

# Arendt, Socrates, and the Ethics of Conscience

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## Introduction

In the book on Adolph Eichmann's trial (*Eichmann in Jerusalem* 1963/68), Hannah Arendt came to the well-known conclusion: Eichmann's evilness, rather than emanating from his wickedness, emanates from his banality, from his inability to think. Thoughtlessness, rather than satanic evil, was his greatest sin. In her "Introduction" to *The Life of the Mind* (1978) Arendt returned to the theme, not from the perspective of evil but that of thinking. If Eichmann's evilness is due to his inability to think, could it be possible that the opposite is true as well? Not that thinking as such would produce the good as its outcome but that only thinking can resist evil:

Could the activity of thinking as such, the habit of examining whatever happens to come to pass or to attract attention, regardless of results and specific content, could this activity be among the conditions that make men abstain from evil-doing or even actually "condition" them against it?<sup>1</sup>

She continues by noting that the very word "con-science" points in this direction insofar as it means "to know with and by myself."<sup>2</sup> In the "Introduction," however, the question remains open – and it remains open for the reason that the first part of the book consists in an effort to examine whether thinking as such, regardless of specific content, could resist evil.

Although Arendt chooses the word "conscience" as her catchword, she does not pay much attention to the history of the concept, starting from Cicero (*conscientia*),

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1 Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*. New York: Harvest Book, 1978, Vol. I, 5.

2 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, Vol. I, 5.

Philo of Alexandria (*syneidos*), and Apostle Paul (*syneidêsis*).<sup>3</sup> Or if she does, she merely points out that the long history of conscience is a long history of misunderstandings, to the extent that conscience has always been conceived as the voice of God or Nature in man. Arendt does not believe that conscience is the voice of God or that of Nature. She believes that it is a metaphor for man's intercourse with himself – and especially for a “side-effect” of such intercourse.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, it is not Cicero, Philo, Paul, nor any of the other authors who have actually written about conscience, including for instance Aquinas, Fichte, and Freud, but Socrates who represents the case of conscience for Arendt. Socrates is the paradigm of a conscientiously thinking being, the diametrical opposite of Eichmann.

In this article, my purpose is first, to examine why Arendt sees in Socrates a conscientiously thinking being and second, to offer a slightly different reading of Socrates, which takes Arendt's analysis as its point of departure but with the aim of fulfilling a gap she leaves in her analysis. This gap is the absence of an answer to the question how the Socratic intercourse between me and myself in effect prevents evil-doing. I will show that it is what Arendt calls the “side-effect” of thinking that is the true precondition not only for Socrates' successful avoidance of evil-doing but for Socratic morality tout court.

## Arendt's Socrates

What then makes Socrates a conscientiously thinking being? Two things, according to Arendt. On the one hand, Socrates conceives of thinking as an activity that presupposes the so-called “two-in-one,” that is, as an activity that takes place between me and myself, as an inner dialogue with two participants.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, and closely related to the first precondition, Socrates is a conscientiously thinking being because of his quest for harmony between the participants of this inner dialogue, for the harmony of the soul. In order to illustrate these Socratic preconditions for conscientious thinking Arendt usually quotes the following passage from *Gorgias* (482b-c):

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3 It is true that these words, especially *syneidos* and *syneidêsis*, were already used before Philo and Paul, but they are the first to use them in a systematic manner. Before them, there are only eleven confirmed occurrences of the term in Greek literature as a whole. As far as I know, Cicero is the first Latin author who uses the word *conscientia*.

4 Hannah Arendt, “Thinking and Moral Considerations.” In Jerome Kohn (ed.), *Responsibility and Judgment*. New York: Schocken Books 2003, 188.

5 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, Vol. I, 185.

I think it's better to have my lyre or a chorus that I might lead out of tune and dissonant, and have the vast majority of men disagree with me and contradict me, than to be out of harmony with myself, to contradict myself, though I'm only one person.<sup>6</sup>

According to Arendt, the reason why such an intercourse and the simultaneous quest for harmony is conscientious stems from the fact that it has a direct link with morality. For Socrates, the harmony between the two components of the soul is the true criterion for morality. In Arendt's view, Socratic morality is based on the assumption that one has to be consistent with oneself,<sup>7</sup> that is, the "two who carry on the dialogue be in good shape, that the partners be friends."<sup>8</sup> This also explains, according to Arendt, why Socrates holds that it is better to suffer wrong than to do wrong: you can remain a friend to one who has suffered wrong, but who would want to be the friend of or live together with a murderer, for instance.<sup>9</sup>

In *Gorgias*, to be sure, the duality of thinking is illustrated by the metaphor of the lyre, which goes beyond mere "two-in-one," since there were more than two strings in the Greek lyre (*kithara*), usually four or more. But Arendt wants to stick to the idea of two, and in the end of the (contested) Platonic dialogue *Hippias Major* (304c-e) she finds another metaphor ("a close relative"), better suited for her purposes. Because the passage is important also for the aims of this article, I quote it at length:

Hippias, my friend, you're a lucky man, because you know which activities a man should practice, and you've practiced them too – successfully, as you say. But I'm apparently held back by my crazy luck. I wander around and I'm always getting stuck. If I make a display of how stuck I am to you wise men, I get mud-spattered by your speeches when I display it. You all say what you just said, that I am spending my time on things that are silly and small and worthless. But when I'm convinced by you and say what you say, that it's much the most excellent thing to be able to present a speech well and finely, and get things done in court or any other gathering, I hear every insult from that man (among others around here) who has always been refuting (*elegcho*) me. He happens to be a close relative (*genos*) of mine, and he lives in the same house. So when I go home to my own place and he hears me saying those things, he asks if I'm not ashamed that I dare discuss fine activities when I've been so plainly refuted about the fine, and it's clear I don't even know at all what that is itself! "Look," he'll say. "How will you know whose speech – or nay other action – is finely presented or not, when you are ignorant of the fine? And when you're in a state like that, do you think it's any better for you to live than die?" That's what I get, as I said. Insults and blame from you, insults from him. But I suppose it is necessary to bear all that. It wouldn't be strange if it

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6 All the citations of Plato in this article are from John M. Cooper (ed.), *Plato: Complete Works*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997.

