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PROBLEMS OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Hannah Arendt – Critic of the Totalitarianism

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„The originality of totalitarianism is horrible, not because some new ‘idea’ came into the world, but because its very actions constitute a break with all our traditions; they have clearly exploded our categories of political thought and our standards for moral judgment” [Arendt 2005: 309-10]

Abstract

In this article the author will present the philosophical opinions of one of the most influential thinkers of the 20th century – Hannah Arendt (1906-1975). In her works the Jewish philosopher raised the issues of inter alia: totalitarianism, anti-Semitism, thinking and acting, power and violence, relation of philosophy towards politics, politics and religion, ability to distinguish the good from the evil, responsibility, morality, forgiveness. Moreover, the author will indicate the convergence of opinions of this philosopher with the teaching of the Pope John Paul II.

Key words

Hannah Arendt, John Paul II, totalitarianism, anti-Semitism, revolution, politics

Hannah Arendt (born on 14.10.1906 in Kaliningrad, died on 4.12.1975 in New York) was a Jewish philosopher, theoretician of culture and politics, co-founder of the theory of totalitarianism [Nowak 2000: 303]. Her parents were non-practicing Jews. She owed frequent visits to synagogue to her grandfather Max [Heller 2000: 18]. She attended three universities: in

Marburg, in Freiburg im Breisgau and in Heidelberg. She was a student of Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) as well as Karl Jaspers (1883-1969) [Bernacki 2001: 261].

She undertook the issue of her own political consciousness due to "life itself", but her first challenge was the issue of her own Jewishness [Heller 2000: 22]. The Jewish origin was a puzzle for her and the source of anxiety [Ettinger 1998: 10]. Accidental encounter with the correspondence of Rahel Varnhagen enabled her to undertake this issue seriously. Ultimately in 1938 a biography entitled "Rahel Varnhagen" was created [see Arendt 1998a]. Rahel was a German Jewess, between 1790 and 1806 she ran a famous literary saloon in Berlin. She lived with the feeling of lower value and had a complex of "infamous origins" [Arendt 2006a: 13].

The issue of totalitarianism has a central place in Arendt's philosophy [Judt 2002: 58]. She became a famous political philosopher owing to her "Origins of totalitarianism" [Canovan 2002: 146]. She followed its origins, the history of ideas which comprised the totalitarian ideology. She was showing how totalitarianism as a system of political violence is different from despotism, dictatorship and tyranny [Tischner 2002: 35]. She described totalitarianism as a system which deepens the isolation of man, his solitude, at the same time destroying social contacts and the sphere open to public activity of man [Kawalec 2000: 316]. She asked about "the origins of totalitarianism" so about the past which was supposed to provide the explanations for the totalitarian present [Tischner 2002: 36].

During one of her lectures entitled "Concern with politics in the recent European philosophical thought" originally given at American Association of Political Sciences in 1954 she emphasized that: "Like any political philosophy, contemporary concern with politics in Europe can be traced back until shocking experience of two world wars, totalitarian regimes and horrible perspective of nuclear war. In one respect these events encountered philosophy well prepared to recognize the importance of political events, and philosophers more willing to do something than they were in the past [Arendt 2008b: 115]. She stressed that it was necessary to examine the relations occurring between religion and politics: "One of the most surprising by-products of the fight between the free world and totalitarian world is a strong tendency to interpret this conflict in religious categories. We are told that communism is a new «secular religion» for which the free world is defending its own, transcendental «reli-

gious system». The implications of this notion are broader than its direct application; it brings back «religion» to the world of public and political matters from which religion was excluded together with the separation of the Church from the state. Therefore, this notion, although her supporters often do not realize, poses a forgotten issue of relation between religion and politics” [Ibid.: 169].

She emphasized the significance of anti-Semitism in the formation of a totalitarian country and paid attention to the fact of creating totalitarianism by destroying first the political sphere and then the private one [Bernacki 2001: 261]. A historian and sociologist Jan Tomasz Gross emphasized the words of Arendt that “anti-Semitism is such a banal and common prejudice in our times that we do not pay much attention to it [Gross 2008: 84]. She stressed that “many people still think that the origins of Nazi ideology was anti-Semitism, that the politics of the Nazis consequently and uncompromisingly aimed at persecution and the Holocaust. Only the horror at the sight of the scope of the catastrophe, and what is more its homelessness and the feeling of extermination of those who survived, caused” that «Jewish issue» became so noticeable in political life” [Arendt 2008a: 24].

