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Roger Scruton

Philosophy and the Public Culture

It is hard to combine those two approaches to the written word, and I shall always be grateful to Princeton for the opportunity to attempt it, and so to embark on my peculiar calling. For the task of philosophy as I envisage it, which is to make sense of the human world, stands always to be completed by the specific invocation of life as it is lived. The abstract universal must be measured against the lived particular, and philosophy, at least my kind of philosophy, is called to account by art. For me it has never been enough to explore the *Lebenswelt* in terms of a generalised philosophy of mind; the drama of the individual life always intrudes on my reflections, and asks me to say how, in this or that predicament, the philosophy can also be lived.

For a long time during the mid twentieth century there was a rift within the philosophical community between those who identified themselves as members of the 'analytical' school and those who expressed allegiance to 'continental' philosophy, specifically to phenomenology and its off–shoots. I was brought up in the analytical school, and I am grateful for this, since it has given me a vigorous and active bullshit detector. But my writings have shifted perceptibly away from the analytical method, as a result of trying to connect with a vision of culture. In this paper I want to describe how this came about, and why I think it is important if philosophy is really to make sense of our world.

My thinking about architecture was a response to the early modernists — Gropius, Le Corbusier and Mies among them. Those distinguished pioneers had set out to exploit the engineering potential of materials such as cast steel and reinforced concrete which can be bent into any shape without losing their structural properties. If their exuberant theories had been correct this should have produced a mass of new designs, eagerly embraced by the public and occurring around the world in a thousand adaptations. However, I noticed that the textbooks and theories issued in praise of their work reverted always to the

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same handful of examples, like Le Corbusier's uninhabitable Villa Savoie, Mies's vanished Barcelona Pavilion and Tugendhat Villa in Brno or the Bauhaus school in Dessau, and said little or nothing about the everyday buildings that were exploiting the materials that the modernists championed.

If we were to ask just what the result of their 'international style' in architecture has been, however, it is not to those twee little buildings that we should refer. We should rather describe the square miles of blocks dumped on the centres of our cities, the stacks of horizontal kitchen trays, built on a gigantic scale and without facades, obliterating streets and mutilating sky–lines, creating around them deserts of vandalised nothingness and alleys where nobody walks. For it is these easily conceived and standardised forms that have torn apart the fabric of our cities, while being justified in the language of the modernist pioneers. These faceless blocks, we are told, offer an experience of space, time and form appropriate to the period in which we are living. Theirs is the true modern style, and to build in any other way is to be false to the laws of history, to commit a crime against time. If, as a result, the city is destroyed and the population flees to the suburbs, there to live in isolated units among lawns and trees, that too is history, and you had better accept it. History and humanity are the same idea.

I caricature slightly; but only slightly, as all will know who have read the heated manifestoes with which the modern movement announced itself in schools of architecture, and through which the art of building now is taught. Studying this literature profoundly influenced my development as a philosopher. I noticed that the theories offered to justify modernism were not in fact theories about architecture at all. They had been lifted from branches of mathematics and science, and applied to the practise of building on the simple assumption that, since the theories are true, they must be true of building too.

Here is an example. In *The Modulor* Le Corbusier sets out his system of measurement, based on the standing figure of a man with arm raised above his head, squeezed into a golden–section division, and embellished with commentary relating the golden section to the Fibonacci series. This was nothing new: the golden section rectangle has been a principle of composition in architecture since ancient times, Le Corbusier's figure was a remake of Leonardo's famous template of the male body spread–eagled within a circle and a square, and the relation between the golden section and the Fibonacci series is

a mediaeval discovery. What was new, however, was the use of the measure merely as a ruler, specifying the lengths and heights of sections that are not divided from each other by any architectural grammar, which exist as pure expanses of concrete and glass, and which come to an end without an edge, falling in each direction into the void. Architecture, as an art of composition, in which areas are marked by boundaries, and significant parts stand to each other in perceivable relations — architecture conceived in such a way that proportion, harmony and measure are actually perceivable — has dropped out of consideration. All we have is the arcane and invisible 'essence', contained in a measuring function that could be applied in infinitely many ways, and whose application tells us nothing.

