

PUBLIC VICIS, PRIVATE BENEFITS

Ronald Commers

1.

Allow me to start this paper with a little story, which I guess belongs to Latin-American literature. It tells us that once upon a time in Guatemala some thousands of peasants were killed by bullets in what can be called an ambush. The soldiers of the regular army did the job. In the meantime, at a distance of only a hundred meters, rich bourgeois and landlords were having a party. They drank a lot, made good fun, danced and enjoyed themselves in flirting and having interesting conversations concerning their lives and their own personal annoying singularities. One could hear the noise of the slaughter, the gunfire and the cries of anxiety and death, through the music of the boleros played. The party went on.

You can consider this story to be by Miguel Asturias or someone else of his crew. All of them will assert us, that what seems to be a fabrication of literature to us, is an historical reality to them. The boundaries between a monstrous imagination and the bare reality are not so sharp when one regards them from a Latin-american point of view.

But I am obliged to confess that, as far as I am concerned, the story has lost his exotic character. I realize that one should avoid drama when intellectual activity is aimed at, because with drama enacted, one is at the risk to loose one's temper and to endanger what must be considered to be a necessary reflective distance. Nevertheless, it seems that in my turn, I continue the party, the drinking, the fun, the dancing, the flirting, and the having interesting conversations about my annoying singularities. Not far away from here bullets are flying through the air, killing citizens, destroying hospitals and dwellings, injuring children and women.

I guess you will try to understand this remark to be a reference to

my position as a member of the European Community, confronting the tragedy in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The way I talk about it is remarkable. I am using the word: tragedy. Tale or history is tragic only if, in it, one remains merely a spectator, even when in fact one is an actor, because not any personal intervention whatsoever is able to stop its course. You are right. I was thinking about that awful situation in former Yugoslavia. At the last minute I succeeded to avoid speaking about the indignity of the situation. I realised that this qualification might be ill-timed. It would have suggested that there is certainty on the subject of human dignity, and that I was the owner of criteria for judging it. This seems to be in contradiction with my tragic position as a member of the European community. I guess that when actually I have joined a party — and surely this scholarly conference should be considered to be one — while meanwhile, somewhere out in Sarajevo, as a consequence of another explosion a child lost his arm, I should keep silent about human dignity.

Perhaps it was a leg, or an arm and a leg at the same time. I mean: torn off from the child. It could have been a woman, or an elder, or a brilliant young man. I mean: only some seconds ago somewhere nearby the centre of Sarajevo.

But maybe you interpreted my Latin-american story differently. You understood that I wasn't talking merely about my or our position as Europeans related to what happens in former Yugoslavia, pulled asunder through ugly nationalism and separatism. You understood that I was referring to our position as members of a large and prosperous Atlantic community, confronting situations like those in Somalia, or Djibouti, or the southern part of Soudan. But I should stop this awkward enumeration; it leads us nowhere. And as I said, intellectually speaking, one should avoid drama. Moreover, I believe that, in some specific circumstances at least, intellectual analysis and critique may bring us closer to the solution of concrete social problems.

2.

This conference focuses on moral problems concerning private and public morality. I only may offer you some very general and loosely tied up observations on the subject. I hope not to disappoint you too much, knowing that it is beyond my reach to offer you a set of clear theoretical

elaborations.

Let us start with a general observation. The relationship between the spheres of private existence and public life is as old as moral theory. I have several good reasons to say so. Let me explain. From Greek philosophy onwards, the difference and separation between the spheres was a central item for philosophical investigation. There never existed a period in philosophy in which the relationship was evident. This seems to be a very important observation to me, on the consequences of which I want to dwell a little further in my paper. A great part of western intellectuals, in defending a peculiar detachment of the private from the public, is inspired by the ancient Greek example of free conversation, of friendship and of perfection. It is suggested that the languages spoken within the two spheres are different and even incommensurable. So, it is said, one should avoid to be influenced by one language, when in fact one is talking the other. Moreover, when talking about one's private sphere, one's personal singularities, a general approach is unlikely, for it all remains a particular affair. Consequently, private spheres are relatively closed systems, obstructing once and for all general observations and investigations. This excludes a scientific approach. From a practical point of view one should avoid referring to other's private states of the mind, or to generalize from one's own peculiarities. In making this a tool for social life, those who think along these lines are translating a so-called observation into a moral device: keep modest, and do not endeavour to refer to your own private life in general terms. It may be phrased in a more heroic way, for which the inspiration comes from the hilarious work of Friedrich Nietzsche.

