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The Role of Conscience in Politics Following Hannah Arendt and Søren Kierkegaard[1]

Abstract

This paper aims to understand the role of political conscience invoking Hannah Arendt's and Søren Kierkegaard's works. Relying on their philosophy, the paper attempts to reconstruct the notion of "political conscience" and examine its role in politics.

Arendt defines conscience as a by-product of the liberating effect of thinking, more precisely it is resulted by an internal dialogue. In her interpretation, the political significance of conscience lies in that it develops as a result of political thinking and the appearance in the public sphere. The ability of conscience roots not in rule-following, but in the capacity to tell right from wrong. In a similar vein with Arendt's argument, Kierkegaard defined conscience as a state of internal tension when we know what we should do, but do not want to do it. This condition is anxiety that can also be thought of as an internal dialogue within an individual. Kierkegaard argues the sin is a part of individual existence, as such the guilt precedes the sin itself. Thus, the voice of conscience speaks to the individual before the sin could become its subject. It is internal anxiety that prevents the act of thinking from having an effect. Arendt puts it similarly in her description of the operating logic system in the totalitarian state. She argues that overriding the immoral commands would lead to self-contradiction and tension in ourselves.

Realising the role and importance of political conscience can bring us closer to understanding the relationship of political knowledge and action. The most striking common point that connects them closely is the conscience as a pre-political premise, even though there are only a few studies (Rossatti 2014; Mackie 2013; de Paula 2011) focused on the comparison of these two philosophers' thoughts. This paper intends to elaborate and expand these thoughts in order to find the place of political conscience in modern politics.

Keywords: Arendt, Kierkegaard, conscience, responsibility, political self.

1. Introduction: The Influence of Kierkegaard on Arendt

First, I would like to point out the common traits of thought in respect of the two philosophers. The difficulty of the task comes from the fact that, though both belong to the existentialist agenda, they start off from highly different value-relations. Arendt is primarily a philosopher of politics, the philosopher of radical questioning,

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while Kierkegaard is mainly a religious philosopher, one of radical Christianity. At the same time, their interpretations of notions are corresponding on several occasions, which notions are key concepts for the cast of thought of both. Such are the concepts of thoughtlessness, the self, and judgment. As Rossatti points out, the typically Arendtian notion of evil can also be originated from Kierkegaard (Rossatti 2014, p. 312), furthermore, we can also draw a parallel between the Arendtian concept of reflective judgement and the Kierkegaardian relationship with God, since both relationships belong to the realm of inner life, by which the self itself is constructed and we become able to judge and/or to make a decision (Mackie 2013, p. 12).

The interpreters of Arendt regularly ignore Kierkegaard's influence on the philosopher's work, even though she herself reported in an interview that Kierkegaard had been a defining reading experience at her age of 14 and besides Kant and Jaspers, Kierkegaard had been the one by whom things got in place (Arendt 2005c, p. 9). We also learn from biographical data that Arendt attended Kierkegaard seminars at the university even prior to her graduation (Biró-Kaszás 2005, p. 74). Rossatti states that Kierkegaard had a much more significant influence on the philosopher than she would have thought, the proof of that being the root and originality of Kierkegaard's concept of individualism which is further elaborated by Arendt (Rossatti 2014, p. 324). Further evidence is that Arendt also deals in detail with the Danish philosopher in two separate essays titled *"Søren Kierkegaard"* (2005a [1932]) and *"What is Existence Philosophy"?* (2005b [1946]). In the former, Arendt states that Kierkegaard's significance lies in the fact that he was the first thinker to live in a secularized, modern world like ours and that his critiques – which, per her interpretation, can be perceived as social criticism – can be applied not only to his own era but to the twentieth century, as well, thus, in this sense, Kierkegaard was ahead of his time (Arendt 2005a, p. 44). Arendt adds that Germany needed Nietzsche and the life philosophy [Lebensphilosophie] (i.e. Bergson, Dilthey, Simmel) to understand Kierkegaard, who defined his own position against the system of the Hegelian philosophy – indeed, against all philosophical systems in general (op. cit., p. 45). This position, however, is not a new philosophical foundation but an attempt to understand the philosophizing subject, which, in Arendt's interpretation, should be the starting point of all philosophy. Kierkegaard's innovation, thus, is that he does not think in systems, but is interested in the individual himself, which Arendt underlines, that "[The philosophy prior to Kierkegaard] *is so caught up in its own systematics that it forgets and loses sight of the actual self of the philosophizing subject: it never touches the "individual" in his concrete "existence."* (ibid.).