The same turned out to be true of the invocations of physics in Siegfried Giedion's *Space, Time and Architecture*. Giedion argues that the essence of architecture is space, hence, as relativity theory changes our conception of space, so must architecture change along with it. But why say that the essence of architecture is space? What does that mean, and how does it square with the obvious truth that space is not, in itself, perceivable, and becomes a reality for us only with the boundary that encloses it? Again, by identifying the essence of architecture as something unperceived and imperceivable, and by abstracting away from all the things that catch the eye in the buildings that we encounter, the theory takes off into the void, discarding real architecture in favour of grandiose scientific conceptions that tell us nothing about the thing to which they are applied.

Writing about this steadily transformed my vision of philosophy. What is important about architecture, I realised, is the way it appears — not on this or that occasion to this or that person, but in general, as a publicly accessible object of attention. The theories offered by the modernists were ways of overriding the appearance in favour of some hidden essence, and so removing the thing itself from the picture. They were attempts at 'saving the essences', and failed precisely because they were dealing with a matter in which truth and appearance are one.

In scientific reasoning we construct theories to explain what we observe. We explore the physical world using concepts of natural kinds, which identify real essences and law–like connections. We are prepared for the reality to be quite other than the appearance, and accept that explaining things may undermine our naïve belief in them. And if you think that causal explanation is the primary, or

even the only, way of understanding things, you will acknowledge no role for philosophy other than as 'the handmaiden of the sciences', as Locke put it. The philosopher clears up conceptual confusions, shovels the garbage out of the way, lays bare the problem, so that science can get to work on it. Such is the kind of philosophy advocated by Patricia Churchland in her book *Neurophilosophy* and largely endorsed by my Oxford contemporaries — an exercise in conceptual hygiene which, by exposing 'folk psychology' as a rough attempt to explain things, condemns it to extinction with the advance of neuroscience.

However, things are not so simple. Causal explanation is not the only way of understanding things. And some appearances are not subjective and illusory, but part of the fabric of the world — the world *as it appears* to creatures like us. Many of the classifications that we use are not concepts of natural kinds, but classifications designed to capture the world as we perceive and act on it. We see objects in terms of their functions (as tables and chairs), in terms of their appearance (as bright or dull), in terms of their power over us (as frightening, chilling or enchanting). And these classifications, even if not rooted deeply in the physical reality, *are* rooted deeply in human life. They define what Husserl called the *Lebenswelt*: the world as it is revealed to us in our daily transactions. The *Lebenswelt* has an inter–subjective reality, and we must learn to respect this reality if we are to negotiate our place in it.

Here is a simple example from the world of architecture: the class of ornamental marbles, which includes marble, onyx and porphyry, the first a carbonate, an allotrope of limestone, the second an oxide, the third a silicate. This is not a possible category from the point of view of the science of stones. Nothing about the stones, not even their appearance, would be explained by classifying them together. But if our goal is to understand the stones in their use, their aesthetic nature and their role in the architectural experience, then the category is indispensable.

The categories through which we construct the *Lebenswelt* are not subjective, since they are rooted in permanent features of human nature, and in the structure of our self–conscious interaction with each other and with the things that we imbue with our freedom and power. The life–world is an inter–subjective reality, which is also an appearance. This the example shows, and it points towards another kind of philosophy than that of the handmaidens of science.

The crucial concept in this other kind of philosophy is that of intentionality, made central to philosophical reflection by Husserl. Husserl's phenomenology began from the recognition that the I knows itself as subject only because it targets something else — the object of attention: 'all consciousness is consciousness *of* something'. I cannot think without thinking of something; I cannot love or fear without loving or fearing something; I cannot see, hear or imagine without representing the world in thought. Our mental states have *aboutness*, presenting us with objects and colouring those objects according to the way they are given to consciousness. But the subject, the pure awareness that defines the horizon where I stand, can never be an object to itself: the subject flits from its own attention, to occupy always the position of the knower, and never of the thing that is known. At first, therefore, Husserl thought of philosophy as a study of the 'transcendental self', the observer on the edge of the world, who cannot be found within its boundaries. Only later did he come to see that the self is a social construct, dependent on the shared practices through which we organize the object of knowledge. The true topic of philosophical analysis in not the transcendental self but the immanent object, the inter–subjective *Lebenswelt* where self and other meet.

