

A Stinging Citizen: Socrates “the Gadfly” as a Political Model

By Elisa Ravasio*

*In Arendt’s proposal, Eichmann is the perfect performer: he does not think of the consequences of his actions and obeys orders without questioning the correctness of the values on which they are based. Eichmann and Socrates are perfect opposites. The latter is depicted as a model not only for the ancient but also for the contemporary political life too: unlike Plato’s philosopher who focuses only on speculation, Socrates succeeds in harmonizing the two conflicting passions of thinking and acting. Arendt maintains that only a thinking activity based on the two principles of the *Gorgias* could prevent people from obeying impositions without questioning rulers’ proposals: those are ‘living without contradicting oneself’ and ‘to suffer an injustice rather than to commit’. Consequently, Socrates is the perfect thinker and the correct citizen: he does not want to damage his fellows and tries to improve their shared values to achieve the common good. He examines his fellow citizens’ opinions to rebuke them for scorning what is worthless and to exhort them to look after justice and values useful for the civil life. On the contrary, Eichmann is the perfect a-political person, since he only executes orders without inquiring the correctness of the values which found them.*

Keywords: *thinking, Socrates, Eichmann, dialogue, values*

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to highlight the importance of Socrates as a political model in Arendt’s philosophical thought comparing him, by contrast, with Eichmann, the banality of evil in person, as she defined him. During his trial, what shocked Arendt about him was his *normality*: when he answered the questions of the prosecutor or he had to defend himself from the accusations, he seems foreign to the facts, especially from the Auschwitz issue and the murder of such a high number of people (Arendt 1965, Young-Bruehl 2006, pp. 374–377)¹. He was so calm and detached from what was happening to him and from what he had helped to make during the Nazis regime. Eichmann’s trial urged Arendt to re-discuss the role of critical thinking as a mean to improve politics, namely the realm in which people are equal and try to collaborate in order to make others’ lives better. She found the origin of this peculiar kind of thinking ability and this kind of politics in the ancient thought and practices: Socrates is the perfect ethical model, who prefers to be harmed rather than to hurt someone, and the ideal political realm is the Athenian democracy. The principle of the *Gorgias* embodied by Socrates is

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¹For a different account on the relation between rulers and the people they govern in Plato’s philosophy, see Farrar (1988, pp. 267–269).

fundamental because if some people would harm others, this person would prevent others from joining the political life. Therefore, according to Arendt, the world would be deprived of viewpoints that could enhance the perspective from which observing the same event; of more viewpoints with which to critically analyse ethical, civil, political issues. In addition, it is important to stress that this moral tenet expressed in the *Gorgias* would allow people to actively participate to the civic life respecting others.

Likewise, it should be stressed that is a difficult position to support, more precisely because Arendt believes that this principle should underpin political actions which aim at improving social life and they hope that all people participating in political life will rationally come to accept this same principle. Unfortunately, not always happens that those who participate in civil life live in full compliance with others, so it will be worth analysing referring to Plato’s dialogical method to enrich her position.

So, in her main works, she tried to revive these models for the contemporary political life, since she believed that the risk of falling again in a totalitarian regime is always possible and they can help to prevent this relapse. This return could be possible since people often live without questioning the rules they are given by their rulers, and without respecting different points of view from their own. Moreover, ancient democracy is a model of a participatory politics which has disappeared throughout modern times (Farrar 1988): currently, citizens are accustomed to fully delegate their power to a small and selected group of people who will decide for them what is of most value, giving away their opportunity to actively participate in political decisions (Arendt 1973).

It is worth saying that this elitist choice could lead to an unjust government if the small group doesn’t act for the citizens’ good, so Arendt tries to propose an example of participatory politics to sensitise especially people in modern times to deeply reflect on the values they practice.

To sum up, the analysis in this paper will show how, according to Arendt’s interpretation of ancient politics and some ethical models, contemporary people would avoid a relapse into a totalitarian or authoritarian perspective on politics and could reevaluate their active participation to politics.

Methodology and Materials

My analysis will go through some of Arendt’s considerations about totalitarianism and ancient philosophy trying to highlight the main features of what originated one of the most tragic periods of contemporary history, and also the main means Arendt thinks can help to avoid a relapse into it.

This paper will consider some of her main works in which she points out the main causes of totalitarian regimes in the XX century. I will, also, analyse the legacy of Ancients in her proposal, especially, the focus will be on the Periclean democracy, Aristotle’s philosophy and the Socratic dialogue as positive models for contemporary politics. Even if, there are some critical positions about Socrates

as a political model, the paper will focus on the positive aspects of his ethics and its positive impact on politics (Nietzsche 1966, 2021, Mihre 2006)².

Conversely, in Arendt's view, Plato's political philosophy will be considered as one of the main causes which had led people to forget how the most democratic and respectful way to inter-act in politics would be.

It should be noticed, she is not the only one who discuss the role of democracy in antiquity or the retrieval of ancient philosophy in modern times, but the choice of analysing her main works and the ancient models she deals with falls on specific issues. When she published some of her masterpieces, as *The Origin of Totalitarianism* or *The Human Condition*, her reflections on totalitarianism were the first to be so in-depth and the ones with which historiography and philosophy would have confronted in the years to come. The need to refound the culture and political education of her contemporary citizens in a critical and democratic perspective drew Arendt's attention to models of active participation to civic life by all people and to moral models of coherence between ethical principles and political actions³.