According to Éva Biró-Kaszás, Arendt's interpretation of Kierkegaard also reflects her own position, according to which the Hegelian philosophy and the philosophy prior to Kierkegaard in general, which places the logos at the centre of its research, cannot account either for human contingency or for human plurality (Biró-Kaszás 2005, p. 75). According to Marcio Gimenes de Paula's reading, since

Arendt's main problem with modernity is the deep-rooted need for conformity, perhaps that is exactly the reason why Kierkegaard becomes important to her as she sees him as the first advocate of the individual himself (de Paula 2011, p. 32). He adds that in the triumvirate of modern philosophers of doubt, traditionally denoting Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, Arendt replaces the latter with Kierkegaard[2] and names him "*the father of a certain type of radical skepticism*" (op. cit., pp. 34-35). Arendt argues that Kierkegaard reformed not only traditional religious but also traditional political thinking (Arendt 1961, p. 26). The most significant trait for Arendt in Kierkegaard's philosophy is that, in contrast to the former tradition, which, per her interpretation, began with Plato and was taken for granted right until Hegel (op. cit., p. 28), he no longer thought of the person as an animal rationale, but placed the particular, suffering self at the centre of his philosophy. This, in addition, was due to the "leap," a thought process that can be described through *"the images and similes of leaps, inversions, and turning concepts upside down",* i.e. the process of leap from doubt to faith (op. cit., p. 35).

2. The common existentialist basis: the self

The first common point, thus, is the individuum. Kierkegaard defines the self is *"the conscious synthesis of infinitude and finitude that relates itself to itself, whose task is to become itself, which can be done only through the relationship to God"* (Kierkegaard 1980a pp. 29-30) and his only task is to be what he is – himself and he gives the definition of personhood *"is a synthesis of possibility and necessity"* (op. cit., p. 40). The task of the individual for Kierkegaard is therefore to be himself, standing alone before God (or death), which creates a paradoxical situation, since, before God, we are no longer individuum but defined by our relationship with God (Arendt 2005a, p. 46). At the same time, the self, for Kierkegaard, is not only individual but also a social self which is responsible for others (Smith 2005, p. 52). *„The self that is the objective is not only a personal self but a social, a civic self. He then possesses himself as a task in an activity whereby he engages in the affairs of life as this specific personality."* (Kierkegaard 1987, p. 232).

According to Arendt's Kierkegaard interpretation, to understand the universe, we must recognise the universe itself within the individuum, that is, within the individual person, and not seek it outside of it. Those who become an exception

[2] Arendt argues that at the moment of the breaking of the tradition prevailing from Plato to Hegel, only three thinkers stayed persistent: Marx, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard, whose greatness, in her view, lies precisely in the fact that they recognized that traditional political, religious, and metaphysical thinking had become obsolete. They consciously sought to reverse the hierarchy of concepts and human abilities, as they recognized that the traditional conceptual systems were incapable of coping with the socio-political problems of their age. Arendt adds, however, that they could not completely break away from Hegelianism, as they still saw the history of past philosophy as one dialectically developed whole (Arendt 1961, pp. 26-28).

(from the general) will be the ones who realise it (Arendt 2005b, p. 174). At Kierkegaard, this realisation is due to God's call, this being how the paradox dissolves, since in this sense, the self is ab ovo determined by its relationship with God. This realisation, which can also be perceived as a kind of inward action, leads out of philosophy, according to Arendt, as in her reading, Kierkegaard does not confine himself to contemplation but encourages action (Kierkegaard 1987, p. 151). Furthermore, the human guarantee of action is guilt and taking responsibility for the unforeseen consequences of the decisions we make as individuals. For Arendt's Kierkegaard, guilt becomes the mode by which the individuum becomes real, by which he entangles himself in reality (Arendt 2005b, p. 175).

Exception also marks a departure from the general, and uniqueness as in opposition to merging into the crowd will be of capital importance to Kierkegaard. He experiences it as a severe symptom that the members of his society, instead of being themselves, become merely numbers in the crowd, *„one more repetition of this everlasting Einerlei [one and the same]"* (Kierkegaard 1980a, p. 33). Kierkegaard outrightly demands it from humanity that instead of being reduced to mass, they grasp themselves in responsibility and become "*fully existing subjects*" (Mackie 2013, p. 3). On another occasion, he labels his era as *"an age devoid of character"* (as cited in Rossatti 2014, p. 311). Dissolution in the crowd is typically a modern phenomenon and, according to Kierkegaard, it might be evoked by people becoming too comfortable, as there is no need to think and take responsibility as part of the crowd (op. cit. p. 308). It is easier and safer to become like and hide from others, thus avoiding responsibility (Kierkegaard 1980a, pp. 33-35). Arendt, as well, marks one of the pathologies of modernity in uniformization. According to her interpretation, the so-called social realm emerging from modernity encourages individuals to become similar to each other, thus avoiding turning into pariahs. It is, however, problematic since it eliminates plurality which she marked as the first prepolitical condition, as *"the condition of all forms of political organization"* (Arendt 1998, p. 202).