Our perceptions, thoughts, emotions and desires are all predicated on acts of conceptualisation, which are either pre–scientific or intimately tied to our nature as practical beings. These conceptualisations are systematic: they represent the world as a shared intentional realm, which we understand through making comparisons, giving reasons, and in general holding the world in the mirror of consciousness and seeing how it fits. Just as there is scientific understanding, which aims to explain the reality, so there is intentional understanding, which aims to describe the appearances, and in doing so to make them intelligible to us as objects of our joint awareness.

Much damage is done when we use the categories of science to tear the fabric of the intentional realm, to argue that objects are not *really* coloured, *really* ornamental, *really* harmonious, balanced and proportionate, since these categories have no place in science. It is precisely this, it seems to me, that was the great error of architectural modernism, namely to describe architecture in terms of scientific concepts that aim for the essence — the hidden reality behind the thing that interests us. Architecture is an art of appearances: its material is light and shade, the edges marked by mouldings, the

grammar of detail that makes proportion perceivable, and the handiwork that turns dead stone into living spirit. By dismissing such things as mere appearances we tear the *Lebenswelt* without revealing anything beneath it — for in the relevant sense there *is* nothing beneath it. It is a philosophical task to show this, and to recompose the appearances so that we can once again see what architecture really is, as a feature of the world in which we live.

I drew a lesson from the example, which is that my kind of philosophy is not the handmaiden of the sciences but rather the seamstress of the *Lebenswelt*. There is a therapy of which only the philosopher is really capable, which is to repair the concepts and activities that have helped us to make sense of things — architecture being one of them. From this I have derived two principles. The first is 'the priority of appearance', by which I mean that in making sense of the human world it is how things seem that is fundamental: our aims, values, ambitions and perceptions are rooted in what we encounter, when we approach the world from our shared point of view. Oscar Wilde put the point beautifully, when he remarked that 'it is only a very shallow person who does not judge by appearances.' In all kinds of ways, I came to believe, human beings have gone astray through abandoning this principle — and notably in the realm of politics, where false conceptions of the social essence (the Marxist 'class struggle', the Foucauldian 'domination', the free market dogmatism that sees the spectral *homo economicus* moving surreptitiously behind the veil of social life) have displaced the way things seem in favour of an illusion about the way they are. Much of my political philosophy has been an elaboration and application of this thought.

The second principle is that philosophy (my kind of philosophy at least) aims at intentional understanding. Philosophy is a critical examination of our states of mind. We classify the world in terms of non–natural kinds. We search for practical results and for accommodation with others. And because intentional understanding and scientific explanation have different and, to a measure conflicting, goals, the search for intentional understanding may often require us to stand opposed to scientific method.

One phenomenon that abundantly illustrates that second principle is sexual desire. How is the object of desire understood, and what do I want from him or her? This question, so rarely asked by philosophers, and almost never in the context of a full theory of the *Lebenswelt*, took me on a journey every bit as

important as the exploration of architecture. Looking back over the topic of sex as it has been subjected to the pseudo–science of Freudian psychology, to the trivialisation of the Kinsey reports, and to the disenchanting theories of evolutionary psychology, it seemed to me that the public culture has, in this matter, been betrayed by philosophy. The handmaidens of science have stood chuckling in the wings as the fabric is torn to pieces by the ghouls of pseudo–science. And the only seamstress who has appeared — Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* — has used the fabric to wipe himself. Maybe it is too late to stitch the *Lebenswelt* completely, but the worst of the tears ought surely to be pinned together, if only for decency's sake. So I thought, at least.

It is true that one analytical philosopher has courageously attempted to rescue sex from the culture of fun: Elizabeth Anscombe. But her arguments, based in the Catholic Magisterium, sound from another age. They do not touch on the issues that concerned me when I came to address the question of desire. In Princeton Anscombe has been influential, and the existence here of an Anscombe Society, devoted to upholding (among other things) the family–focused view of sex, is a remarkable testimony to the open–mindedness of this great university. Even in raising the question whether there might be a distinction, among consensual sexual acts, between the forbidden and the permitted, you are putting yourself outside respectable academic opinion. Yet here, in Princeton, it can still be done. Indeed, here I am, doing it.

