea of ideas, occurs in the cave allegory and must be understood in this political context. It is much less a matter of course than we, who have grown up in the consequences of the Platonic tradition, are likely to think. Plato, obviously, was guided by the Greek proverbial ideal, the *kalon k'agathon* (the beautiful and good), and it is therefore significant that he made up his mind for the good instead of the beautiful. Seen from the point of view of the ideas themselves, which are defined as that whose appearance illuminates, the beautiful, which cannot be used but only shines forth, had much more right to become the idea of ideas.⁴ The difference between the good and the beautiful, not only to us but even more so to the Greeks, is that the good can be applied and has an element of use in itself. Only if the realm of ideas is illuminated by the idea of the good could Plato use the ideas for political purposes and, in the *Laws*, erect his ideocracy, in which eternal ideas were translated into human laws.

What appears in the *Republic* as a strictly philosophical argument had been prompted by an exclusively political experience—the trial and death of Socrates—and it was not Plato but Socrates who was the first philosopher to overstep the line drawn by the polis for the *sophos*, for the man who is concerned with eternal, nonhuman, and nonpolitical things. The tragedy of Socrates' death rests on a misunderstanding: what the polis did not understand was that Socrates did not

³ *Laws* 716D.

⁴ For an elaboration of this matter, see *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), pp. 225–226 and n. 65.—Ed.

claim to be a *sophos*, a wise man. Because he doubted that wisdom is for mortals, he saw the irony in the Delphic oracle that said he was the wisest of all men: the man who knows that men cannot be wise is the wisest of them all. The polis did not believe him, and demanded that he admit that he, like all *sophoi*, was politically a good-for-nothing. But as a philosopher he truly had nothing to teach his fellow citizens.

The Tyranny of Truth

The conflict between the philosopher and the polis had come to a head because Socrates had made new demands on philosophy precisely because he did not claim to be wise. And it is in this situation that Plato designed his tyranny of truth, in which it is not what is temporally good, of which men can be persuaded, but eternal truth, of which men cannot be persuaded, that is to rule the city. What had become apparent in the Socratic experience was that only rulership might assure the philosopher of that earthly immortality which the polis was supposed to assure all its citizens. For while the thought and actions of all men were threatened by their own inherent instability and human forgetfulness, the thoughts of the philosopher were exposed to willful oblivion. The same polis, therefore, which guaranteed its inhabitants an immortality and stability which they never could hope for without it, was a threat and a danger to the immortality of the philosopher. The philosopher, it is true, in his intercourse with eternal things, felt the need of earthly immortality less than anybody else. Yet this eternity, which was more than earthly immortality, came into conflict with the polis whenever the philosopher tried to bring his concerns to the attention of his fellow citizens. As soon as the philosopher submitted his truth, the reflection of the eternal, to the polis, it became immediately an opinion among opinions. It lost its distinguishing quality, for there is no visible hallmark which marks off truth from opinion. It is as

though the moment the eternal is brought into the midst of men it becomes temporal, so that the very discussion of it with others already threatens the existence of the realm in which the lovers of wisdom move.

In the process of reasoning out the implications of Socrates' trial, Plato arrived both at his concept of truth as the very opposite of opinion and at his notion of a specifically philosophical form of speech, *dialegesthai*, as the opposite of persuasion and rhetoric. Aristotle takes these distinctions and oppositions as a matter of course when he begins his *Rhetoric*, which belongs to his political writings no less than his *Ethics*, with the statement: *hé rhétoriké estin antistrophos té dialektiké* (the art of persuasion [and therefore the political art of speech] is the counterpart of the art of dialectic [the art of philosophical speech]).⁵ The chief distinction between persuasion and dialectic is that the former always addresses a multitude (*peithein ta pléthé*) whereas dialectic is possible only as a dialogue between two. Socrates' mistake was to address his judges in the form of dialectic, which is why he could not persuade them. His truth, on the other hand, since he respected the limitations inherent in persuasion, became an opinion among opinions, not worth a bit more than the nontruths of the judges. Socrates insisted in talking the matter through with his judges as he used to talk about all kinds of things with single Athenian citizens or with his pupils; and he believed that he could arrive at some truth thereby and persuade the others of it. Yet persuasion does not come from truth, it comes from opinions,⁶ and only persuasion reckons and knows how to deal with the multitude. To persuade the multitude means to force upon its multiple opinions one's own opinion; persuasion is not the opposite of rule by violence, it is only another form of it. The myths of a Hereafter with which Plato concluded all his political dialogues, with the exception of the *Laws*, are neither

⁵ *Rhet.* 1354 a 1.

⁶ *Phaedrus* 260A.

truth nor mere opinion; they are designed as stories which can frighten, that is, an attempt to use violence by words only. He can do without a concluding myth in the *Laws* because the detailed prescriptions and even more detailed catalogue of punishments makes violence with mere words unnecessary.