It should, of course, be remembered that other intellectuals were also concerned with a contemporary reinterpretation of ancient democracy and philosophers as Socrates, but this reinterpretation took place at an ethical rather than a political level (see, e.g., *the Virtue Ethics* or Bernard Williams' works)⁴.

Results

The route between the past and the present would have two aims: the former will be to underline the importance of ancient models in Arendt's thought, especially, since she believes they could help contemporary citizens to avoid a relapse into a totalitarian attitude in political and social issues. The latter would be

²Mihre critically analysis Socrates figure and his relationship with Athenian political life. He emphasises the difficulty of discussing the figure of Socrates as a political model because many philosophers including Hegel, Rousseau, some contemporaries including Voegelin, Arendt, Vlastos emphasise his importance for civic life starting from an analysis of his moral principles. Conversely, Mihre is convinced that there is a more than shadow in the Socratic civil life, especially referring to the independence of the democratic realm from his philosophical enquiry. 'The setting for the emergence of philosophy is then a non-philosophical setting, one that is whole without the insights brought on by sustained reflection. This is what we meant when we noted that the city is self-sufficient; the city as city grows out of the need men have for one another, both in an erotic and spirited way' (p. 357). See also Castoriadis 1993 (pp. 109–110), who emphasises the role of active participation in the Athenian democratic life.

³It should be noticed that she warrants slavery and female isolation in ancient democracy for the good of the city: for men to practise virtue, slaves and women must keep their social status. For a critique of this aspect of Arendt's reflections, see Butler and Spivak (2009, pp. 32–34). Regarding these concerns, it is not possible to uphold Arendt's position: what it could be done is to critically take note of the fact that in order to guarantee the full freedom of people to actively participate in politics, she does not openly criticise what should be corrected about Athenian democracy in the context of equality she advocates. See also Vegetti (1987): the author underlines the main differences between man and women's virtues in Aristotle philosophy.

⁴Some of the *Virtue Ethics*' most important representatives are, for example, M. Nussbaum, G. Von Wright, P. Foot, I. Murdoch, N. Sherman, D. Wiggins, e A. MacIntyre.

to understand if, currently, that legacy could be useful for our ethical and political realm. Especially, if some of these classic thoughts could actually be applied to some of our daily issues, above all when we are asked to act with other people sharing the same situations and the same common world. To summarize, the paper aim at underline if ancient philosophical models urge people in modern times to reflect on the importance of being coherent to their system of good moral values and show the possibility of not using violence to interact in civic life.

Discussion

The Origin of Arendt’s Philosophical Thought

According to Arendt, people should critically think before acting with others and this can prevent them to illegally behave or to be accessories of some crimes, as it widely happened during the ‘30s in Europe, namely during totalitarian regimes.

During her life, she experienced Nazis’ persecution and she was forced to leave her own country, Germany, because of her Jewish origins. She was imprisoned in a French concentration camp, but fortunately she managed to escape thanks to a clandestine group which rescued her and her husband. When she reached the USA in 1941, she was still a stateless person because of a Nazis law which deprived Jewish people of their civil rights in 1933. She was stateless until 1951, when she became an American citizen (Young-Bruehl 2006). Her life was too tough, but she always tried to have a critical glance on politics, trying to turn it into better. Her works highlight the importance of being involved in what is happening in political life and the role played by one’s critical activity of thinking to enhance the world shared with other people.

In *The Origin of Totalitarianism* (Arendt 1973), she underlines the main factors which occurred in Europe and brought about Communism and Nazism. Imperialism and Antisemitism were the main factors determining totalitarianism, as well as pan-movements. All these features create a sort of hierarchy among human people mercilessly exploited by totalitarian regimes to impose their ideologies.

Imperialism was responsible for the violence against African and Asian people colonized by Europeans during the XIX century, and also among Europeans between each other: for example, she refers to Boers against Hottentot and to the English-Boer war. In the former case, Boers brutally murdered these tribes; in the latter, English people built some concentration camps for other white people, for other Europeans (Arendt 1973). Reading her thoughts on these facts shows how much she is shocked and incredulous about such a truculent violence committed against people’s fellows.

Moreover, according to Arendt, during the XIX and XX centuries, Antisemitism was spread in all European countries not only in Germany, as we could be led to think: the iconic symbol of what she maintains is the *Dreyfus-affair* (1973, pp. 89–109) which showed that even in France there was a latent but deep aggressiveness against who was considered different, especially against Jewish people.

According to her, also pan-movements contributed to the rise of totalitarian regimes, especially pan-Germanism and pan-Slavism. These movements evoke a shared past, language and culture of German and Slavic people spread all over various countries, as it already was for Jewish people. Their aim was to create a community of shared values thanks to some common cultural elements. As Arendt underlines, these pan-movements tried to describe the group they represent as the new and more modern “chosen people”: this feature was of more interest for those who believe in the possibility to unify all German and Slavic people in one ideal and transnational State, as Jewish already have been for centuries. However, unlike the Jews, they aimed to exclude from their ideal nation all people who are different.

