

On the Political Incompetence of Philosophy

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The conflict which has tended recently to crystallize in particular around the name of Martin Heidegger goes back a long way. Where do philosophers stand in relation to political and social reality? What assistance can their problems and insights offer the process of coming to terms with this reality? In the context of the discussions surrounding Farias's book I set out my own position in Paris in November 1987; the full text was later published in German under the heading "Return to Syracuse?"¹ This title referred to the disappointment Plato felt in his own time when, at the invitation of the tyrant of Syracuse, that city's absolute ruler, he had twice gone to initiate the young prince in the basic principles of his thought concerning the just idea of the state and the just ordering of society. Things turned out badly and Plato had considerable difficulty getting back home again. Later still he was to suffer bitter disappointment when his intimate associate Dion, a member of the innermost circle of his academic community, was suddenly murdered by his own friends after heading a victorious operation to liberate Syracuse (one would like to know more about what lay behind that particular assassination).

Plato's political adventure in Sicily is highly symbolic in its expressive force, and considerably thought-provoking. Of course, Heidegger's expression of support for Hitler in 1933 cannot be measured by the same yardstick as Plato's Sicilian project. The Platonic Academy to which Dion and the thinker's other friends belonged had from the outset a considerably more marked politico-social character than any university or academy today, or than intellectuals in modern society generally. This adds weight to the speculation that what is at issue here is somehow connected with the ways of

thinking of philosophy itself. The philosopher's gaze, which probes every question down to its basic and ultimate generality, does not seem predisposed to view correctly the possibilities and concrete circumstances of social and political life; and since the issue is being examined in such a fundamental manner, the underlying question must no doubt also be put to philosophy itself: what really is the nature of philosophical knowledge if, to important and existentially crucial questions, it gives oblique, wayward answers?

Thus the well-known French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu took up several years ago a critical position with regard to Heidegger's philosophy, which he viewed as deriving from the conservative tradition and semi-revolutionary thought of the right under the Weimar Republic, in a word from the circles of the so-called "right-wing revolution." Bourdieu's analysis is an interesting one, but it is based on a presupposition which I can neither grant nor share, namely that philosophy makes its appearance in the world only as a particular arrangement which sociologists would be able to consider from a critical point of view and all of whose pretensions to knowledge they could finally and radically expose.

I am greatly disturbed when I see such questions addressed to philosophy, because it sounds as if there are, or perhaps should be, particular kinds of people who practice philosophy, which is not the case. Philosophy is practiced by everybody, albeit usually even worse than by those who are called philosophers. That suffices in my opinion to shed an awkward light on the question put by Bourdieu not to everybody, but only to so-called philosophers. Insofar as philosophy exists as a specific discipline, in our organized scientific world – and, as an institution made up of professors, rather on the fringe of the academic world – Bourdieu's competence cannot really be questioned. But insofar as philosophy, to the same degree as art and religion and beyond today's scientific culture, encounters a welcome in the wider world and suitable answers, Bourdieu ought to feel out of his depth.

Everywhere people are asking philosophical questions – on the origin of things, nothingness, the future, death, happiness, the meaning of life – to which no one is in a position to give answers. A passionate interest in such matters is felt by humanity in general, not just by professional philosophers.

In setting out this preliminary issue I am not myself following any particular school of thought. To speak in Kantian terms, this universal conception of philosophy indicates a natural human tendency that has at all times made us receptive to the answers offered by religions, in the face of which the academic conception of philosophy is really not interesting; compared to the passion of thought and humanity's anxious questioning, such an academic concept, like everything academic, is somewhat secondary.

