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KETTERING
REVIEW

Fall 2016

For more than three decades, this journal of democratic thought has been edited by Robert J. Kingston, a senior associate of the Kettering Foundation. Sadly, Bob passed away on August 20 of this year at the age of 87, leaving his wife, Carol Vollet Kingston, his children, colleagues, friends, and neighbors grieving his loss.

Bob left England for America in 1954 to teach Shakespeare; he stayed to work on democracy. He was an extraordinary person, raising the level of conversation wherever he went, curious about everything and everyone he met, and capable of discerning the course of democratic thought as it developed in a forum and in the country.

After teaching English literature at a number of colleges and universities in the United States, Bob joined the National Endowment for the Humanities as director of planning and analysis. He moved up to serve as deputy chairman and acting chairman during the administrations of former Presidents Nixon, Ford, and Carter. In the late 1970s, he left government service to become president of the College Board, then joined the Kettering Foundation's longtime research partner Public Agenda as executive director.

As a senior associate of the Kettering Foundation, in the 1980s Bob became the *Review's* editor and for many years, he also helped produce the tapes for A Public Voice, Kettering's annual meeting in Washington, DC.

In his tenure as editor of the *Kettering Review*, he explored some of the most important issues facing democracy of the past 30-some years. Our next issue of the *Review*, through essays and interviews, will follow and develop the arc of Bob's thought about democracy. With a heavy heart, this issue is dedicated to his memory.

In Memoriam
Robert J. Kingston
1929-2016

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On Civil Society

By Merab Mamardashvili

Civil society is not a collection of objects but rather a dynamic living field sustained by movement and made of symbols, that is, things of reason or consciousness with which to formulate social problems, which are made meaningful by history itself.

To create is to create the act of thought and not its content. The task of art, then, is to generate the act of thought, and not just any particular thought. The task for constructions of this sort is not to think but to allow to think. Such constructions operate in society in relation, for instance, to what we call human rights. The rights that came to be called natural are natural only in one sense: not that there are some inherent rights in nature; instead, the theory of natural right shifts naturalness to another domain, raises it to the second power; this is natural. Here in topology there is the action of those forces that cannot be constituted by human beings themselves (in that case they could have been constituted differently). Instead, these are the forces that surpass the human being, amplify her capabilities and allow her for the first time to know something through some form, but to know it in the sense of our postulates, which is different from knowing the meanings of language and the meanings in language. In this respect, sense and presence—or existence—of rights coincides with consciousness of rights in their creation, if by creation one understands creation of what is already present. In other words, rights presuppose maturity of consciousness. Here a tautology is possible: meaning and presence of rights is a condition of becoming conscious of them, it's a condition of consciousness. The consciousness of them is a way into these rights and into this existence of rights.

When it comes to civil society, we mean rights only as rights that can be actualized, executed, that possess the force for their own execution



as rights. I said [earlier] that knowledge is force. Knowledge is that which possesses the power to realize its potential capabilities. The same is true of rights. We always operate with words on two levels. We say the word *justice*: this is simultaneously the feeling of justice, which is certainly invariant in any society, however its scale of values, or differentiation between good and evil might vary. This feeling is invariant (in the sense in which it can be and is a product of a test of form) and dual: it is the referent of the meaning of the word *justice*, and an event of justice, i.e., justice sought by a subject who has the power to realize as a real state in the world the possibility of justice as a concept or a feeling.

All the states that we ordinarily designate as objects (for instance, the states that have to do with rights, and detailed structures in the form of institutions are [ordinarily considered to be] simply objects that naturally exist, even if we also have in mind a certain dynamic, such as their alteration in time, or their movement)—all such states are more complex things; civil society is a complex figure, circumscribed by a movement originating within itself. I established that events and objects exist in the world only to the extent that the human being makes a certain effort and to the extent that these objects and states

hold themselves at the crest of the wave of this human effort—the effort of recognizing oneself, the effort of self-mastery, the effort to liberate oneself, the effort to transform oneself, and the effort to rise above oneself.