7 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, Vol. I, 186.

8 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, Vol. I, 187–188.

9 See Hannah Arendt, "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy." In Jerome Kohn (ed.), *Responsibility and Judgment*. New York: Schocken Books 2003, 90–91.

were good for me. I actually think, Hippias, that associating with both of you has done me good. The proverb says, “What’s fine is hard” – I think I know that.

Arendt interprets this passage as follows:

When Hippias goes home, he remains one, for, though he lives alone, he does not seek to keep himself company. He certainly does not lose consciousness; he is simply not in the habit of actualizing it. Instead, when Socrates goes home, he is not alone, he is by himself. Clearly, with this fellow who awaits him, Socrates has to come to some kind of agreement, because they live under the same roof. Better to be at odds with the whole world than be at odds with the only one you are forced to live together with when you have left company behind.<sup>10</sup>

Arendt then continues her analysis, transforming the Aristotelian maxim “the friend is another self” to the would-be Socratic maxim “the self, too, is a kind of friend.”<sup>11</sup> And to the extent that one is capable of maintaining a good relationship with the self, that is, with the friend or the relative, he has passed the test of Socratic morality, based on the principle of non-contradiction. His soul has not turned into a “lyre out of tune” which is characteristic only of wicked men, as Socrates says in *Gorgias*.<sup>12</sup>

The reason why Arendt speaks about Socrates’ *conscience* – or Socratic conscience – lies in the fact that, in her view, later times have given the fellow who awaits Socrates in his home the name of conscience. Or, they should have given this name precisely to this fellow because, in Arendt’s opinion, Socrates’ housemate is what conscience *is*. It is an after-thought roused by bad deeds or thoughts, or, by unexamined opinions as in Socrates’ case. Or, Arendt continues, it is the anticipation of such after-thoughts, the condition of possibility of which is, of course, that you start to think in the first place, that is, if you go “home”: “Conscience is the anticipation of the fellow who awaits you if and when you come home.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, conscience is either a bad conscience or the anticipation of bad conscience, nothing more. And you can have one, according to Arendt, only if you start to (critically) examine your deeds and thoughts, which simultaneously is the guarantee that the soul does not become a dissonant lyre: “No man can keep his conscience intact who cannot actualize the dialogue with himself.”<sup>14</sup>

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10 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, Vol. I, 188.

11 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, Vol. I, 189.

12 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, Vol. I, 189.

13 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, Vol. I, 191.

14 Hannah Arendt, “Socrates.” In Jerome Kohn (ed.), *The Promise of Politics*. New York: Schocken Books 2005, 25.

This in a nutshell is what Arendt thinks about Socratic conscientious thinking which, I believe, she saw as a model against evil-doing. If we examine this analysis more closely, however, some strange contradictions appear. For it seems that it is precisely Hippias whose soul is in harmony. Socrates says that Hippias is happy and Arendt says that he remains one. Of course, this is only so, according to Arendt, because he does not even start to think, but this alludes nevertheless to the fact that it is precisely *thinking* that is the original cause of the dissonant lyre, its condition of possibility. This may in fact be also Arendt's view to the extent that she admits that only good people (presumably, those who do think) are full of regret, but bad people never.<sup>15</sup> But how, then, can she simultaneously subscribe to Socrates' claim that it is characteristic of *bad* people to be at variance with themselves? For if those who do not think remain the same ("one"), and those who think are split in two ("two-in-one"), only the latter can be at variance with themselves and of feeling their immorality. Only thinking men are haunted by a bad conscience and the possibility of inner turmoil, whereas criminals are, as Nietzsche says, "one and all unbroken natures."<sup>16</sup>

Therefore, I think, Arendt's (Socratic) conclusion that "no man can keep his conscience intact who cannot actualize the dialogue with himself" stands in need of correction. It is not the man who cannot actualize the dialogue with himself who cannot keep his conscience intact but on the contrary, only the one who actualizes the dialogue with himself is exposed to a danger that his conscience will not remain intact but becomes vulnerable and confused instead. And for a simple reason: he is the only one who has a conscience in the first place. Moreover, unlike Arendt, who stresses the importance of the inner dialogue (between me and the relative) in Socratic ethics, I would like to emphasize, on the one hand, the radical dissymmetry between Socrates and his relative: what takes place between them is not a proper dialogue between equal participants but rather an interrogation carried out by the relative. On the other hand, I would like to underscore certain characteristics of the relative, especially his extremely severe attitude towards Socrates: "When you're in a state like that," he says to Socrates, "do you think it's any better for you to live than die?" If the relative is as harsh as Socrates reports, it is quite obvious that Socrates is "afraid" of him. At least he admits that it is hard to live with such an obnoxious fellow. Nevertheless, he *wants* to live with him, because *he believes that it is precisely the dissymmetry (between me and the relative) and the fear and respect of the relative, not thinking itself, which is the true criterion of morality*. It is this fear and respect that makes men ethical beings.