Although it is more than probable that Socrates was the first who had used *dialegesthai* (talking something through with somebody) systematically, he probably did not look upon this as the opposite or even the counterpart to persuasion, and it is certain that he did not oppose the results of this dialectic to *doxa*, opinion. To Socrates, as to his fellow citizens, *doxa* was the formulation in speech of what *dokei moi*, that is, of what appears to me. This *doxa* had as its topic not what Aristotle called the *eikos*, the probable, the many *verisimilia* (as distinguished from the *unum verum*, the one truth, on one hand, and the limitless falsehoods, the *falsa infinita*, on the other), but comprehended the world as it opens itself to me. It was not, therefore, subjective fantasy and arbitrariness, but also not something absolute and valid for all. The assumption was that the world opens up differently to every man, according to his position in it; and that the “sameness” of the world, its commonness (*koinon*, as the Greeks would say, common to all) or “objectivity” (as we would say from the subjective viewpoint of modern philosophy) resides in the fact that the same world opens up to everyone and that despite all differences between men and their positions in the world—and consequently their *doxai* (opinions)—“both you and I are human.”

The word *doxa* means not only opinion but also splendor and fame. As such, it is related to the political realm, which is the public sphere in which everybody can appear and show who he himself is. To assert one’s own opinion belonged to being able to show oneself, to be seen and heard by others. To the Greeks this was the one great privilege attached to public life and lacking in the privacy of the household, where one is neither seen nor heard by others. (The family, wife and

children, and slaves and servants, were of course not recognized as fully human.) In private life one is hidden and can neither appear nor shine, and consequently no *doxa* is possible there. Socrates, who refused public office and honor, never retired into this private life, but on the contrary moved in the marketplace, in the very midst of these *doxai*, these opinions. What Plato later called *dialegesthai*, Socrates himself called maieutic, the art of midwifery: he wanted to help others give birth to what they themselves thought anyhow, to find the truth in their *doxa*.

This method had its significance in a twofold conviction: every man has his own *doxa*, his own opening to the world, and Socrates therefore must always begin with questions; he cannot know beforehand what kind of *dokei moi*, of it-appears-to-me, the other possesses. He must make sure of the other's position in the common world. Yet, just as nobody can know beforehand the other's *doxa*, so nobody can know by himself and without further effort the inherent truth of his own opinion. Socrates wanted to bring out this truth which everyone potentially possesses. If we remain true to his own metaphor of maieutic, we may say: Socrates wanted to make the city more truthful by delivering each of the citizens of their truths. The method of doing this is *dialegesthai*, talking something through, but this dialectic brings forth truth *not* by destroying *doxa* or opinion, but on the contrary reveals *doxa* in its own truthfulness. The role of the philosopher, then, is not to rule the city but to be its "gadfly," not to tell philosophical truths but to make citizens more truthful. The difference with Plato is decisive: Socrates did not want to educate the citizens so much as he wanted to improve their *doxai*, which constituted the political life in which he too took part. To Socrates, maieutic was a political activity, a give and take, fundamentally on a basis of strict equality, the fruits of which could not be measured by the result of arriving at this or that general truth. It is therefore obviously still quite in the Socratic tradition that Plato's early dialogues frequently conclude inconclusively,

without a result. To have talked something through, to have talked about something, some citizen's *doxa*, seemed result enough.

Dialogue Between Friends

It is obvious that this kind of dialogue, which doesn't need a conclusion in order to be meaningful, is most appropriate for and most frequently shared by friends. Friendship to a large extent, indeed, consists of this kind of talking about something that the friends have in common. By talking about what is between them, it becomes ever more common to them. It gains not only its specific articulateness, but develops and expands and finally, in the course of time and life, begins to constitute a little world of its own which is shared in friendship. In other words, politically speaking, Socrates tried to make friends out of Athens's citizenry, and this indeed was a very understandable purpose in a polis whose life consisted of an intense and uninterrupted contest of all against all, of *aei aristuein*, ceaselessly showing oneself to be the best of all. In this agonal spirit, which eventually was to bring the Greek city states to ruin because it made alliances between them well nigh impossible and poisoned the domestic life of the citizens with envy and mutual hatred (envy was the national vice of ancient Greece), the commonweal was constantly threatened. Because the commonness of the political world was constituted only by the walls of the city and the boundaries of its laws, it was not seen or experienced in the relationships between the citizens, not in the world which lay *between* them, common to them all, even though opening up in a different way to each man. If we use Aristotle's terminology in order to understand Socrates better—and great parts of Aristotle's political philosophy, especially those in which he is in explicit opposition to Plato, go back to Socrates—we may cite that part of the *Nicomachean Ethics* where Aristotle explains that a community is not made

out of equals, but on the contrary of people who are different and unequal. The community comes into being through equalizing, *isasthénai*.⁷ This equalization takes place in all exchanges, as between the physician and the farmer, and it is based on money. The political, noneconomic equalization is friendship, *philia*. That Aristotle sees friendship in analogy to want and exchange is related to the inherent materialism of his political philosophy, that is, to his conviction that politics ultimately is necessary because of the necessities of life from which men strive to free themselves. Just as eating is not life but the condition for living, so living together in the polis is not the good life but its material condition. He therefore ultimately sees friendship from the viewpoint of the single citizen, not from that of the polis: the supreme justification of friendship is that “nobody would choose to live without friends even though he possessed all other goods.”⁸ The equalization in friendship does not of course mean that the friends become the same or equal to each other, but rather that they become equal partners in a common world—that they together constitute a community. Community is what friendship achieves, and it is obvious that this equalization has as its polemical point the ever-increasing differentiation of citizens that is inherent in an agonal life. Aristotle concludes that it is friendship and not justice (as Plato maintained in the *Republic*, the great dialogue about justice) that appears to be the bond of communities. For Aristotle, friendship is higher than justice, because justice is no longer necessary between friends.⁹

The political element in friendship is that in the truthful dialogue each of the friends can understand the truth inherent in the other’s opinion. More than his friend as a person, one friend understands how and in what specific articulateness the common world appears to the other, who as a person is forever

⁷ *Nic. Eth.* 1133 a 14.