Responsibility is important to Kierkegaard not only for it being through which the individual becomes himself, but also since each individual has a share in the story of every other individual; *"man is individuum and as such simultaneously himself and the whole race"* at the same time (Kierkegaard 1980b, p. 28). That would be unthinkable without taking responsibility for each other and the world. Per Graham Smith, an essential element in Kierkegaard's process of becoming a self is that the self is bound to society and ethical-political relations (Smith 2005, p. 58). The basis of this relation is that we must recognise each other as equal, spiritual ends, assuming that everyone else has the correct relationship with God. According to Smith, the relationship with others is equally important to Kierkegaard as the relationship with God (op. cit. p. 44). In Kierkegaard's words, this relational self must also constitute its relation to God with correct relations with others, and the starting point for this is to recognise the other as a neighbour (Kierkegaard 1995, pp. 252-256).

Furthermore, as Arendt formulates it, as no one in the world exists alone and no

one can act solely on their own, we are morally accountable not only for our own actions, but also for the actions of others and for the world, that being the price we have to pay for not existing alone (Arendt 2003, pp. 156-158). In addition, the connection between each other's stories appears also in Arendt: the Arendtian actors (or individuals) can become themselves if they reveal themselves in the public realm before others and present, tell their stories and opinions, which contributes to the construction of the self as others hear, see, interpret, and ultimately pass these stories on (Arendt 1998, p. 184). Without this space of appearance, people's own identity could never actually exist (op. sit.).

Arendt's public realm can also be seen as a kind of stage where performers are just as important as the audience. For Arendt, sharply distinguishing the public from the private realm is crucial, and she attaches importance to the attributes and qualities that are related to the former. If we accept this metaphor, it must mean that in Arendt, we can distinguish two concepts of the self: the concept of the private self and the concept of the public self (i.e. *homo politicus*). The qualities of the private self must necessarily be hidden behind a mask on the political stage (Kovács 2018, pp. 130-131). By contrast, the public self has not only the opportunity but also the duty to show itself, inasmuch as only in this way it can become itself in the public realm created together with others.

Thus, the self is a key figure in the philosophy of both Arendt and Kierkegaard, and its uniqueness and dissemblance from the crowd are emphasised by both. The self, however, can only truly be self if it steps out and shows itself: in the case of Arendt, before others in the public realm, and in the case of Kierkegaard, before God. What they have in common, then, is that no matter how significant the role of the individual is, they cannot conceive and interpret the self on its own but solely in its external relationships, through its relation to someone else – and this relationship requires a doctrine of responsibility, which is, again, a key element for both philosophers. I believe, the apparent difference is not a real difference either. Whether we reveal ourselves and become ourselves in front of others or in front of God, we must be responsible and bear this responsibility for the world and the issues of the world in both relations, thus, the others present – who, in Kierkegaard, is the one God, – in point of fact, symbolise this, that is the world. The latter assertion is supported also by the fact that, per Kierkegaard, living life in solitude is to be condemned, instead the individuum must "*choose himself ethically*" in his relations with others with whom he has been connected through God (Kierkegaard 1987, pp. 218-224).

However, God is partly related to Arendt's concept of the self as well, for she argues that the individual cannot be capable of defining himself in the same way as the things surrounding him, since if someone is, only a god can be capable of that. In Arendt's words, "*if we have a nature or essence, then surely only a god could know and define it"* (Arendt 1998, p. 10). Naturally, this does not mean that at the same time God determines the nature of man – at least in Arendt's conception – but only he can understand and describe it. In another passage, she considers Jesus as

the embodiment of real good deeds, as well as placing Goodness itself in an "other world" (op. cit., pp. 74-77). Although Arendt was not a philosopher of religion or a religious person, and for her man was primarily a political being, perhaps precisely because of Kierkegaard's influence, she still sought the connection between man and God.[3]

The self, then, is an entity defined by God, not in itself, however, but closely dependent on others around it with whom God has placed it in relation (Kierkegaard) and with whom it can construct the space of appearance, which is the place of public-political realm (Arendt) – the goal of all this being to shape the (common) world. For the latter to take place in order, the phenomenon of responsibility is needed, which in turn stems from conscience, so I shall examine as follows the notion of conscience through the work of the two philosophers.

