3.2

A Vocal Ontology of Uniqueness

> Since sound indicates an activity that takes place "here and in this moment," speech as sound establishes a personal presence "here and in this moment."
> —Walter Ong, *The Presence of the Word*

In the uniqueness that makes itself heard as voice, there is an embodied existent, or rather, a "being-there" [*esserci*] in its radical finitude, here and now. The sphere of the vocal implies the ontological plane and anchors it to the existence of singular beings who invoke one another contextually. From the maternal scene onward, the voice manifests the *unique being* of each human being, and his or her spontaneous self-communication according to the rhythms of a sonorous relation. In this sense, the ontological horizon that is disclosed by the voice—or what we want to call a *vocal ontology of uniqueness*—stands in contrast to the various ontologies of fictitious entities that the philosophical tradition, over the course of its historical development, designates with names like "man," "subject," "individual." For what these universal categories share is the neglect of the "uniqueness" of those human beings (or, to use the metaphysical lexicon, their "particularity" and their "finitude"). It is therefore not surprising that the "subject," in its classic Cartesian clothes, has no voice and speaks only to itself through the mute voice of consciousness. This metaphorical voice of the soul or consciousness, so dear to philosophy, is a crucial rhetorical figure through which the voice—through its identification with the silent work of thought—gets transformed into a negation of the voice. Thought has no voice; it neither invokes nor speaks—it cogitates [*cogita*]. Thinking is structurally immune to the musical and relational interference of the

acoustic sphere of speech. A vocal ontology of uniqueness must therefore first overturn the old metaphysical strategy that subordinates speech to thought. The first step toward freeing the voice from *nous*, the first gesture against the devocalizing canons of philosophy, also passes through a privileged thematizing of speaking. At least potentially, Levinas' *le Dire* could be of interest in this regard. But it is another Jewish philosopher of the early twentieth century who comprehends the heart of the question: Franz Rosenzweig.

Rosenzweig is aware of the novelty of his perspective, and calls it—with a rather infelicitous expression—"new thought." Also defined as "experient philosophy," this "new thought" tries to distinguish itself from "old" thought, or from the Greek philosophical tradition. More than a "new" thought, in any event, at stake is a horizon whose novelty consists in opposing the centrality of *speaking* to a philosophical tradition that instead has focused on *thinking*. "In the place of the method of thinking, as it has been constituted by all preceding philosophies, there comes the method of speaking."[1] Thinking and speaking are rather different activities. Thinking wants to be timeless; it poses a thousand different connections in a single stroke and assembles its objects in an eternal present. Furthermore, it is always solitary, even when it takes place between several people "who are philosophizing in common, even then the other only poses an objection that I would have been able to pose all alone."[2] According to Rosenzweig, this accounts for the artificial effect of Plato's dialogues. As Maria Zambrano notes, too, "*logos* proceeds without any other opposition than what it, in order to better show itself, poses to itself."[3] The thinker, including the platonic Socrates, knows his own thoughts beforehand. The time required for the questioning and answering thus ends up being an obstacle or a delay with respect to the speed of thought. Speaking, on the contrary, is always bound to time. It does not know in advance where it is going, and it entrusts itself to the unpredictable nature of what the interlocutors say. In short, thought is as solitary as speech is relational. Speaking "lives above all through the lives of others, whether they are the listener of a narration, the interlocutor of a dialogue or the member of a chorus."[4] There is a dependence on others that passes through a plural connection of mouths and ears. Unlike what Plato believes—when he inaugurates the metaphorical voice of the soul—speaking is not at all a thinking that expresses itself out loud, nor is it merely vocalized thought, nor is it an acoustic substitute for thinking. The phenomenology of speaking possesses an autonomous status in which the relationality of mouths and ears comes to the fore.

Speaking in fact means to speak to someone, "and this someone is always quite precise, and not only has ears, like the collectivity, but has a mouth as well."[5] In other words, speaking is an interlocution with others and requires a reciprocity of speech and listening. Unlike thinking, speaking does not allow its protagonist to be an abstract subject; instead, it implies that the speakers are human beings in flesh and bone, with mouths and ears. Rosenzweig effectively defines each one of these speakers as "very common individual, dust and ashes." In other words, this is an existent in flesh and bone, unique and unrepeatable, which philosophy declares unreal because he or she does not belong among the universal and atemporal objects of thought that, alone, are true and real. It is thus hardly surprising that the "I name and surname" ends up being unsayable (or, as Arendt would say, "superfluous") within the canon of philosophy. But this is not the only consequence. Rosenzweig in fact notes that "philosophy has declared that I, name and surname, must remain silent." Thus, not only does philosophy claim the epistemological ineffability of the single, particular human being, but it also orders human beings not to make their voices heard. The famous *individuum ineffabile* is, in the end, a unique being whose voice was taken away.

Indeed, this voice was taken away even more than Rosenzweig imagines. Although insisting on the physicality of mouths and ears, he in fact stops at the phenomenology of "speaking." Although he is open to a relational and antimetaphysical ontology, he does not root this ontology in the voice. As a result, rather than being denied, the uniqueness of the voice remains, in his texts, an implicit given that merely confirms the embodied singularity of the "I name and surname." One of the consequences of this is that Rosenzweig thus overlooks the possibility of emphasizing the vocal uniqueness of that *I* that philosophy, along with modern linguistics, ends up negating. For both linguistics and philosophy, the "I" functions as an empty, mobile indicator. Because everyone says "I," this "I" would stand for everyone and no one; or, better, for the speaker who appropriates the pronoun in the act of designating himself as "I." Even paying the slightest attention to the voice of this speaker is, however, enough to complicate this linguistic analysis and to push it in another direction. Consider the rather banal, everyday occurrence of the telephone or intercom, where one asks me "who is it?"—and I respond without hesitation "it's me," or "it is 'I.'" The depersonalized function of the pronouns "I" or "me"—highlighted here by the fact that the speaker does not show her face—gets immediately annulled by the unmistakable uniqueness of the voice. The sound con-

quers the generality of the pronoun. This everyday scene, a kind of banalization of the story of Isaac and Jacob, shows that every human being has, in the uniqueness of his or her voice, a sonorous self-revelation that overcomes the linguistic register of signification.