In other words, Socratic morality is not based, as Arendt claims, on the assumption that one has to be consistent with oneself, but on the fear of being inconsistent.

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15 Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, Vol. I, 191.

16 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*. New York: Vintage Books 1968, 233§.

It is true that Arendt also pays attention to the negative and burdensome side of Socratic ethics, not only in the sense that Socrates' ethics of conscience does not create values but rather "dissolves accepted rules of conduct,"<sup>17</sup> but also in the sense alluded to above: it is based on the fear of bad conscience. To be sure, in her view, it is based on the fear of contradiction, but to the extent that "the logical contradiction and the ethical bad conscience" was for Socrates, as she correctly notes, one and the same phenomenon,<sup>18</sup> it is obvious that she recognizes the presence of the fear of bad conscience in Socratic ethics as well.<sup>19</sup> To my mind, however, she does not sufficiently stress the role of this fear. According to her, the fear of bad conscience is merely the moral by-product of thought, and in itself of secondary importance.<sup>20</sup> And, to be sure, also Socrates himself always spoke against the idea that evil should be avoided because of the fear of punishment, but this does not entail that he would have abolished fear as such as the motive for avoiding evil. In Socrates' view, the fear of external punishment should just be replaced by the *fear of an internal one*. It is possible that he conceived of thinking as the precondition of such an internal punishment, which would legitimate Arendt's claim that the internal punishment is only the by-product of thinking. However, Socrates' own focus, I believe, was on this by-product itself, which he saw as the most effective means of protecting one's conduct against evil: it prevents evil-doing even if no one will ever know about it (that is, even if he had the ring of Gyges),<sup>21</sup> and more astonishingly, even if the deed is not evil according to the traditional standards of good and evil in the *polis*.

## Socratic Ethics of Conscience

As George Kateb has pointed out, the principle of avoiding injustice is the principle which guides Socrates' conduct from start to finish.<sup>22</sup> Hence, contrary to the traditional Greek ethics of virtue, based on the assumption that evil and injustice take place when the generally accepted virtues are not properly carried out in action, the point of departure for Socrates' ethics of (bad) conscience is evil and injustice themselves. Socrates does not speak on behalf of certain virtues (he does not even know what virtue as such is) but against evil and injustice. The wrong is his ultimate concern, the cornerstone of his ethics: "Neither to do wrong or to return a wrong

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17 Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations," 188.

18 Arendt, "Socrates," 23.

19 Cf. esp. Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, Vol. I, 190.

20 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, Vol. I, 190; Arendt, "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," 107.

21 On the famous discussion on the ring of Gyges that makes a man invisible, cf. Plato, *Republic* 359c-360d.

22 Georg Kateb, "Socratic Integrity." In Ian Shapiro & Robert Adams (eds.), *Integrity and Conscience. Nomos XL*. New York: New York University Press 1998, 79-80.



is ever right, not even to injure in return for an injury received” (*Crito* 49d). What then is “wrong”? How can we say what “wrong” is if we don’t know what “right” or “virtuous” are? Arendt replies: “For Socrates every act is wrong with whose agent I cannot go on living together.”<sup>23</sup> In other words, the wrong is what makes the soul a dissonant lyre. It is said that subjective reflection as well as the idea that each man should act according to his own conviction were introduced in the classical *polis* by the Sophists: “Instead of holding by the existing state of things, *internal* conviction is relied upon.”<sup>24</sup> In this sense, Socrates was certainly a Sophist, but contrary to Sophists in general, Socrates lacks a *positive* conviction. What he has is merely the negative one, the conviction that one should avoid doing wrong, because it disturbs man’s inner harmony, which is, after all, the only criterion for the wrong.

The problem that both Arendt and Socrates face is that it is possible or even very likely that some people are harmonious without ever posing the question of what wrong is. “Bad people,” Arendt complains, “are not full of regrets.”<sup>25</sup> They have a good conscience (“inner harmony”) despite their (bad) deeds – as the thoughtless Eichmann. However, unlike Arendt, who occasionally seems to think that the remedy for thoughtlessness is thinking itself, Socrates presents a different remedy: mocking. None of the Athenians should have a good conscience, and if they did, they needed reproaching. Not because such a conscience is bad as such, but because a good conscience should be earned. And it is earned by exposing oneself to the possibility of a bad one. Hence, in Socrates’ view, there are three ways of avoiding a bad conscience (“lyre out of tune”). The wrong ways of avoiding it are living without recognizing its existence at all, or trying to push the experience away from one’s mind without further examination. The right way of avoiding it is, instead, to have a close and intimate relationship with it. This means that one has to be extremely sensitive to it: one has to concentrate on its ever present possibility, to be continuously conscious of it, and to feel its constant pressure. This is what Socrates thinks and for a simple reason: according to him, namely, *the ever-present possibility of bad conscience is the very foundation of ethics*. Only the one who has recognized this possibility is able to pose the question of what is good and right in the first place. This is, I think, why Socrates insists that it is necessary to bear the insults of the “close relative”: if one wants to be good, one has to be sensitive to the experience of bad conscience.

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23 Arendt, “Some Questions of Moral Philosophy,” 108.

24 G. W. F. Hegel made this point in *The Philosophy of History* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1990, p. 253), but it has been confirmed in many subsequent studies. Cf. e.g. G. F. Kerferd, *The Sophistic Movement*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981; Jacqueline de Romilly, *The Great Sophists in Periclean Athens*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002; W. K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*. Vol. III. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1969, 27–319.