Reason establishes, in the form of a plan, a society's aim to lift up the human being through society in a given program. How does this happen? Through a social connection or that which people could not do separately, and which augments the joining of their efforts. The primary social form, then, is something that happens in the world incrementally from the joining of efforts. It turns out, then (I am returning to civil society, as I already introduced the notion of effort),

Rights presuppose maturity of consciousness.

that civil society is not a collection of objects, but is instead the state that is a complex figure traced out by a movement. I will give a simple example. Take a chessboard. On it objects—chess figures—are assigned; certain qualities are ascribed to them. In the chess field, or on the chessboard, there is always a figure, there is a whirlwind, and the idea of a combination creates a configuration in which figures have a different meaning, or a meaning nonderivable from that of a pawn, or of a bishop. This is a dynamic living field sustained by movement; that is, by effort; and a figure traced out by movement and effort that is different from the one we



could get by adding the qualities of the bishop, pawn, queen, etc. Whatever is found in this state is civil society. It is not merely a society constituted from objects and phenomena. Here we are discussing (this is important for understanding the metaphysical or invisible side of constructive phenomena in society in general and in civil society in particular) the symbolic or semantic character of this reality: it is made of symbols, which are things of a special kind. Let's call them things of reason, or things of consciousness.

The social contract or the Greek *agora* is such a thing of consciousness or of reason, which has perfectly observable, or empirical, and in this sense material consequences. It is a thing; a symbolic thing; a symbol. A symbol itself is a thing. The social contract is something that has never existed, exists nowhere, and will never exist; one cannot even imagine it as accomplished by people. If we would want to derive the social contract empirically, we would be deriving it from human qualities, and so it could never be possible that people could reach an agreement. Concrete empirical people could never reach an agreement, i.e., this not only does not exist as an object, but it is even not representable as something empirically

possible for people (unrepresentable in the same way as an empirically possible selfless love). If we were to assume that this once existed, and if there were people who proceed from this ideal as from an example of something that once was, we would run up against fundamental impossibilities.

I discussed figures and forms. These would be impossible figures, impossible forms, such as in the drawings of Escher where there are figures that cannot be traced out by a single movement . . . in no dimension (that is, in three dimensions). Nevertheless, the social life of European society functions, organizes itself, and generates events because at any given moment people decide something regarding this social agreement, while keeping it in mind and thinking it. This agreement is named by a word that has as its referent an object and that has an empirical analogy in the possible empirical agreements between people, even though the symbol itself has a different, empirically unrealizable, meaning. Moreover, it is not necessary, as Kant put it, that it was at any point realized by predecessors and passed on as a covenant or testament. The agreement has some reality in our own reality but as though across it or in a different dimension.

These symbols or meanings, apart from providing one with the possibilities of experiences and recognitions (one experiences and recognizes something only through them; she recognizes in such a way that she can say the word *recognized*, or *experienced*), are also the reserve and the background from which one draws the terms with which to formulate social problems, i.e., the problems made meaningful

by history itself, by life itself, solvable social and historical problems. Therefore, some invisible reality (semantic and symbolic, and not literal and real, presentive) is the condition, the background, and the repository from which one draws, from which one forms meaningful terms to formulate social and historical tasks that neither resemble nor are that reality. They are in this reality, but their presence there in empirical form is conditional upon the symbolic reality I mentioned. And vice versa, when one observes these actions in the world—for instance, the act of the French Revolution—she must understand that they receive their symbolic meaning from this background reality. Consequently, one should not consider an empirical action to be an attempt to realize in reality, in objects, that symbolic reality which is simply the condition of the possible meaningful terms in which social and political tasks are formulated. In other words, civil society is civil to the extent it understands

Maxims that require publicity to be realized agree with politics.

or is conscious at the level of muscles and skills of subjects that make it up, that some phenomena and events are symbolic “givers” of meaning, not the models of the real organization of society and society’s objectives.