If the *Origin of Totalitarianism* focused on the main historical, cultural, political main causes of the totalitarianism itself, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (Arendt 1963) marked a new path in her thinking, since she concentrates also on individuals who acted during the Nazis’ ages. She described Eichmann as a person who has no ability of thinking about the consequences of his actions, namely he doesn’t have a conscience and he never feel guilty about his heinous actions (Arendt 1965). Arendt followed his trial in Israel in 1961 as *The New Yorker’s* correspondent and she was astonished by his answers to some prosecution questions, especially when he tried to justify his unjust actions and the murder of so many people defining himself as a tool of a bigger machine. He seemed to be at peace with his conscience, therefore nothing could have undermined his coherence to the principles of Nazis regime. According to Arendt’s view, this person was the perfect performer unable to critically think, he was the personification of what she called “the banality of evil”. Eichmann was unable to understand his actions’ seriousness and he was convinced that what he had done, to transfer many people to Auschwitz condemning them to death, was simply what he *had to do*. He seemed to be truly convinced that if he wouldn’t have obeyed, someone else would have complied: during the trial, even if the actions he committed were clearly unprincipled, unjust and harmful, nonetheless he had never questioned them and he was proud of what he had done for his country.

After this experience, Arendt tried to identify a more conscious model of action. If Eichmann is an example of how a person ought never to act, she proposes some alternatives: those who want to participate to the political realm must critically think to what can improve the life of their fellows, as it happened during the Periclean democracy in Athens during the V century BC or as it was for Socrates.

Ancient Models for a New Political Path: Plato

Even if Arendt tries to find out some political models for the contemporary citizens in the ancient democracy of Pericles, nonetheless she is aware of the role played by Plato’s political philosophy in removing people from their responsibility to govern and, more in general, to take care of their political realm.

Especially, she refers to the myth of the cave in the VII book of the *Republic*.

The gulf between philosophy and politics opened historically with the trial and condemnation of Socrates, which history of political thought plays the same role of a turning point that the trial and condemnation of Jesus plays in the history of religion. Our tradition of political thought began when the death of Socrates made Plato despair of polis life and, at the same time, doubt certain fundamentals of Socrates’ teachings’ (Arendt 1990, p. 73)⁵.

Socrates accusation by the restored democracy led Plato to a distrust in this kind of regime, more in general, to a distrust in people ability to properly govern, as it is stated in *VII Letter* (325e-326b):

I was filled with an ardent desire to engage in public affairs, when I considered all this and saw how things were shifting about anyhow in all directions, I finally became dizzy; and although I continued to consider by what means some betterment could be brought about not only in these matters but also in the government as a whole, yet as regards political action I kept constantly waiting for an opportune moment; until, finally, looking at all the States which now exist, I perceived that one and all they are badly governed; for the state of their laws is such as to be almost incurable without some marvelous overhauling and good-luck to boot. So in my praise of the right philosophy, I was compelled to declare that by it one is enabled to discern all forms of justice both political and individual. Wherefore the classes of mankind (I said) will have no cessation from evils until either the class of those who are right and true philosophers attains political supremacy, or else the class of those who hold power in the States becomes, by some dispensation of Heaven, really philosophic⁶.

According to her analysis of the myth of the cave, Arendt highlights how men are not described in terms of *lexis* and *praxis* – according to her, the two essential characteristics of a man conceived as a *zôon politikon*⁷. Conversely, the slaves are looking (*apoblepein*) at something. The inhabitants of the cave are all staring at the images of the reality reflected on the wall in front of them. Even the philosopher, when he comes back after having seen the sun outside the cave, he is unable to make other people understanding what he had seen. No one speaks, no one shares with others his own view about their shared world; no one relies on the company of his fellows.

Arendt points out that people in the cave, in the human world, do not speak, do not have any relation, except when the philosopher returns to explain to them the truth he now knows: the cave is a silent space, because in Arendt’s interpretation, Plato believes that a dialogue based on opinions is not suitable for the political realm. Opinions (*doxai*) that characterized Athenian democracy proved themselves ineffective since they were used to make false accusation against Socrates, who was not able to convince the jury of his innocence: according to Plato, opinions were not enough persuasive, not as much as truth is.

⁵For a critical analysis of the myth of the cave in Arendt’s proposal, see Abensour (2007).

⁶The translation of the Platonic dialogue came from <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu>. For these passages, I referred to, see <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0164%3Aletter%3D7%3Asection%3D326b>.

⁷For a different account of Plato’s political Philosophy, see Trabattini (2001): he tries to show the importance of political realm and human life in Plato’s philosophy.

Moreover, the idea of the described in the VI book of the *Republic* is something visible only by the philosopher: all the others who live the public realm ignore how to put this good into practice, how to properly behave. Through the contemplative activity, only the philosopher-rulers can see it and to find the common good for their fellow citizens.

Arendt also points out that the philosopher's knowledge is mute because it is the knowledge of the contemplation: what the wise man sees outside the cave is so amazing that it cannot be told to others.