⁸ *Nic. Eth.* 1155 a 5.

⁹ *Nic. Eth.* 1155 a 20–30.

unequal or different. This kind of understanding—seeing the world (as we rather tritely say today) from the other fellow's point of view—is the political kind of insight *par excellence*. If we wanted to define, traditionally, the one outstanding virtue of the statesman, we could say that it consists in understanding the greatest possible number and variety of realities—not of subjective viewpoints, which of course also exist but which do not concern us here—as those realities open themselves up to the various opinions of citizens; and, at the same time, in being able to communicate between the citizens and their opinions so that the common-ness of this world becomes apparent. If such an understanding—and action inspired by it—were to take place without the help of the statesman, then the prerequisite would be for each citizen to be articulate enough to show his opinion in its truthfulness and therefore to understand his fellow citizens. Socrates seems to have believed that the political function of the philosopher was to help establish this kind of common world, built on the understanding of friendship, in which no rulership is needed.

For this purpose, Socrates relied on two insights, the one being contained in the word of the Delphic Apollo, *gnôthi sauthon*, know thyself, and the other related by Plato (and echoed in Aristotle): “It is better to be in disagreement with the whole world than, being one, to be in disagreement with myself.”¹⁰ The latter is the key sentence for the Socratic conviction that virtue can be taught and learned.

In the Socratic understanding, the Delphic know thyself meant: only through knowing what appears to me—only to me, and therefore remaining forever related to my own concrete existence—can I ever understand truth. Absolute truth, which would be the same for all men and therefore unrelated, independent of each man's existence, cannot exist for mortals. For mortals the important thing is to make *doxa* truthful, to see in every *doxa* truth and to speak in such a way

¹⁰ *Gorgias* 482C.

that the truth of one's opinion reveals itself to oneself and to others. On this level, the Socratic "I know that I do not know" means no more than: I know that I do not have the truth for everybody, I cannot know the other fellow's truth except by asking him and thereby learning his *doxa*, which reveals itself to him in distinction from all others. In its ever-equivocal way, the Delphic oracle honored Socrates with being the wisest of all men, because he had accepted the limitations of truth for mortals, its limitations through *dokein*, appearances, and because he at the same time, in opposition to the Sophists, had discovered that *doxa* was neither subjective illusion nor arbitrary distortion but, on the contrary, that to which truth invariably adhered. If the quintessence of the Sophists' teaching consisted in the *dyo logoi*, in the insistence that each matter can be talked about in two different ways, then Socrates was the greatest Sophist of them all. For he thought that there are, or should be, as many different *logoi* as there are men, and that all these *logoi* together form the human world, insofar as men live together in the manner of speech.

For Socrates the chief criterion for the man who speaks truthfully his own *doxa* was "that he be in agreement with himself"—that he not contradict himself and not say contradictory things, which is what most people do and yet what each of us somehow is afraid of doing. The fear of contradiction comes from the fact that each of us, "being one," can at the same time talk with himself (*eme emautô*) as though he were two. Because I am already two-in-one, at least when I try to think, I can experience a friend, to use Aristotle's definition, as an "other self" (*heteros gar autos ho philos estin*). Only someone who has had the experience of talking with himself is capable of being a friend, of acquiring another self. The condition is that he be of one mind with himself, in agreement with himself (*homognômonei heautô*), because somebody who contradicts himself is unreliable. The faculty of speech and the fact of human plurality correspond to each other, not only in the sense that I use words for communication with those with

whom I am together in the world, but in the even more relevant sense that speaking with myself I live together with myself.¹¹

The axiom of contradiction, with which Aristotle founded Western logic, can be traced back to this fundamental discovery of Socrates. Insofar as I am one, I will not contradict myself, but I can contradict myself because in thought I am two-in-one; therefore I do not live only with others, as one, but also with myself. The fear of contradiction is the fear of splitting up, of no longer remaining one, and this is the reason why the axiom of contradiction could become the fundamental rule of thought. This is also the reason why the plurality of men can never entirely be abolished and why the escape of the philosopher from the realm of plurality always remains an illusion: even if I were to live entirely by myself I would, as long as I am alive, live in the condition of plurality. I have to put up with myself, and nowhere does this I-with-myself show more clearly than in pure thought, always a dialogue between the two who I am. The philosopher who, trying to escape the human condition of plurality, takes his flight into absolute solitude, is more radically delivered to this plurality inherent in every human being than anybody else, because it is the companionship with others which, calling me out of the dialogue of thought, makes me one again—one single, unique human being speaking with but one voice and recognizable as such by all others.