25 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, Vol. I, 191.

This is also in my view the context within which we should examine Socrates' famous *daimonion* (see e.g. *Apology* 31d and 40a-b, *Republic* 496c, *Phaedrus* 242c-d, *Theatetus* 151a). Arendt does not pay much attention to Socrates' *daimonion*, although it is precisely this private divinity which was associated, especially in Arendt's lifetime, with the experience of moral conscience. It is true that this interpretation has recently been challenged, especially because Socrates' *daimonion* seems to lack a moral dimension: the divine sign intervenes also on "insignificant occasions."<sup>26</sup> And, in a sense, this holds true, but only from the perspective which fails to consider that there is no moral "dimension" in Socrates' life, because it is thoroughly moral. There are no morally insignificant events in it to the extent that any man, as Socrates stresses, "who is any good at all," should look to this only in his actions: "whether what he does is right or wrong" (*Apology* 28b). Hence, morality is not a dimension that is sometimes present, sometimes absent for Socrates: it is present whenever man acts, even whenever he thinks.

What then is Socrates' *daimonion* and how does it operate? First, it manifests itself as a sign or a voice. Second, it limits itself, as Arendt also correctly notes, in every case to a prohibition: it diverts Socrates from pursuing action, in the orders of speech and activity, that he is about to undertake.<sup>27</sup> Third, it diverts Socrates from pursuing action that would harm him. What would this be? Any such act or utterance that would bring about dissonance in his soul. In Socrates' view, even death is, as we read in *Apology*, more beneficial than the dissonance of the soul. Only the real possibility of the dissonance of the soul, caused by a morally wrong action, impels the divine sign to manifest itself. Or, to put it another way, *daimonion* warns him about the (future) accusations of the "close relative" (who is, in fact, nothing but the other side of the same phenomenon). This is also the reason why *daimonion* prevents him from participating in the political life of the *polis*. Participation in politics presupposes, according to Socrates, that one becomes necessarily involved in unjust acts. Socrates' *daimonion*, however, does not approve this, because it cannot approve of any wrongdoing.

Of course, this does not yet explain why his *daimonion* opposes him so frequently, "even in small matters" (*Apology* 40a). The reason lies in Socrates' relationship with his "close relative." *Daimonion* warns Socrates whenever he is about to do or say something that would irritate the relative – and it is because of the relative's harsh attitude (in modern terms: Socrates' severe conscience) that *daimonion* warns him so often and regarding such insignificant matters. Hence, it is precisely the relative that is primary, the negative foundation of Socratic ethics. Without it, there would be no need for a *daimonion*, whose only task is in fact anticipating the

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26 Luc Brisson, "Socrates and the Divine Signal according to Plato's Testimony: Philosophical Practice as Rooted in Religious Tradition." *Apeiron*, Vol. 38, No. 2, 2005, 6.

27 See e.g. Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, Vol. 1, 190.



relative's accusations, preventing him from doing and saying anything that would rouse them – without being *fully* successful. For if it were, it would have made itself superfluous: nobody needs a guardian who has nothing to be afraid of. But Socrates is afraid, and he is afraid of the possibility of bad conscience. And yet, he flirts with this possibility, even loves this possibility, because it is the foundation of all ethics: "What is fine, is hard."

## “Knowing with Oneself”

It is true that the Greeks of the classical period did not speak about “bad conscience,” or even about “conscience,” since they lacked the concept. This is arguably the reason why Arendt says that antiquity did not yet know the phenomenon of conscience.<sup>28</sup> But the lack of the concept does not signify that they would have been ignorant of the phenomenon. In fact, Arendt herself admits that Socrates knew it (he, she says, “discovered conscience”), even though he did not yet have a name for it, which is why he was forced to use such metaphors as the “relative” and “divine voice.”<sup>29</sup> This is not the whole truth, however. On the one hand, it is quite possible that at least the experience of guilt (“bad conscience”) is as ancient as civilized humanity, perhaps as ancient as humankind itself.<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, even though the Greeks had no name for conscience, they had a verbal expression for what we would call the experience of conscience: *emautô synoida* (“I know with myself”), from which the noun *syneidêsis* (the Greek term for conscience) was derived during the Hellenistic period.<sup>31</sup> What type of experience, then, was the experience of *emautô synoida*? In order to answer this question, we must look first at the word itself and second at how it was used in the classical period of Greece.

*Synoida* (inf. *syneidenai*) is a compound of *syn*, signifying “with,” and *oida* which is the perfect indicative active of the verb *eidenai*, signifying to “see,” to “perceive,”

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28 Arendt, “Some Questions of Moral Conscience,” 107.

29 Arendt, “Socrates,” 22.

30 Cf. for instance Walter Burkert, *Homo Necans. The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth*. Translated by Peter Bing. Berkeley: University of California Press 1983, 16–29. Burkert argues that even in hunting societies hunters express clear feelings of guilt with regard to the slaughtered animal, sacrificial rituals being their “method” of getting rid of guilt.