In “The Human Condition” [Arendt 2000] she was proving that the highest achievement of man is not his thought but an active life [Crittenden 1998: 33]. This book is devoted to three types of activities: work, production (manufacture) and action. Man works because of life necessity – biological needs. Because of work he can survive as species not as an individual. Man produces, that is manufactures, “artificial” world of things which can be potentially more permanent than man [Pawelec 2001: 143]. According to Arendt this form of activity is an answer to “worldliness” of man. Man also acts with other people without the mediation of things, that is he participates in politics [Ibid.]. She gave emphasis to the fact that “Human condition includes something more than only the conditions on which life was given to man. People are conditioned beings because whatever they encounter instantly changes into some kind of conditioning of their existence. (...) Besides the conditions (and partially beyond them) on which life on earth was given to man, people constantly create their own conditions which, despite their human origin and changeability, have the some conditioning power as natural things. (...) human condition is not the same as human nature, and a whole sum of human activities and abilities corresponding to human condition, does not take the form of human nature (...) these conditions (S.G. added) do not constitute essential charac-

teristics of human existence in this sense that without them this existence would not be human any more [Arendt 2000: 13-14].

Arendt thought that owing to action, speech, so owing to politics, we may become individuals different from other. Neither work will give us such a possibility because it is a natural, animal activity nor production which displays all individuality in things [Środa 2000: 22]. Action is the only activity requiring the presence of other people. It can only take place in public space which enables interpersonal contacts [Brzechczyn 1998: 93]. For example femininity, love, suffering, fight belonged to privacy and politics, freedom, dialogue and reason belonged to the public sphere. According to Arendt public is everything which can be seen, heard and understood by everyone [Środa 2000: 22]. The sphere in which freedom can realize itself to the fullest is politics [Brzechczyn 1998: 93].

Politics is the highest form of realization of human community and therefore doing politics requires unselfishness. Excessive ambition is a form of evil, thoughtlessness and therefore politics can only be done by thinking people. Her advice concerning a mutual activity is to meet in a pluralistic world by doing something together and take delight in it [Król 2006: 15].

Arendt distinguished two ways of life: *vita contemplativa* (life in contemplation) and *vita activa* (active life). Life in contemplation is alone. Its aim is to experience the Truth and "watching/observing God". Active life is a public life, in the presence of things and people [Brzechczyn 1998: 94].

According to this philosopher all the evil originated from the mixing of history with politics. There was nothing more fragile and transitory than human action. She often indicated the degradation of politics as a result of the intervention of history [Bertherat et al. 1991: 61-62].

In the book entitled „Between Past and Future” [see Arendt 1994] she stressed that the crisis of contemporary world has an especially political character. This crisis is expressed by means of the collapse of tradition, religion and authority [Kowalewska 1994: 254]. This Roman triad was the foundation giving durability to the republican system [Bernacki 2001: 261]. The authority is a guarantor of durability and stability of the world. People need it because of their fragility and mortality. It requires obedience and therefore it is often confused with various forms of violence and power [Kowalewska 1997: 254].

Three fundamental statements concerning the basic principles of political ontology of Arendt are: 1) only action shows the fundamental dimension of human existence and pluralism; 2) human condition is defined by birth and death; 3) uniqueness, instability and openness are a fundamental feature of human relations [Śpiewak 1986: 32-33].

In her next book "On revolution" [see Arendt 1991a] Arendt stated that the thread of tradition was broken by totalitarianism. The presence of a brutal game of interests and unrestrained ambitions can only be minimized by means of the effort of reflections and dialogue [Król 2006: 13]. Every revolution which belonged to the category of actions is the birth and the beginning of something new [Brzechczyn 1998: 95]. She emphasized that in order to "understand the essence of modern revolutions one must bear in mind that the idea of freedom converges in it with the experience of new beginning" [Arendt 1991a: 27]. At the same time she indicated that "freedom happens to be better protected in the countries in which there has not been a revolution (although scandalous economic and political conditions could prevail there) and that in the countries where the revolution lost, there are more civil liberties than in the countries where the revolution would win" [Ibid.: 116].

She believed that one cannot overlook the fact that "war as well as revolution are unthinkable without the use of violence. It is hard to deny that one of the reasons due to which wars change into revolutions so easily, and revolutions display this dangerous tendency to start wars is the fact that violence and violation constitute a common denominator for both of these forms. The amount of violation during the World War I could be enough to trigger a series of revolutions after the end of the war without any revolutionary tradition and even if there had not been any revolution previously" [Arendt 1991a: 16-17].