In recent book on *Moral Differences*, Robert W. Miller says:

There is a distinguished tradition, extending at least as far back as Nietzsche, in which modern moral anxieties are traced to the inadequacy of the modern outlook and ancient Greek accounts of virtue are recommended as hinting at the remedy, if not supplying it ready-made ... (p. 391)

These recommendations, in which the example of the Aristotelian ethics of friendship plays a major role as an ideal type for the free development of a person, for free conversation, and for a detached interpersonal relationship, these recommendations, I said, stand against another tradi-

tion in moral philosophy. Miller sums it up as follows:

Modern moral philosophies regulate choice by impartial, detached perspectives, and usually try to sum up their favoured perspective in a general rule requiring no further moral discriminations. This legislative approach is very different from the ancient ethical emphasis on diverse concrete norms of how to live ... (ibidem)

In this other tradition, for which the work of Jeremy Bentham stands as a brilliant example, moral philosophy concentrates on impartiality, on detachment, and on general theories of human behaviour and social organization. Moral philosophers take interest in abstract notions of universal welfare and in general rules for the global administration of human life. The social sciences are part of this moral philosophy. In this tradition some very general narratives of human happiness and emancipation are put forward in order to be able to intervene in a world of misery, inefficiency, waste, and corruption, and in order to make this intervention more rational. Of course, to a certain extent, the concrete social situations and the divine peculiarities of the individual seem lost with this approach. Moreover, these moral philosophers turn to the public sphere exclusively. As Jeremy Bentham once put it: private ethics are not my affair as a moral and legal philosopher.

The person and work of Nietzsche can be linked with the refusal of the great theories of public morality. Somewhat earlier, Max Stirner had prepared the path to this refusal. Not one of the generalizations of moral philosophy could stand his criticism. They all told lies to the good folks: no God, no humanity, no general happiness, no proletariat, no new society. For Stirner only the very particular private sphere could have a concrete and rational meaning. People could reach certainty about their own persons. Nietzsche joined the party and fabricated a heroic version of it. His themes are all too well-known.

We are living in a period in which we are told that the great narratives of western society have come to an end. The inspiration of Nietzsche is said to be of a major importance. We are incited to free ourselves from the generalizations of a moral philosophy sunken down to far already into the social sciences and history. Although some part of the criticism seems correct to me, I want to defend the other tradition in

proposing a new theoretical and scientific move in moral philosophy.

The refusal of the great narratives of humanity, in which the concrete human existence was submersed, only to speak about society's development or history's process, has given way itself, for the last ten years, to a misguided view. Ever since that time we are facing a rash relativism, which I consider to reveal a deep crisis within the western intellectual milieu. The nostalgia of the so-called "happy freedom of the ancient Greeks" is part of the abandonment of the renovating and creative work of signification and valuation in the face of the new challenges and problems of our world. No doubt, we do not have a unitarian theory of the relationship of private and public morality. But on top of this we are invited to accept the contingency of ourselves, of the languages we speak, and of the communities in which we live, only to play our small — conversational — role in the whimsical games of language. Some long for older types of community life, and refer to ancient Greek *arètè* or Renaissance's *virtù*, through which a totally different and spontaneous unity of the two spheres would be guaranteed, thus departing from the endeavour of others, who are searching for new general foundations: non-reciprocal time-centred responsibility; transcendental discourse-type; and an *Ideal-type* of communicative action.

3.