Belonging however to this same field of fundamental human questions are the issues of the future of our own social situation and the concern for personal, individual, happiness in life. The question of the just life was first raised by Socrates, who was not a philosophy professor, and he raised it with such doggedness that he would certainly acknowledge that deep down all human beings ask themselves the same question, even if, instead of laying themselves open to their own uncertainties, they secretly dodge it through the answers they give. Whoever recognizes that sees immediately that the passion for questioning, whether it concerns the future of humanity, individual happiness or the terrifying secret of death, comes up constantly against an ignorance that calls us into question. The same goes for the origin that predetermines us in a manner not chosen by us, and for the events of the past that not even a God would be able to erase. All this goes hand in hand with the process of socialization (as we say today), by virtue of which, from the instinctive life of earliest childhood onwards, we integrate ourselves into society through education and the control exercised by life within the family, and later on through language acquisition and language use. I believe that, faced with this situation, we must ask ourselves why those who feel themselves drawn toward such philosophical questions to which no science can offer answers should, because they are professors of philosophy, have a particular aptitude to comprehend and even resolve the problems of the day. I am always amazed that the philosopher, in the academic sense of the word, is supposed to have a particular competence denied to others, by virtue of which he ought even perhaps to be invested with a particular responsibility, something that is frequently expected of us. Should not it rather be recognized that in this sense the priest, the doctor, the schoolteacher, the judge or

even the journalist exert a much more decisive influence, and that on this account they are invested in the present and for the future with a much greater responsibility?

It will be recalled that Heidegger was once asked (by a young Frenchman, Beaufret, after the war) when he was going to write an ethics, and he tried to give a detailed answer. The burden of his reply was that the question cannot be put like that, as if it was the philosopher's job to "teach" someone an *ethos*, that is to propose or justify a social order, or recommend this or that moral order, this or that manner of influencing widely held convictions; such, in truth, were educational processes which had clearly been undertaken on for a long time and had conditioned all and sundry before humankind began to raise the radical questions customarily ascribed to philosophy.

The conflict is not between the specialized knowledge of some experts and the social reality of practical life, it is in humanity itself, in its questioning and errors. We are as human beings so disconnected from the natural order of things that we are no longer determined by any natural *ethos*. The word *ethos* in Greek refers to the way of life, including that of animals, assigned to us by nature. In the case of animals, habits are governed by such a powerful instinctive control-mechanism that their behavior becomes irresistibly conditioned by it.

I once had an interesting experience. It was a bad summer. A couple of swallows had made their nest on our balcony. It was already very late in the season when their second brood was hatched. Then the migrating instinct of the swallows proved stronger than the powerful instinct to care for their young. The parents left the poor chicks to die of hunger. Later, we found their bones in the nest. That shows with what strength nature and its mechanisms pervade the behavior patterns of other living creatures.

We human beings do not undergo such unequivocal domination by our instincts. We enjoy "freedom of choice," at least so we believe, and that is why we call it that. It is what the Greeks termed *prohairesis*: the liberty to behave in this way or that. The ability to ask questions is part of it, but also the capacity of seeing possibilities that may well not be realizable at all. The person who lacks the necessary imagination to see possibilities obviously runs less risk

of making a mistake. That is why I say that it is not just Heidegger or those people called philosophers who are prone to error, but humankind as such, and that it is above all to its own secret aspirations, hidden from itself, or to the shimmering dreams of fulfillment in life, that humanity succumbs. That is what determines for all and sundry the way they assess their own life circumstances and relations with others. We all run the risk of harboring illusions and getting things wrong. So, too, doctors are too close to themselves to prescribe their own treatment, and defendants to mount their own defense. At bottom that holds true for all knowledge: its concrete application requires a particular gift that cannot be found in the knowledge which can be acquired as such. The one-sided nature of today's scientific culture tends to undervalue the autonomy of practical forms of knowledge. The philosopher, to whom a certain academic competence in the formulation of insoluble questions is conceded and who has sometimes the good fortune to prepare at least some solutions, can then pass for a sage, but is not immune from error or from a poor assessment of a situation, especially where personal involvement is a factor.

