

## *Preface: Equality—Political, Not Metaphysical*

These metaphysic rights entering into common life, like rays of light which pierce into dense medium, are by the laws of nature refracted from their straight line. Indeed, in the gross and complicated mass of human passions and concerns the primitive rights of men undergo such a variety of *refractions and reflections* that it becomes absurd to talk of them as if they continued in the simplicity of their original direction.<sup>1</sup>

The “metaphysic rights” which Burke speaks about here are the rights of equality which the French Revolution had set up, with the declaration of human rights, as the basis of the new political order. Burke calls the equality established by the revolution, equality before the law and in legislation, a “metaphysical” idea. The antithesis of “metaphysical,” for Burke, is “political.” In the revolutionary constitution that spells out the idea of equality there is, according to Burke, “much, but bad, metaphysics; much, but bad, geometry; much, but false, proportionate arithmetic.”<sup>2</sup> The problem is not, however, that the metaphysics, geometry, and arithmetic of equality is bad or wrong: “but if it were all as exact as metaphysics, geometry and arithmetic ought to be, and if their schemes were perfectly consistent in all their parts, it would make only a more fair and sightly vision.”<sup>3</sup> The problem with the revolutionary establishment of equality is that “not one reference whatsoever is to be found [in it] to anything moral or anything politic, nothing that relates to the concerns, the actions, the passions, the interests of men. *Hominem non sapiunt.*”<sup>4</sup> What is metaphysical is the conception of equality that is given expression in the revolutionary act and its philosophical articulations: a conception that only considers its own validity and does not relate to the concerns, actions, passions, and interests of human beings. This relation takes place, however, in a *political* consideration of equality. The political reflection of equality that Burke undertakes

in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* is one of the “variety of refractions and reflections” of and upon what human beings are and want.

In the title of a famous essay, John Rawls has again taken up Burke’s programmatic formula for a political replacement of the metaphysical consideration of equality; Rawls too wants to treat justice “politically and not metaphysically.”<sup>5</sup> In this respect, Rawls calls an understanding of justice (as fairness or equality) “political” when it presupposes “no particular metaphysical doctrine about the nature of persons.”<sup>6</sup> That is, when it relies upon an understanding of equality which does not depend, in its grounding, upon any assumptions concerning the “essence” of human beings. In the liberal state, such assumptions have to be “avoided” because of their contentiousness. With this concept of a “political liberalism,” Rawls has put his finger on a process of the self-reflection of liberal societies which has been practically effective—especially since the 1960s. His aim is to free the basic liberal principles from the rationalistic, bourgeois, chauvinistic, and racist convictions with which their implementation and maintenance have been historically bound up. Rawls’s political liberalism is clearly opposed, in this aim, to the political reflection of equality carried out by Burke. For Burke was concerned to show how liberal equality is opposed to the concerns, actions, passions, and interests of human beings. Rawls, by contrast, is concerned with a new understanding of liberal equality—one that no longer makes any “metaphysical” assumptions about the true concerns, actions, passions, and interests of human beings.

This is, however, only one side. The other side is constituted by the fact that political liberalism presupposes and, what is more, remains at the mercy of the political reflection of equality proposed by Burke. From Burke’s critique of the traditional, that is, “metaphysical,” understanding of liberal equality, it follows that political liberalism has to be preceded by a reflection of equality similar to the political consideration practiced by him. For the traditional understanding of liberal equality is certainly not wrong *because* it makes metaphysical presuppositions. (And the metaphysical is certainly not wrong only because it is metaphysical.) We recognize and criticize these presuppositions as metaphysical, rather, because, in a political consideration, we realize that liberal equality in its traditional understanding has repressive consequences for the concerns, actions, passions, and interests of some human beings. At the origin of the political understanding of liberal equality in Rawls’s sense—as an understanding

which is no longer metaphysical—there lies a political consideration of liberal equality in Burke's sense: a particular understanding of liberal equality in its refractions and reflections, in its consequences and meanings for the concerns, actions, passions, and interests of human beings.

A great number of poststructuralist, communitarian, and feminist arguments in the philosophical debates of the last few decades can be understood as wanting to bring to consciousness this political reflection of equality in political liberalism—a reflection which is presupposed just as much as it is concealed. It is to these arguments that I refer here while trying, partly in direct confrontation with them, to more precisely grasp the concept of a reflection of equality. Over and above this, I want to draw attention to a critical distinction in these arguments and conceptions. The political reflection of equality is frequently understood as the criticism of an existing, exclusive, and oppressive understanding of liberal equality from the perspective of an anticipated, extended, and power-free understanding. This is, however, a misinterpretation. The reflection of equality that Burke calls “political” is a consideration of equality from outside: a consideration from the point of view of the concerns, actions, passions, and interests of *individual* human beings. The reflection of equality allows this consideration to reflect and refract the fundamentally nonequal, which can be called the individual. The reflection of liberal equality does not only serve to improve equality; it also puts it in question by pointing to its irrevocable limits with regard to the individual. This is the element of truth in Burke's *critique* of equality, something that has been seen not only by Nietzsche and Schmitt but also, with entirely different political consequences, by Adorno and Derrida.

The program that the essays in this volume carry out can thus be described as an attempt to reformulate, with respect to the present form of liberalism, the political reflection of equality drawn up by Burke (and others). At the same time, it is a further attempt to find an adequate articulation for this program. In a first approach, I have undertaken this program by means of a reading of Hegel's interpretation of modernity as a “tragedy in ethical life.”<sup>7</sup> In the essays collected in this volume, this program will be further worked out by means of a confrontation with contemporary, or more recent, conceptions that are important to it, including those of Nietzsche, Schmitt, Adorno, Luhmann, Taylor, Rawls, and Derrida. The two essays in the second part are thus intended to clarify the op-

position to individuality which the reflection of equality leads to. The two essays in the third part consider two forms of the “sovereign” treatment of this opposition: revolution and mercy. The texts of these two parts stand in a close argumentative interrelation, even if they were conceived and worked out for different occasions. They are preceded by a first part which presents, in an interrelated form, some central structural determinations of the undertaking of a “questioning of equality” (Chapter 1), and which offers a comparative profile of three varieties of this questioning (Chapter 2). This first part was written later as a programmatic introduction to the following chapters. It brings into a general schema that which is later considered in its details and consequences.