THE DIALECTICAL LINK BETWEEN POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY AND THE UNPOLITICAL
GUEST EDITORS’ PREFACE

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ABSTRACT
Between the 19th and the 20th century, German culture experienced a conflict between two apparently opposite tendencies. The first leads thinkers to detach themselves from the dominant ideology of the time; the second bears on the need to take a stand on the crisis of modern Western civilization. The category of the Unpolitical is meant to interpret the former. Yet, by this term, we do not necessarily mean an attitude aimed to abandon the activities characterizing the life in the community or to ignore the debate concerning political affairs. The adjective “unpolitical” has not to be automatically identified with “anti-political”. Rather, it designates a way to address political issues that characterize those who reject to live in the city without asking what their life consist of, what kind of behaviours and dispositions it requires, and what ends does it have. The essays collected in this monographic issue of Ethics & Politics investigate the relation between the city (understood as a model embracing both society and the modern State) and the thinker (construed in a very broad way, so as to include the philosopher, the artist, the historian, the writer, etc.). The main aim is to explore the various possible ways in which the life of an individual mind can interact with the life of the historical community.

KEYWORDS
Political philosophy; the unpolitical; civilization; crisis of modernity; phenomenology; apolitia.

The question concerning what role should a philosopher have in the city is as old as philosophy itself. As Plato taught us, when the philosopher moves her questioning gaze from the stars onto the cave of human affairs, she inevitably throws herself into a dangerous situation. Her aim is to dispute with her fellow citizens the laws of the city (the nomos), not necessarily to weaken them but, above all, to
understand what assumptions we make as a guide for our life and eventually consider the possibility that this horizon does not coincide with the whole.

By so doing, the philosopher’s attitude inevitably questions the behaviours of her fellow citizens, who, therefore, are not inclined to accept it as a possible way of living in the city. This explains why the philosophical way of life has often been seen as unpolitical. Yet, by this term, we do not necessarily mean an attitude aimed to abandon the activities characterizing the life in the community or to ignore the debate concerning political affairs. The adjective “unpolitical” has not to be automatically identified with “anti-political”. Rather, it designates a way to address political issues that characterize those who reject to live in the city without asking what their life consist of, what kind of behaviours and dispositions it requires, and what ends does it have. Such a consideration led Leo Strauss to identify this disposition to question life in the city with that branch of philosophy that we should more appropriately call “political”. In this way, the unpolitical encroaches the political.

As is to be expected, the scholars do not agree upon the way of describing the unpolitical nature of philosophy no less than they often contrast each other about the way of circumscribing the sphere of the political. This volume would like to give a contribution to this debate focusing on some exemplary cases where a dialectical link between the political and the unpolitical emerges with particular evidence.

The starting point of our issue is inevitably the thought of that intellectual who allowed the notion of the “unpolitical” to enter the cultural, philosophical and political debate of the last century: Thomas Mann.

In the first article of the volume, Elena Alessiato tries to demonstrate how, if examined in its complexity not excluding his implicit saying, Mann’s position could not be interpreted as merely anti-political. It is rather a perspective from which one can critically consider the transformation of the State in a mere mechanism affirming the democratic and egalitarian paradigm of Zivilisation. Mann contrasts this paradigm with that of the Kultur in which he sees how the values of German artistic and philosophical tradition are summarized. This does not simply entail a rejection of politics. As Alessiato explained, Mann substantially endorses Weber’s realism by identifying politics with the art of government and by acknowledging the necessity of the State to assure order in society.

This also leads Alessiato to compare Mann’s perspective with a book by Roberto Esposito, Categories of the Impolitical. Though Esposito explicitly takes a distance from Mann’s term “unpolitical”, Alessiato demonstrates that he shares with Mann two theoretical assumptions: first, the realistic tendency to locate the impolitical within the horizon of politics understood as a destiny; second, the will to identify the impolitical with the capacity to break with the politics from within, or, as

Esposito puts it: “The impolitical is not something other than the political, but only
the political itself as seen from a point of view that ‘measures’ it against something
that it neither is nor can ever be: the political’s impossibility. In this sense, there
is not a duality, but only difference. And this difference is a question of the perspective
of the gaze, not the object that is gazed upon—and even less its subject”.

Esposito’s conception of the impolitical is quite close to the one we are adopting
in this volume insofar as by this he offers a perspective that is not merely anti-politi-
cal but critically addresses the political issue from within, as the quotation above
clearly shows. The difference lies in the fact that Esposito considers the impolitical
“as a category internal to modernity”. On the contrary, one of the aims of the edi-
tors of this volume is to ask to what extent the category of the unpolitical is rooted
into the life of Socrates and into the way Plato’s art of dialogue depicts the relation-
ship between the philosopher and the city. Therefore, by insisting on the affinity
between Mann’s category of “Unpolitischt” and Esposito’s category of the impoliti-
cal, Alessiato allows us to think of a unique paradigm connecting all modern intel-
lectuals, either those who would like to take a distance from their present for keep-
ing the value of modern culture alive (as Thomas Mann), or those who highlight the
 crisis of modernity by returning to the ancients.