Although I tend to believe that part of the criticism of former narratives within our western intellectual history is very valuable indeed, I have some good reasons to refuse the resulting rash relativism. In my opinion, we should beware of general theories of human behaviour and history, accepting, however, that we should search for them without interruption. Call this a dialectical point of view. We cannot reach an olympian theoretical clarity, and for this reason are searching without any interruption for improvement of our theories and investigations concerning human existence. The concrete and historical world outside obliges us to do so. In this way I can understand why and how Hans Jonas pleaded for an ethics of responsibility, a plea in which he turned his back both towards marxist historiosophy *and* contemporary nihilism. The concrete and historical world outside obliges us to new investigations and narratives concerning individual and social existence. Time and again this will force

us to rely on the social sciences. In this, so it seems, individuals and their singularities are sacrificed. But such happens only in a rational "suspension of judgment", originating from an attempt to take historical and socio-economic settings into account. The historical circumstances of the metabolism of man and nature cannot be neglected. But the labour of signification and valuation, deduced from these investigations will never be final. The former is as ungoing a work as the latter is an unended quest. Indeed neither of them can be confined ultimately, for, contingency being our fate and our realm, an absolute point of reference — the so-called olympian view — is beyond our reach. But, for the same reasons, we are forced to rickkeys those significations and valuations of the human existence which petrify in the mere assessment of 'the' human contingency. It will be clear that the fatalist and defeatist narrative of the Nietzschean (or Heideggerian) western intellectual, in which we are urged to beware for all too encompassing sayings (writings) of 'the' human condition, is itself a generalization of the western life-style and the fragmented human condition characteristic for it. This narrative itself is a general and total theory of signification and valuation which overlooks its own fatal contingency.

I would like to dwell a bit further on the rash relativism, in which private and public spheres are disconnected in a timeless and non-local way. I use an example which seems highly relevant for our discussion.

At the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, political economists were already talking about the contingency of lifestyles and existences when they suggested the impossibility of the interpersonal comparison of utilities. The marginalists subscribed to cardinal measurability of utility first, and *a fortiori* to the cardinal interpersonal comparison of utilities. Later, they dropped this idea and opted for ordinal measurability and comparison. Still later, some of them dropped the idea of measurability and comparability altogether. Neither the one nor the other were accepted. The idea of the extreme oddity or singularity of utilities or, say, desires, purposes, and life-styles became an established theoretical thesis. Strangely enough, a general theory of human behaviour took shape in this way. In this theory, human behaviour and existence were confined to a limited frame of a singular economic view. It was an *Idealtipe* of human behaviour induced by and accompanying the living reality of the developed capitalistic system. Human existence volatilized in separate momentary indifference. At the limit the individual, or-

ganizing his existence, lost the capacity to even see a unity. The only thing within reach was the addition of the contingent and separate indifference (his volatile desires, changing from one moment to the other).

I want to emphasize this example taken from the history of political economy, talking about a period during which George Moore wrote his devastating *Principia Ethica*, a book that smoothed the way for Stevenson's ill understood deconstruction of Anglo-saxon ethics. The importance of this is that any moral philosopher whatsoever was able to read all this long before the beginning of the Second World War. Human behaviour, fancied in political economy and theoretical ethics, made human existence an extremely contingent phenomenon. General outlines concerning happiness could only be derived *post factum*, which means: after whimsical human desires had developed the way they did.

It should be clear, first, that this theory is locking up the private sphere, and, next, that it is conditioned by the historical stage and spatio-temporal setting of its appearance. This marginalistic theory of human behaviour is the outcome of — in Macpherson's terms — *possessive individualism*. Paradoxically, in *possessive individualism*, a steadily fragmented and splintered private sphere is locked up in the individual person, only to be compared to a global "desiring machine" (to use the words of Deleuze-Guattari). We know this to be nonsense from an empirical point of view. I think the most important observation concerning the matter is the following: the idea of the incomparability of life-styles (desires or utilities) and of the extreme case of idiosyncrasy could only be conceived of in a social universe which had gone through a far-reaching process of social differentiation and which, relatively speaking, is characterized by a great (material) prosperity in terms of commodities. The greater this prosperity, the greater and the more variable the supply of goods and services, the greater also the diversity of enforced material consumption. At best, marginalist political economists worked with an historical "law", as we might call it. The idea of the aleatory workings of the human desires, and consequently of the whimsical human existence, could only be conceived of within the boundaries of the western capitalistic system of social differentiation and commodity-oriented prosperity. But even when we should acknowledge that, in the western world of commodity-oriented prosperity, things are as they were accepted in the marginalist theory of human behaviour; we constantly are reminded of the fact that the whole world doesn't fit in this model. Western com-