As a fact of everyday experience, the voice appears as the elementary principle of an ontology of uniqueness that radically contests the metaphysical tradition that silences the "I" in flesh and bone. Not that my face, as Levinas would say, does not appear as unique to the one who is next to me, looking at me. Yet this looking runs the risk of continuing to pay homage to the philosophical centrality of *theoria*. This ontology entrusted to the eye has been the lifeblood of western metaphysics since Plato. Narcissus is only its tragic and suggestive variant.

Unlike the detached, objective gaze that characterizes platonic metaphysics, Narcissus in fact represents the gaze of the subject on himself, the autocircuit of the eye. The act of looking at himself forces the reciprocity of the gaze and produces a sort of autistic face to face of the self with the self. Narcissus' narcissism, in addition to the many ways in which narcissism has been considered by psychoanalysis and contemporary thought, also has the following basic function.[6] It opens the sphere of the eye to a horizon of reciprocity, ignored by metaphysical *theoria*, and at the same time closes this very same horizon on a self-reflection of the self. It alludes to the possibility of "looking at one another" and then nullifies this possibility by looking at itself. In this sense, Narcissus announces the narcissistic self-referentiality of the modern subject—or, better, the modern figure of self-consciousness—but he also supports the general philosophical tendency born in Greece to ignore the reciprocity of looking and (therefore) the uniqueness of the other's face.

Metaphysics not only constructs itself on the primacy of sight, but also decides to ignore the reciprocity that is inscribed, as a decisive relational factor, in the economy of the gaze. The metaphysical eye, starting with Plato, fixes as its model a gaze that allows for the isolation, distance, and noninvolvement of the observer. This in turn legitimates the reduction of whatever is seen to an object. Thus, Levinas is not wrong when he proposes the face to face of the reciprocal gaze as a fundamental alternative to the objectifying effect of metaphysical *theoria*. Symptomatically, this alternative allows him to understand differently the category of *presence*. Rather than functioning as an eternalizing quality of *being*, the presence of those

who look at one another face to face is guaranteed by the empirical contingency of the context. In the reciprocal gaze, the presence of the other is always the presence of an other who is *here*, who looks at me *now*, in the unrepeatable time of a present that is inscribed in the actuality of the context. It thus cannot be transformed into a hypostasis of a determinate duration. Rather than the atemporal dimension of a lasting permanence, the face to face evokes a discontinuous becoming, characterized by the ever-new "present" of the "nows" in which the gazes intersect. This is, moreover, why the Levinasian ontology of the face to face has an immediate ethical tonality. The face of the other is presented, *in the moment*, as a demand of responsibility that cannot be deferred. The ones who look at each other are not called on to respond—in general—for "man" or other fictitious entities. Rather, they are called on to respond, now, for the uniqueness of the other. The face, which is always the unrepeatable face of someone, punctually represents every time the same demand. It is enough to look at one another, to expose oneself reciprocally to the gaze. To make the eye a medium of communication. To distract it from the usual metaphysical (or scientific) orientation toward the object.

This work of distraction is, symptomatically, a quite natural effect of the voice. The voice never comes from an object, nor is it addressed to an object. Rather, the voice—as in Aesop's fable—subjectivizes the one who emits it, even when it is an animal. The voice belongs to the living; it communicates the presence of an existent in flesh and bone; it signals a throat, a particular body. For this reason, there is a certain wisdom in those modern languages that—breaking with ancient Greek, for example—distinguish "voice" and "sound" with two different words. Every human voice is obviously a sound, an acoustic vibration among others, which is measurable like all other sounds; but it is only as human that the voice comes to be perceived as unique. This means that uniqueness resounds in the human voice; or, in the human voice, uniqueness makes itself sound. The ear, its natural destination, perceives this unique sound without any effort, no matter what words are spoken. No matter what you say, I know that the voice is yours. Jacob's voice is not only different from Esau's, but it is different from every other voice. The voice is always unique, and the ear recognizes it as such. Indeed, the ear perceives the voice's uniqueness even when, never having heard it before, it cannot "recognize" this voice.

Unlike the gaze, the voice is always, irremediably relational. It does not allow a detached focus on the object because, properly speaking, it has

no object. The voice vibrates in the air, striking the ear of the other, even when it does not mean to do so. Listening, as Koestenbaum puts it, is a reciprocal exercise, "grateful for what the ear receives, the truth responds by opening."[7] The elementary phenomenology of the acoustic sphere always implies a relation between mouth and ear. Because it belongs to the world of humans, the voice is *for* the ear. The thesis that the ear is there—as Derrida puts it—to "hear oneself speak" is curiously narcissistic (and metaphysically suspect). The emitted voice always comes out into the world, and every ear within earshot—with or without intention—is struck by it. The ear is an open canal; it can be surprised from anywhere at any moment. It is always cocked to a sonorous universe that it does not control. It can try to decipher the sounds, as Calvino's king tried to do, but it cannot decide on, or control, their emission. The ear receives without being able to select beforehand. The ear distinguishes the sound of the voice and knows it to be human not only because it vibrates in the specifically human element of speech, but also because the ear perceives its uniqueness. And this happens, obviously, even to the ears of philosophers. This is why they must mute their soul with the silent vision of *theoria*: in order not to run the risk of hearing the uniqueness of the voice that sounds in every spoken word.

After all, the strange poverty of the Greek philosophical language—which indicates both "sound" and "voice" with the single term *phone*—is due precisely to this muting effect of *theoria*. For the hearing of the metaphysicians—and for the linguists who inherit their acoustic pathology—the human voice is simply a sound among other sounds. The mouth, the living body are aligned with other sources of sonorous emission. It is true that Plato and Aristotle are interested in the phonic organs as instruments that articulate the vocal flux in discrete sounds, but this interest is already oriented toward the centrality of a speech that is characterized by the urgency to signify. The uniqueness of the voice as voice, as a sort of superfluous given, does not get thematized. Founded in the visual realm of the signified, speech blinds the natural sensibility of the ear. The most important consequence of this, from the perspective of the history of metaphysics, is a devocalization of logos that sweeps the voice from the realm of truth and allows philosophy to construct a system that neglects uniqueness and relationality.