3. The Role of Conscience in the Philosophy of Arendt and Kierkegaard

Arendt describes conscience as a by-product of so-called representative thinking. According to her interpretation, it is an internal dialogue with ourselves – a model of Socrates – during which we are able to imagine ourselves in the place of others and thus make judgments and decisions (Arendt 2003, p. 90). Arendt calls it reflective judgment by which judgments and choices are articulated as actions in the public realm, thus, it is crucial for this process to take place in order. Thus, representative thinking and its results, especially the phenomenon of conscience, are political abilities in Arendt which are attached to the common world and enable us to choose the *right* deeds in public realm (D'Entréves 2006, pp. 250-252). In Arendt's words:

> Political thought is representative. I form an opinion by considering a given issue from different viewpoints, by making present to my mind the standpoints of those who are absent; that is, I represent them. This process of representation does not blindly adopt the actual views of those who stand somewhere else, and hence look upon the world from a different perspective; this is a question neither of empathy, as though I tried to be or to feel like somebody else, nor of counting noses and joining a majority but of being and thinking in my own identity where actually I am not. The more people's standpoints I have present in my mind while I am pondering a given issue, and the better I can imagine how I would feel and think if I were in their place, the stronger will be

[3] It should not be forgotten that Arendt studied also religious studies at university, and later she was seriously preoccupied with Jewish religious culture, so all of this obviously may have implicit effects on her philosophy. Arendt's concepts of God are worth comparing with *"The Human Condition"* and *"Der Liebesbegriff bei Augustin"*.

> my capacity for representative thinking and the more valid my final conclusions, my opinion. (Arendt 1968, 302)

The text above clearly points to the fact that for Arendt, thinking in itself is not yet a sufficient guarantee for right action, the power of imagination is also needed. This extended, reflective form of thinking gains political significance in the notion of judgment, which process is necessary since it makes difficulties arising from plurality manageable, namely the issues of relating to others and taking the accomplishments of others into account (Olay 2008, p. 315). Thinking in itself would not enable one to do so, imagination and reflective judgment are also essential. The former appears in Kierkegaard's concept of the self, as well, when he states that "*the self is reflection, and the imagination is reflection",* and defines fantasy as a potential for all reflections (Kierkegaard 1980a, p. 31).

The Arendtian concept of internal dialogue appears also in Kierkegaard, who, like Arendt, relies heavily on Socrates' theories. Kierkegaard emphasizes the importance of agreement with ourselves (cf. Kierkegaard 2009), but he primarily uses the notion of *"lack of consciousness"* [samvittighedsløshed] rather than conscience. He characterizes the modern state as lacking the phenomenon of conscience, denoting the influence of the press and the effects of alienation as the reasons for this, which is why Rossatti notes that the aforementioned marked the beginning of Kierkegaard's career in social criticism (Rossatti 2014, p. 308). Alienation, as Kierkegaard interprets it, is a consequence of massification, and the characteristic of the crowd is that it judges without thinking, that being what Kierkegaard mean by the phenomenon of thoughtlessness [tankeløst] (Kierkegaard 2009, p. 183). It can be induced by mass media, rampant capitalism, and bureaucracy, as well. It should be pointed out that Arendt cites the same processes as the causes of susceptibility to totalitarian ideologies (Arendt 1979, pp. 234-235), which she also associates with the phenomenon of thoughtlessness.

By thoughtlessness [die Gedankenlosigkeit], Arendt means the opposite of representative thinking, when due to some external or internal counter-effect the internal dialogue cannot flow properly. In such cases, neither a sense of responsibility nor conscience can be established, and thus the individual will be capable of immoral deeds (Arendt 1981, p. 191). Thoughtlessness is the lack or erroneous course of internal dialogue and the suspension of critical thinking (op. cit.). However, we need to ask the question, what can evoke all this? Arendt sees the barrier to thought and conscience in totalitarian ideologies, and most importantly in radical evil which denies all boundaries and eliminates the plurality of human beings (Arendt 2007, p. 77). Thoughtlessness, thus, is a kind of human mistake in both authors that rears its head typically in modern conditions (Rossatti 2014, p. 315).

Thinking is a privileged concept in Arendt's theory as when we think, we are able to give advice to ourselves. In contrast, radical evil means that this ability of ours is impaired (Arendt 2007, p. 75). Evil as such is a phenomenon bound to human thinking. She later states that modern evil is no longer absolute evil in the sense that

the individual does not do evil because he is evil, but because he is able to accept its binding force on himself (Arendt 2006, p. 252). There are now rather humanly than devilish motivations behind "committing" (Arendt 2007, p. 150). Elsewhere, she cites obedience along with acceptance of the *Zeitgeist* as an example of motivation (Arendt 2003, pp. 41-43). Rossatti points out that however controversial Arendt's thesis of banality is, in fact, the roots of the idea can already be discovered in Kierkegaard. According to his interpretation, Kierkegaard means exactly the same thing by "*secular mentality*" [Verdslighed] (Kierkegaard 1991), that is, a lack of conscience obscured by comfort and greed of gain allowing people to act wrongly while not perceiving they are acting wrongly (Rossatti 2014, pp. 311-312).