She perceived a revolution as the only chance to recreate the public sphere in which action would be possible. The revolution itself constituted only the first stage, whilst the second stage would have to be constituting freedom *constitutio liberatis*: „If the ultimate aim of revolutionary aspirations was freedom and *constitutio liberatis* – that is the establishment of public sphere, in which freedom might become an evident fact – then elementary republics, the only tangible place, in which everybody could be free, in fact constituted the foundation of a great republic in which the main aim in the field of internal affairs would be provision of such places of freedom to citizens and protecting them" [Ibid.: 258].

None of her books but "Eichmann in Jerusalem. A report on Banality of Evil" [Arendt 1998b] stirred such a heated discussion [Benhabib 2002: 180]. The trial of this war criminal took place in Jerusalem in 1961 where Arendt went as a "New Yorker" correspondent. She decided to believe Eichmann that he had nothing to do with the extermination of the Jews [Saner 2002: 178]. According to Arendt, Eichmann was not a demon but an average diligent clerk who was commissioned to kill several million of people and he performed this task as well as he could [Wojna 2000: 259].

Marin Buber (1878-1965), the father of philosophy of dialogue, called Eichmann's execution „the mistake of historical dimension" because, as he claimed, this situation could "cause to erase the guilt felt by many young people in Germany" [Szczęśniak 2001: 228].

According to Arendt people do evil things because they cannot think. Therefore, we should attach great importance to philosophy and a philosopher who is "devoted to thinking" [Król 2006: 14]. Man has an identity when he conducts an internal dialogue with himself or he is in constant move, always asks, searches and thinks. She clearly emphasized the role of internal dialogue of thoughts, which she called "the conversation between me and myself" [Young-Bruehl 2002: 67]. And it was not about the fact that the crimes in which Eichmann participated were banal or that the extermination of the Jews was banal [Benhabib 2002: 185]. She later admitted that the style and some slogans in before mentioned book were a mistake and she regretted the use of the expression "banality of evil" [Elon 2002: 166].

She faced the issue of the relation of thought and the world in her last fully edited book entitled "Thinking". The essence of Arendt's philosophy is possible only in man the reconciliation of thought and the world. Her interest in mental activity had two distinct sources: the participation in the abovementioned trial of Eichmann in Jerusalem and the issue of action, especially the term *vita activa* [Arendt 1991b: 33-38]. The reconciliation is possible on the grounds of constantly moving structure „2 in 1", which allows for the reconciliation, or not, of two passions in man – thinking and action [Szczepański 2004: 73, 100]. "Thinking, taking it existentially, is a solitude but not abandonment; solitude is a human situation, in which man is alone with himself. Abandonment comes when we lose the ability to separate into 2 in 1, when we cannot be alone with ourselves, keep us company" [Arendt 1991b: 253].

In the collections of so far unpublished texts of Arendt from the last decade of her life entitled "Responsibility and judgment" she put our ability to distinguish between good and evil

under critical scrutiny. She summarized the issue of relation of philosophy and politics, theory and practice, thinking and action in such words: "Specific questions must wait for specific answers, and if next crises which we have experienced since the beginning of this century can teach us anything then I believe that there are no general criteria allowing us to formulate judgments reliably and no general rules which could be applied to specific cases" [Arendt 2006b: 7]. She indicated the basic difference between thinking and action, in a political sense, which in her opinion "depends on the fact that when I think, I am only with my «I» or other «I», but when I start to act, I am accompanied by others" [Ibid.: 134].

She considered the issue of personal responsibility in the conditions of dictatorship. She stressed that "even relatively small number of people making decisions, who in a normal system can be known by name and surname, in any dictatorship, not to mention totalitarianism, is reduced to unity, and all the institutions which have some control over the decisions and may verify them, are abolished. In the Third Reich there was only one man (Adolf Hitler – S.G. added) entitled to take decisions and therefore he took the full political responsibility" [Ibid.: 62]. She indicated two conditions necessary for the collective responsibility to occur: "I must be held responsible for something I did not do, and the reason for this responsibility must be my membership in a group (community), which no act of my will is able to invalidate – it means a completely different membership, for example from partnership in business, from which if I wish I may withdraw" [Ibid.: 178].

She raised the issue of morality, which in her opinion "concerns man as an individual. Criterion of good and evil, an answer to a question: «How should I behave?»" in the ultimate calculation depends neither on the customs or habits, which are common for me and people who surround me, nor on the commandments of divine or human origin, but on what I decide myself. In other words, I cannot do certain things because if I did them, I would not be able to live with myself" [Ibid.: 126].