modity-oriented prosperity is a somewhat unique phenomenon in an universe of poverty, deficiency, and waste. The greater the latter are within social systems other than ours, the greater the comparability of needs, desires, life-styles among their members. Thus, incomparability and extreme diversity of human existence, at best, seems the outcome of a privileged position within specific spatio-temporal boundaries of capitalist world-economy. If I am correct, the conclusion might be phrased as follows: it is this peculiar situation that we should study in order to grasp the significance of the relationship between the private and the public sphere on a world-wide scale. So, we cannot do without a social scientific point of view. We cannot avoid turning to investigation, identification of situations, to theory. For example, Bourdieu's investigation of the phenomenon of *distinction* within developed capitalist society, is part of this investigation and theory-building.

I would like to link this consideration to another one. It is a consideration which has obtained a great weight during the last twenty years. It invited many an ethical theorist to change his or her valuations of human existence in front of a new general view of our condition. Western commodity-prosperity, which invokes the fatal idiosyncrasy of human existence and the incomparability of life-styles and of private spheres, which on its turn induces the idea of the irreducible diversity of significations and valuations (the fatal moral diversity), is itself an extremely frail social condition. Prosperity and commodification of the world have their limits. Material growth is based on human labour and natural resources. Neither of them is limitless and free from the risk of deterioration. Human labour leads to few problems. Exploitation may be reorganized on a world-wide level. The organization of human labour in countries such as Southern Korea, Japan, and Latin-America, demonstrates how far the commodity-production can draw extensively on human lives. With natural environment things are different. The weight of the global ecosystem (biosphere) and of particular ecosystems (local niches) has been reinforced by mass-production all over the world (call this mass-commodification). A new general frame of extraction of wealth and of material growth, arose from the evolution of human desires and life-styles. All of us are more or less, equally affected by the deterioration of the biosphere. In these cases, it would be a mark of blindness to stick to the incomparability and fatal diversity of utilities, desires and life-styles.

May I draw your attention to the following: as a consequence of the

historical process of capitalist world-economy, global problems were created, through which human existences were put on a common denominator. The global process of world-economy confronts us with a perspective of human life, which sharply contrasts with the plea for diversity and incomparability (or incommensurability). The last twenty years we were drawn into a new reality in which our private existences are intimately connected with a world-wide public sphere that keeps fastly expanding. Consideration for our own future, or for our children and grandchildren, due to our *limited generosity*, leads us toward a much larger responsibility for the future, than ever in human history before. One may draw an optimistic conclusion. Due to a limitless material (or commodity-) growth of capitalist world-economy, we are confronted with the limits of this growth, which urges us to compare our past, contemporary, and future life-conditions to each other. All this is subject to scientific investigation. Induced by material growth, mankind is facing a totally new dimension of the relationship between the private and the public sphere.

From what has been said, we may conclude that the private sphere of human existence is tied to the public sphere. This is the very consequence of the material growth and world-wide amplification of commodification. Diversity of existence goes hand in hand with this new dimension in which the private and public spheres are interwoven. I have to admit that in asserting this, I took a western point of view. For a Somalian there is no other diversity in human existence than that between starving and having something to eat. And in Sarajevo some citizens are said to be longing for death, for there is no other future that might be thought of.

4.