An antimetaphysical strategy, like mine, aiming to valorize an ontology of uniqueness finds in the voice a decisive—indeed, obligatory—resource. The point is not simply to revocalize logos. Rather, the aim is to

free logos from its visual substance, and to finally mean it as sonorous speech—in order to listen, in speech itself, for the plurality of singular voices that convoke one other in a relation that is not simply sound, but above all resonance. The fact that this resonance leads back to the scene of infancy does not mean that the sense of the vocalic exhausts itself in this dynamic of regression. In fact, the problem does not consist in recuperating a voice that is still pure voice because it precedes the advent of speech, but in recuperating the voice in the realm of speech toward which the voice is itself essentially destined. On the scene of infancy, it is precisely the mother who links the sphere of the voice to that of speech. She does not just respond to the infant's invocation by singing a duet; rather, as the source of language and the storyteller for the infant, she musically gives the register of speech to the child. However, the insistence on the mother as the source of this vocalic pleasure—no matter how good or theoretically grounded the intention may be—does not therefore justify her stereotypical opposition to a father who would be instead the one from whom speech ultimately comes. This opposition in fact goes on corroborating the old metaphysical dichotomy between "pure" phonic and "pure" semantic, which identifies the semantic itself with thinking rather than with speaking. In other words, the Law of the Father—if we want to call it that—concerns the semantic, universal, disciplining, rational side of language, not the communicative and relational side of speech. The Law of the Father deals with the Said, not with Saying. *Saying* [*le Dire*] pertains philogenetically to the figure of the mother—who in fact takes care that speech begins by singing, and who nourishes the infantile ear with the sweetness of music rather than the rigor of concepts.

It is often emphasized that "mother and baby are united by an umbilical cord of sounds."[8] Already in utero, an internal musicality wraps the unborn in the rhythms of the maternal body; it envelops the baby in its sonorous texture. In this sense, the vocalizations between mother and baby, modulated on the play of echo and resonance, would be nothing but a continuation of the intrauterine sonority. Precisely because the mother gives language to the infant, there is no rupture between this music and speech. The lullaby, or the song of words that rocks the baby to sleep with rhythmical movements, is perhaps the clearest example of the absence of such a rupture. In his book *The Songlines*, Bruce Chatwin notes how Aborigine women walk with their children, giving names to things while combining these names into the rhythm of a song that follows the pattern of

their footsteps.[9] In this case, therefore, the singing voice, the heartbeat, the footstep, and nomination are all one. As Maria Zambrano puts it, "the footsteps of man on the earth seem to be the imprint of the sound of his heart, which orders him to walk."[10] An analogous phenomenon can be found in the Muslim and Jewish practice of reading the sacred text aloud while undulating the body back and forth—as if, to paraphrase Carmelo Bene, the movement of the reading restored the original rhythm of the "writing in Voice; Voice as the reanimation of the oral dead [*rigor mortis*] which is writing."[11] Speech, in its acoustic essence, has at its heart a rhythmic soul. This means that there is an intrinsic and substantial link between voice and speech, between the rhythmic embodiment of the voice and the expressivity of saying. The maternal figure is precisely the conduit that, in all of our lives, embodies this link—to which, as it were, metaphysics reacts in the name of the father. She is voice *and* speech; or, better, she is the originary sense of the voice insofar as the voice is destined to give speech its essential sense.

Instead of transmitting speech to the infant as something that can be taught and learned—a system, a language—the maternal voice transmits to speech the primary sense of the vocalic, the sonorous self-expression of uniqueness and relation, the self-invocation of embodied singularities through a spontaneous resonance. This resonance, begun by the duet between mother and infant, is not simply music—it is *the* music of speech, the specific mode for which speech sings musically. It is, in other words, the musical way in which the speaker cannot help but communicate him- or herself by invoking and convoking the other. The fact that there does not exist a language without music, without accents or rhythms, depends on this law of resonance that lies at the origin of all communication. Speaking does not have in the voice a mere instrument; rather, it has in the voice the *sense* that was maternally destined to it. Rather than being the irresistible pole of a regression, the scene of infancy is therefore instead the site of an imaginary that gives us an opportunity to rethink the maternal link between speech and voice. The point is not to separate the "pure" voice from speech, but rather to reorient speech toward its vocalic nucleus, stripping away at the same time the armor of the semantic that metaphysics put on it. In the end, it is a question of the imaginary that Echo leaves us—namely, a speech that is stripped of the semantic, a speech that represents itself as a pure voice, and that alludes to the resonance of an infantile voice that is not yet speech, but whose meaning is already destined to resound in the musical sense of saying.

Unlike Echo, however, speakers do not return to the experience of infantile vocalizations that are not intentioned toward speech. What is usually said about language goes for speakers as well: the time of the *origin* is already lost and unrecoverable. In the case of the speaker, this origin is, however, not a muteness or a silence that precedes speech. It is voice, cry, invocation that calls for the duet, a rhythm of reciprocity. It is communication that not only exceeds the register of verbal signifieds, but that is also not reducible to the general system of signs. Neither semantic nor semiotic (in the Aristotelian sense of these terms), vocal communication consists entirely in the uniqueness that is communicated. Paraphrasing Hannah Arendt, we could say that before communicating "merely something—thirst or hunger, affection or hostility or fear," the human voice communicates itself, its uniqueness.[12] Without this communication, the scene of infancy and the relation of the infant with the mother is reduced to a mere semiosis of needs.