Following this direction, in the second article of the volume, Marco Menon leads
back to the origin of the opposition between the unpolitical and the anti-political by
focusing on the real meaning of Jacob Burckhardt’s notion of apolitia. Menon ex-
amines some of Burckhardt’s main interpretations (in particular, those of Cassirer,
Löwith, Salomon, and Croce) to demonstrate that Burckhardt’s detachment from
political affairs shares many affinities with the unpolitical attitude of ancient philos-
ophers. In Menon’s view, Burckhardt’s apolitia amounts to a critical movement
aimed at establishing a spiritual connection with the past. This allows the intellectual
to service a high ideal of humanity and to contrast barbarism through the develop-
ment of a deep sense of history.

In this context, Löwith’s interpretation of Burckhardt’s apolitia appears to be
particularly significant insofar as it suggests that apolitia coincides with the capacity
of taking a distance from the historical horizon in which we are immersed as citizens
in order to study the development of human culture over the centuries from a phil-
osophical perspective. Nonetheless, Leo Strauss thought that, by assuming Burck-
hardt as his model, Löwith still fit into the tradition of modern historicism without
leading back to the way of living of late antique philosophers, as he held.

2 Esposito, p. xii-xiii, eng trans, p. xxi-xxii. Notice that the English translator of Esposito’s book
avoids using the term “unpolitical”. He opts for “impolitical”, while, by following one of the English
translation of Mann’s Reflection, he adopts “non-political” instead of “unpolitical”, which would be a
calque from the German “Unpolitischt”. On one hand, this evidently helps differentiating the two
concepts but, on the other, hides their latent connection.

3 See ibid., p. ix, eng trans, p. xiv.
Focusing on this and the other contrasts emerging from the correspondence between the two thinkers, in the third article of the volume, Danilo Manca attempts to outline two different models for rethinking the way out of the crisis of modernity. On one hand, Leo Strauss revaluates Socrates’s political philosophy characterized by the act of questioning all things (in particular on the laws and the gods of the city) and remaining in the community. On the other hand, Löwith takes a distance from political affairs by radicalizing historical consciousness on behalf of the adoption of philosophical scepticism. Contrary to what we might believe, Löwith’s position cannot be reduced to an anti-political attitude in contrast to Strauss’s political one. Manca strives to demonstrate that there is a political motive in Löwith’s apolitia as well as there is an unpolitical motive in Strauss’s recovery of ancient political philosophy. Following Paul Valéry’s reflection on history, art and nature, at the end of his life Löwith depicts the return to the cosmos as a way of contrasting modern secularization, which brought to an overwhelming politicization of culture. On the contrary, Socrates’s questioning is rooted in the desire for wisdom that brings the philosopher out of the city’s cave in search of truth and virtue. Thus, for Löwith, the unpolitical consists in the refutation of history and the recovery of the biological nature, whereas for Strauss, the unpolitical is one with the trans-political attitude of the philosopher.

In his return to nature and to an ordinary way of living, Löwith is profoundly influenced by Nietzsche and Heidegger; Leo Strauss on the contrary, in his recovery of natural right against the historicist worldview, is inspired by Husserl’s call for a return to things themselves.

In the fourth article of the volume, Rodrigo Chacón delves deeper into Strauss’s paradoxical non-political political philosophy by considering to what extent this perspective is connected to Strauss’s re-elaboration of Husserl's critique of natural understanding and the naturalistic worldview of natural sciences. In this way, Chacón argues that the true sense of the unpolitical in Strauss must be sought in his embrace of Husserl’s idealistic quest for rigorous science. Since from this perspective nature remains an idea, the non-political foundation of the political can be only approximated asymptotically. This argument also allows Chacón to point out that Strauss’s conservatism, often identified with his classical preference for a closed society, is continuously challenged in his works by a particular form of utopia, which Chacón sees inhabited by people willing to live the conflict between competing horizons, i.e. Athens and Jerusalem, the ideal of nature and that of revelation.

Continuing to reflect on Strauss’s debt to Husserl’s phenomenology, in the fifth article of the volume, Pierpaolo Ciccarelli tries to demonstrate that Strauss offers a phenomenological reading of Schmitt’s *Der Begriff des Politischen* in his famous and widely debated review of this text. Seen from a phenomenological perspective, Schmitt appears to Strauss as an unpolitical thinker. Ciccarelli contrasts Schmitt’s affirmation of the political with the natural view epitomized by a passage from
Plutarch quoted by Strauss in the *Anmerkungen.* While this natural comprehension is characterized by simple realism, according to which the affirmation of the political would be an absurdity, Schmitt's attitude before the political betrays a sophistication that belongs, ultimately, to a philosophical perspective. Therefore, when Strauss refers to *das Moralische* as Schmitt's true motivation for his affirmation of the political, he is not pointing to a specific conception of virtue, but to the moral question of the philosopher, namely to the proper vocation of the philosophical life. In Ciccarelli's view, Strauss unmasks Schmitt's Socratic attitude, which however remains quite convoluted because it is unable to gain "integral knowledge", as Husserl conversely did.