In the *Theaetetus* (155d) and in the *VII Letter* (341c), Plato deals with the astonishment (*thaumazein*) felt when a person knows and sees the truth but – Arendt states – he proposed to indefinitely lengthen a moment which leaves people speechless, conversely to what happens in politics where people should be accustomed to dialogue, to exchange their opinions. As she argues, philosophers took refuge in the world of contemplation without taking any part to the life of the community, however they impose their view about how turn into better the life of their fellows.

According to her, Plato was the philosopher who introduced uniformity into the complex and various life of Greek polis and the philosopher who made citizens unbalance to deal with public affairs⁸. Precisely, he introduced the idea of a selected group able to conceive reality from a single and true perspective: these people can select the right actions to practice better than others, so they twisted the public realm into the sovereignty of truth on opinions between equals, namely the sovereignty of political philosophy on the Athenian democratic life. Considering different historical periods, Arendt is worried about applying this kind of elitism in politics, since this small group of people could be guided by racist, violent and prevaricating moral principles. If these people will take over the control of the power they will overrule others, prevaricating them. Sometimes, as it was during the totalitarian regimes, some of those who collaborate with the government did not even find out that their actions were unjust, because they were convinced that those in power have the correct view of how politics and social life should be.

Ancient Models for a New Political Path: Aristotle

Unlike Plato's philosopher, a suitable political model is the man who exercises the ethical virtues described by Aristotle. According to Arendt, Aristotle seized some useful aspects to describe what is the actual good for people: on the contrary, some previous scholars haven't succeeded, as he shows in his critique of Plato's

⁸It is worth saying, that Plato allows women to participate in his Academy and in some dialogues, as it is the *Republic*, they are as able as men to govern the city. The presence of female figures in Plato's dialogues is well known, as is their probable attendance in the Academy: think of Diotima in the *Symposium*, the women philosophers and warriors in the *Republic*, and women present in the Academy such as Axiothea of Phlius and Lastenia of Mantinea. So, when Arendt harshly criticizes Plato, she forgets to mention also some positive aspect of his philosophy that make his thought more inclusive and respectful of differences than she would have us believe. For further considerations concerning Plato and the role of women in his philosophy, see also Lesser (1979).

idea of the good (*NE*, I 6-7, 1096a 10-1097a 14 and VI 7, 1141b 4-8)⁹: discussing Thales and Anaxagoras’ philosophical proposals, Aristotle points out they were wise but they concentrated on something useless for people life (*ta anthropina pragmata*).

In *Philosophy and Politics* (1990), Arendt quotes only some of these Aristotelian statements, but it is interesting to fully discuss them because he emphasizes that some intellectuals do not possess that practical wisdom (*phronêsis*) which is typical of those who virtuously act in the political realm. Some of these philosophers lacked the ability to deliberate about what is good for people because they are like Plato’s one, namely they only focused on what is wonderful and divine, without taking care of human good. They are an example in the flesh of how thought is disconnected from action, of how contemplative life is radically separated from the one of the city. Plato believes that only those who see the truth can have the right to express their own judgments about what is correct or wrong in public life, namely they are the only one who have the right to rule. But, according to Arendt, this is not the right way to conceive politics. Indeed, as she states: “the philosopher can have the experience of the eternal, which to Plato was *arrêthos* (the ‘unspeakable’) and to Aristotle *aneu logou* (‘without word’) [...] but this can occur only outside the realm of human affairs and outside the plurality of men”, but in this way the main features of the public and democratic debate suddenly disappear (Arendt 1998, p. 20).

Arendt’s analysis of Ancients mainly aims at re-evaluating the political realm, as she conceives it, namely as an open exchange of opinions between free citizens: the active life it is never conditioned by the contemplative one as it was in Plato’s philosophy (Zerilli 2002, p. 544).

The men described by Aristotle is a more suitable model for political life, according to Arendt, since she critically underlines that him preferred the contemplative life as the best one to achieve the true good life. Despite of some problematic Aristotle’s reflections, he suggests some significant considerations about the common dimension in general: for Arendt, the main feature which defines the human condition is to actively and freely participate in the public sphere, and the Aristotelian *bios politikos* and ethical virtues perfectly describe that condition: human affairs are undefined and, to enhance the public life, it is necessary to discuss together the kind of measures people should adopt every single time (*NE*, V 10-11, 1137b 29 ff.)¹⁰.

This kind of behavior, namely find the right solution on each occasion, can link individual actions and thoughts to the – so called by Arendt– being together in the public life: the Aristotelian *spudaios* is the person she considers suitable for political life, unlike Plato’s philosopher stuck by the contemplation of truth.

In Arendt’s view, Aristotle grasped some useful aspects to describe what is the actual and human good and he also criticized those people (*sophoi*) who had not been able to point out it, as he showed in his critique of Plato and his idea of the good (*NE*, I 6). According to Aristotelian definition of “man”, all people could

⁹English version of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is drawn from <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0054>.

¹⁰See also Vegetti (2005): he illustrates in detail the main differences between ancient ethics.

be conceived as a *zōon politikon* and a *zōon logon echon* which means to be free from practical duties and participate to the public life, deciding what means and ends are needed to put practice the public good.