The book on sexual desire was, for me, a great liberation. I had found a topic that enabled me to call on my knowledge of art and literature in laying bare the inter–subjective intentionality of an experience that has been manifestly misunderstood. I encountered the distinction between intentional and scientific understanding in its most vivid form, and saw that the impetuous invasion of the *Lebenswelt* by the science that purports to explain it had not merely misrepresented the phenomena but, to a great extent, made them imperceivable — imperceivable, that is, as *phenomena*. It was a heretical book, in that it defended (in a somewhat oblique way) monogamous marriage, and argued that homosexuality, while not a perversion, is *significantly* different from heterosexuality, in a way that partly explains, even if it does not justify, the traditional disapproval. I based this on a detailed account of the otherness of the other sex as displayed in the intentionality of arousal. I was sure that moderate feminists (those inspired by the Kantian theory of the person) would endorse my

argument, as would philosophically minded homosexuals. Alas, however, I had stumbled into a realm of radical censorship, and the book was effectively placed on the Index. I realised then that I should address my thoughts to the public culture, rather than to the academic glasshouse. In a later publication — 'Phryne's Symposium', contained in *Xanthippic Dialogues*, 1992 — I returned to the arguments of that book, however, and placed them in the mouths of some quite strong and challenging characters. The result is my only really successful attempt at comedy, apart from passages in the related study of wine, *I Drink Therefore I Am*, which I published much later, in 2009.

In *Sexual Desire* I argued that 'there is no need to look below the surface of human consciousness in order to understand sexual shame, sexual modesty, obscenity and jealousy, or to understand how sexual desire may issue in such peculiar projects as those of Don Juanism, Tristanism and sadomasochism. All this can be easily accounted for, in terms of the conscious structure of desire, as an interpersonal emotion.' The book was an account of interpersonal states of mind, seen from the standpoint of their intentionality. As I developed the argument I came to see that the two concepts of the person and the human being belong to two different registers. The concept: human being is that of a natural kind, whose essence is given by biological theories. The concept: person is a concept that has no part to play in the natural sciences, and would be eliminated from biology in something like the way the concept of colour is eliminated from physics.

Persons are nevertheless a real part of the *Lebenswelt*. They are the object and subject of personal relations. They are accountable to each other, identify themselves in the first person, and negotiate their place in the world in the special way characteristic of moral beings. Subsequently, strongly influenced by Steven Darwall's *The Second–Person Standpoint*, I turned attention from the inter–personal attitudes to the I–You dialogue that is the ultimate ground of accountability, and therefore of human freedom. I began to think that there cannot be a science of what we are. Of course, there is human biology, the theory of evolution, and all the other theories that take the human animal as their subject matter. But the thing that makes us what we are — namely our existence as persons — will not be mentioned in these sciences. The 'scientific image' will abolish the first–person perspective, and therefore the I–You relation that depends on it. It will be strictly useless as a guide to our being in the world, and

must be by–passed by all our day–to–day ways of knowing, meeting and responding to each other.

This suggestion looks more plausible in the context of the wider cognitive dualism that I have developed in recent writings. This too has its origins in thoughts about art, specifically about music. In *The Aesthetics of Music*, published in 1997, I distinguished sound from tone, and sequences of pitched sounds from the melodies and harmonies that we hear in them. I argued that the science of acoustics could tell us the whole truth about sounds and their causal relations, and could therefore give a complete account of everything that we hear when listening to a work of music. But it would say nothing about music. For music is what we hear *in* sounds, when we hear them as music.

To describe this experience we use metaphors that are foundational to the musical experience. When I hear a melody move upwards from C to G, gather momentum, rotate in a turn around A and then rush onwards to the C above I am clearly hearing something moving. Moreover it moves in a one–dimensional space in which there is momentum, force, gravitation and the rest. Yet there is nothing in the material world that corresponds to this movement or the space in which it occurs. In the material world there is only a sequence of sounds, one after the other. There is no up or down, and no re–identifiable particular that moves from one location to another. This case shows a kind of systematic 'metaphorisation' of a set of concepts — spatial and dynamic concepts — in order to create an intentional realm that is fully ordered, but without reference to the material objects upon which it ultimately depends. The intentional realm of music is systematic, shared and yet not reducible to anything that can be identified in the physical world. Music belongs to the *Lebenswelt*, but not to the physical world, the world as science describes it.