As vital as it is for the survival of the infant, communicating something is only a secondary function of a gamut of the communicable that is engendered by this primary self-communication to the other. Symptomatically, this goes for those pragmatic forms of communication in which gesture supplants and accompanies speech, but it goes for verbal communication in the strict sense as well.[13] The relationality of saying, in the proximity of mouths and ears, is a necessary prerequisite for the communication of the Said. As Levinas emphasizes, only platonic metaphysics can postulate as self-sufficient and originary the reality of a Said that does not depend on any act of Saying. However, this Saying, precisely because it is a *saying*—in spite of what Levinas himself claims—implies the voice rather than the gaze. On the plane of speech, the communication of oneself—although not excluding the face to face—is necessarily vocalic. In speech, even in that speech that Aristotle calls logos and defines as *phone semantike*, it is the *phone* that is in play. Logocentrism and the ontology of fictitious entities find in the voice a theme that was always, inevitably destined to confront it.

There are many reasons for rooting an ontology of uniqueness in the phenomenology of the voice, rather than in that of the gaze. It is worth repeating that the main reason is the necessity of adopting a perspective that challenges, in a direct fashion, the logocentric tradition. In other words, what makes the voice a necessary point of intervention now is the strategy of devocalization that accompanies the history of logos from the very be-

ginning. This logos strives to prevent the voice from entering the realm of meaning. In the economy of logos, vocality belong to the horizon of nonsense. Given that the semantic claims to cover the entire territory of meaning, a *phone* that evades its *semantic* function becomes meaningless, irrational—indeed, when reduced to its semiotic function, at best it becomes animal. From the perspective of logos, the vocal ends up being funneled into a nostalgic regression toward nonsense, where the infant and the animal coincide. According to metaphysics, once the voice is taken away from language as a system of signification, it becomes meaningless. This view is obviously a certain interpretation of "signification" that demands, in the name of logos, the entire sphere of meaning. "Signification" implies here the work of a code and the structure of the sign. By the same token, the voice gets trapped in the realm of the semantic or the semiotic as the sonorous articulation of the signified or as a symptom of affection. The result is a voice that remains unthought because it lies outside of the logocentric domain of meaning.

Instead, in my view, the voice pertains to the very generation of meaning—the very meaning that renders logos itself as a system of signification possible. Beyond the visionary dreams of metaphysics, the "linking" [*legare*] in *legein* is at the same time a "speaking," which announces the relation between mouths and ears that logos carries inside of itself from the beginning. By misunderstanding this, the metaphysical tradition has instead focused on a relation among the various elements of a logos that is, above all, a system or a structure. It has focused on a relationality that, in platonic terms, consists in a connection modeled on the order of ideas, a "right joning." However, what is really at issue in speech, in my view, is a vocalic relation that convokes mouths and ears, making the uniqueness of the voices vibrate in their resonance. This resonance, the first matrix of every poetic song, does not exhaust its meaning only in determining the musicality of language. Rather, the meaning of the resonance lies first of all in the vocal relation to which the singular voices are called. In other words, the resonance is musicality in relation; it is the uniqueness of the voice that gives itself in the acoustic link between one voice and another. It is a vocal exchange where the repetition of sound, and all its tonal rhythmic variants, expose uniqueness as an understanding [*un'intesa*] and a reciprocal dependence.

3.3

Logos and Politics

> This concept of speaking, which also lies at the base of the discovery of the autonomous force of logos by Greek philosophy, becomes secondary already in the experience of the *polis*, and then totally disappears from the tradition of political thought.
> —Hannah Arendt, *Was ist Politik?*

Logos is *phone semantike*, says Aristotle who, unlike Plato, insists on understanding logos above all as speech. The definition, which compares the human voice with the animal voice, is in the *Poetics*, but it is implicitly recalled—together with the ever-present comparison with the animal—in a crucial page of the *Politics*,[1] namely, the passage where having logos—nature's gift given only to humans—confirms the final design of nature herself in making man a *zoon politikon*. That is, rather than a "political animal" (the usual translation), man is an "animal of the *polis*," just as the bee is an animal of the apiary. The initial pages of the *Politics* are dedicated to illustrating how the *polis* is a kind of community [*koinonia*] that is proper to man. By adopting a method that parses the *koinonia politike*—here assumed to be the final synthesis of the various elements that constitute the community's own articulation—Aristotle begins by analyzing the genesis of the *polis*. Within this genetic analysis, logos does not yet play a crucial role.

According to the Aristotelian doctrine, the *koinonia politike* is the result and at the same time the final goal of a natural process of association. Man, by nature, "cannot be without others."[2] What makes man a political animal depends first of all on this ontologically rooted aggregating drive. Unlike the modern individual, Aristotle's man is neither self-sufficient nor autonomous. The ontology that concerns him is instead rooted in a state

of dependence. This dependence places man in the first natural form of the *koinonia*—namely, the union of man and woman that forms the family as a locus of generation. Likewise, the community in the larger sense is just as natural as the family, and this community in fact foresees the union of more families in the village. Only the union of more villages into the *polis*, however, constitutes the perfect, self-sufficient *koinonia*—which the whole aggregating process foresees from the start. Man is a *zoon politikon*, Aristotle concludes, because the being-with-others of an animal "that cannot be without others" has its best, most complete form in the *koinonia politike*. This *koinonia politike* does not summarize the individuals one by one, nor does it simply keep them together in some ordered way; rather, it brings the aggregating nature of man as species to full realization and thus allows man to live a happy life. As the organic synthesis of the subordinate forms of unions that constitute it, the *polis* is the final community of natural bonds. The *zoon politikon*, at this point in Aristotle's analysis, is such, even without taking the capacity for speech into consideration.