Together with Oneself

What Socrates was driving at (and what Aristotle's theory of friendship explains more fully) is that living together with others begins with living together with oneself. Socrates' teaching meant: only he who knows how to live with himself is

¹¹ *Nic. Eth.* 1166 a 10–15; 1170 b 5–10.

fit to live with others. The self is the only person from whom I cannot depart, whom I cannot leave, with whom I am welded together. Therefore “it is much better to be in disagreement with the whole world than *being one* to be in disagreement with myself.” Ethics, no less than logic, has its origin in this statement, for conscience in its most general sense is also based on the fact that I can be in agreement or disagreement with myself, and that means that I do not only appear to others but also to myself. This possibility is of the greatest relevance to politics, if we understand (as the Greeks understood) the polis as the public-political realm in which men attain their full humanity, their full reality as men, because they not only *are* (as in the privacy of the household) but *appear*. How much the Greeks understood full reality as the reality of this appearance, and how much it mattered for specifically moral questions, we may gauge from the ever-recurring question in Plato’s political dialogues of whether a good deed, or a just deed, is what it is even “if it remains unknown to and hidden before men and gods.” For the problem of conscience, in a purely secular context, without faith in an all-knowing and all-caring God who will pass a final judgment on life on earth, this question is indeed decisive. It is the question whether conscience can exist in a secular society and play a role in secular politics. And it is also the question whether morality as such has an earthly reality. Socrates’ answer is contained in his frequently reported advice: “Be as you would like to appear to others,” that is, appear to yourself as you would want to appear if seen by others. Since even when you are alone you are not altogether alone, you yourself can and must testify to your own reality. Or to put it in a more Socratic way—for although Socrates discovered conscience he did not yet have a name for it—the reason why you should not kill, even under conditions where nobody will see you, is that you cannot possibly want to be together with a murderer. By committing murder you would deliver yourself to the company of a murderer as long as you live.

Moreover, while engaged in the dialogue of solitude in which I am strictly by myself, I am not altogether separated from that plurality which is the world of men and which we call in its most general sense humanity. This humanity, or rather this plurality, is indicated already in the fact that I am two-in-one. ("One is one and all alone and evermore shalt be" is true only of God.) Men not only exist in the plural as do all earthly beings, but have an indication of this plurality within themselves. Yet the self with whom I am together in solitude can never itself assume the same definite and unique shape or distinction which all other people have for me; rather, this self remains always changeable and somewhat equivocal. It is in the form of this changeability and equivocality that this self represents to me, while I am by myself, all men, the humanity of all men. What I expect other people to do—and this expectation is prior to all experiences and survives them all—is to a large extent determined by the ever-changing potentialities of the self with whom I live together. In other words, a murderer is not only condemned to the permanent company of his own murderous self, but he will see all other people in the image of his own action. He will live in a world of potential murderers. It is not his own isolated act that is of political relevance, or even the desire to commit it, but this *doxa* of his, the way in which the world opens up to him and is part and parcel of the political reality he lives in. In this sense, and to the extent that we still live with ourselves, we all change the human world constantly, for better and for worse, even if we do not act at all.

To Socrates, who was firmly convinced that nobody can possibly want to live together with a murderer or in a world of potential murderers, the one who maintains that a man can be happy and be a murderer, if only nobody knows about it, is in twofold disagreement with himself: he makes a self-contradictory statement and shows himself willing to live together with one with whom he cannot agree. This twofold disagreement, the logical contradiction and the ethical bad

conscience, was for Socrates still one and the same phenomenon. That is the reason why he thought that virtue can be taught, or, to put it in a less trite way, the awareness that man is a thinking and an acting being in one, someone, namely, whose thoughts invariably and unavoidably accompany his acts, is what improves men and citizens. The underlying assumption of this teaching is thought and not action, because only in thought do I realize the dialogue of the two-in-one who I am.

To Socrates, man is not yet a “rational animal,” a being endowed with the capacity of reason, but a thinking being whose thought is manifest in the manner of speech. To an extent this concern with speech was already true for pre-Socratic philosophy, and the identity of speech and thought, which together are *logos*, is perhaps one of the outstanding characteristics of Greek culture. What Socrates added to this identity was the dialogue of myself with myself as the primary condition of thought. The political relevance of Socrates’ discovery is that it asserts that solitude, which before and after Socrates was thought to be the prerogative and professional *habitus* of the philosopher only, and which was naturally suspected by the polis of being antipolitical, is, on the contrary, the necessary condition for the good functioning of the polis, a better guarantee than rules of behavior enforced by laws and fear of punishment.

Here again we must turn to Aristotle if we wish to find an already weakened echo of Socrates. Apparently in reply to the Protagorean *anthrôpos metron pantôn chrématôn* (man is the measure of all human things or, literally, of all things used by men) and, as we have seen, Plato’s repudiation that the measure of all human things is *theos*, a god, the divine as it appears in the ideas, Aristotle says: *estin hekastou metron hé areté kai agathos* (the measure for everybody is virtue and the good man).¹² The standard is what men are themselves when they

¹² *Nic. Eth.* 1176 a 17.

act and not something which is external like the laws or superhuman like the ideas.

Nobody can doubt that such a teaching was and always will be in a certain conflict with the polis, which must demand respect for its laws independent of personal conscience, and Socrates knew the nature of this conflict full well when he called himself a gadfly. We, on the other hand, who have had our experience with totalitarian mass organizations whose primary concern is to eliminate all possibility of solitude—except in the nonhuman form of solitary confinement—can easily testify that if a minimum amount of being alone with oneself is no longer guaranteed, not only secular but also all religious forms of conscience will be abolished. The frequently observed fact that conscience itself no longer functioned under totalitarian conditions of political organization, and this quite independent of fear and punishment, is explicable on these grounds. No man can keep his conscience intact who cannot actualize the dialogue with himself, that is, who lacks the solitude required for all forms of thinking.