The metaphors here have a necessary character. You *have* to apply the concept of movement to what you hear if you are to hear music at all. This is not like the normal case of metaphor, in which surprise, originality, unusual insight are part of the point. Moreover, the metaphor is systematic. It is not that you sometimes hear movement; it is that you hear *constant* movement. This movement can be charted in a one–dimensional space (up and down), in which there are identifiable locations; it moves at varying speeds, and encounters both obstacles and fields of force. There is gravity in musical space; some music (the chamber music of Brahms, for example) moves with heavy ballast, while some

(the chamber music of Ravel, for example) barely touches the ground with its toes.

Interestingly, you don't hear movement in everyday life — not, at least, in the way you hear it in music. You hear things that move, and you can hear something moving in the room next door. But hearing movement in itself, without the thing that moves, is an experience that belongs to music alone. And this movement is situated in a space of its own, which has many features that are, as it were, borrowed from the physical space in which *we* move. Things rise and fall in musical space: they follow each other, mirror each other, imitate each other, clash with each other. There are opaque and transparent chords, heavy and light melodies, running, walking and plodding passages. Everything in music has direction, or if it does not — say because it is a scatter of unrelated sounds that do not reach for each other, lead into each other, carry energy to each other, as in some of the products of IRCAM (the Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique) — then we do not respond to it as music.

This raises an interesting question about essence: music is of course not a natural kind, so we can call acoustical games of the IRCAM kind music if we want; but there is still an important question, whether we do so because we find in them whatever it is that draws us in general to music. Once again we encounter the kind of false essentialism that was so influential in the thinking of the architectural modernists. The project of IRCAM flowed from the belief that music is essentially sound, and that therefore any organisation of sound is an act of musical creation. But music is no more essentially sound than architecture is essentially space. Through music we create a purely intentional realm — a realm inhabited, or perhaps we should say haunted, by purely intentional objects, objects with no material counterparts, which are nevertheless accessible to all musical people. The space in which these objects are arranged is one that we cannot enter, and yet one in which our own impulses and emotions seem to be driving forces.

To put it in another way: music presents subjective awareness in objective form. In responding to expressive music, we are acquiring a 'first–person' perspective on a state of mind that is not our own — indeed which exists unowned and objectified, in the imaginary realm of musical movement. That is the thesis that I set out to develop in *The Aesthetics of Music,* and which led me in time to the cognitive dualism that I have expounded in recent works. Music

forces us to acknowledge that the *Lebenswelt* and the physical world may be incommensurable, and that value, meaning and purpose might be contained in the *Lebenswelt*, even though science can never discover them.

Beginning from the example of music, therefore, I have argued that the distinctive features of the human world are to be understood independently of their scientific image, in terms of the awareness that lies at their heart. This awareness is predicated on the fact of first–person knowledge. I can relate to you as You only because you are I to yourself — that is, only because you can make declarations concerning your intentions, feelings and desires, laying direct claim to them as your own. It is only because of this that I am able to change your behaviour by argument, compel you to acknowledge my claims on you, extract from you promises and repentance. Connected with this aspect of the person are the phenomena of first–person privilege — the fact that we don't *find out* what our present mental states are, and that in general we do not stand to be corrected in the matter.

These features of first–person awareness are sometimes summarised (for example by Hegel and Schopenhauer) in the view that first–person awareness is *immediate*, which means one of two things — non–inferential, and non–conceptual — or maybe both those things. In holding you to account I am trying to connect with the subjective centre of your being: I am asking you to *show* your first–person perspective. I am aiming my states of mind at the very place from which you declare them, that horizon where you stand alone and which is forever inaccessible to me, since I cannot have the awareness that is granted there without being you, and which is in a sense inaccessible also to you, since your awareness of it is immediate, based on nothing, not a form of 'knowledge by description' at all. To say that my inter–personal responses are directed towards *you* is therefore problematic: what exactly *is* the you in question? If we mean the thing that knows itself in the first person and presents itself as I, then this is less an object than the horizon at which objects disappear, something that cannot be known by description and which has no place in the empirical world. Aiming at it is like lobbing a message over a wall that can never be climbed, and waiting for the response. This is what I call 'over–reaching intentionality', and which infects the whole range of our interpersonal responses.