However, at this point, logos is called on to resolve an embarrassing question. There are certain animals, like bees, whose aggregating drive carries with it organized and complex forms of living together. From a methodological point of view, the problem lies, so to speak, in distinguishing the apiary from the *koinonia politike*. It is here that the human specificity of logos comes into play, as a sort of supplement to the argument that had been conducted up until this point. Animals perceive pleasure and pain and, through the voice, indicate this to one another. "Nature does nothing without a purpose," says Aristotle, and nature has given man speech so that he can express the useful and the harmful, the just and the unjust, the good and the evil.[3] In other words, man can express things that relate directly to the sphere of the *koinonia politike*. And his capacity to signify these things depends in turn on the fact that he has a perception [*aisthesis echein*] of them.[4] Man, therefore, does not make these things common because he communicates them by signifying them. Rather, these things appertain objectively to the community. The just, for example, as Aristotle makes clear, depends on justice as the intrinsic order of the political community.[5] The just belongs to the political community; it is part of its genesis and makes up its natural organization. Man, as a political animal, perceives the just and, through logos, signifies it. But this signifying does not regard things "that are always the same way," as happens with the theoretical sciences that take incontrovertible truth as their object. Rather,

this signifying regards things that "are mostly the same way." Politics, like ethics, is a practical science—that is, a science linked to the contingent sphere of action. Acting in the right way implies a knowledge of the just that has a nonnecessary character—a character that is instead probable or opinible. When many people are called on to deliberate on what is just for the *polis*, a space of confrontation and discussion is opened for speech.

Symptomatically, however, in the passage that links the *zoon politikon* and the *zoon logon echon*, the accent does not fall on the communicative function of speech as a privileged medium of public discussion, or an element that is characteristic of democracy. First, according to Aristotle, man is not political because he speaks and thus mobilizes the intrinsic communicativity of language. Rather, man is political because he perceives and speaks of things that belong, per se, to the political community. Generated by a natural process of aggregation, this political community can take many forms—among them democracy. Indeed, through discussion and deliberation, the citizen of the democratic *polis* shows himself to be a *zoon logon echon*—one who knows full well the political role of speech. However, speech is inscribed in the natural state of the *zoon politikon* whether or not it takes place in a democracy.

From the perspective of modern democracies, Aristotle's position appears interesting for many reasons. The most notable of these is the contrast between the communitary substance of the Aristotelian man who, by nature, "cannot be without others" and the absence of natural bonds that characterizes the modern individual as self-sufficient, and thus free or autonomous. The political anthropology of the ancients and the moderns describes, as is well known, two very different theoretical frameworks. The *polis* and the state imply radically different types of ontology. This is demonstrated by the artificial genesis of the state, illustrated by the modern doctrine of natural law—namely, the social contract through which atomized individuals are linked together—which produces at the same time the juridical and procedural form of their union. This union—of which the individualistic ontology is both the presupposition and the result—can only be called *community* if the term is understood in a strictly non-Aristotelian sense. As Roberto Esposito notes, the state manifests the effect of immunity that the *communitas*—as *immunitas*—assumes as its intrinsic possibility. The "immunization project" of modern politics basically consists in thinking individuals as free and autonomous in order to save them

from the "contagion of relation."[6] In contrast to what happens in the Aristotelian *koinonia*, modernity erases the natural bond and thinks of individuals as autonomous, isolated, and competitive. No one means anything to anyone else; each is already complete in the self-sufficiency that encloses them in themselves, like a world apart. And thus they are prevented from "recognizing" the other because what is lacking here is precisely the context of community in which each can exist and be recognized.[7] Because they replicate the same, each one is worth *one*. And the community that keeps them together—namely, the state—therefore cannot have its generating principle in the formal and quantitative mechanism of the majority. Modern democracy, as a procedural form that organizes the representative body, is founded on this very principle—that is, a principle totally in keeping with liberal individualism, according to which "the State was supposed to rule over mere individuals, over an atomized society whose very atomization it was called upon to protect."[8] The so-called pathologies of democracy that were the object of much debate in twentieth-century political thought depend on this very logic, which is called on to construct the political bond on the constitutive unbinding that guarantees the autonomy of the individual.

This explains why Aristotle is invoked by those who want—like the "communitarians,"[9] or all the champions of a "communitary ethics, hierarchically modeled on the priority of the collective over and against that of individual rights"[10]—to contest the logic that postulates the originary absence of any bond. And this also explains why a certain Aristotelian influence, amended by Kantian parameters, is also at work in those thinkers who, like Habermas, do not give up on the universality that is inscribed in the modern notion of the individual, but by considering that this individual is suited for the social bond, nevertheless persist in focusing on the political role of speech.

Actually, however, Aristotle's work does not really lend itself well to such an appropriation precisely because it is extraneous to the individualistic ontology that characterizes modernity. Aristotle's work authorizes the recuperation of the community neither through the rubric of identity nor through a linguistic or discursive rubric. And anyway, what is interesting here is not the philological plausibility of a modern use of Aristotle. What matters instead is the relationship—which is already remarkable, but which is symptomatically not really essential—between logos and politics that Aristotle proposes in his work.

According to Aristotle himself, politics as *koinonia politike*—the final and self-sufficient union in which the subaltern unions that compose it are articulated—consists in the full realization of a community bond that is natural. But logos is not what binds them. Logos as speech instead has the function of expressing signifieds that are inherent to the order of this community bond—a bond that is constructed in another way, through the natural process of association. In the exercise of this expression, the communicative dimension of speech is as obvious as it is inessential to the genesis and structure, or the constitution, of the community. In other words, when Aristotle reflects on the general (and generating) principles of politics, although he appreciates the deliberative scene of democracy, he does not think of the community of speakers, nor does he ground politics in the relationality of speaking. Rather, according to Aristotle, political community and speech are in a relation that is guaranteed by the teleological order of nature. Nature, "which does nothing without a purpose," assures the correspondence between the register of logos as the sphere of verbal signification and the register of the aggregating drives that make man a *zoon politikon*. Having been given a signifying voice, man signifies the things that are proper to the political community for which nature destines him. In Aristotle's view, the political nature of logos is thinkable only as an attribute of an animal that is by nature communal. Logos is common, but it does not make the political community. Logos signifies the political community, and is therefore functional to it.