The Doxa Destroyed

Yet Socrates also came in another, less obvious way into conflict with the polis, and this side of the matter he seems not to have realized. The search for truth in the *doxa* can lead to the catastrophic result that the *doxa* is altogether destroyed, or that what had appeared is revealed as an illusion. This, you will remember, is what happened to King Oedipus, whose whole world, the reality of his kingship, went to pieces when he began to look into it. After discovering the truth, Oedipus is left without any *doxa*, in its manifold meanings of opinion, splendor, fame, and a world of one's own. Truth therefore can destroy *doxa*, it can destroy the specific political reality of the citizens. Similarly, from what we know of Socrates' influence, it is obvious that many of his listeners must have gone away, not

with a more truthful opinion, but with no opinion at all. The inconclusiveness of many Platonic dialogues, mentioned before, can also be seen in this light: all opinions are destroyed, but no truth is given in their stead. And did not Socrates himself admit that he had no *doxa* of his own, but was “sterile”? Yet was not, perhaps, this very sterility, this lack of opinion, also a prerequisite for truth? However that may be, Socrates, all his protests not to possess any special teachable truth notwithstanding, must somehow already have appeared like an expert in truth. The abyss between truth and opinion, which from then on was to divide the philosopher from all other men, had not yet opened, but it was already indicated, or rather foreshadowed, in the figure of this one man who, wherever he went, tried to make everybody around him, and first of all himself, more truthful.

To put it differently, the conflict between philosophy and politics, between the philosopher and the polis, broke out because Socrates had wanted—not to play a political role—but to make philosophy relevant for the polis. The conflict became all the sharper as this attempt coincided (yet it probably was no mere coincidence) with the rapid decay of Athenian polis life in the thirty years which separate the death of Pericles from the trial of Socrates. The conflict ended with a defeat for philosophy: only through the famous *apolitia*, the indifference and contempt for the world of the city, so characteristic of all post-Platonic philosophy, could the philosopher protect himself against the suspicions and hostilities of the world around him. With Aristotle the time begins when philosophers no longer feel responsible for the city, and this not only in the sense that philosophy has no special task in the realm of politics, but in the much larger sense that the philosopher has less responsibility for it than any of his fellow citizens—that the philosopher’s way of life is different. Whereas Socrates still obeyed the laws which, however wrongly, had condemned him, because he felt responsible for the city, Aristotle, when in danger of a similar trial, left Athens immediately and without

any compunction. The Athenians, he is reported to have said, should not sin twice against philosophy. The only thing that philosophers from then on wanted with respect to politics was to be left alone; and the only thing they demanded of government was protection for their freedom to think. If this flight of philosophy from the sphere of human affairs were exclusively due to historical circumstances, it is more than doubtful that its immediate results—the parting of the man of thought from the man of action—would have been able to establish our tradition of political thought which has survived two and a half thousand years of the most varied political and philosophical experience without being challenged over this fundament. The truth is rather that in the person as in the trial of Socrates another and much deeper contradiction between philosophy and politics appeared than is apparent from what we know of Socrates' own teachings.

It seems too obvious, almost a banality, and yet it is generally forgotten that every political philosophy first of all expresses the attitude of the philosopher to the affairs of men, the *pragmata tôn anthrôpôn*, to which he, too, belongs; and that this attitude itself involves and expresses the relationship between specifically philosophical experience and our experience when we move among men. It is equally obvious that every political philosophy at first glance seems to face the alternative either of interpreting philosophical experience with categories which owe their origin to the realm of human affairs or, on the contrary, of claiming priority for philosophic experience and judging all politics in its light. In the latter case, the best form of government would be a state of affairs in which philosophers have a maximum opportunity to philosophize, and that means one in which everybody conforms to standards which are likely to provide the best conditions for it. Yet the very fact that only Plato of all philosophers ever dared to design a commonwealth exclusively from the viewpoint of the philosopher and that, practically speaking, this design never was taken quite seriously, not even by philosophers, indicates

that there is another side to this question. The philosopher, although he perceives something that is more than human, that is divine (*theion ti*), remains a man, so that the conflict between philosophy and the affairs of men is ultimately a conflict within the philosopher himself. It is this conflict which Plato rationalized and generalized into a conflict between body and soul: whereas the body inhabits the city of men, the divine thing which philosophy perceives is seen by something itself divine—the soul—which somehow is separate from the affairs of men. The more a philosopher becomes a true philosopher, the more he will separate himself from his body; and since as long as he is alive such separation can never actually be achieved, he will try to do what every free citizen in Athens did in order to separate and free himself from the necessities of life: he will rule over his body as a master rules over his slaves. If the philosopher attains rulership over the city, he will do no more to its inhabitants than he has already done to his body. His tyranny will be justified both in the sense of best government and in the sense of personal legitimacy, that is, by his prior obedience, as a mortal man, to the commands of his soul, as a philosopher. All our current sayings that only those who know how to obey are entitled to command, or that only those who know how to rule themselves can legitimately rule over others, have their roots in this relationship between politics and philosophy. The Platonic metaphor of a conflict between body and soul, originally devised in order to express the conflict between philosophy and politics, had such a tremendous impact on our religious and spiritual history that it overshadowed the basis of experience from which it sprang—just as the Platonic division itself of man into two overshadowed the original experience of thought as the dialogue of the two-in-one, the *eme emautô*, which is the very root of all such divisions. This does not mean to say that the conflict between philosophy and politics could smoothly be dissolved into some theory about the relationship between soul and body, but that nobody after Plato had been as aware as

he of the political origin of the conflict, nor dared to express it in such radical terms.