Aiming without a target [or purposiveness without a purpose]: this is very important. The citizen of a civil society keeps as a symbol something that prohibits its natural fulfillment, i.e.,



prohibits naturalizing absolute notions. All chiliastic or gnostic movements that have existed for a long time (all of them come along with Christianity) accompany a European civil society that crystallizes the Christianity of the Gospels in secularized social and civic institutions. These movements take the form of a naturalistic heresy and—how should I put it?—an abyss of solemn nonbeing. It is as though the being of forms is always accompanied by the abyss of nonbeing, on the edge of which one constantly experiences temptation. One can fall into this abyss, drawn by the temptation of imparting a natural meaning to absolute, symbolic notions, if insufficiently civically educated, i.e., disciplined, or forged.

Everything that the human being is must be represented in society in structural form through this symbolic reality. These are, of course, motile representations because one cannot represent to oneself in advance that something somewhere at some point is accomplished immediately. They are fluid in the sense that this representability can be obtained only historically. History is, in fact, an attempt to represent all that is in the

human being outside of her: any of her impulses, potentialities, capabilities—those thinkable now and those yet unthinkable. The distinctive feature of civil society is that if there is something in the human being in which she feels fulfilled, fully present and alive, and this something is sensual, then sensuality must exist in the public space as an institution. Somebody has to make sensual movies, somebody has to write sensual novels, etc.

Kant said that *maxims* (one could substitute maxims with *ideals* or *moral and reflective intentions*) that require publicity for their realization accord with politics, i.e., are consistent with right [*Recht*] and ethics. I repeat: maxims that require publicity to be realized agree with politics. This is terribly interesting.

We know that experiencing some live feeling, such as love or awareness, requires public exposure for its realization.

Something is realized and fulfilled only through constructions (including a sensual construction, and in this case by such a construction one simply understands sensual feature films, sensual books, etc.). If a phenomenon can allow itself publicity and also realizes itself through it, then it is consistent with right [*Recht*] and ethics. And vice versa: in civil society everything that is consistent with right and ethics must be public, since the meaning of all this, its content and essence, is its realization

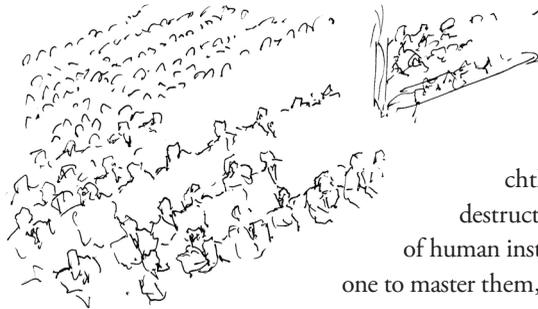
through publicity. Otherwise, it is nonexistence, shadows, a realm of shadows.

The other side of this (the verbal material of this other side already flashed by in the form of the words *shadows* and *nonexistence*) is that in the space of objectification a gap is being filled—the gap between intention of thought and thought, between the impulse to right [*Recht*] and right as a state of the human being. This space of objectification is the space of the objectifications that allow one to be born or to be fully born; to become entirely fulfilled. Such fulfillment doesn't leave behind the archaic, doesn't leave our human feeling—the human in the human—in the womb or in the limbo of an archaic chthonic mass, shot through with

the ligaments of myth, the archetypes of the unconscious, etc.

These objectifications never leave us face-to-face with the chthonic abyss that breathes destruction, including the abyss of human instincts, but always allows one to master them, having transferred them onto a screen.

Thinking consciousness is simultaneously a screening that allows the human being not to find herself face-to-face with that which she cannot master in principle, and cannot in principle understand; that which is in principle incommensurable with her, and with which she can be only overwhelmed, in the same way as a living being—which has a living consciousness—is overwhelmed by the Saint Vitus dance. You are inside a gnashing machine of entirely mechanical and relentless sequences of gestures



and bodily positions (like a human being jumping in a monkey skin). And these are not at all your intentions. You can only observe, helpless to intervene, the developing action, yet it is your own body that is acting: your own hands, and nose, etc. This image is very clear if you ever observed a human being suffering from Saint Vitus dance. We now understand the principle

In a republic, all are citizens to the extent to which they can represent themselves publicly.

of objectification, and through it we understand the meaning and content that the institutional organization of society, the so-called democratic organization, possesses. The public space is constituted from the instruments by means of which one is fulfilled, and publicity is the condition of my recognizing what I think, what I want, of my recognizing my right, not in the sense of right's meaning, but of its power, which is simultaneously the power of realizing myself as a state of being, the state of right. If there are such tools by means of which we are fulfilled, then these are civic things in the strict sense.