That takes me back to my thoughts about desire. I can look at someone in the course of conversation, happily enjoying the reciprocity of eye contact, without

asking myself whether I am doing anything more than to look at her eye to eye. In the look of desire, however, I look into the other's eye, not as an optician might, to explore its nature as a physical object, but in another way entirely, as though to summon the other into her eye, so as to 'meet my gaze'. This looking into is also a looking *beyond* the bodily reality, though to nowhere in the physical world. I am attempting to meet the other I to I, as we might put it. The case of the caress is similar. In the caress of affection, which you might give to your child, your parent or your dog, there is an elementary form of body language that makes no special metaphysical claim. But the caress of desire is different, even if it looks exactly the same. Sartre writes of the desire to possess another in her freedom — the impossible desire to be the free possessor of this body, just as she is. In other words to pass through the caress to the horizon from which *she* observes it, there to replace *her* freedom with yours. (Of course these are metaphors: but the need for metaphor confirms the point, that we are aiming beyond the world that we can literally describe and know.)

Revisiting those arguments about desire led me towards *The Soul of the World,* in which I argue that there is a complete and integrated *Lebenswelt,* a shared framework, which is something like a background to our inter–personal experience, in the way the space of music is a background to our musical experience. We must take seriously, I suggest, the presence in the *Lebenswelt* of the many first–person points of view — the holes in the collective background through which the stars of subjectivity shine. We need a theory of 'over–reaching', of the way in which our states of mind target the indescribable horizon of the other, and it is my view that this theory will provide a clue both to the experience of the sacred and to aesthetic experience generally.

That theme, which brings me back to my starting point in the philosophy of art, has also played a major part in my creative writing, and it is fitting to say a little about that. The *Lebenswelt* is an inter–subjective reality; but its foundation lies in the way things seem. And the way things seem is the way they seem to us, self–conscious and accountable beings, as we weave the web of our inter–personal relations. That web can be distorted and manipulated; it can be torn apart to show the 'truth' of our condition, the reality behind the veil, the skull beneath the skin. And that is part of what happened in the 20th century, when love and family were debunked by the Freudians and freedom, property and law by the Marxists. Humanity was reconstructed as a purely material thing;

individual persons were subsumed by impersonal forces, and the *Lebenswelt* was deconstructed in the interests of power.

This became the theme of a school of philosophy that arose in Central Europe, partly in response to the post–war communist governments. Two philosophers in particular tried to take the measure of this new reality: Jan Patočka in Czechoslovakia, and Karól Wojtyła (JPII) in Poland. The official Marxist doctrine claimed that the scientific 'truth' had abolished bourgeois ideology. The 'freedom' offered by Western forms of government was merely another name for capitalist enslavement. The true citizen was not the one who accounted for himself to his neighbour, but the one who informed on his neighbour to the secret police. An all–pervasive and all–observing system of surveillance maintained the people in a state of mutual distrust, and human relations in every sphere were depersonalised, controlled by a vast and Kafakaesque machine, which also controlled the people who controlled it.

Heavily influenced by the phenomenology of Max Scheler Wojtyła described this impersonal power as embarked on a war against the person. This war, he believed, could never be successful, since personhood defines what we are — indeed, as he saw the matter, it is God–given, which is what is meant by the Biblical doctrine that we are made in God's image. Even if we must retreat into some private corner in order to protect our personhood, even if we withdraw to the utmost extent from the power that seeks to denature us, still what we are in ourselves remains, the essential core of responsible action in which love and duty grow. Patočka, more drastic by far, drew on the ideas of his teacher, Edmund Husserl, in describing the modern citizen, for whom politics is no longer the 'care of the soul' described by Plato, but who lives under an enforced system of lies. In the wars of the 20th century, and the totalitarian stasis that has resulted from them, people experience a tearing asunder of the *Lebenswelt*, to which there is no cogent response besides the 'solidarity of the shattered', as we huddle together in the darkness.

During visits to the communist world, I experienced something of what those two thinkers were trying to convey, and recognized the many truths that underlay their arguments. The ground of these arguments lay less in abstract argument, however, than in individual experience, when people are forced, as Havel put it, to 'live within the lie'. How are love, care, duty and desire experienced, in that world in which all such things can at any moment be exposed

to the all–seeing eye of officialdom, as the spotlight turns on them? To put this into words was, I felt, a task for literary art rather than philosophy, and this was the seed of my novel *Notes from Underground*, in which I attempted to capture the peculiar atmosphere of those 'beautiful, terrible times', when love and distrust were locked in combat, and also strangely feeding from each other.