In the Cave

Plato himself described the relationship between philosophy and politics in terms of the attitude of the philosopher toward the polis. The description is given in the parable of the cave, which forms the center of his political philosophy, as it does of the *Republic*. The allegory, in which Plato means to give a kind of concentrated biography of the philosopher, unfolds in three stages, each of them designated a turning point, a turning-about, and all three together form that *periagôgê holês tês psychês*, that turning-about of the whole human being which for Plato is the very formation of the philosopher. The first turning takes place in the cave itself; the future philosopher frees himself from the fetters which chain the cave dwellers' "legs and necks" so that "they can only see before them," their eyes glued to a screen on which shadows and images of things appear. When he first turns around, he sees in the rear of the cave an artificial fire that illuminates the things in the cave as they really are. If we want to elaborate on the story, we could say that this first *periagôgê* is that of the scientist who, not content with what people say about things, "turns around" to find out how things are in themselves, regardless of the opinions held by the multitude. For the images on the screen, to Plato, were the distortions of *doxa*, and he could use metaphors taken exclusively from sight and visual perception because the word *doxa*, unlike our word opinion, has the strong connotation of the visible. The images on the screen at which the cave dwellers stare are their *doxai*, what and how things appear to them. If they want to look at things as they really are, they must turn around, that is, change their position because, as we saw before, every *doxa* depends and corresponds to one's position in the world.

A much more decisive turning point in the philosopher's biography comes when this solitary adventurer is not satisfied with the fire in the cave and with the things now appearing as they really are, but wants to find out where this fire comes from and what the causes of things are. Again he turns around and finds an exit from the cave, a stairway which leads him to the clear sky, a landscape without things or men. Here appear the ideas, the eternal essences of perishable things and of mortal men illuminated by the sun, the idea of ideas, which enables the beholder to see and the ideas to shine forth. This certainly is the climax in the life of the philosopher, and it is here that the tragedy begins. Being still a mortal man, he does not belong and cannot remain here but must return to the cave as his earthly home, and yet in the cave he can no longer feel at home.

Each of these turnings-about had been accompanied by a loss of sense and orientation. The eyes accustomed to the shadowy appearances on the screen are blinded by the fire in the rear of the cave. The eyes then adjusted to the dim light of the artificial fire are blinded by the light of the sun. But worst of all is the loss of orientation which befalls those whose eyes once were adjusted to the bright light under the sky of ideas, and who must now find their way in the darkness of the cave. Why philosophers do not know what is good for them—and how they are alienated from the affairs of men—is grasped in this metaphor: they can no longer see in the darkness of the cave, they have lost their sense of orientation, they have lost what we would call their common sense. When they come back and try to tell the cave dwellers what they have seen outside the cave, they do not make sense; to the cave dwellers whatever they say is as though the world were "turned upside down" (Hegel). The returning philosopher is in danger because he has lost the common sense needed to orient himself in a world common to all, and, moreover, because what he harbors in his thought contradicts the common sense of the world.

It belongs to the puzzling aspects of the allegory of the cave that Plato depicts its inhabitants as frozen, chained before a screen, without any possibility of doing anything or communicating with one another. Indeed, the two politically most significant words designating human activity, talk and action (*lexis* and *praxis*), are conspicuously absent from the whole story. The only occupation of the cave dwellers is looking at the screen; they obviously love seeing for its own sake, independent from all practical needs.¹³ The cave dwellers, in other words, are depicted as ordinary men, but also in that one quality which they share with philosophers: they are represented by Plato as potential philosophers, occupied in darkness and ignorance with the one thing the philosopher is concerned with in brightness and full knowledge. The allegory of the cave is thus designed to depict not so much how philosophy looks from the viewpoint of politics but how politics, the realm of human affairs, looks from the viewpoint of philosophy. And the purpose is to discover in the realm of philosophy those standards which are appropriate for a city of cave dwellers, to be sure, but still for inhabitants who, albeit darkly and ignorantly, have formed their opinions concerning the same matters as the philosopher.

Wonder

What Plato does not tell us in the story, because it is designed for these political purposes, is what distinguishes the philosopher from those who also love seeing for its own sake, or what makes him start out on his solitary adventure and causes him to break the fetters with which he is chained to the screen of illusion. Again, at the end of the story, Plato mentions in passing the dangers which await the returning philosopher, and concludes from these dangers that the philosopher—

¹³ Cf. Aristotle *Metaph.* 980 a 22–25.

although he is not interested in human affairs—must assume rulership, if only out of fear of being ruled by the ignorant. But he does not tell us why he cannot persuade his fellow citizens, who anyhow are already glued to the screen and thereby in a certain way ready to receive “higher things,” as Hegel called them, to follow his example and choose the way out of the cave.