It can of course be said that "philosophers" bear a particular responsibility to the extent that, whether they like it or not, they exert an influence as professors and role-models in the realm of thought, but it would be hard to deny either that the representatives of other sciences, and not only people called philosophers, find themselves in this situation, particularly when their own discipline touches on problems of real economic, social and political life. And it would certainly be a mistake to imagine that in such cases scientific competence alone would suffice to teach practical thought without recourse to the reason which, as creatures endowed with intelligence, human beings possess. Conversely people who impress us by the power of their philosophical thought can appear superior; that is particularly what happened to me, faced with the superiority of thought that I encountered in Heidegger. It can then happen that we are led astray, and I have no wish to deny that Heidegger's powerful spiritual influence on his age resulted in many people making wrong judgements in practical and political matters. But in thought as in life we are individually responsible for our actions. If what we have learnt as academic philosophers is nothing

other than asking questions that preoccupy everybody, without it being humanly possible to come up with valid answers, then we can call that, following Jaspers, "existential enlightenment."

It may be that we gain awareness in this way of the limits of scientific understanding. The ability to perceive correctly the aims of action, aims that are feasible and capable of being translated into reality, is however something very different.

Thus can occur what happened in Heidegger's case: a man whose thought had captivated half a century and from whom emanated an incomparable power of suggestion, a man who as thinker had thrown light on the nature of existential dread, and its indissociable propensity for moral degradation, behind all human activity toward humankind and the world, such a man could in spite of everything succumb in his own behavior to illusions. Heidegger experienced that in himself, and it was this his subsequent silence acknowledged.

It would nonetheless have been much easier for him to admit his political error, especially as he had ended up seeing it, as well as his illusions in general on the Nazi movement, but too late. It was doubtless the bad company he would have kept in making such a public avowal that prevented him. Also perhaps he feared what indeed appears soon to have happened: that his philosophical views could be safely ignored because of his blunder. He would no doubt have found here confirmation that his conception of universal history, that is of postwar developments, his concept of the unity of the destiny of Europe from the Greeks to present-day technology, was not so easily refuted.

Of course, as a thinker and teacher, he did not give up the pursuit of his own visions. This can be seen throughout his teaching career, in his lectures which are now for the most part available in print. The same is true for the years following the collapse of the Third Reich. He remained mentally wedded to his vision of a just path for humanity even after acknowledging that National-Socialism and Hitler's interpretation of it was quite different from such a step on the road to conversion which he conceived as humanity's true vision.

We ought not to be surprised that a man endowed with the power of superior thought can be mistaken. Whoever thinks sees

possibilities. Whoever possesses a strong power of thought sees possibilities with tangible clarity. Something can easily seem real, and appear to such people as they would wish it to be, whereas in reality everything is very different. Like many others, the young Heidegger had already seen clearly in his social and political environment, and in particular in contemporary university life, the abuses and the signs of decline. In the Germany that had emerged from collapse in the First World War and had had foisted upon it an imported democracy for which Germans were ill-prepared, these signs were obvious. The tensions and disputes, acts of violence, coup attempts and racketeering experienced by the Weimar Republic in those years are notorious. Even after the consolidation of the state through the despoliation of the so-called bourgeois middle class and the emergence of an intellectual proletariat incomparably larger than its predecessors, even then the Germans could have no confidence in the future as long as they did not have a peace treaty and enjoy economic conditions clearly laid down and guaranteeing them jobs and reasonable prospects in life. Even the British later acknowledged that this situation had contributed to the extreme radicalization of a nation become a nation of the jobless. Heidegger saw it too. But he viewed it in the grand perspective of the whole of human history, and he concluded that there would have to be a radically fresh start, which would necessarily come about, and that is what he thought he saw in 1933. It is hardly surprising that a great thinker should get it so badly wrong. On the other hand it does seem surprising to me that people keep on confronting this philosopher with the question of an ethic. I interpret that as a sign of distress, or even as evidence of moral poverty in a society which needs to ask others what is honorable, what is decent and what is human, and wants to hear from someone else, from the philosopher, the answer to that question. That only goes to show that society has lost all sense of direction.

Of course, one can hardly blame someone who expects something like advice from another person. It is perfectly understandable that people ask such questions. The fact remains, however, that there is an indissoluble connection between, on the one hand, the character-imprint human beings receive very early on

(together with all the experiences they undergo in society, affecting both their own nature and their historical conditioning), and, on the other, the question of the good, which must always be asked *in concreto* when one would like to transform this thing or that so that it might become better.