Such signification—while it has specific objects within the sphere of politics, like the just and unjust, good and bad—belongs to language as a general system of signification. According to Aristotle, having logos makes man first of all an animal that signifies everything of which he has perception. And when this perception regards the things of the political community, then logos is revealed to be a fundamental gift of the *zoon politikon*. A certain portion of the semantic, a series of signifieds that concern the community, thus confers to logos a political valence. This obviously does not exclude—on the contrary, it implies—that logos mobilizes its persuasive, argumentative, and communicative power in the political sphere. And yet it does not show that it is precisely this power that renders the *zoon logon echon* an animal that is, as such, political. Unlike the moderns, Aristotle does not have to insist on the coincidence between politics and the communicativity of language—because the community has other foundations. For him, language constitutes a rational sphere wherein men come to un-

derstand one another, by perhaps discussing or arguing their opinions; but the political community is not generated by this understanding. The *zoon politikon* rather understands through words because nature assures the objective correspondence between the order of the community and the order of language that expresses its signifieds.

Symptomatically, the logos that reaffirms the communal essence of the political animal in fact subordinates the exercise of Saying to the order of the Said. Men are not political because they speak to one another but rather because they speak of political things. The relationality of speaking becomes a function—expected, but secondary—of signifying. What is important for the *phone semantike* is, precisely, the semantic, or the register of verbal signification as a rationally organized structure. Logos, as Aristotle points out in his "logical" works, is characterized by an objective rationality, by procedures and rules—among which the principle of noncontradiction stands out because it assures the validity of the signifying process. And this goes for both the objects of theoretical knowledge and the objects of practical knowledge, over and beyond the speakers themselves. For Aristotle, as for Plato, the question of the bond between the speakers depends most of all on the firm belief that language binds the speakers to its rules. And it is precisely this feature of Aristotle's thought that turns out to be crucial for the democratic rehabilitation of logos on the part of some modern authors. Even if it does not found the political community on the binding power of these rules, Aristotle's work in fact ends up providing modernity with a linguistic figure of the bond that functions as a remedy for the immunizing pathologies of individualism. The free and equal individuals, who have nothing in common with one another, finally find their community in the communicative rationality of a language that binds them because it binds them to its procedural norms. Language becomes the bond of the unbound. It becomes a universal bond that makes the linguistic community the most suited for constituting a democracy of individuals.

"Wherever the relevance of speech is at stake," writes Arendt, "matters become political by definition, for speech is what makes man a political being."[11] This sentence appears in the introduction to *The Human Condition*—a work that, according to Jürgen Habermas, not only reveals Arendt's sympathy for Aristotle but moreover supports Habermas himself in the notion that democracy finds its most genuine principle in language as an intersubjective medium of communication, an act that regulates pub-

lic discussion and produces understanding.[12] Insofar as language is characterized by a rationality that is normative (or universal) for all those who are bound to it, language constitutes the bond between individuals as members of the "ideal linguistic community."[13] However, if one reads Arendt's text, one discovers that it develops a line of thinking that is quite far from the Aristotelian conception of the *zoon logon echon*, as well as from the Habermasian notion of communicative rationality. For Arendt, what makes speech political is not signification, expression, or the communication of something, even if that "something" is the just, the useful, the good, or the bad. Rather, the political essence of speech consists in revealing to others the uniqueness of each speaker. It should be pointed out that this is not a vocalic uniqueness—not because the voice does not reveal uniqueness in Arendt's view, but because it is, according to her, speech that qualifies this self-revelation as political. What Arendt calls "political" is in fact a space that is materially shared, whereupon those present show to one another, in words and deeds, their uniqueness and their capacity to begin new things. Although it already appears "in the unique shape of the body and sound of the voice," uniqueness assumes a political status only through the words and deeds of those who, in this way, actively show their uniqueness to one another.[14] The political sphere is generated precisely by this sharing of words and deeds that Arendt puts under the name of action.

This sharing is the political form of a bond that is inscribed in the ontological condition that makes human beings a "paradoxical plurality of unique beings."[15] The essential difference between men and animals—about which Aristotle cared so much—for Arendt, before having to do with language, has to do with this plural, and therefore relational, ontology of uniqueness. Every human being is unique, different, distinct from every other: "But only man can express this distinction and distinguish himself, and only he can communicate himself and not merely something—thirst or hunger, affection or hostility or fear."[16] Political action essentially coincides with this expression and communication of oneself, through words and deeds, which allow each one, already physically distinct, to distinguish him- or herself actively, and therefore politically, from every other. By founding politics on the ontology of plurality, Arendt understands politics as "the practice through which each human being gives meaning to his or her existence, and redeems the naturalness of human-kind by affirming his or her singularity."[17] With respect to Aristotle, therefore, the conceptual framework changes radically. The celebrated confrontation in Aristotle be-

tween the animal voice, which is a sign of an affective state, and the human voice, which instead expresses a mental signified, is not at all determinant of the political sphere for Arendt. According to her, speech—even when it is understood as *phone semantike*—does not become political by way of the things of the community that speech is able to designate. Rather, speech becomes political on account of the self-revelation of speakers who express and communicate their uniqueness through speaking—no matter the specific content of what is said. The political valence of signifying is thus shifted from speech—and from language as a system of signification—to the speaker. The speakers are not political because of what they say, but because they say it to others who share an interactive space of reciprocal exposure. To speak to one another is to communicate to one another the unrepeatable uniqueness of each speaker.

According to Arendt, speech falls under the political name of action. It is an act. As with Levinas, Arendt is interested in Saying and not the Said—and in a Saying that is a "speaking to someone," whose sense lies in communicating the speakers to one another.[18] What is at stake, therefore, is that Saying of everyone and no one that we call language. Put differently, Arendt is interested in the relationality of the act of speaking, not in speech as a system of signification characterized by objective rules that bring the speakers to an understanding. As Ireneo Funes understood, this system functions because of its generalizing power, which captures the contingency of the particular in the universal web of the semantic. Under the regime of the name as a universalistic system of the Said, the plurality of unique human beings becomes "man." But as Arendt notes with wise ingenuity, on this earth and in the world live men, not man.[19] "Man"—a name in language—is an abstraction that creates a disembodied and fictitious entity; it makes of plurality a faceless one, without biography. And this, obviously, does not change—indeed, it gets worse—when in modernity the term *man* gets replaced by the name "individual" or "subject."