In order to answer these questions, we must recall two statements of Plato which do not occur in the cave allegory, but without which this allegory remains obscure and which it, so to speak, takes for granted. The one occurs in the *Theaetetus*—a dialogue about the difference between *epistémé* (knowledge) and *doxa* (opinion)—where Plato defines the origin of philosophy: *mala gar philosophou touto to pathos, to thaumadzein; ou gar allé arché philosophias hé hauté* (for wonder is what the philosopher endures most; for there is no other beginning of philosophy than wonder . . .).¹⁴ And the second occurs in the *Seventh Letter* when Plato talks about those things which to him are the most serious ones (*peri hôn egô spoudadzô*), that is, not so much philosophy as we understand it as its eternal topic and end. Of this he says, *rhéton gar oudamôs estin hós alla mathémata, all' ek pollés synousias gignomenés . . . hoion apo pyros pédésantos exaphthen phôs* (it is altogether impossible to talk about this as about other things we learn; rather, from much being together with it . . . a light is lit as from a flying fire).¹⁵ In these two statements we have the beginning and the end of the philosopher's life which the cave story omits.

Thaumadzein, the wonder at that which is as it is, is according to Plato a *pathos*, something which is endured and as such quite distinct from *doxadzein*, from forming an opinion about something. The wonder that man endures or which befalls him cannot be related in words because it is too general for words. Plato must have first encountered it in those frequently

¹⁴ 155D.

¹⁵ 341C.

reported traumatic states in which Socrates would suddenly, as though seized by a rapture, fall into complete motionlessness, just staring without seeing or hearing anything. That this speechless wonder is the beginning of philosophy became axiomatic for both Plato and Aristotle. And it is this relation to a concrete and unique experience which marked off the Socratic school from all former philosophies. To Aristotle, no less than to Plato, ultimate truth is beyond words. In Aristotle's terminology, the human recipient of truth is *nous*, spirit, the content of which is without *logos* (*hôn ouk esti logos*). Just as Plato opposed *doxa* to truth, so Aristotle opposes *phronésis* (political insight) to *nous* (philosophical spirit).¹⁶ This wonder at everything that is as it is never relates to any particular thing, and Kierkegaard therefore interpreted it as the experience of no-thing, of nothingness. The specific generality of philosophical statements, which distinguish them from the statements of the sciences, springs from this experience. Philosophy as a special discipline—and to the extent that it remains one—is grounded in it. And as soon as the speechless state of wonder translates itself into words, it will not begin with statements but will formulate in undending variations what we call the ultimate questions—What is being? Who is man? What meaning has life? What is death? etc.—all of which have in common that they cannot be answered scientifically. Socrates' statement "I know that I do not know" expresses in terms of knowledge this lack of scientific answers. But in a state of wonder this statement loses its dry negativity, for the result left behind in the mind of the person who has endured the *pathos* of wonder can only be expressed as: Now I know what it means not to know; *now* I know that I do not know. It is from the actual experience of not-knowing, in which one of the basic aspects of the human condition on earth reveals itself, that the ultimate questions arise—not from the rationalized, demonstrable fact that there are things man does not know, which

¹⁶ *Nic. Eth.* 1142 a 25.

believers in progress hope to see fully amended one day, or which positivists may discard as irrelevant. In asking the ultimate, unanswerable questions, man establishes himself as a question-asking being. This is the reason that science, which asks answerable questions, owes its origin to philosophy, an origin that remains its ever-present source throughout the generations. Were man ever to lose the faculty of asking ultimate questions, he would by the same token lose his faculty of asking answerable questions. He would cease to be a question-asking being, which would be the end, not only of philosophy, but of science as well. As far as philosophy is concerned, if it is true that it begins with *thaumadzein* and ends with speechlessness, then it ends exactly where it began. Beginning and end are here the same, which is the most fundamental of the so-called vicious circles that one may find in so many strictly philosophical arguments.

It is this philosophical shock of which Plato speaks that permeates all great philosophies and that separates the philosopher who endures it from those with whom he lives. And the difference between the philosophers, who are few, and the multitude is by no means—as Plato already indicated—that the majority knows nothing of the *pathos* of wonder, but much rather that they refuse to endure it. This refusal is expressed in *doxadzein*, in forming opinions on matters about which man cannot hold opinions because the common and commonly accepted standards of common sense do not here apply. *Doxa*, in other words, could become the opposite of truth because *doxadzein* is indeed the opposite of *thaumadzein*. Having opinions goes wrong when it concerns those matters which we know only in speechless wonder at what is.

The philosopher, who, so to speak, is an expert in wondering and in asking those questions which arise out of wondering—and when Nietzsche says that the philosopher is the man about whom extraordinary things happen all the time, he alludes to the same matter—finds himself in a twofold conflict with the polis. Since his ultimate experience is one of

speechlessness, he has put himself outside the political realm in which the highest faculty of man is, precisely, speech—*logon echôn* is what makes man a *dzôon politikon*, a political being. The philosophical shock, moreover, strikes man in his singularity, that is, neither in his equality with all others nor in his absolute distinctness from them. In this shock, man in the singular, as it were, is for one fleeting moment confronted with the whole of the universe, as he will be confronted again only at the moment of his death. He is to an extent alienated from the city of men, which can only look with suspicion on everything that concerns man in the singular.