It is hard to explain to young people today what it was like to visit Soviet–controlled Europe, as I first did, in the late seventies. At that time the bids for freedom — East Germany 1953, Hungary 1956, Czechoslovakia 1968 — all lay in the irrevocable past. The diligent work of the secret police had created a society so riven with suspicion and mutual betrayal that citizens could not combine against the ruling Party. Moreover the dissidents had been 'normalised'. They were no longer done to death in Uranium mines or concentration camps, but treated as normal criminals, hardly more wicked than rapists or murderers, entitled to visitors and food parcels during their times inside and kept under quiet surveillance during their holidays at home. A kind of graveyard stillness hung over the cities of central Europe, and only in Hungary were there loud conversations, dancing and laughter. Even there you had to watch your step, knowing that someone else was watching it too.

The thing that most vividly struck me about the people I got to know was that they were not part of the 'dissident' world. You had to graduate to the status of dissident, and that involved being taken up by the Western media, being jailed from time to time, having the kind of signature that would create a stir when it appeared on an incriminating document. Dissidence was a social status like any other, and even if the price was one that most people were not be prepared to pay, it brought order where there might have been chaos. Dissidence had a career structure, and your place in that structure gave meaning to your life and a reason for carrying on. It also brought fatigue and privations, and never has its atmosphere been so effectively caught as by Havel, in his play *Largo Desolato,* written in 1984, and first appearing in samizdat after my visits came to an end.

Those cloth–bound, type–written samizdat texts were precious to the people I knew. They were signs that thought cannot be stolen, and will always find the beautiful words that it needs, even if there is no 'socialist paper' on which to write them down. The Party can take everything else, but not this. I came to think that the young drop–outs I knew represented the *true* underground, the

archeological layer beneath the buried temples of the dissidents. Dig further into the crypts beneath those temples and you would find people who had nothing, and whose isolation from the world of action was only exacerbated by their isolation from each other. For love too, and this I often had occasion to observe, is impeded when each has nothing to offer save total powerlessness.

Long after the fall of the Berlin Wall I remained obsessed by what I had known in those times of sorrow and fear. After many attempts — because there was so much to say — I hit on a simple story–line, and the novel wrote itself. The characters are entirely imaginary, though one or two of them are based on people I knew. Certainly Betka, the heroine, if that is what she can be called, would be less interesting if she had not jumped into my imagination and dominated it for weeks as though on her own initiative. Much that she says and thinks was as though spoken into my head. In taking over Dostoevsky's title, I did my best to make my 'notes from underground' read like voices echoing in the catacombs, on the trompe–l'oeil doors of which she and her bewildered lover, Jan Reichl, were beating in vain.

The same attempt to give the inner dynamic of situations that must be understood from the inside if they are to be understood at all has animated many of my other fictions. One notable example is *The Disappeared,* 2015, an attempt to explore the 'clash of civilizations', as this has affected our Northern cities. The story is heavily influenced by the discussions of sexual shame and rape in my recent philosophical texts, notably in *The Face of God,* 2012. But it is also an exploration of another torn and trampled *Lebenswelt*, one torn not by totalitarian power or Marxist pseudo–science, but by the political correctness that forces even us, citizens of the free democracies, to 'live within the lie'.

And I suppose that it is in this area that my work as a philosopher has had the greatest interaction with the public culture. As is fairly well known, because I have not troubled to hide it, I am a conservative, and indeed see conservatism as already implied by the first of the two principles that have guided my work — that of 'the priority of appearance'. It is this that leads me to see the 'given way of life' as the true subject–matter of political adjustment. For conservatives all disputes over law, liberty and justice are addressed to a historic and existing community. The root of politics, they believe, is *settlement* — the motive in human beings that binds them to the place, the customs, the history and the people that are theirs. The language of politics is spoken in the first–person plural

and for conservatives the duty of the politician is to maintain that first–person plural in being. Without it law becomes an alien imposition, not *ours* but *theirs*, like the laws imposed by a conquering power, or those, as we have experienced in Britain, imposed by a treaty made years ago in a vanished situation by people long since dead. Conservatives are not reactionaries. As Burke said, ‘we must reform in order to conserve’, or, in more modern idiom: we must adapt. But we adapt to change in the name of continuity, in order to conserve what we are and what we have.