In the sixth article of this volume, Ieva Motuzaite further compares Schmitt and Strauss, by pointing out an ambiguity concerning the meaning of the political. On the one hand, the political is understood as polemical; on the other, the political is understood as normative. According to Motuzaite in the *Anmerkungen zu Carl Schmitt, «Der Begriff des Politischen»* Strauss defends a normative conception of the political against the polemical one endorsed by Schmitt in his *Der Begriff der Politischen.* For the goals of this volume, it is particularly significant that, according to Motuzaite, the identification of the political with the polemical hinders the emergence of the unpolitical as the negation of the political. But at the same time, if we contrasted this polemical conception of the political with the perspective that identifies it with the normative, it is this last conception to appear as unpolitical.

In the seventh article of this volume, Antoine Pageau-St-Hilaire compares Strauss's understanding of philosophy as an unpolitical pursuit and Hans-Georg Gadamer's negation of the unpolitical as a feature of philosophy. In the first part of his article, Pageau-St-Hilaire argues that, in his interpretation of Greek political philosophy, Gadamer responded to Strauss's challenge, and tried to show the impossibility of an unpolitical way of life. In this context, the reading of Plato's *Republic* plays a crucial role. For Gadamer reads Plato's utopia not negatively, as Strauss would do, but dialectically. What *kallipolis* is meant to show is not the radical irreconcilability of philosophy and politics, as Strauss would argue, but the need for a middle way, namely, a philosophical education for citizens. In the rest of the article, Pageau-St-Hilaire focuses on how Gadamer attunes philosophy to human finitude when addressing the idea of the Good, he argues that a purely unpolitical way of life would be possible only to gods, not to human beings who, as such, are necessarily situated within the limits of their finitude.

In the eighth article of the volume, Nathan Pinkoski compares Hannah Arendt's and Leo Strauss's interpretations of Plato's allegory of the cave and his doctrine of the ideas. Pinkoski's main aim is to overcome the scholarship's tendency to regard Arendt and Strauss as radically opposed to one another, arguing that appreciating their common themes helps clarify the character of their projects. In the first part of his article, Pinkoski addresses the issue of Plato's esotericism, a theme
traditionally associated with Strauss, but from Arendt's point of view. Interpreting Plato esoterically, Arendt exposed the political motivations that underlie Plato's presentation of the allegory of the cave. These political motivations are the origin of the allegory of the cave's distortion of political phenomena. Instead of re-actualizing ancient political philosophy as Strauss sought, Arendt aimed at gaining a clear comprehension of political phenomena purified from Plato's unpolitical distortions. In the second part, Pinkoski attempts to demonstrate that Hannah Arendt would deserve more than Strauss the tag of a non-metaphysical thinker because she interpreted Plato's doctrine of the ideas primarily through Plato's political motivations for arranging them as he did. Strauss, by contrast, used the doctrine of the ideas to raise the question of what nature is, interpreting this doctrine in light of the authentically metaphysical issue of the nature of all things.

In the ninth and last article of the volume, Daniel Conway focuses on Arendt's *The Banality of Evil* intending to describe justice as the other of politics, namely as the positive content of the unpolitical. The article reconstructs the duality of political justice and jurisprudential justice. Arendt's problem was not so much Eichmann *per se*, but the new figure of a criminal with banal motivations that he embodied. Which canon of justice could be applied to a criminal without clear criminal intention? According to Conway, an answer to such a question can be found in the epilogue of her essay, whereby Arendt shows that at the origin of the justice done in Jerusalem there is the voice of politics. This entails a double outcome. On one hand, the deferral to politics reveals a deficit of justice in Jerusalem or the affirmation of an archaic and barbaric canon of justice. On the other, the entailment of politics produces the "tremor" of Justice, inviting future jurisprudence to create a new, improved modern canon of justice in the form of a robust network of institutions devoted to the administration of international law.

The articles of this volume outline an articulated but homogenous path showing that philosophy cannot avoid having to do with the city (in the different historical form, from Greek polis to modern historical society, culture and State) and, at the same time, that the political task of philosophy cannot be understood unless the philosopher keeps a distance from the city. The unpolitical designates nothing other than the philosopher's mode of living in the city, keeping the way out continuously alive. In this sense, the unpolitical coincides with the theoretical moment of the philosopher's attitude. More specifically, the unpolitical is the moment of philosophical inquiry concerning life in which the philosopher lays a foundation for her very own method of questioning the community, and her way of being part of that a community.