

On the Gap Between Philosophy of Friendship and Political Philosophy

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Naoko Saito claims in her essay that her interpretation of Stanley Cavell's philosophy could flesh out the relation between the private and the public. According to her this relation should be seen as an "incommensurable correspondence" between two spheres that one cannot "bridge." Saito derives the relation between the private and the public, which she also calls a relation between the psychological and the political, from a dialectics between the inner and the outer of the self. She describes these dialectics in a highly elaborate way and with a great sense for productive paradoxes. This is particularly true with regard to her explorations of the constitutive character of the disturbance of friendship, and of self-transcendence by the individual's participation in a language community for the development of self-reliance. However, for the following three reasons I believe that the strategy to derive the relation between the private and the public (the political) from the relation between the inner and the outer of the self is mistaken:

First, I do think that Naoko Saito's essay indeed offers very interesting and important insights about the intersubjective constitution of the self by developing a "Cavellian" (and "Emersonian") argument that our self-reliance requires opening up to a non-reducible otherness. However, it seems to me that Saito confuses the relation between the inward and the outward of the self with the relation between the private and the public. Furthermore, I think that she wrongly identifies "the public" with "the political."

This becomes particularly clear when we consider the crucial role that "friendship" plays in Saito's argument. To be sure, I fully agree with Saito that friendship transcends the singularity of the self, and that that transcendence is constitutive for the self's autonomy and freedom. However, it seems to be very counter-intuitive to ascribe friendship also to the public realm, or even to the realm of the political. The political should be understood as an *institutionalized* public sphere, whereas friendship is characterized by its non-institutional nature. That is why we can hardly address typical political questions about justice and rightness of public institutions on the ground of a concept of friendship that belongs solely to the sphere of the private. While in our relations with our friends we often, or even always, transcend ourselves, we normally do not understand these relations as political interactions. And if we do so, we have probably been misguided by a totalizing notion of the political; a notion that does not allow us to discriminate between political and social phenomena.

Second, Naoko Saito frequently contrasts her (and Cavell's) understanding of the relation between the private and the public with the "politics of recognition," "liberalism" and "communitarianism," but she does not really elaborate these key paradigms in Political Philosophy. Rather, the essay entails a number of short

remarks on these paradigms; remarks, which one cannot characterize otherwise, but as oversimplifications. So, for example, Saito seems to interpret the politics of recognition simply as a politics of adjusting conflicting interests, of resolving disagreements and of the acknowledgment of difference. But if you look at the work of leading theorists of recognition, such as Charles Taylor, Axel Honneth, or Nancy Fraser, you will quickly realize that the approach of the politics of recognition is about much more than that. It is about identifying and establishing social relations that enable development of selfhood in *both* public and private sphere. To put it in Saito's terms: the paradigm of recognition itself entails — if properly understood — the two different horizons of the psychological and the political.

Furthermore, Saito seems to reduce “liberalism” to autonomy and “communitarianism” to care and to communal relationships, and to construct a binary opposition between the two concepts that is similar to the binary opposition between the private and the public; an opposition Saito is arguing against. However, liberals like Richard Rorty, Jürgen Habermas, and even John Rawls strongly emphasize that self-autonomy can be developed only within certain social relations that crosscut the boundaries between private and public spheres (solidarity in the case of Rorty, discursive communication in the case of Habermas, respect in the case of Rawls). On the other hand, “communitarians” like Taylor and Will Kymlicka insist that the main function of communal relations is to enable the development of individual autonomy.

To sum up, none of the paradigms of recognition, liberalism, or communitarianism suggests a dichotomy between the private and the public. Rather, it seems to me that Saito models these paradigms in a highly reductivist way in order to contrast her own position with these constructed surrogates of the politics of recognition, liberalism, and communitarianism.

Third, closely linked to the second point, is a further deficit of the essay, namely that its main argument is not situated within the leading discourses in the Political Philosophy in general, and within the discourses on political education in particular. Saito seems to suggest that the opening to otherness and to transcendence of language should be seen as the key feature of political education. But I cannot see how this openness alone could cultivate a critical thinking about the question of what characterizes just institutions — a question that seems to me to be crucial for the state of art in Political Philosophy and political education. Although this openness could indeed be understood as an important prerequisite for aesthetic and even moral education, it does not address the particular issues of political education if the latter is to be understood as an education for just political action. Saito claims that, in the “incommensurable correspondence” of friendship, the friend “awakens us,” that she teaches us indirectly to articulate our desires publicly. However, this notion of political education as mutual teaching between friends does not even touch upon the crucial question about the aims and the contents of political education. Let us imagine that a friend did awaken one's desire to discriminate between people of different colors, to see the whites as *Übermenschen*, or that the friend made the hidden racist “ashamed of his shame” for being a racist. Shall we call this kind of

“awakening” really a form of political education? And how should formal political education, or political schooling, deal with this kind of informal “political” teaching? I do not think that Saito’s approach can offer any answers to these questions, for this approach is lacking any normative perspectives on the political sphere in general, and on political education in particular.

Nevertheless, Naoko Saito makes an interesting and important point in her essay, namely that the development of self-autonomy presupposes self-transcendence and self-decentralization — a point that should be seen as a significant contribution to the discourse of general educational theory.