It has become clear that in my opinion we cannot free ourselves from a scientific investigation of the changing relationships between the private and public spheres, which follows from the alterations of the commodification-processes of capitalist world-economy. I want to confront this with the nihilistic pleas of some philosophers of "la différence". Some of them are suggesting that — western capitalist conditions of human existence taken into account — the individual is delivered up to a productivistic, technical and administrative system. This system is

supposed to have an autotelian destiny, in which neither individual human action nor collective investigation can play a role of importance. The system — Kafka's *Das Schloss* is not far away — has its own finality in which our private existence has stopped to play a role of importance. The detachment of the two spheres has become a gulf. This is the theme of an intimistic defeatist philosophy in which *Das Gestell* (to use the word of Martin Heidegger) plays a major role. No one can escape *Das Gestell*. We are all in the condition of K in Kafka's *Das Schloss*. We are handed over to the system of technical and scientific administration. The important thing is this: it is excluded that we could obtain knowledge about the processes which dominate our individual existences. We are locked up in the system. Only the gods can help us.

There is a second observation which relates to the theme of self-realisation. I consider it to be of great value to all of us. Ever since Renaissance philosophy, the defence of self-realisation has been part of the plea for human dignity. But what was its content? Can we answer this question without turning to history itself? The answer is no. I recall an earlier quotation from Robert Miller's: that Greek *arete* and ancient notions of self-realization were considered to offer a way out from the anxieties of modernity. I want you to remind an observation of Agnes Heller, who once said:

The philosophy of emerging bourgeois society did not reject the notion of self-creation, nor that of (technical) many-sidedness, nor that of infinite capacities. But it searched in a new direction, it sought the *motive* which impelled man to create. And it found that motive — which was no longer sublime nor moral — in the real motivation of the bourgeois individual: egoism ...

Western history reveals an uninterrupted propagation of a misunderstood and unreachable Greek ideal mixed up with the bare reality of pursuing private desires and interests. Two worlds and two totally different semantics. This becomes a relevant theme for us, when we remember how central a place Arne Naess has given to the theme of self-realisation in his consideration of a new value-system in front of the challenges of our time (in a chapter under the heading: Self-realisation as top norm and key term for an ultimate goal, pp. 84-86, in *Ecology, community and lifestyle. Outline of an Ecosophy*, 1989). Naess is well aware of the differences

between the two semantics of moral life. He says:

(Spinoza's) ideas of 'self-preservation' (...) cannot develop far without sharing joys and sorrows with others, or, more fundamentally, without the development of the narrow ego of the small child into the comprehensive structure of a self that comprises all human beings. The deep ecology movement, as many earlier movements before it, takes a step further, and asks for the development of a deep identification of individuals with all life forms ...

This identification — I would prefer the term 'commitment' — of individual persons of which Naess is talking within the context of his consideration of the 'self-realisation' as a topnorm of eco-sophy, was still well-known among intellectuals, during the 18th century, as witnessed by the work of Shaftesbury, Schelling, and Shelley. Even Mozart sung the praise of contentment (see his song K 349) and of freedom (see his song K 506), revealing the importance of the deep involvement in nature of each individual person on his way to self-realisation. But this sensibility has disappeared from our intellectual horizon ever since. Only within the frame of a new ecological approach and a holistic semantics of modern life does the idea seem to reappear.

It was Naess's view that, as members of the western world and a fortiori as members of the centre of world-capitalism, we have a disturbed view on self-realization and human dignity. Time and again egoistic motives were mixed up with the ancient notions. Since Nietzsche the former were repudiated in remembrance of the latter, utopian or nostalgic solutions were phrased. They all enable us to see how strong the relationship is between the private and public spheres. Therefore Arne Naess, from the point of view of human responsibility for the future of mankind, proposed to avoid a narrow definition of the value of self-realization. Ego-realization, idiosyncrasy, incommensurability, intranslatability, are concepts all belonging to such a narrow semantic universe. Unfortunately they are linked to a meagre or parsimonious idea of rational human behaviour that should be abandoned. But are we able to abandon it? Is it right to abandon it?