In her work entitled "On violence. Civil disobedience" she stressed that "The more doubtful and uncertain tool violence has become in international relations, the greater publicity and attractiveness in internal affairs, especially in relation to revolution it has gained " [Arendt 1999: 17]. She indicated that "Everybody, who is engaged in historical and political thought, must realize how great role violence has always played in human matters" [Ibid.: 14]. She believed that violence "is phenomenologically close to power due to the fact that means of

violence, similarly to all the other tools, are designated and used to increase the natural power before, in the final stage of development, will replace it" [Ibid.: 59], while "it appears where power is endangered, but violence which is left to its own fate leads to the disappearance of power" [Ibid.: 72]. Furthermore, she stressed that "(...) the greater the bureaucratization of public life is, the more attractive violence is. In an advanced bureaucracy there is nobody with whom one can have an argument, to whom one can complain, with whom one can put pressure on the authority. Bureaucracy is a form of government, which deprives everybody of political freedom, authority of action; because government by Nobody is not identical with lack of government and everybody is equally helpless, we have a tyranny without a tyrant [Ibid.: 103-104].

The views of Hannah Arendt clearly correspond with the thought of the blessed John Paul II (pontificate from 1978 to 2005). In his encyclical *Centesimus annus* (Rome, 1 May 1991) the Pope underlined that „it is necessary to notice that in a situation when there is no ultimate truth being a guide for political activity and indicating the direction, it is easy to have the instrumentalization of ideas and convictions for aims which the authority sets for itself [Modrzejewski 2006: 189-190]. History teaches us that democracy without values easily transforms into explicit or camouflaged totalitarianism" (nr 46). The Pope defended the democratic state against totalitarian ideologies [Ballestrem 2002: 296]. Similarly to Arendt he opposed every totalitarian system which deprived man of his right to freedom of thought and religion [Ibid.], he was fighting for man, for his dignity and the right to a full quality of life [Skrzypczak 2006: 119].

The Pope emphasized that a dialogue must be conducted and prejudices must be overcome. Specific indications of John Paul II, how to gradually overcome any manifestations of intolerance, discrimination, anti-Semitism are: speak openly with one another about competition and conflicts of the past, try to recognize their historical conditioning and overcome it by means of mutual care for peace, for consequent testimony of faith and development of moral values [Urban 1997: 63].

In his speech to the representatives of American Jewish Committee (Vatican, 15.02.1985) the Pope emphasized that "Anti-Semitism, which unfortunately still remains an issue in various parts of the world, was condemned many times by Catholic tradition as an approach which is impossible to reconcile with the teaching of Christ and the feeling of due respect for

men and women created in the image and likeness of God. Once again I would like to express the view of the Catholic Church which rejects any form of oppression and persecution, any discrimination of people – regardless of reasons for which it could occur (...)” [Jan Paweł II 1985: 63].

Hannah Arendt stressed that „Jesus from Nazareth was the discoverer of the role of forgiveness in the field of human matters. The fact that he made this discovery in the religious context and expressed it in the religious language is not a reason to treat its secular sense with a lesser seriousness” [Mazurkiewicz 2005: 207]. She believed that the power of forgiveness, according to the teaching of Jesus, is not reserved to God, is also in the power of man: “This authority does not come from God – then it would be so that if man did not forgive but God by means of human beings – but on the contrary, people must activate it in relation to one another mutually and only then they can hope that God will forgive them too” [Ibid.: 212, fn. 23]. Also John Paul II put emphasis to the forgiveness, which concerns the past, but reconciliation – the future. In order to reach permanent peace, the differences between communities discovered by means of appropriate readings of history and acquired owing to new sensitivity, should be respected and accepted [Ibid.: 215].

To sum up, it is worth emphasizing that Arendt was more engaged in the moral issue of evil than the structure of any existing political system [Judt 2002: 60]. She believed in the power of Socratic dialogue (politics as its most perfect form) and in this that man must be conscious of the consequences of his actions [Duda and Śpiewak 2002: 43]. She was never afraid of passing judgments and sticking to them [Judt 2002: 64]. She tried to build new image of political space indicting new perspectives, notions and definitions [Heller 2000: 27]. She was a woman who expressed strong and firm opinions, she was not hiding her elitist prejudices taken from German grammar school [Young-Bruehl 2002: 66]. She reached the conclusion that man who is blind to reality, confused and uprooted, cannot resist totalitarian temptations and the charm of utopia [Ballestrem 2002: 295].

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