31 To be sure, the noun *syneidêsis* was already used in the classical period once, in a fragment attributed to Democritus: “Some people, ignorant about the decomposition of mortal nature and in the *syneidêsis* of evil-doing in life, endure the time of their lives in confusion and fear because of inventing lies about the time after death.” Democritus, *Fragment 297*, DK. Transl. in Philip Bosman, *Conscience in Philo and Paul*. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr 2003, 61. Here, *syneidêsis* should perhaps be translated as “consciousness,” but to the extent that the object of such consciousness is evil-doing, it has a connotation which comes very close to the Christian and modern understanding of conscience. In addition, there existed a substantive participle of Attic origin, *syneidos*, but its usage is as rare as that of *syneidêsis*, appearing only once in the classical texts, namely in the fourth-century oration of Demosthenes, who was defending himself against the accusations of Aeschines: “Even if I would say nothing about the rest of the policies, to me the *syneidos* with each of you in any case suffices.” Demosthenes, *Orations* 18.110. Transl. in Bosman, *Conscience*, 62.

and to “know,” especially intuitively, as opposed to acquiring knowledge through reasoning (*noein*).<sup>32</sup> On the one hand, the verb *synoida* appears in phrases where the subject of the verb “knows with” other persons. This shared knowledge may be neutral, but from very early on it acquired the more specific association of being a potential witness for or against the person with whom the knowledge is shared. In the ninth oration of Isaeus (*Orationes* 9.20), for instance, we can read: “To prove that he was the whole time at variance with Cleon, I shall present to you as witnesses those who know with [*syneidotas martyras*].”<sup>33</sup> These non-reflective phrases occur throughout Greek literature, remarkably often in contexts mentioning or suggesting complicity in conspiracies. Such a context is also at stake for instance in *Antigone* (264–267) when the guard tries to assure Creon of their ignorance regarding the burial of Polynices:

We were prepared to hold glowing iron in our hands and to crawl through fire and to swear by the gods neither to have done nor to be aware (*xyneidenai*) of performing the deed.<sup>34</sup>

On the other hand, the verb appears in phrases where the subject of the verb shares knowledge with itself. In this specific use of *synoida*, a reflexive pronoun *emautô* (“myself”) is usually attached to the verb: *synoida emautô*, “I know with myself” – and it is precisely this reflexive form that is interesting here. It could have a neutral meaning, signifying that one is conscious of something concerning oneself. However, it could also have a moral meaning, expressing negative judgment concerning one’s own moral state as a man and a citizen. For instance, in *Apology* Socrates says that “I am very conscious (*synoida emautô*) that I am not wise at all” (*Apology* 21b). Of course, to a modern reader the way Socrates is using the phrase denotes neutral rather than moral experience. From what we have already said, however, it is obvious that Socrates is not speaking here about something that has no ethical relevance. Indeed, Socrates had a bad conscience because he did not know things, as we have seen in the *Hippias Major* passage: the close relative holds that it is better to Socrates to be dead rather than alive because he does not know what the “fine” is.

However, there exist also more obvious ethical cases linked with the experience of bad conscience. The earliest instance is found in the *Thesmophoriazusae* (476–477) of Aristophanes. “I know with myself of many terrible things [*xynoid’ emautê polla dein*].”<sup>35</sup> In the same way, Isocrates writes in the letter to Demonicus

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32 Cf. Bosman, *Conscience*, 50. Cf. also Don. E. Marietta, “Conscience in Greek Stoicism.” *Numen. International Review for the History of Religions*. Vol. XVII, Fasc. 3 December 1970, 177.

33 Transl. in Bosman, *Conscience*, 51.

34 Transl. in Bosman, *Conscience*, 52.

35 Transl. in Bosman, *Conscience*, 55.

(*Orationes* 1.16): “Never hope to conceal any shameful thing which you have done. For even if you do conceal it from others, you still know with yourself (*seautō syneidēseis*).”<sup>36</sup> In *Anabasis* (1.3.10), Xenophon also says: “I don’t want to go to him, especially being ashamed because I know with myself (*synoida emautō*) that I have proved utterly false to him.”<sup>37</sup> What else is this privately shared knowledge than a pang of conscience? At any rate, it is obvious that this knowledge is harmful, to the extent that to “know with myself” was frequently opposed to happiness. In Plato’s *Republic* (331a), Cephalus says: “Someone who knows that he hasn’t been unjust (*mēden heautōi adikōn syneidotī*) has sweet good hope as his constant companion – a nurse to his old age, as Pindar says.” In like manner, Isocrates writes: “Do not emulate those with the most possessions, but those who do not know of anything bad with themselves [*mēden kakōn sphisi autois syneidotās*]. For with such a psyche one can live the happiest life.” (*Orationes* 2.59.2.)<sup>38</sup> In other words, the one who went through the experience of *emautō synoida* was necessarily unhappy – like Orestes in Euripides’ play *Orestes*, which has become the *locus classicus* in the discussions among scholars on the question of whether the Greeks had a conscience. In the tragedy (392-397), Orestes complains about the inner suffering caused by the matricide:

Menelaus: What is it? What sickness is destroying you?

Orestes: My conscience (*synesis*); I am aware (*synoida*) that I’ve done something terrible.<sup>39</sup>

Usually, of course, the Greek noun *synesis* is translated as “mind,” “understanding,” or “intellect” and not as “conscience” as I have done here, but when the context is taken into account, it seems quite clear that Euripides is referring here to something that we take for granted: the accusing conscience. Hence, it is quite obvious, given the examples above, that the Greeks knew the phenomenon of conscience and, especially, the phenomenon of a guilty conscience. It was expressed in terms of *emautō synoida*, referring to an experience of the inner turmoil caused by evil deeds and plans. However, there is a certain truth in Arendt’s claim that it is, after all, Socrates who discovered the conscience. At least, he conceived the respect of conscience as the true criterion for morality. This is due to the fact that to Socrates “knowing with oneself” had a different meaning than to the Athenians in general.

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<sup>36</sup> Transl. in Bosman, *Conscience*, 58.

<sup>37</sup> Transl. in Bosman, *Conscience*, 57.