As a fictitious entity of the ancient philosophical vocabulary, man inaugurates a tradition in which the plurality of unique beings appears from the beginning as an insignificant and superfluous given. This is even true for Aristotle's "man," "who cannot be without others." For at stake is "man" as a species, a universal substance modeled on the paradigm of the free, male adult—whose community is generated, tellingly, by a union between man and woman that gets configured as a hierarchy. In the first phase of the associative process—that is, in the family—the others, without whom

the Aristotelian man "cannot be," are "by nature" subordinated to him. The *zoon politikon*, as Arendt would say, is founded on a clamorous falsification of the plural and antihierarchical matrix of politics. In *Was ist Politik?*—an incomplete text that testifies to her complex relation to Aristotle—Arendt in fact emphasizes that "Man is apolitical. Politics is born *among* men, and is therefore decidedly *outside* Man."[20] Because "Man" assumes and neutralizes the plurality of all men (and, what's more, excludes and subordinates women), it cannot be political because, in this horizon, there is no plurality and thus no relation. In the economy of the One—mirror image of the economy of the Same—there is no *in between*, no common space to share.[21] What the western tradition calls politics is in truth a model of depoliticization that, starting with Aristotle, excludes the plural and relational foundation of politics. According to Arendt, even the modern form of democracy falls under the rubric of this depoliticization, for this continues within the economy of the One, through a notion of the "individual" that is "more or less equivalent to the Same."[22] The basic lexicon of equality, while allowing for a pluralism of opinions and political parties that represent them, denies plurality—and therefore politics.

The Arendtian horizon of plurality, in fact, should not be confused with the pluralism invoked by contemporary thinkers who defend freedom of expression, or with respect for difference in multicultural and multiethnic societies. The recognition of the pluralistic instance—through which the abstract universality of democracy is opened to the concrete reality of differences—does not get rid of the ontology of the individual. Rather, it tries to reconcile the individual with the various group identities or affiliations into which the individual finds itself historically dropped. The Habermasian notion of logos as communicative rationality—characterized by objective and universally valid norms that assure understanding among the individuals of a pluralistic society—is part of this same logic. This logic is, in short, completely extraneous to the Arendtian notion of plurality. For Arendt, plurality has nothing to do with the theme of pluralism, which arises from the question of communitarian identities. Arendt's plurality is, first of all, a character of the human condition, the incontrovertible fact of an elementary ontology, or, perhaps, a radical phenomenology. Every human being appears to others and thus is different from "anyone else who ever lived, lives or will live."[23] From birth, which announces the human being as a new beginning, everyone shows him- or herself to be unique. This is what men have in common: uniqueness in plurality, or the uniqueness

that makes them plural and the plurality that makes them unique. As the greatest sphere of activity in which men communicate and distinguish themselves, politics is called on to respond to this plural status. Therefore, it is not the pluralism of opinions—nor, much less, is it the pluralism of cultural identities—that qualify this interactive sphere as politics. If anything, for Arendt, the pluralism of opinions functions as an indirect proof of a plurality of unique beings that is translated into a multiperspective disposition of their worldview. In other words, for Arendt the political lies entirely in the relational space between human beings who are unique and therefore plural. The faculty of speech is political because by speaking to one another in a relational space and communciating themselves, men at the same time communicate the political nature of this space. What they communicate—contents, signifieds, values—might be congruent with this space, but however it is secondary with respect to the political act of speaking. It is in fact the relational plurality of the unique beings that constitutes the criterion on which the congruence of "what gets communicated" can be judged. The dominance of a single thought, typical of totalitarian regimes for example, is in keeping with a mass society where the negation of plurality, or the reduction of all men to a single Man, is borne out by the existence of a single perspective.[24] The very same criterion allows the pluralism of opinions to be considered as a positive sign—but it is only a sign, not a foundation of the political. The political, the exclusively human sphere of the world, consists in the "in-between," in what relates and separates men at the same time, revealing their plural condition.[25]

In claiming that it is "language that makes man a political being," Arendt, on the one hand, radically changes the meaning of Aristotle's sentence, and on the other hand, focuses her analysis on a political notion of communication that has very few points in common with the communicative rationality of a Habermasian sort. Far from emphasizing language's normative valence, its rationality, its universality, its orientation toward understanding, Arendt in fact insists on a "concept of speaking" in which the relational and contextual act of self-communication comes to the fore. The bond is precisely this self-communication that, by actively linking the unique beings who are already ontologically bound, shows them as who they are to each other. In other words, the bond consists in a reciprocal exhibition that finds its active (and thus political) medium in speech. The Said becomes secondary—whether as specific content (what gets said), or as a structure (the system of signification that regulates what gets said).

And Saying becomes the privileged realm of a reciprocal self-communication, which simultaneously expresses uniqueness and relation. Significantly, those who communicate themselves in this way are not individuals. They are unique beings in flesh and bone who, unlike the abstract and universal "individual," have a face, a name, and a life story. Unrepeatable and different from every other, they communicate the uniqueness of their own personal identity; they communicate reciprocally who they are. Because it is abstract and fictitious, on the other hand, the modern individual is incommunicable. In the horizon of communicative rationality, it is in fact language itself that communicates itself, by binding the speakers to its rules. In other words, discursive democracy risks focusing too much on a language—guaranteed by understanding and rational norms—of which the speakers are nothing but a function. In this sense, democracy becomes a product of language, and the linguistic bond between individuals becomes the communitary essence of democracy.