This kind of evil, however, is no less serious or dangerous than the completely intended evil, in fact. According to Kierkegaard, it is nothing but an unconscious rebellion against the good which conforms to the norms and morals of the social order in force and therefore individuals do not perceive they are acting evil (ibid.). A century later, Arendt also articulates that individuals are capable of immoral action since evil is no longer recognisable in totalitarian states, as *„evil in the Third Reich had lost the quality by which most people recognize it - the quality of temptation." (*Arendt 2006, p. 150).

The two philosophers are thus equally socially critical of their own age and society, and although no historical or socio-political similarities can be discovered between the nineteenth century Denmark and the Third Reich, the statements of the two philosophers are highly significant from a political-philosophical point of view. The changing social order involved a change in moral norms, and individuals had no scope to question it and to recognise the voice of conscience suppressed by the modern age: according to Arendt, by ideologies and the enforced, *"unnatural conformism of a mass society"* (Arendt 1998, pp. 40-42; 58), and according to Kierkegaard, by greed of gain and massification. These, however, are again interrelated phenomena. With the formation of mass society that began in Kierkegaard's time and continues to nowadays, and with the disenchantment of secularisation, various isms forged ahead, and economic interests came to the fore over higher interests.

In articulating the lack of conscience, they captured the impact of socio-political changes on individuals. The idea of alienation presents itself in both authors in relation to public affairs (Arendt) and God (Kierkegaard), but I would like to recall the earlier statement that the focus is on the world, and thus it takes on significance on a political-philosophical level, as well. For Arendt, alienation from public affairs is tantamount to alienation from the world (Arendt 1998, pp. 254-256). As I also stated earlier, for Kierkegaard, the self represents both itself and humanity in general, and *"this is the secret that lies in the conscience; this is the secret the individual life has with itself—that simultaneously it is an individual life and also the universal"* (Kierkegaard 1987, p. 225). Conscience here signifies not only the responsibility but also the duty of the self to awake to itself, to choose itself as an ethical being, and to be open-minded towards others, towards the issues of the world (op. cit. p. 228). The

lack of conscience then leads to the lack of sense of responsibility, which compromises the room and prospects of truly political and the truly religious (Smith 2005, p. 58).

According to Smith, the key figure in Kierkegaard's political philosophy is the responsible individual, who is made by conscience what and who he is (op. cit. p. 52), while modern mass democracies have brought an age in which meaningful reflection, action, and taking responsibility are no longer possible (Kierkegaard 1978, p. 67), and the power of the anonymous crowd reigns. Furthermore, in the absence of responsibility, the anonymous crowd is more powerful than any tyrant. According to Smith, Kierkegaard depicts the anti-democratic features of modern mass democracies ahead of his time: the tyranny of many, in which it is not clear who the ruler is and what the rules are (Smith 2005, p. 54).

4. The Object of Conscience: Sin

We can also draw a parallel between the Arendtian internal dialogue and reflective judgment and the Kierkegaardian faith. A common element is that the essence and purpose of both phenomena is to uplift the individual from the crowd (Mackie 2013, pp. 10-11). Partly, it is intended for the self to be self, and at the same time, it is essential concerning sin. In Kierkegaard's words, *It is obvious that there can be no judgment: there are too many to be judged; it is impossible to get hold of them or manage to get hold of them as single individuals, and therefore judging has to be abandoned."* (Kierkegaard 1980a, p. 123). Arendt on the same: *"Where everyone is guilty, it does not judge anyone, because no one is in possession of the responsibility"* (Arendt 2012, 30). And *„where all are guilty, no one is."* (Arendt 2003, p. 21). The correspondence between the positions of the two philosophers can also be seen here.

The emergence of mass society and the dulling of the voice of conscience also entails the problem that it is difficult to distinguish and differentiate true sinners and to make a judgment. Separating individuals from the crowd is also important to Kierkegaard as, in his view, the particular individual who [would] be able to act for the good becomes corrupt at the moment he becomes part of the crowd. From that it follows that it will not be in his interest to step out of the crowd voluntarily or to make an attempt to its elimination (Kierkegaard 2009, p. 137). Thus, ahead of his time, Kierkegaard reproaches people for that social psychological dynamics which we call today as group effect. He argues that as part of the crowd, someone is more likely to become guilty than as an individual (op. cit.). This idea also can be found in Arendt, who underlines that the decisive factor in an individual's behaviour will be not only which group he commits to but also how easily he will be able to adapt to all its thoughts and expectations (Arendt 2003, p. 145).