<sup>38</sup> Transl. in Bosman, *Conscience*, 69.

<sup>39</sup> Translation mine. Euripides does not use the reflexive pronoun *emautō* here, but this may be the case due to reasons relating to meter.

## The Other's Gaze

Arendt always laid emphasis on the fact that the Greek world was a world of appearances in which one's identity depended on one's worth in the eyes of the others.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, to the Greeks, reputation was everything. Reputation, in turn, was based on the light in which other people saw one.<sup>41</sup> For this reason, the others' gaze rather than the inner voice of conscience determined a person's worth and this worth was the foundation of his identity. One was what the others saw in one, and that one was actually seen, was the precondition of his identity, even of his very existence. This being the case, it is obvious that the experience of *emautô synoida* ("I know with myself") must also be examined in this context, that is, in the context in which knowing (*eidenai*) as such was intimately linked with seeing (*idein*), and in which even self-knowledge was dependent on the others' gaze. Or, as Jean-Pierre Vernant puts it: "Man could never contemplate himself the visible sign of his identity except by seeking in the eyes of others the mirror that externally reflects one's own image."<sup>42</sup>

Indeed, if we study the reasons why *emautô synoida* was a bad experience more closely, we find that it had consequences related to reputation and especially, to the loss of reputation. If someone "knew something with himself," the worst consequence was not that his conscience was pricking him but that he became socially vulnerable. He started to act like a coward, not looking people in the eye and avoiding contact with them.<sup>43</sup> In particular, it prevented *parrhêsia*, speaking one's mind, which had become the duty of an honorable citizen in the *polis* and hence, the precondition for taking part in the political life of Athenian democracy.<sup>44</sup> In fact, such bad consequences are also the main reason why the heroes usually complain about the fact that they "know with themselves" in Euripides' plays. Let us take the example of *Hippolytus*, in which Phaedra, the king's wife, had fallen in love with her husband's son (Hippolytus) by an Amazon woman. Although the play exemplifies a change in the moral landscape in classical Greece in the sense that it introduces mere intention and feeling (love) – nothing had happened between Phaedra and Hippolytus – into the list of sins in the Greek world of morality, the emphasis is still on the external consequences of the sin, not on the internal ones (inner turmoil). The primary concern is reputation, not bad conscience as such:

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40 Cf. esp. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958, 50–58.

41 On the role of recognition (of honor and dishonor) in the Greek landscape of morality cf. K. J. Dover, *Greek Popular Morality*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974, 226–229.

42 Jean-Pierre Vernant, "Introduction." In Vernant (ed.), *The Greeks*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1995, 16.

43 Cf. Bosman, *Conscience*, 278.

44 On the role of *parrhêsia* in Athenian democracy, cf. Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2001.

“I knew that both the deed and the passionate longing for it were discreditable” (*Hippolytus*, 405–410).<sup>45</sup> Bad reputation linked with the lack of *parrhêsia* was likewise the reason why Phaedra committed suicide, rather than not being able to bear the burden of guilt:

My friends, it is this very purpose that is bringing about my death, that I may not be detected bringing shame (*aiskhynas*) to my husband or to the children I gave birth to but rather that they may live in glorious Athens as free men, free of speech (*parrhêsiai*) and flourishing, enjoying good repute where their mother is concerned. For it enslaves a man, even if he is bold of heart, when he is conscious (*xyneidei*) of sins (*kaka*) committed by his mother or father. Only one thing, they say, competes in value with life, the possession of a heart blameless and good. But as for the base among mortals, they are exposed, late or soon, by Time, who holds up to them, as to a young girl, a mirror. In their number may I never be found! This alone, men say, can stand the buffets of life’s battle, a just and virtuous soul in whomsoever found. For time unmask the villain soon or late, holding up to them a mirror as to some blooming maid. Amongst such may I be never seen! (*Hippolytos*, 419–444.)<sup>46</sup>

In other words, Phaedra wants to save her husband and her children from shame and the slavish conduct that follow from it, and to keep her image in the mirror untarnished.

At this point, in fact, we reach the true nature of the experience of *emautô synoida* in the classical era. It was not the guilty conscience as such that made the experience essential as regards the social order of the *polis*. It was its external consequences, crystallized in the concept of shame (*aiskhos*). In his *Rhetoric* (1383b10-15) Aristotle describes shame as follows: “Shame may be defined as pain or disturbance in regard to bad things, whether present, past, or future, which seem likely to involve us in discredit (*adoxia*).”<sup>47</sup> A guilty conscience causes pain and disturbance for its own sake, but shame (“mental picture of disgrace”) presupposes that there are others involved in the situation. One is ashamed only if other people are taken into consideration, especially people “who admire us, those whom we admire, those by whom we wish to be admired, those with whom we are competing, and those whose opinion of us we respect” (*Rhetoric* 1384a25-30). Hence, in classical Greece one sought to avoid the experience of *emautô synoida*, because it brought about shame if recognized by others, to the one who experienced it. Yet, Socrates’ reason to avoid it was different.

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45 Transl. in Euripides, *Children of Heracles, Hippolytus, Andromache, Hecuba*. Ed. and transl. David Kovacs. Loeb Classical Library No. 48. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995.

46 Transl. in Euripides, *Children of Heracles, Hippolytus, Andromache, Hecuba*. Ed. and transl. David Kovacs. Loeb Classical Library No. 48. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995.

47 Transl. in Aristotle, *Art of Rhetoric*. In *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, Vol. 22. Transl. J. H. Freese. Loeb Classical Library No. 193. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926.