It is worth saying that Arendt's reflections on Aristotle are linked with those about the democratic Greek *polis*, considered as a space in which each action (*praxis*) and words (*lexis*) could appear on public scene: one person is really free from the limits imposed by the *oikia*, so that he can actively participate, dialoguing and acting, to the life of the community. Moreover, thanks to these speeches and contributions, it could be possible to politically interact without using violence, and this is what Arendt considers the most relevant aspect of the political actions. In this way, the public space could be a place where everything is decided thanks to the dialogue and persuasion rather than power and violence (Arendt 1998, p. 22).

It is worth to underline Arendt's referencers to the Greek *polis* because ancient political life was the opposite of the unconditional domination of the head of household (the father, the husband) who, at home, exercises this kind of full power over other people (p. 24). In the public sphere one person is truly free to express their opinions, and equality seems to be the true essence of liberty: according to Arendt, this human condition is what makes life worth living¹¹.

Ancient Models for a New Political Path: Socrates

As well as considering the main features of public life using Plato and Aristotle's considerations, Arendt also focuses on the ethical side of political issues. She suggests a new way of behaving in politics, namely grounding the thinking activity on some moral principles. Those who want to contribute to the civic life must correctly think and judge events and people, as Socrates did and unlike Eichmann behaved (Arendt 1978, p. 166 ff). The *thinking activity* deletes all the prejudices and false beliefs. The main ability of the good politician is the skill at deeply analyse the importance of some values which can produce a moral improvement of the political realm (p. 168).

Socrates is chosen as a model of the perfect citizen because he teaches nothing to others. He declares himself ignorant, namely he does not want to make other people wiser than they already are: he does not possess some eternal truth to transmit. Referring to a *Meno's* passage (80c), Arendt points out that Socrates doubted and taught others to do so, because he was convinced this was the only way to correctly think and the only way this activity could be taught (Arendt 2003, p. 170).

¹¹See also Castoriadis (1983, pp. 95–98): the philosopher underlines that men do not know the truth so the exchange of opinions which characterizes Greek democracy could be effective, since people try to find together what just, good, correctness are. Unlike Arendt, he strongly disapproves the exclusion of women and slaves in Athenian democracy. Castoriadis also criticizes Plato's philosophy and his seek of one unique truth, as Arendt did: 'the operative postulate that there is a total and "rational" (and therefore "meaningful") order in the world, along with the necessary implication that there is an order of human affairs linked to the order of the world-what one could call unitary ontology-has plagued political philosophy from Plato through modern liberalism and Marxism' (ibid).

In addition to that, Arendt finds in Plato’s *Gorgias* (482b-c) the two principles which ground such as a correct *thinking* (p. 82): “I [...] should rather choose to have my lyre [...] out of tune [...] or to have any number of people disagreeing with me and contradicting me, than that I should have internal discord and contradiction in my own single self (*ena onta emē emautō*)”¹², and “doing wrong is fouler than suffering it” (e.g., 475b-c and 508c). In Arendt’s view, the latter principle grounds the former.

Moreover, the two principles of the *Gorgias* which the thinking activity is based on make a person able to understand which system of values is more suitable to apply to the public shared space, that is to say that people will choose the more correct set of beliefs to practice without harming anyone.

To explain more in depth these reflections, Arendt analyzes the discussion with Callicles and she points out that Socrates does not convince him to correctly behave, and indeed Callicles argues that a real man would ever behave as Socrates has done in his entire life: the philosopher is like a slave, his condition is that of a person for whom it would be better to be dead rather than to suffer such a deprivation of liberty (*Gorgias*, 474b, 483a-b).

The verbal clash with Callicles is also important because the young man is convinced that he will not feel ashamed (482e-483a) – so he won’t contradict himself – dialoguing with Socrates (“so that if a man is ashamed and dares not say what he thinks, he is forced to contradict himself”). The impetuous and overbearing Callicles is an excellent touchstone for Socrates, precisely because, from his point of view, he impersonates a certain kind of justice, even if his idea of it diametrically opposes to the one proposed by Plato’s teacher: in this conversation Socrates is committed to refute an ethical and political proposal which contrasts to the one it seems to be the most plausible, according to the philosopher. Indeed, for Callicles there is a clear distinction between what happens according to nature (*physei*) and what is established by the law, namely between justice and injustice: the strongest people deserve to have more and they are also able to subdue others, so that they will be the happiest people (*Gorgias*, 483d):

but nature, in my opinion, herself proclaims the fact that it is right for the better to have advantage of the worse, and the abler of the feebler. It is obvious in many cases that this is so, not only in the animal world, but in the states and races, collectively, of men—that right has been decided to consist in the sway and advantage of the stronger over the weaker.

The actual politics – and specifically Callicles is referring to Athenian democracy – contradicts this natural law because it shows that, thanks to the laws, the weakest people have the right to govern and to keep under their control the strongest (483e-484a):

¹²Elsewhere, Plato describes this type of dialogue as the dialogue between two persons (e.g., *Theaetetus*, 190a5-7, *Sophist*, 263e3-8, *Philebus*, 38e1-4). For the relevance of the dialogue as a philosophical method, the relationship between the internal dialogue and the dialogue with the interlocutors in Plato’s thought, cf. Dixsaut (1997).