First, I assumed that there are things of consciousness in a symbolic reality that casts semantic light on all that we can do in this reality, and I said that the things of consciousness, the things of reason, are in that same sense social things. Let's say a social contract is a social thing; let's call this differently: connection. I discussed constructive connection. (Social ligaments . . .

religio. The primary connection.) It—for I ascribed to it a symbolic character—is the connecting representation of an infinite manifold, i.e., the representation connects this infinite manifold, representing it locally. The infinite variety is infinite, and this is its representation: not in itself, but its connecting representation here and now, a *representative* not in the sense of a mental representation, but in the sense of representing.

If we are talking about such things, then we are dealing with what the Greeks invented and the Romans concerned themselves, and for which the Romans found a word, because they in general found all the words for the state of right (we did not get far from Roman right [*npavol/Recht/ius*], and, I hope, will never get far from it, but, to the contrary, will return to it). This is *res publica*, i.e., a public thing that belongs to all in the sense that all are citizens to the extent to which they can represent themselves publicly and then, by the light reflected from public deliberation, articulate in themselves their own wishes, aspirations, states and thoughts; inform themselves, recognize, and teach themselves. Before what? Before acting, as it turns



out. For then the plan of reason is read there. In other words, if I inform myself, then also on the second and third steps I can preserve the imprint of freedom in my actions, I can be free again, and also retain my freedom. There are constructions for reviving feelings. I work in them, in their terms, and then tomorrow and the day after there is an articulation of my feelings, it preserves the possibility of iteration, i.e., realization in potential infinity. Recall that infinity is built into these formations and differentiates them from a machine. Tomorrow, then, I will not simply react to something mechanically, but will be able to think again (in the sense of the definition I gave at the beginning); that is, think freely what is and cannot be otherwise, i.e., see reality. My feeling of reality is eternally new. To the extent it is new I will never be a captive of irreality, that is, in this context the novelty will always be a mark of reality.

Returning to the republic . . . it is the primary reality and the primary basis of all democratic transformations, of all democratic societies. It is higher, broader, and more primary than democracy. In what sense? Republic means the independence of *res publica*, i.e., a public thing, both from the minority and any mercenary advantage in general, and from the majority. The collection of rights that exist and make up the life of a republic emerge from the force for right [*Recht*], i.e., the power to actualize in the form of a real state in the world one's capability and impulse to right.

I need to remind you of the plan of reason. The plan of reason is like a sign of freedom on the next step or after several steps, a guarantee

that there I will turn out once again capable and free. This plan ascribes to a society the goal to raise the human being, i.e., of civilization as the human ability to rise above herself,

The republic is the primary reality and the primary basis of all democratic transformations.

above her natural or animal nature. The possibility of this elevation is measured from the next step, if it is at the next step. Let's put it this way (as I already once defined consciousness): consciousness is the possibility of greater consciousness, and, in fact, from the greater we can measure to the lesser, i.e., to consciousness, to the possibility of greater consciousness. And thought is thought when it is the possibility of greater thought.