## Socratic Citizenship

As we have seen, Socrates would agree with Isocrates: bad conscience is the opposite of happiness. For he holds, as Dana R. Villa correctly notes, that the “happiest man is not the embodiment of virtue but the one who has no evil in his soul because he has avoided injustice.”<sup>48</sup> In Socrates’ view, however, the reason why one should avoid bad conscience is no longer one’s reputation. Instead of the external consequences (contempt and shame) of bad conscience, he concentrates on the internal ones. Bad conscience (“evil in one’s soul”) should be avoided because of its own sake, irrespective of whether it is recognized by others. But it should be avoided, as already said, in a specific way, that is, by being sensitive to its possibility, to the possibility of evil in one’s soul. Even more: one has to know what it is to “know with oneself,” and to know it presupposes that one has an *experience* of it. Hence, one cannot avoid the evil in his soul (caused by injustice) without admitting an “evil” into one’s soul, that is to say, a close relative who dwells inside. This is the price that a just man must pay – as described in *Hippias Major* (302e):

Insults and blame from you, insults from him. But I suppose it is necessary to bear all that. It wouldn’t be strange if it were good for me. I actually think, Hippias, that associating with both of you has done me good. The proverb says, “What’s fine is hard” – I think I know that.

In Socrates’ view, as already stated, the problem is that the Athenians do not want to know anything about this obnoxious knowledge (*emautô synoida*): either they are not aware of it at all, as is the case with Callicles in the *Republic*, or they want to deny its possibility, that is to say, they try to push this knowledge away from their minds, as in the case of Alcibiades in *Symposium*. Hence, the Athenians must be roused and reproached – and this is indeed what Socrates, the gadfly, does: “I never cease to rouse each and every one of you, to persuade and reproach you all day long and everywhere I find myself in your company” (*Apology* 30e). It is not enough that Socrates’ focus is on his own (bad) conscience, Athenians should focus on it as well (they should know what it is to “know with themselves”). Therefore, as long as the Athenians themselves lack this knowledge, the “close relative,” Socrates thought that he *himself* must be such a relative, the substitute for the pricking conscience, not yet interiorized by the Athenians. And indeed, if we are to believe Plato, sometimes he was quite successful. Even Alcibiades, the proudest of young Athenians, felt shame before Socrates:

Socrates is the only man in the world who has made me feel shame – ah, you didn’t think I had it in me, did you? Yes, he makes me feel ashamed, because I know perfectly well [or, I know with myself: *synoida emautô*] that I can’t prove he’s wrong when he tells me what I should do; yet, the moment I leave his side, I go back to my old ways:

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48 Dana R. Villa, *Socratic Citizenship*. Princeton: Princeton University Press 2001, 33.



I cave in to my desire to please the crowd. My whole life has become one constant effort to escape from him and keep away, but when I see him, I feel deeply ashamed, because I'm doing nothing about my way of life, though I have already agreed with him that I should. Sometimes, believe me, I think I would be happier if he were dead. (*Symposium*, 216b.)

From Socrates' point of view, Alcibiades' problem was, of course, that he was nevertheless able to escape, even though only partially ("I can't live with him, and I can't live without him! What *can* I do about him?"). And he was able to escape because he had not interiorized Socrates: he had not yet become Alcibiades' "superego" (to use the Freudian metaphor), but remained external to him. In the company of Socrates, Alcibiades' soul started to protest that his life is no better than the most miserable slave's, and that his life is not worth living. But when he left his company, he could feel at least some relief. He no longer knew with himself (*synoida emautō*).

But why should the Athenians, even the most excellent of them, feel shame, or better still, to have a bad conscience? Because Socrates thought that the ethics of (bad) conscience, introduced by him into the Greek world of morality, is the foundation of true statesmanship as well, no more, no less. Therefore, I agree with Arendt who says that Socrates' way of life had a strong political dimension,<sup>49</sup> and that it is legitimate, as Villa observes, to speak about Socratic citizenship,<sup>50</sup> even though he did not participate in the political life of the *polis*, as he should have done according to the ethical standards of Athens. The point Socrates wanted to make by withdrawing from politics was not that withdrawal as such is good but that the political life of Athens was corrupt – and that it should be renewed. And it should be renewed by introducing new standards, exemplified by the life of Socrates himself. *He* is the one who practices true politics: "I believe that I'm one of a few Athenians – so as not to say I'm not the only one, but the only one among our contemporaries – to take up the true political craft and practice true politics" (*Gorgias* 521d). Everybody should become like him, acutely conscious of the ever-present possibility of injustice – so conscious that one's whole life is determined by this possibility, and hence, by the possibility of bad conscience. In the Greek context, of course, this was scandalous. How could one who is continuously afraid of not being "consistent with oneself" be a courageous and brave citizen of the *polis*? These were the values the Athenians praised, but Socrates desired that they should feel shame, not only before others but before themselves as well. Hence, he indeed did "corrupt" young people, not so much by introducing alien divinities but by making them "soft" in the sense that they ceased to trust the traditional values of the *polis* and, by the same token, themselves. In *Gorgias* (486a-b), Callicles complains to Socrates that the philosophical way of life has made him impotent

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49 Arendt, "Socrates," 15.

50 Villa, *Socratic Citizenship*, 1-58.

and effeminate, and in the *Symposium*, as we have seen, his teachings made others (Alcibiades) impotent and effeminate as well. Indeed, the one who seeks incessantly for signs of evil is notoriously incapable of action. From the Socratic point of view, however, it is precisely such impotence and incapability that is the true condition of possibility of ethics, and politics, too.