At the same time, it is to be noted that sin is interpreted differently by the two philosophers. The source of sin in Kierkegaard is the individual's inner anxiety over committing the sin itself. He describes anxiety as an option that paralyses the

individual on the one hand and tempts him to sin on the other (Kierkegaard 1980b, pp. 56-62). He characterises this state as a state of collapse, and thus the individual may be both sinful and innocent at the same time, but ultimately *„anxiety about sin produces sin*" (op. cit. p. 73). However, this anxiety is not based on the possibility of the individual committing a sin, but on being considered guilty (op. cit. pp. 73-76). Here again, it is important to underline that we have defined the self in its external relationships. If, by this, Kierkegaard meant merely God, it would not be clear at this point why what *others* think of the individual matters. For Arendt also, the interpretations of others present are important, and in the application of reflective judgment, the decisive factor is how the individual is seen by others, not how he sees himself.

Arendt identifies the source of crime as the lack or erroneous course of internal dialogue[4]. She states that if in the course of our internal dialogue we come to the conclusion that what is expected of us or whatever decision is in front of us is immoral and incompatible with our inner values, then the one who does not deny it is guilty (Arendt 2003, p. 155). According to Kierkegaard, if one does not act at the moment of his recognition immediately, that recognition will fade away. For if the recognised idea does not please the will, the latter will move on, but if it only postpones the action, the recognition will gradually fade: the ethical recognitions and judgments will be blurred (Kierkegaard 1980a, pp. 94-95). The real sin, however, is when our will does not want the right or when we are unwilling to recognise it (op. cit. p. 96).

The concept of the Arendtian crime is strongly related to the motif of responsibility. In Arendt's view, we are responsible not only for our own deeds but also for the actions of others – those whom we live in the same community with, whom we shape our common world with. Crime, then, is tantamount to the lack of this sense of responsibility. Gábor Kovács draws attention to the fact that in Arendt's book *On Revolution*, she identifies crime with hypocrisy, that is, she denotes it to be the worst when someone shows up in the public sphere "*flaunts something that does not exist"* thus deceiving the other individuals constituting the realm (Kovács 2018, p. 128). Hypocrisy, in this way, does not only threaten moral integrity, but directly poses a threat on the political realm, as Arendt understands it (op. cit. p. 132).

For Kierkegaard, sin is also capital for the self to become self, as anxiety encourages it to act and to be itself. According to Arendt, this is feasible as the relation comes about in the form of obligations in the realm of inner life (Arendt 2005a, p. 49). The aforementioned seems to be justified by the fact that Kierkegaard denotes freedom as the opposite of sin (Kierkegaard 1980b, pp. 108-109), which

[4] „If opinions were not based on correct information and the free access to all relevant facts they could scarcely claim any validity. And if they were to be based on fantasy, self-deception, or deliberate falsehood, then no possibility of genuine debate and argumentation could be sustained. Both factual truth and the general habit of truth-telling are therefore basic to the formation of sound opinions and to the flourishing of political debate" (D'Entréves 2006, p. 257).

traditionally signifies exemption from bondage. For Arendt, the opposite of crime is action, the precedent-based use of reflective judgment that allows us to act righteously in public sphere, and freedom is the outcome of that action (Ruszkai 2019, p. 10). Essentially, they both recognize the opposite of sin in the phenomenon of freedom, which is the liberation of the individual from worldly obligations. Arendt strictly separates the physical labor, subsistence, and material creative activity assigned to the categories of *animal laborans* and *homo faber* from the true purposes of the human, embodied by the individual *homo politicus*, who acts in the realm of public affairs and politics, without any constraints. In this way, then, he alone is the sole savourer of freedom (cf. Arendt 1998). Kierkegaard is more permissive; he states that freedom is present in all spheres and constantly communicates: he links freedom to the liberating power of language and word (Kierkegaard 1980b, p. 124), which thought in turn is again a common trait with Arendt, for whom free action is a kind of speech.

Committing a sin, according to Kierkegaard, is not just a one-off mistake, but the perpetrator is also accountable for what led him to commit the sin. If it is merely temptation he did not resist, he is guilty of temptation itself, as well (op. cit. p. 109). He adds that for this very reason, the one who learns of his guilt only from a judicial judgment will never understand his own guilt, because *„for if a man is guilty, he is infinitely guilty."* (op. cit. p. 161). Arendt was, as well, preoccupied with this question in connection with Adolf Eichmann's trial: Eichmann in fact did not feel guilty and was only pronounced guilty by the judge's decision, the thought was not ideated in his mind (Arendt 1981, p. 4.). Arendt explained this by the phenomenon of thoughtlessness already discussed above[5], and Kierkegaard by the weight of subjectivity. For him, individuals already exist in sin – in Adam's sin –, that being the reason they no longer recognise their own sin unless they become self. Per Kierkegaard, for the individual, only the truth that he can subjectively consider to be true is truth, just as sin cannot be explained by any science, since like truth, sin carries a different meaning to everyone (Kierkegaard 1980b, p. 138; pp. 77-78). Accordingly, conscience can only speak to the individual if he is able to deem something subjectively true or sinful. M. G. de Paula emphasizes *"In both authors, one can detect the transformation of simply aesthetic problems into ethical and existential problems"* (de Paula 2011, pp. 35), namely both authors tend to steer issues of an otherwise unethical nature to the ethical level, in that they attach both the explanation of matters and faith itself to subjective understanding.