Yet even worse in its consequences is the other conflict that threatens the life of the philosopher. Since the *pathos* of wonder is not alien to men but, on the contrary, one of the most general characteristics of the human condition, and since the way out of it for the many is to form opinions where they are not appropriate, the philosopher will inevitably fall into conflict with these opinions, which he finds intolerable. And since his own experience of speechlessness expresses itself only in the raising of unanswerable questions, he is indeed in one decisive disadvantage the moment he returns to the political realm. He is the only one who does not know, the only one who has no distinct and clearly defined *doxa* to compete with other opinions, the truth or untruth of which common sense wants to decide, that is, that sixth sense that we not only all have in common but which fits us into, and thereby makes possible, a common world. If the philosopher starts to speak into this world of common sense, to which belong also our commonly accepted prejudices and judgments, he will always be tempted to speak in terms of non-sense, or—to use once more Hegel's phrase—to turn common sense upside down.

This danger arose with the beginning of our great philosophical tradition, with Plato and, to a lesser extent, with Aristotle. The philosopher, overly conscious, because of the trial of Socrates, of the inherent incompatibility between the fundamental philosophical and the fundamental political

experiences, generalized the initial and initiating shock of *thaumadzein*. The Socratic position was lost in this process, not because Socrates did not leave any writings behind or because Plato willfully distorted him, but because the Socratic insights, born out of a still-intact relationship to politics *and* the specifically philosophical experience, was lost. For what is true for this wonder, with which all philosophy begins, is not true for the ensuing dialogue of solitude itself. Solitude, or the thinking dialogue of the two-in-one, is an integral part of being and living together with others, and in this solitude the philosopher, too, cannot help but form opinions—he, too, arrives at his own *doxa*. His distinction from his fellow citizens is not that he possesses any special truth from which the multitude is excluded, but that he remains always ready to endure the *pathos* of wonder and thereby avoids the dogmatism of mere opinion holders. In order to be able to compete with this dogmatism of *doxadzein*, Plato proposed to prolong indefinitely the speechless wonder which is at the beginning and end of philosophy. He tried to develop into a way of life (the *bios theôretikos*) what can be only a fleeting moment or, to take Plato's own metaphor, the flying spark of fire between two flintstones. In this attempt the philosopher establishes himself, bases his whole existence on that singularity which he experienced when he endured the *pathos* of *thaumadzein*. And by this he destroys the plurality of the human condition within himself.

That this development, of which the original cause was political, became of great importance for Plato's philosophy in general is obvious. It is already manifest in the curious deviations from his original concept to be found in his doctrine of ideas, deviations due exclusively, I believe, to his desire to make philosophy useful for politics. But it has of course been of much greater relevance for political philosophy properly speaking. To the philosopher, politics—if he did not regard this whole realm as beneath his dignity—became the field in which the elementary necessities of human life are taken care

of and to which absolute philosophical standards are applied. Politics, to be sure, never could conform to such standards and therefore, by and large, was judged to be an unethical business, judged so not only by philosophers, but in the centuries to come by many others, when philosophical results, originally formulated in opposition to common sense, had finally been absorbed by the public opinion of the educated. Politics and government (rulership) were identified and both considered to be a reflection on the wickedness of human nature, as the record of the deeds and sufferings of men was seen as a reflection of human sinfulness. Yet while Plato's inhuman ideal state never became a reality, and the usefulness of philosophy had to be defended throughout the centuries—because in actual political action it proved utterly useless—philosophy rendered one signal service to Western man. Because Plato in a sense deformed philosophy for political purposes, philosophy continued to provide standards and rules, yardsticks and measurements with which the human mind could at least attempt to understand what was happening in the realm of human affairs. It is this usefulness for understanding that was exhausted with the approach of the modern age. Machiavelli's writings are the first sign of this exhaustion, and in Hobbes we find, for the first time, a philosophy which has no use for philosophy but pretends to proceed from what common sense takes for granted. And Marx, who is the last political philosopher of the West and who still stands in the tradition that began with Plato, finally tried to turn this tradition, its fundamental categories and hierarchy of values, upside down. With this reversal, the tradition had indeed come to its end.

Tocqueville's remark that "as the past has ceased to throw its light upon the future, the mind of man wanders in obscurity" was written out of a situation in which the philosophical categories of the past were no longer sufficient for understanding. We live today in a world in which not even common sense makes sense any longer. The breakdown of common sense in

the present world signals that philosophy and politics, their old conflict notwithstanding, have suffered the same fate. And that means that the problem of philosophy and politics, or the necessity for a new political philosophy from which could come a new science of politics, is once more on the agenda.

Philosophy, political philosophy like all its other branches, will never be able to deny its origin in *thaumadzein*, in the wonder at that which is as it is. If philosophers, despite their necessary estrangement from the everyday life of human affairs, were ever to arrive at a true political philosophy they would have to make the plurality of man, out of which arises the whole realm of human affairs—in its grandeur and misery—the object of their *thaumadzein*. Biblically speaking, they would have to accept—as they accept in speechless wonder the miracle of the universe, of man and of being—the miracle that God did not create Man, but “male and female created He them.” They would have to accept in something more than the resignation of human weakness the fact that “it is not good for man to be alone.”