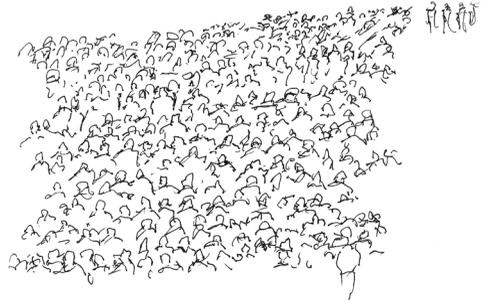
The space of objectification (if there is such a space) in which civil society is situated, i.e., transparently represented on the agora, where



citizenship is not a right, but a duty to participate in civic affairs, for only such participation crystalizes in you civic states, and for the first time you recognize what is it that you are pondering, wishing, thinking, etc.—to this space of objectification one can apply a notion of density. This is a spatio-temporal density: the density of history, i.e., how many, how many more or fewer nodes and points, in which the human being can rise above herself through connecting representations of the infinite manifold. If these are constructions in the symbolic sense of this word, i.e., in the sense of historic points, interlinkages of simply historical motives, human motives, actions, etc., then their condensation (in which there is an impulse to a still greater or further elevation) is the intensive or dense space. In other words, there are many such points, and their multiplicity makes the space

Russia's space is almost empty. European space is very dense, in the sense that one always finds oneself at the point at which there is a stimulus to rise above oneself.

dense. Say, Russia's space is empty; almost empty. European space is very dense, in the sense that one always finds oneself at the point (there are tons of these points) at which there is a motive, a stimulus to rise above oneself. Otherwise it is impossible for me to be, I cannot not rise above



myself. There is always an active impulse to elevation. An *historial* so to speak, to realize the design of history, which is for the human being to fulfill herself, to become.

When it comes to humankind, the interval of this becoming is the entire history, the end of which is merely symbolic. It cannot be a point or a part of history. The immobile social connections, the connecting representations, trace out a very complicated curve of historical events, the curve of civil society itself, civil being itself, civil life, and civil history. These immobile connections are as though a motor and a motive of a still greater elevation of the human being (and not simply above animal life or above some squabble) also because they demand to be continuously “bound.” A human being binds [and sets] history through these historical acts. History doesn't flow of itself. In order to flow it is continuously connected by human activity. We then observe this flow, but in reality history does not flow of itself, but is connected once again.

Different special entities or institutions can exist to summon the human being for a new connecting of history, which accomplishes two objectives. I mentioned that outside there must be everything that is inside. Here history is

fulfilled, knit together as externally flowing objective history. So too on the side of the human being, inside her, are deposited certain abilities, including rights that passed the crucible of the binding anew of history. In this case they are *natural rights*, i.e., not the rights distributed by the state, but natural rights, the collection of which is the foundation of civil society or the civil society itself. There are special mechanisms for this: certain democratic institutions are mechanisms that both incite and provide defense and resources for these new connections. The rite of initiation could have been such a mechanism in antiquity.

I repeat, *religio* is the primary bond. It is simultaneously religion and *religio* as connection. A simple mechanical or natural collection or communal life of people turns into society only through connection of this kind. Civil society is, of course, not society in general, and not a society separate from other societies, but a certain quality of society. Society of high quality is civil society. It is not the entire society, but society brought to a certain state—the state of the figure that exists while the movement that traces it out exists, the movement with human effort, or with the effort of many individuals who are in a certain state of this effort. Remove the effort and civil society

will disappear. Take the Greeks: the effort disappeared and Greek society disappeared even before it was crushed by the barbarians. Therefore, if there is civil society, then it has the actions or democratic institutions in which the human being matures, through which she masters herself; she is able to master herself because there are always external equivalents for all her possible states. Say there is aggression in her. Here we go: there is something in which the only possible humanly acceptable meaning of this aggression can be explicated and realized and thereby this natural passion can be resolved, dissolved—but under the condition that the figures or the forms that are in this social field, in this social realm, are not themselves resolved or dispersed.

One of the most important Eastern European philosophers of the 20th century, Merab Mamardashvili (1930-1990) addressed some of the most urgent problems of our time: the meaning of democracy and civil society, European or Western responsibility, nationalism, and the problem of immigration. This lecture was given circa 1989, just before the collapse of the Soviet Union. It is one of the first lectures to be published in English, thanks to the ongoing translation work of the philosopher Julia Sushytska and creative writing professor Alisa Slaughter.

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