Why, surely these men follow nature—the nature of right—in acting thus; yes, on my soul, and follow the law of nature—though not that, I dare say, which is made by us; we mold the best and strongest amongst us, taking them from their infancy like young lions, and utterly enthrall them by our spells and witchcraft, telling them the while that they must have but their equal share, and that this is what is fair and just. But, I fancy, when some man arises with a nature of sufficient force, he shakes off all that we have taught him, bursts his bonds, and breaks free [...].

The second part of Callicles' speech is a critique of the philosophical life proposed and portrayed by Socrates himself. Callicles strongly reminds Socrates that philosophy must be practiced only during childhood, because after being grown up one person must devote himself to rhetorical life, namely to politics: only this way they could be actually happy. Philosophy can't help those who live according to its principles, and it does not make them able to protect themselves in a debate. Ominously, the interlocutor of Socrates states "and when you came up in court, though your accuser might be ever so paltry a rascal, you would have to die if he chose to claim death as your penalty" (486a2-4), foretelling Socrates trial and death. Callicles repeatedly tries to demonstrate the importance of rhetoric to overpower others in public and individual debates; to always win in the political arena and, following his argument, to be unjust in order to be happy. The just person described thanks to Callicles' words has the ability to violently take (*bia*) what belongs to the weakest and, therefore, to get richer and richer at the expense of those who do not have the strength to react. Conversely, according to the young man, philosophical life is the one of stones, of losers and he believes that Socrates must abandon his positions because he is becoming ridiculous ("but when a man already advancing in years continues in its pursuit, the affair, Socrates, becomes ridiculous", 485a).

It worth saying that Arendt analyses these passages of the *Gorgias* because she wants to discuss the topic of political and ethical justice. Concerning this topic, what Arendt wants to underline thanks to these lines is that Socrates has accurately understood that, more in general, an injustice to someone has been committed and something unjust occurred depriving the world of some positive values.

However, Arendt points out that the two proposals would be equivalent, if we consider them only from an individual point of view: for Callicles it would be better to commit injustice, for Socrates to suffer it (489a) (Arendt 2003, pp. 83–87). Conversely, from the point of view of the world, she states, the question becomes crucial, because looking at their conversation from the political realm's perspective, to violently act against someone means depriving the world, namely the plurality of actions and discourses, of someone's peculiar and unique thoughts or points of view. So, according to Arendt, as citizens we must prevent injustices, because it is of much interest for our shared world that citizens can peacefully live, act and dialogue.

Moreover, Socrates is the example of those who can help others to improve their ethical perspectives to collaborate in politics because of his coherence with *Gorgias'* principles. He never claims to improve his fellows with his teachings, but he simply invites them to reflect, to seek what kind of principles make their and others life good. He makes the thinking activity visible thanks to the dialogue

with Athenian citizens and he urges people to criticize their values, also political and social events (p. 271).

In Arendt’s proposal, the Socratic dialogue mirrored the typical exchange of opinions of a democratic system, since he always seeks, with the help of interlocutors, some universal principles to find out which model could be the more suitable to apply to specific cases. The constant exchange of opinions of the Athenian democracy is reflected in the Socratic dialogical method with his interlocutors or with himself. Eichmann showed how banal – namely superficial and ordinary – evil could be: he wasn’t aware of other people’s worthiness in enriching his own world, his own experiences, while Socrates showed how deeply-rooted the good corroborated by consistency to good morality and sense of justice towards the political community is, as it is highlighted in the dialogue of the philosopher with the prosopopoeia of Athenian laws in Plato’s *Crito* (50a-c). Ordinary people as Eichmann were able to commit such heinous crimes by considering morality to be nothing more than a common system of habits uncritically learnt. Conversely, Socrates is the personification of a respectful, just and good life. He is the model of an ethical system able to actively and positively contribute to the public realm (pp. 126–127)¹³.

Thinking and Judging

According to Arendt, when Socrates proposes his values to other citizens and when he dialogues with them, he is always aware of the importance of his fellows’ points of view. If necessary, he is critical about their systems, but never imposes his own values since he is able to think how they reached their moral and political positions, namely he is able to understand the path which led them to their ethical considerations. He is respectful of them, and he considers the dialogical method the only mean thanks to which interact with his fellows to improve the values they could share. In Arendt’s opinion, *thinking* is the most political ability a person could have, even because it grounds another kind of activity, namely judging, to express one’s thoughtful opinions.

Judging “concerns matters that are absent, [...] but in contradistinction to the thinking activity, which deals with the invisible in all experiences and always tends to generalize, they always deals with particulars and in this respect are much closer to the world of appearances” (Arendt 1989, p. 213). Thinking activity assumes political importance thanks to the ability to judge, because we can vividly express what we have previously pondered dialoguing with ourselves. “Judgment deals with particulars, and when the thinking ego moving among generalities emerges from its withdrawal and returns to the world of particular appearances, it turns out that mind needs a new “gift” to deal with them” (p. 215). Thinking and judging help people to plumb their convictions to their system of values even measuring them with those of other citizens.