As Arendt interprets it, for Kierkegaard, this kind of subjectivity appears not so much in faith as in doubt (Arendt 1998, p. 275), therefore he is considered by her to be the most influential thinker of his time (Arendt 2005b, p. 175). She stresses that the relationship between doubt and faith is capital to Kierkegaard and he, in fact,

[5] It was a state of absence of thinking because Eichmann was responsible in Arendt's view for his inability to judge in those circumstances where judgment would have been most needed (Arendt 1981, pp. 4-5).

aims to reverse the conventional relation between reason and faith (Arendt 1961, p. 29), thereby questioning the traditional hierarchy of human abilities and the specific human quality of man (op. cit. p. 39). In Kierkegaard's words *"nor do they doubt their immortality, for the person who deeply and fervently doubts it on his own behalf is sure to find what is right."* (Kierkegaard 1987, p. 149). Mackie concludes that this kind of subjective thinking can be the key to the individualisation of the self and the internal (or intrasubjective) dialogue, and ultimately to counteract totalitarian tendencies (Mackie 2013, p. 3). She adds that a common trait in the mindset of the two philosophers is that they expect a kind of arrogance from their individuals to cling to their own subjective judgment, even against the dominant ideology (op. cit. pp. 10-11).

However, the above-mentioned insistence is exercised only by a few, since if the state (or society, or God, i. e. an entity definitely above the individual) expects the individual to act in a way that is in conflict with the internal dialogue, then insistence would lead to self-contradiction and inner tension, as commands given by the state (or God) should never be of immoral nature, that immoral nature, thus, being highly difficult for an individual to both recognise and accept (Arendt 1981, p. 191). Mackie highlights that Kierkegaard formulates very similar ideas in his interpretation of the Old Testament's Abraham (Mackie 2013, p. 10) when he describes the inner tension Abraham felt above God asking him to kill his only son, Isaac (Kierkegaard 1983, pp. 57-59). We experience this anxiety when we know what would be right, but we do not want to do it (cf. "*Anxiety About the Good (The Demonic)* Kierkegaard 1980b, pp. 118-123).

The guarantee of our conscience speaking and of acting righteously is found by Arendt in the ability to think and by Kierkegaard in the power of faith. At the same time, neither of these can be a real guarantee to eliminate the internal contradiction outlined above. On the one hand, the internal dialogue can only be a guarantee of righteous action, which is easy to recognise and accept, but there can be no guarantee that, in parallel, we will not commit wrongdoing if the prevailing norms (social, legal, or religious) accept it as right, moreover, what proves to be appropriate according to the internal values of the individual cannot be guaranteed to be so from the point of view of the world (Ruszkai 2019, p. 7).

Furthermore, the guarantee of faith is based on the relationship with God, which is different for each individual, and in a situation like Abraham's, the individual should *in toto* rely on this absolute, external relationship, which, however, is not allowed by socio-political constraints and obligations (Mackie 2013, pp. 5-6). On the same note, Kierkegaard argues that if an individual is put in a situation from which choosing is the only way out, he will always choose good (Kierkegaard 1987, p. 148). The latter statement, however, is highly debatable, especially since it is exactly Kierkegaard who asserts that this choice is not primarily a matter of good and bad, but a choice of will, and that we can choose evil without wanting to choose it – it is enough not to choose good (op. cit. p. 149-150).

5. Summary: The Role of Conscience in Politics

I outlined above how conscience comes into being and what its role in relation to individuals is according to the two philosophers. In what follows, I will now examine what significance all this has with regards to the world or politics. I have previously stated that the appearance before the others present in Arendt and before God in Kierkegaard can be interpreted both as appearing before the world and, in Arendt's words, as shaping the world. The main difference in the two philosophers' trains of thought is thus dissolved in the process of appearing before the world. While speaking of shaping the world collectively, however, it is important to mention that for Arendt, it is important for itself, while for Kierkegaard, it remains only a means to achieve faith and a correct relationship with God.

For Kierkegaard, conscience is of paramount importance to the individual. The crowd, as Kierkegaard sees it, is "thoughtless" and judges without thinking, individuals dissolve in it and become corrupt, their personal and economic interests obscure their judgment, and only the phenomenon of conscience can guide an individual out of this state. Kierkegaard has fundamentally criticised levelling for not deeming the individual's conscientious responsibility a basic moral category. For an individual existing, thinking, and acting as part of the crowd only accepts certain thoughts as ethically correct but does not reach recognition. On the one hand, the phenomenon of conscience would be an important factor in becoming self, and on the other hand, following Kierkegaard, an individual who has already turned into self and has the capacity of conscience, is above any political system that built its empire on the lack of conscience. According to Rossatti, despite Kierkegaard's approach to the notion of the individual in two non-political ways — namely, a conscience based on Socratesian roots and the doctrine of Christian equality — he still depicts a kind of democratic image of individuals who, if retaining their uniqueness and holding on to their convictions, may be able to master *essential thinking*, which can emerge as a force shaping the world (Rossatti 2014, pp. 326-327).