## Conclusion

At the beginning of the article, I quoted Arendt's question in which she wonders if thinking as such could be among the conditions that make men abstain from evildoing or even actually "condition" them against it. She does not provide an answer to the question, but she could have, if she had interpreted Socrates' activity as I have done here: thinking, the intercourse between me and myself, is the condition of possibility of the fear of (bad) conscience, and it is this fear, not thinking as such, that impels man to abstain from doing wrong. During the classical period of Greece, to be sure, such fear was not the main reason why people kept themselves in check, if it was a reason at all. On the one hand, it was the fear of (external) punishments (in this life or in Hades) that "encouraged" them to abstinence but, on the other hand, and more importantly, it was the fear of losing one's face and good reputation: "I cannot do evil, because if I do I lose my good reputation, and reputation is everything." Thus reasoned the man in the fifth century Athens, where the other's gaze was among the principal means of controlling people. But Socrates wanted to change things, introduce other means of control and other foundations for identity. He wanted people to interiorize the other's gaze, which was no longer other people's gaze but, rather, the gaze (or, better still, the voice) of the Other. However, it was not until the Christian era that it was properly interiorized and that these new means became dominant. Only then the voice of conscience, "thinking with and by myself" (i.e. whether I have done something "sinful"), became the foundation of identity and the means of controlling people, both by themselves as well as by others. In this sense, Christianity has been Socratism for the people – and it is this Socratism that still haunts our morality today.

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To be sure, Arendt herself would not have subscribed to this last thesis. In her view, it is not Socratic ethics but thoughtlessness and conformism that prevail today:

Thoughtlessness – the heedless recklessness or hopeless confusion or complacent repetition of "truths" which have become trivial and empty – seems to me among the outstanding characteristics of our time.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 5.

It is Eichmann and not Socrates that stands as the ethical paradigm in late modernity. In fact, Arendt seems to claim that Eichmann is the ethical paradigm of *all* epochs, at least in normal conditions. For she argues that conscience “remains a marginal affair in society except in emergencies.”<sup>52</sup> It should also *remain* marginal, since Arendt claims that thinking – the side-effect of which conscience is – does society little good under normal conditions, because it does “not confirm but rather *dissolves* rules of conduct.”<sup>53</sup> In other words, thinking and conscience are anarchical and destructive principles rather than principles that could create order. This does not mean that they have no significance at all. They do, but only during emergencies or “boundary situations.”<sup>54</sup> In these situations thinking has significance, and not only by virtue of causing these situations by dissolving the rules of conduct, but also in the sense that thinking has a liberating effect on another human faculty, the faculty of judgment, which “one may call with some reason” the most political of man’s mental abilities.<sup>55</sup> It is, in other words, through thinking taking place in a boundary situation that the political capacities of men are liberated – which probably means that man is a political animal in such situations alone and that the state of exception is, for Arendt, the condition of possibility of all politics.

If this is true, there is a certain paradox in Arendt’s analysis of late modernity. On the one hand, she maintains that thoughtlessness and conformity are the outstanding characteristics of our time, which implies that we are not living in a state of exception (because thoughtlessness can neither produce or be a consequence of emergency), but, on the other hand, she *also* holds that modernity is characterized by a crisis and the loss of all standards: “The loss of standards defines the modern world in its facticity and cannot be reversed by any sort of return to the good old days or by some arbitrary promulgation of new standards and values.”<sup>56</sup> How, then, are these two views of modernity compatible? How is it possible that modernity is characterized both as thoughtlessness *and* as a state of exception, conformity *and* a boundary situation? Is Arendt attempting to say that in modernity the state of exception has become rule? This was Walter Benjamin’s critical reply to Carl Schmitt in his theses on history, which Arendt surely knew. We are not thinking or judging *although* we are living in a boundary situation, that is to say, in a situation in which practices of thinking and judging as political practices “normally” take place. We are thus caught in a double exception. In the normal situation, thinking, conscience, and judgment remain marginal affairs, whereas in the boundary situation they come to the fore, being simultaneously the result and

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52 Arendt, “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” 188.

53 Arendt, “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” 188; See also Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, Vol. I, 192.

54 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, Vol. I, 192.

55 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, Vol. I, 192.

56 Hannah Arendt, “Introduction into Politics.” In Jerome Kohn (ed.), *The Promise of Politics*. New York: Schocken Books, 2005, 104.

the cause of such a situation. In late modernity, however, thinking, conscience, and judgment remain marginal affairs even though the outstanding characteristic of modernity is the loss of standards. It is an epoch when “things fall apart” and the “center cannot hold,”<sup>57</sup> an epoch when God is dead, at least the “traditional thought of God,” this death being the common although unexamined assumption held almost universally,<sup>58</sup> but it is also an epoch of thoughtlessness and non-conscientiousness, devoid of judgment. It is hence an epoch in which the state of exception has become rule: things fall apart but we do not think or judge. This is, I believe, a logical conclusion of Arendt’s analysis of late modernity.

It must be admitted, however, that Arendt nowhere explicitly came to this conclusion – and perhaps for good reasons. For even though things do indeed fall apart, thinking and judging have perhaps never been so actively practiced than today. What informs late modernity is neither thoughtless conformity to the rule nor thoughtless conformity to the state of exception, because the outstanding characteristic of the epoch is rather a thoughtful and conscientious conformity to the very loss of standards – nihilism as an authentic ethical choice.

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57 Arendt, “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” 188.

58 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, Vol. I, 11.

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