People have to thoroughly imagine what is happening in the world of

¹³For a critical analysis of the faculty of judgment in Arendt and its connection and relation with the thinking activity see also Palazzi (2015, pp. 10–13). See also Steinberger (1990).

appearances – as Arendt called the political realm (p. 187) – then they have to judge the systems of ethical principles rulers are proposing them considering their correctness or not, especially if they are respectful of other fellows or not. They are given the task to sweep away any prejudice and they should try to assume different points of view thanks to which analyse moral and political situations, then choosing the more suitable for a just public life.

According to Arendt, the more useful faculty that allows people to reach this aim is imagination: it can help achieving impartiality, which is the specific virtue of judgment because if there are private factors that affect us, imagination and reflection “allow to get rid of them (free ourselves) and to achieve that relative impartiality which is the specific virtue of judgment” (p. 164). This impartiality is reached when we can consider how other system of values can be applied and what will be their consequences in the political realm: if applied, they will make people hurt each other, they must be excluded. Conversely, we could consider them as effectively relevant.

In the dialogue with oneself, namely the Socratic two-in-one, everyone should try to find those values can make the civic life more just. This system of principles allows a person to find a new and stable foundation to politics, such as freedom, esteem, justice. In order to avoid that any axiological system – even unjust and disrespectful systems – would be promoted at community level, Arendt suggests some criteria which allow us to select what values can be actually considered correct: these criteria are the same as those proposed in the *Gorgias* by Socrates, namely the settled belief that it is preferable to suffer an injustice rather than to commit it (*Gorgias*, 479e6) and always maintain an agreement with oneself with respect to the system of right values one professes (482c).

Conclusions: Ancient Remedies?

According to Arendt’s interpretation of ancient thought and political behaviour, we can draw a conclusion about what she thinks in general about politics and what she is worried about in the case of totalitarianism: in her view, the political world is the world of plurality, namely where some people meet other people and exchange opinions about the common good. The political realm is not a violent place but the one where peace reigns, where people respect each other, they act according to just moral values, and they are correct towards their fellows.

Conversely, the totalitarian regimes create a world where all people seem to be tangled by a shared ideology, but actually they are lonely: therefore, people *only seem* to stand together for a great future that is about to come, but they are no way related with others, they always are suspicious and untrustful.

Totalitarian government, like all tyrannies, certainly could not exist without destroying the public realm of life, that is, without destroying, by isolating men, their political capacities. But totalitarian domination as a form of government is new in that it is not content with this isolation and destroys private life as well. It bases itself on loneliness, on the experience of not belonging to the world at all, which is among the most radical and desperate experiences of man (Arendt 1973, p. 475).

Arendt highlights that, even if the thinking activity happens when people are in solitude, nonetheless this isolated activity is so different from the loneliness that the totalitarian systems produce in the mass society. The isolation in which people live in a totalitarianism provides that people live close to each other, but they are unable to communicate and freely share their opinions, as it happens in Plato’s myth of the cave: all the slaves are very close, but they are also speechless, and they don’t communicate each other at all. According to Arendt, isolation is the distinctive feature of all human actions, but it necessarily needs to go back to the world, to that shared world where people communicate their thoughts to others to devise, as much as possible, a just political realm together. As Arendt remind us: “what makes loneliness so unbearable is the loss of one’s own self which can be realized in solitude but confirmed in its identity only by the trusting and trustworthy company of my equals” (p. 477).

According to Arendt, as showed thanks to Socrates’ two-in-one dialogue and the principles of the *Gorgias*, those people who want to take part to politics must think in solitude and judge considering some different points of view. So, for her, it is important to withdraw from the world to find within oneself the values a person wants to practice and share with other people. Eventually, however, after a person has critically thought about the values, they consider most correct, the dialogue with those who take part in political life becomes the only mean of confrontation that should be used to improve the community life.

According to Arendt, these kinds of activities make people just citizen, so when they will act, they will be able to collaborate without overpowering others. Conversely, a person could be evil since they have always preferred to act only obeying to rulers’ orders, without questioning their correctness, without thinking to the actual consequences of the values put into practice in the actual world. From her point of view and the ancient philosophers she refers to, politics is something which deeply concerns everyone and not only government or rulers. So, we are called to properly reflect on the principles we believe in, and the ones proposed by our rulers, especially when we are challenged to act in tragic historical situations, as it happened in the ’30 in Europe during the XX century.

Never stop thinking in a critical way without harming other people, as Socrates did, must be the only one remedy to an unjust government of politics, to collaborate together to aim at the same good and just life.

It should be emphasized that these considerations imply a very optimistic anthropological and ethical view, precisely because Arendt assumes that those who think also have the courage to renounce violent actions when they are supposed to behave with others. Moreover, she does not clearly explain what might happen, in contrast, to a just person who faces someone willing to commit injustice or use violence as political instruments of interaction.