I would like to answer this question in the affirmative. The process of world-capitalism in which the semantic of ego-realization captured the

broad holistic idea of human self-realization, to repeat Agnes Heller's observation, and which led us into the dead-ends of utopian, nostalgic, defeatist, trivial and nihilistic interpretations of this western concept, brought forth a large-scale system of public vices. When Naess was talking about the changing of life-styles in western countries, he was obliged to propose far-reaching alterations in the system of production, distribution and consumption. These changes would interfere drastically with the functioning of the market and the state. One reaches the same conclusion when listening to what Hans Jonas had to say about the ethic of responsibility. Both, Naess and Jonas, lead us beyond the boundaries of nostalgia and utopia.

To end (but not to conclude my paper) I shall endeavour to explain the idea of public vices a bit further to you. I owe you that, for the title of my paper somewhat enigmatically referred to the opposition between benefits and vices. A famous author, commenting and justifying the beginning (the take-off) of western capitalism in the United Kingdom, inspired me. But I shall not mention him. The meaning of the expression: "public vices", seems more important to me. In a narrow sense, political economy speaks about diseconomies of scale. I would suggest to enlarge the concept. We have to take into account the *world-wide diseconomies of scale accompanying the material growth and commodification-process of capitalist world-economy*. I hold that the discourse of incomparability and idiosyncrasy was archetypical for a developed system of material prosperity relying on the idea of ego-realization (the "desiring-machines"). This developed system of prosperity rests on both the market and the state. It has been demonstrated that it brings forward phenomena which are putting the system under great pressure, both internally and externally. That is what I would like to call the pressure of public vices, of which the deterioration of the bio-sphere and the global eco-system is the most, but not the only evident phenomenon. I see other pressures which accompany the endangering of the environment. Among them: the socio-cultural and ideological intoxication induced by a poverty fastly developing both in the centre and in the periphery of world-capitalism, the so-called dualization of world-society; the nationalistic and separatist strains developing with the overt disintegration of a bureaucratic political world-system; the world-wide cancer of corruption and patronage; the slow corrosion of democracy linked with the former; child-prostitution and child-labour; the reappearance of slavery; the outburst of religious

obscurantism; the growth of a new analfabetism.

I am convinced that we should and can study these public vices from a global, systematic and dynamic point of view. For this purpose the concept of the diseconomies of scale, which was a thiny one, is too limited. We should at least try to work with the hypothesis of a systemic whole of public vices, a system in which all the afore-mentioned elements are interlinked. It should be clear that this hypothesis has been used already implicitly by what I consider to be one of the great instances of human consciousness and responsibility in the western world, namely the courageous journalistic work of the editorial board of *Le Monde Diplomatique*. For a contemporary moral philosopher, the reading of this monthly magazine seems to be more fruitful than to join in with the Heideggerian lamentations on the effects of technique and so-called scientific administration of human existence. More fruitful also than searching for a new Saint-Benedict to appear in the 20th century, and not less fertile than the western-centred defence of the ironic cultivation of our own singularities in respect of the contingency of our place in nature. But the endeavour of *Le Monde Diplomatique* do not stand alone, for social scientists as well as political, social and moral philosophers, have suggested a new scientific program of *global thinking* (Mike Featherstone). In this global thinking the systemic features of public vices, induced by the rash propagation of the conception of private benefits throughout the world, become the centre of attention.

I dare not say that the Aristotelian semantic of freedom and friendship, of autonomy and self-reliance, has no value whatsoever. On the contrary. This semantic should invite us to see how the defence of similar conceptions of freedom, autonomy, and self-realization, in our contemporary circumstances of waste-growth on a world-wide scale, supposes a social time that doesn't exist already, or that has still to come (to speak with Ernst Bloch).

I dare not say that our conceptions of human dignity and autonomy, born from a Greek father and a Jewish mother, are worthless. On the contrary. The very idea of them should invite us to see how these values participate in a global world-system in which very different temporal and spatial settings are at work.

I dare not say anything definite whatsoever about them, because way out there one can hear the bullets, the cries, the despair, while in the meantime the party goes on.

But again, the conclusion one may draw is the following: this tying together of these perspectives, values, and ideals can be studied from a systemic point of view, in which we should join our efforts, turning our back to the defeatism professed covertly and/or openly within at least a part of the western intelligentsia.