It is worth noting that although Arendt is the first to denounce the traditional subjection of politics to the principle of *theoria*, she is not alone in conceiving politics in terms of an ontology that insists on a plurality of unique existents in relation to one another.[26] One finds a similar position today in the speculative thought of Jean-Luc Nancy. In his lexicon, which derives the name and concept of plurality from Arendt, uniqueness becomes "singularity" and relation becomes "knot." To "democracy's empty truth and subjectivity's excessive sense," he opposes a "politics of incessant tying-up of singularities with each other, over each other, and through each other, without any *end* other than the enchainment of (k)nots."[27] Such a politics consists, "first of all, in testifying that there is singularity only where singularity ties itself up with other singularities."[28] This is, therefore, a politics that coincides immediately with the ontological constitution of the being-in-common of singular existents: because "the singular is primarily *each* one and, therefore, also *with* and *among* all the others. The singular is a plural."[29] The singular implies the plural because it is constituted in relation: "being-in-common means that singular beings are, are presented, appear only insofar as they appear together (*cum*), are exposed, presented and offered to one another."[30] The political, for Nancy, corresponds precisely to the *in* of this being in common. Favoring, particularly in less recent works, the term *community*, he in fact grounds politics in the *with*, the *among*, the *in*—which corresponds in Arendt's lexicon to

the in-between—that is, in any particle that alludes to the original, ontological relation inscribed in the plurality of singular beings. Politics is the bond—a bond inscribed in the ontological status of singularity, insofar as this implies plurality and relation. These three categories of uniqueness, plurality, and relation—which generate each other—determine the coincidence of ontology and politics.

For Nancy, this coincidence is absolute. Unlike what happens in Arendt, there is no difference between ontology and politics. Politics consists immediately in the given relation of the ontological condition. In other words, politics is already, right away, everywhere the existence of singular beings who are tied to one another. And it is not just politics, in Nancy's texts, that gets flattened into ontology. Each disciplinary sphere—including the ethical, the political, and the aesthetic—is in fact reduced to a variation that articulates in different ways the ontological theme of the knot. The question that draws in the various disciplinary horizons is precisely the *among* and the *with* of a singularity that is a plurality, or, to put it in Arendtian terms, it is the in-betweeness that "relates and separates men at the same time."[31] Existence, writes Nancy, "*is*, only if it is shared." What binds us together, the political or the community, is the same thing that shares us. It shares us, and at the same time, it shares itself. Symptomatically, this is also true of logos.

As Heraclitus understood, logos is common. Glossing a famous verse of Holderlin's—"since we are a dialogue"—Nancy explains that we are our dialogue: "we are this between-us, that is language, and reciprocally, language is the between-us."[32] Language "itself is the insubstantial tie" where the meaning of the spoken words is only a secondary and consequent effect of the tie itself, insofar as it is the original meaning.[33] In other words, it is the knot of speech, the fact that we are our dialogue, the between-us of language, which makes meaning. Every other meaning, every other process of signification, presupposes this meaning. Like Levinas and Arendt, Nancy therefore privileges the relationality of Saying instead of the universal horizon of the Said. He thus claims that the event of politics "could be called the seizure of speech [*prise de parole*]," which should not be understood as either a democratic principle of free speech, or as a plurality of "multiple wills competing to define a Sense."[34] It is, in fact, the singular entry—always singular precisely because it is spoken by someone—into the concatenation of speech, into the *legein* or bond. This concatenation is indissoluble, reticular, infinitely interrupted, and tied again. It tends toward the

most naked function of language, toward what one calls its phatic function—the maintenance of a relation that communicates no other meaning than the relation itself.[35]

Nancy's *prise de parole* thus seems to lead toward the vocal. Although it does not thematize the voice directly, the phatic function of language alludes to an acoustic sphere where the relationality of the voice cannot help being heard. Moreover, Nancy's interest in the voice is explicit elsewhere, particularly in his essay "Sharing Voices" [*La partage des voix*] cited earlier. In that text we read that meaning is a sharing of logos and that "we are the meaning of the sharing of our voices."[36] Although he emphasizes that these voices are singular and valuable precisely because of this singularity, Nancy still does not problematize the uniqueness of their sound or the material relationality of the acoustic sphere. Rather, he is interested in rejecting logos as an abstract system of signification. He understands logos instead as a sharing "which brings us together only by splitting us."[37] In a certain sense, therefore, the voice stands as a metaphor for the uniqueness of the speaker, for the singularity of his announcement that "we are a dialogue." Obviously, this does not contradict the fact that each speaker has a unique voice, but it still ends up considering this vocal uniqueness as a given that does not merit further speculation. For what Nancy really cares about is a community that "remains to be thought according to the sharing of *logos*."[38] As yet another figure for the "knot," logos is political because it binds us and splits us, it shares us, it is shared.

For Nancy, there is not so much a relation between logos and politics—rather, there is a coincidence between them, as with all figures for the knot. Nancy is convinced that—as Giorgio Agamben puts it—"every ontology implies a politics."[39] And so Nancy works against the individualistic ontology of modernity by contrasting it with the ontology of the knot that finds in logos one of its many figures. The immediate political nature of this knot, however, ends up denying a proper sphere to politics. The result is a community that, because of its coincidence with ontology, extends as far as the human condition of plural singularity—namely, everywhere and anytime. Although the modern state, which is founded on the ontology of the unbound individual, must mobilize its resources in order to recuperate this bond, the ontology of bound (tied, knotted) singularities that Nancy seems to evoke need spend no resource in order to cut out a specific space for politics. Even the classical relation between logos and politics loses its tension here. For politics is the tying up of plural singularities—

the very knot that is represented in the phatic function of language that ties the speakers to one another.

In spite of her common interest in a relational ontology of uniqueness, Arendt's position is rather different. For her, the political sphere of action is clearly distinct from the ontological state of plural uniqueness of which action itself, as interaction, is both consequence and response. Ontology and politics are in a necessary relation, but they are not the same thing; they do not coincide. By the same token, in Arendt's horizon, only in the public sphere of plural action does the relation configure itself in terms of power. This power—in Greek *dynamis*, and in Latin *potentia*—has a "potential" character: "Wherever people gather together, it is potentially there, but only potentially, not necessarily and not forever."[40] Power is generated by interaction, and exists only when actualized. It lasts as long as the time and space of the active relation. It cannot be accumulated; when plural action ceases, power dissolves. Thus, the realm of politics, unlike that of ontology, has constitutive characters of intermittence. In other words, all human beings are unique, but only when and while they interact with words and deeds can they communicate to one another this uniqueness. Without such communication, without action in a shared space of reciprocal exhibition, uniqueness remains a mere ontological given—the given of an ontology that is not able to make itself political.