How could one put the question of the true good differently? The essential prerequisite is to address the question to oneself, and not to think only of oneself. One cannot however put oneself in someone else's place, and one cannot make people accept the recommendations, suggestions, advice or even instructions that they do not see or acknowledge themselves. There is no such thing as a conciliatory ethic. Consequently, if Beaufret asked Heidegger "When will you write an *Ethics?*," it was simply because the young Frenchmen had recognized in *Being and Time* such a strong, radical potential for questioning that he thought Heidegger capable of offering his help in the threatening situation faced by humanity in the wake of the widespread devastation that took place in the closing months of World War II. What was being asked of Heidegger was no doubt not something that philosophy could be specifically expected to do. It is incumbent upon everyone to obey the imperatives of common sense, but that was something lacking in Germany, a country which, never having known a revolution or the overthrow of established authority, was accustomed to obedience. That was how our political immaturity became our national downfall.

The fact that Max Weber in the Germany of the time felt the need to invoke an "ethics of responsibility" is a reflection of that curious depoliticization, as if responsibility were not the kernel of all ethics! In any case ethics is not a matter of simple conviction but refers to real behavior and taking responsibility for the consequences of that behavior and of any lapses from it. "Conviction ethics," derived (mistakenly) from Kant, were in reality the expression of political weakness and of the lack of political solidarity. German nineteenth-century bourgeois society suffered from such a weakness because of its habit of respect for authority. That was no doubt a weakness too of the Protestant church, which accorded authority a kind of religious power that led to the neglect of the duty of critical intelligence. Such an attitude coin-

cided with the depoliticization of the intelligentsia: secularization buttressed the religious *pathos* of faith and hardened into questions of conviction and conscience. In the last analysis each and everyone of us experiences in himself or herself the responsibility which we all bear and which we conceal from ourselves. I have once again reread Kafka's *The Trial*. The marvelous and agonizing description found there shows how so-called innocence makes a person guilty. In such circumstances in life philosophers can perhaps help us formulate better the questions that concern us all, but they can only be of assistance if they are able to show other people how much we are faced with tasks whose resolution cannot be treated as the sole responsibility of others. It is never solely the other person who is guilty.

Translated from the German by John Fletcher

Notes

1. "Zurück von Syrakus?," in J. Altwegg (ed.), *Die Heidegger Kontroverse* (Frankfurt am Main, 1988), pp. 176-179.

Translator's note: The most recent and complete version of this article has not yet been published in French or in English (see below, *Sinn und Form*, 1993).

Previous articles of Hans-Georg Gadamer on the same subject matter are as follows: "Comme Platon à Syracuse: 'Peut-être nous demande-t-on de renoncer définitivement à penser?'" (traduction de Geneviève Carcopino), in *Le nouvel Observateur*, n° 1211, 22-28 janvier 1988, p. 45.

"Zurück von Syrakus?," in Jürg Altwegg, éd., *Die Heidegger Kontroverse*, Francfort s. M., Athenäum, 1988, p. 176-179.

"La responsabilità al singolare" (trad. Renato Cristin), in *Aut Aut (Nuova serie)*, La Nuova Italia, Milano, Firenze, n° 226-227, juillet-octobre 1988, p. 40-45.

"Back From Syracuse?" (trad. J. McCumber), in *Critical Inquiry*, The University of Chicago Press, vol. 15, no. 2, 1989, p. 427-430.

"Über die politische Inkompetenz der Philosophie," in *Sinn und Form: Beiträge zur Literatur*, Akademie der Künste zu Berlin, 45^e année, n° 1, janvier-février 1993, p. 5-12.

Cf. Etsuro Makita, *Gadamer Bibliographie (1922-1994)*, Francfort s. M., (Berlin, New York, et. al.), Peter Lang 1995, p. 172 et 175, n° A88/01 et A88.14.