As I argue in *The West and the* Rest, 2002, those who dismiss conservatism in the name of the universal ideals of the Enlightenment have a tendency to forget that governments are elected by a specific people in a specific place, and must meet the people’s needs, including the most important of their needs, which is the need to trust their neighbours. That is why, in all the post–war political debates in Britain and America, conservatives have emphasized the defence of the homeland, the maintenance of national borders, and the unity and integrity of the nation. And this is also a point of tension in conservatism, since belief in a free economy and free trade inevitably clashes with local attachments and community protection. We are living now through the latest eruption of this tension.

It was in the name of their social and political inheritance that conservatives fixed their banner to the mast of freedom. What they meant was *this* kind of freedom, the freedom enshrined in our legal and political inheritance, and in the free associations through which our societies renew their legacy of trust. So understood freedom is the outcome of multiple agreements over time, under an over–arching rule of law. And the task of politics is to establish a ‘constitution of liberty’, as Hayek described it. Freedom is not a set of axioms but an evolving consensus. This consensus cannot be easily described. Sir Isaiah Berlin’s famous distinction between negative and positive liberty does not capture the crucial idea of a free *community*, in which constraints are real, socially engendered, but also tacitly accepted as a part of citizenship. Nor (*pace* the defenders of the ‘republican’ concept of freedom) is it the absence of domination that has been valued and assumed in Britain and America. What we in the anglosphere have valued and protected is the harmony between public customs and private choices. We have lived by a tacit agreement to abide by norms that constrain our

choices without coercing them. And we have agreed to this because for us freedom is a way of *belonging*.

In engaging in public debate over the conflicts and contests that animate the political realm, my intention has been to define and to defend this way of belonging. *England: an Elegy*, published in 2000, has a valedictory character; but I remain convinced that the core of our political inheritance, which is the common law and the culture of compromise that grows from it, retains its ancient sovereignty over both the government and the feelings of the English–speaking people, and in all my writings about matters of public concern I am consciously teasing out and clarifying the philosophical presuppositions of that great legacy of shared practical reasoning. Indeed, if you were to ask me what, in the *Lebenswelt* of the English–speaking people, is the most important feature, it is to the common law that I would direct you. For it has instilled ideas of fairness, compromise and responsibility into the heart of all our transactions, whether or not these are brought before a court of law, and whether or not they impinge on the world of politics. We live in a world marked by rights and duties as though by a grid, and each of us, negotiating a private corner for himself and his loved ones, acts to maintain the grid that orders the things that we share. This is what we mean, or ought to mean, by liberty. And it is inseparable from the institutions that I have devoted so much of my work to defending.

In all my recent work, literary and philosophical, three concepts have been central to both the imagery and the argument: the concepts of beauty, the sacred and home. These concepts contain a promise — as Stendhal put it, a promise of happiness. The path that they illuminate lies in the *Lebenswelt* itself. It leads away from the habit of calculation, through works of love and sacrifice, towards an experience of belonging, where past, present and future come together in a revelation that this place where I am is mine. That revelation is, in my view, fundamental to the experience of beauty, and also to the attitude that I call oikophilia, the love of home. In my book *Green Philosophy* (also *How to Think Seriously about the Planet*) I take the environmentalists to task, for their failure to recognize the importance of oikophilia, preferring to dictate to us from on high rather than to guide as along the path that is naturally ours. But it is not only in discussions of the environment that this motive enters our thinking: home is part of what we are, and the promise of it is contained in our most poignant emotions.

It is here that my thinking encounters the question posed by religion, and this is an appropriate note on which to end. We find consolation in beauty, in sacred moments, in home and the *Heimkehr* that takes us there. And all these we might imagine in the glance of love, as Jan Reichl imagines them in the eyes of Betka. But is he *only* imagining them? Is this simply an illusion — though one that she strives in the most cunning way to perpetuate? Religious people will say: yes, without the belief in a transcendent God these glimpses of homecoming are mirages in the desert, which offer hope without rescue. Betka strives to sustain a love that is free from the taint of calculation; but her doing so is a calculation. One day the illusion will vanish; and meanwhile there is only deception and doubt.

I am not so gloomy as that implies. It seems to me that, if we understand the life–world in its full inter–subjective reality, we will realize that there is a position between agnosticism and theism, in which we 'make room for God'. That is what my literary works are about, and if they have brought consolation to anyone, it is because they have cleaned and tidied the unusual antechamber to faith that I have discovered.

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