Arendt argues that conscience is born by the act of thinking, and failure to do so makes one a *sleepwalker* (Arendt 1981, p. 191). From this it follows that in case individuals are unable to conduct internal dialogue (correctly), they cannot feel responsible for either the world or political affairs. This comes from the fact that Arendt attaches the capacity of judgment to the public sphere and acting together with others. Conscience may be the only controlling mechanism for immoral actions. Therefore, if this were to be consolidated as a key political element, a shift towards extremism in politics could be eliminated. However, the voice of conscience can be suppressed by the ideology of radical evil, thus, conscience in itself is not sufficient as a guarantee. At the same time, Arendt cites responsibility as one of the criteria for

a normatively correct politics, but a sense of responsibility cannot develop without conscience. We can only be able to feel and take responsibility for our community and the world if we are able to identify with them through interiorisation and if, through representative thinking, we come to the realisation that a crime has been committed or a bad decision has been made (Ruszkai 2019, p. 23).

Per Kierkegaard, it is not in the interest of the individual who has already become part of the crowd to break out of it, as by blending in, all responsibility is removed from his shoulders. In contrast, Arendt argues that in the absence of the public sphere, individuals have no means to step out of the crowd. She thus assumes that individuals would otherwise want to break out of the crowd, they simply have no opportunity to do so – as the pathologies of modernity (especially totalitarianism) are taking away the public realm. It is also this difference the linguistic distinction arises from; Arendt speaks of the fading of conscience, while Kierkegaard labels it the lack of conscience. Another essential point is that the evil appearing in the modern age has been identified by both philosophers as something new which is not merely radical, rather infinite. One feasible way to defend against it is to listen to our conscience, but as we have seen, this alone is not always enough. According to Dana R. Villa's interpretation, the Socratesian foundations were further elaborated by them as a new kind of concept of citizenship that is based on the principle of personal responsibility and defines itself against the pathology of "thoughtlessness" (Villa 2001, p. ix). As Villa adds, the figure of the individual appears as an external representation of conscience, thus, it is evident how conscience acquires political significance (op. cit.).

Although both authors emphasise the uniqueness and prominence of individuals, in fact, in both cases, they go beyond "being self". For Arendt's individuals, the goal is embodied by the (political) community, and for Kierkegaard, by the true Christian faith, defined against the secularised faith of his society and era. A common element is that the uniqueness and "self-ness" of individuals is not yet a goal, but merely a means to achieve a greater goal. In my interpretation, this greater goal can be perceived in both cases as building a better world. In Arendt, this goal is easily acceptable, as for her, the point of human existence and condition is the shaping of the common world, the act itself, which always happens in front of others and together with others. Kierkegaard expresses the idea that individuals should live ethically right and should not be stuck at the level of contemplation but should act most prominently in *Either/Or* Part II (1987). Even though the consequences of their actions are unpredictable, the higher order of things fuses them and thus shapes the world history (op. cit. pp. 151-154).

Smith points out that Kierkegaard places the ontological status of man and politics under a common, spiritual category. He cites Kierkegaard's idea, i.e. in the modern age, everything is political but at the same time nothing is political anymore, since just as true religion, politics was abolished by the circumstances of modernity and that individuals no longer recognise their own role in the world. Without a correct interpretation of the self, then, no *truly* politics is possible (Smith 2005, pp.

58-59). It is characteristic of both authors that they articulate sharp criticisms but do not offer a positive suggestion for the pathologies of modernity. Smith summarises the criticisms stating that should everyone become self and take responsibility for both their own actions and those of others, it would become possible to build a normative political community. In the modern age, however, the true meaning of politics and of self, as well, is already lost. We have failed in conceiving ourselves as spiritual beings; that being a form of despair even modern politics cannot understand (ibid.).

We can thus distinguish a political form of conscience that is more than a simple sense of guilt. In the case of both authors, it means a responsibility and a duty to the world, which can be understood as "political conscience". It can be a guarantee of right political action and responsibility for the common cause. Also, the lack of it leads to the formation of a "thoughtless" crowd, which entails the tyranny of many, in which truly politics will no longer have a place. What distinguishes political conscience from conscience in the traditional sense is that it is able to recognise their possible immoral nature even against the norms and morals of the existing social order, so, they are not accepted automatically. The key to responsibility for the world is, thus, the ability of political conscience.

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