Undoubtedly, her reflections on Socrates are chequered, especially when she refers to him as an ethical model: she uses the philosopher to reflect on how people might review their thoughts and moral values, when they act in a difficult historical-political context, especially when it implies to make decisions that also affect others. According to Arendt, Socrates’ ethical integrity is what of more interest, even if she is aware this integrity is not costless; since such a stature may

require a rift with the civic life. Thus, there might arise the problem of the gulf between philosophy and the city as it was for Plato, because even the intellectualistic model does not seem to be actual effective in social life (Ober 2003, p. 3)¹⁴. Nevertheless, Arendt very high esteems Socrates precisely because he did not compromise. His integrity and his respect for a just life are the crucial points to reflect on in order to review the value system within which people should orient their thoughts before acting.

What is interesting about these above-mentioned reflections, as well as the reference made to the *Gorgias* and the dialogue between Socrates and Callicles, is that Arendt, Socrates, Plato and even Callicles himself are dialoguing, are employing a non-violent measure to discuss their ethical systems. From the conversation between Callicles and Socrates, the philosopher probably did not completely convince the young man to change his lifestyle: what emerges from the conversation, however, and what Plato wants to emphasize, is that probably dialogue is the only method thanks to which discuss what kind of values deserve to be practiced civically and socially at the community level.

The Athenian democracy as well as the dialogue between citizens mentioned by Arendt refer to small social dimensions, so it is difficult to apply the model on a large scale, but this does not mean that the suggestion given should not be successfully taken up and effectively used as a model of active participation to the civic life. What it should be considered is the possibility given to each person to be visible with their own ideas and moral values.

In its peculiarity, Callicles may also represent a figure to reflect on, above all because he is an example of a system of values implying prevarication and arrogance, but he decides to discuss these positions in a dialogue with a person who might also prove their ineffectiveness. The Aristotelian perspective of the 'slave by nature' deprives other people of their visibility, reducing them to the private or domestic sphere, namely to an invisible realm. Conversely, the dialogical dynamic could propose an alternative to this invisibility: the staged views are discussed by the interlocutors. They show several alternative perspectives from which an ethical and a political question could be examined.

If, according to Arendt, these perspectives should appear only if they are reasoned, thoughtful, and only if those who participate in politics are able to imagine different situations or alternative system of correct values and always bearing in mind the two Socratic criteria, Plato succeeds in grasping perhaps a further important issue, namely the merit of the dialogical method between even radical and provocative positions.

Both, Arendt and Plato, are seeking a solution to a problem concerning the public and individual dimension that excludes violence and force, that tries to very avoid hierarchies between those who participate in it.

¹⁴The author underlines that Socrates "has proved that his own political convictions are drastically at odds with popular views, and that his irritating, idiosyncratic everyday practice of examining his fellow Athenians (and finding them painfully wanting in wisdom), followed necessarily from his convictions". Ober underlines that Socrates' values are more about individual ethics than politics or useful to keep a stable social order. Socrates seems to stand alone against the entire city attitude in youth education.

These considerations probably allow us to formulate a further consideration on the value of these two philosophical reflections. Indeed, a philosophical enquiry should always be critical towards historical, political and cultural systems and it should also try to think of possible alternatives which don't provide for hierarchization or discrimination as Arendt attempts to do identifying the practice of thought and dialogue as the fundamental basis for the political participation. Furthermore, the philosophical ideal should try not to lose his connection with the concrete situations it wants to criticize, thus by it shouldn't remain ineffective. On the contrary, it should help in proposing plausible theoretical alternatives useful to some practices.

The role of these philosophical reflections, namely of Arendt, Socrates, and Plato, is that to be possible examples, possible alternatives to more violent way of acting. Even if these models seems unattainable or inapplicable, they nonetheless invites us to critically think of possible alternatives to our ethical-political praxis in order to improve our lives and the one of other people who shares the same public space with us.

To conclude, it is worth arguing that a democracy in which all citizens actively and consciously participate will probably never be realised, but the models of ethical behaviour suggested by these philosophers could urge people to deeply think of the priceless value of the dialogue and critical thinking for a more democratic and less violent politics to be possible. In Arendt's view, ancient thinkers have something to teach to people in modern times: some of them demonstrate their strict coherence with their moral principles. In her opinion, this coherence and allegiance to good moral values could also help contemporaries to reflect on their own way of being and of conceiving active participation in public life¹⁵.

¹⁵For a different account from which analyze the Athenian democracy and ancient models, see Farrar (1988, pp. 277–278): the author focuses his attention on Thucydides and Pericles, addressing them as who helped in combining the 'external from the internal perspective, spectator from agent', nor 'privilege one at the expense of the other'. They were the two main Athenians who helped in harmonizing people's good and the opportunity to live politics without excluding anyone. See also Castoriadis (1983, pp. 81–82): the author considers Greece and its politics as a germ for the contemporary one. He points out the importance of not losing sight of some issues related to a specific society within which certain institutions are born and formalised. However, despite the specificity of certain practices relating to individual societies, there is always the possibility of understanding them by giving a meaning that can be understood by different cultures than the one whose practices are being analysed. He further adds that the idealisation of some human groups may not make one understand certain issues which are present in specific practices. For example, this might be what happens to Arendt when she neglects to criticise slavery and the role of women in Athenian democracy.

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