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Preferred Citation: Kulik, Kamila. 2002. *Daimon ... the Citizen: Arendt and Plato's Socrates*. In *Questionable Returns*, ed. A. Bove, Vienna: IWM Junior Visiting Fellows Conferences, Vol. 12.



Daimon ... the Citizen: Arendt and Plato's Socrates

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In this essay I will discuss an important concept within Hannah Arendt's political thought, a concept that she discusses in several books: *The Human Condition* (1958), *The Life of the Mind. Volume one: Thinking* (first published 1978), and in a collection of her essays entitled *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (first published 1961).

The concept I shall discuss is that of the *daimon*. *Daimon* is a Greek word that most philosophers associate with Plato. In the Platonic dialogues, *daimon* refers to a mysterious spirit, and in particular, to a spirit or inner voice that spoke to Socrates, mostly in a negative way (for instance, see *Hippias Major*, 304 b-c).

In Arendt's thought, *daimon* has a completely different meaning. In fact, Arendt resurrects a different Greek tradition of *daimon*. In this tradition, the term describes an individual's political aspect. Arendt does not directly refer to Plato's use of the term with regard to Socrates. However, in her discussion of *daimon*, the figure of Socrates plays an important role, namely, as the "ideal" thinker and citizen.

My comparison of Arendt's and Plato's understanding of *daimon* has three main aims:

First, I would like to demonstrate Arendt's anti-platonism in her understanding of *daimon*, which is connected with Arendt's critique of Plato's metaphysics. Arendt

disagrees with Plato's opposing "true Being" or "Ideas" to "mere appearances". Plato's metaphysics also initiated a tendency in Western philosophy to understand contemplation as the highest state of the mind, and the contemplative way of life as superior to the active (political) life. Arendt argues against this hierarchy and against the opposition between a few philosophers, "wiser" than others, and the many "mere citizens".

Second, I will discuss Arendt's own interpretation of Socrates as an "ideal" citizen and thinker. Her description of Socrates will serve as an example of how narrating a story about an individual's words and deeds "gives him" his *daimon*, in the Arendtian sense.

Third, I will attempt to show how Arendt's notion of *daimon* expands understanding of political life. Here I will introduce a second Greek term, *eudaimonia*, which is usually translated as "happiness", but in Arendt's interpretation means the "good life", the "well-being" of ... *daimon*.

At first, the answer to the question: "Who is the citizen of the *polis* in Arendt's political thought?" is not obvious.

We know who were not citizens of the ancient Greek *polis*, namely: slaves, women, and foreigners. We also know two types of human being who cannot be citizens according to Arendt's understanding of citizenship. First: *homo laborans*, whose work serves the biological processes of the human body (for example, women and slaves). Second: *homo faber*, who creates the world of human "artifice" and produces things. *Homo faber* thinks about his work in terms of means and ends. *Homo laborans* and *homo faber* cannot belong to the political sphere. Activity in the political sphere (action and judging) does not serve any of these kinds of interests.

Of course, in both cases, for the ancient Greeks and for Arendt, only the free man can be a citizen. We can even say that to be a citizen means to be a free man (human being). To be free, according to Arendt and her interpretation of the Greek *polis*, means to be free from both activities, of *homo laborans* and of *homo faber*. It also means to have the same rights as other citizens and to have freedom of speech and action.

Arendt says that the political sphere is a space where, "in acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world" (*The Human Condition*, 179). Arendt juxtaposes the disclosure of "who" we are with "what" we are (our qualities, gifts, talents, shortcomings, and so on). She says that although this unique identity "is implicit in everything we say and do," we cannot control the way it appears to other people. "On the contrary, it is more than likely that the 'who', which appears so

clearly and unmistakably to others, remains hidden from the person himself, like the *daimon* in Greek religion which accompanies each man throughout his life, always looking over his shoulder from behind and thus visible only to those he encounters" (*The Human Condition*, 179-180).

Hence, for Arendt, the political sphere manifests in space both freedom and – correlated with freedom – the unique personal identity, which Arendt metaphorically compares to the Greek *daimon*. In some other passages, Arendt's metaphor becomes stronger: one's identity is not *like* the *daimon*, but Arendt speaks about *daimon as if* it were one's unique identity (see: HC 193). It is very important to remember that the mysterious manifestation of the "who" – which Arendt compares to the way ancient oracles used to manifest themselves "neither revealing nor hiding in words, but giving manifest signs" (see: HC 182) – appears only to other people, not to oneself.

This theme is connected in Arendt's thought with the notion of the pluralism of the human world. Human beings are like spectators watching a spectacle from many different perspectives. There would be no spectacle without the audience. There are no appearances without witnesses who can perceive them. People are both: the spectators and the actors (or agents). Human existence oscillates between these two ways of being: acting (as actors, agents) and observing, thinking (as Spectators). Thinking and judging mean something different, according to Arendt, than the contemplation of the "professional philosophers". Here thinking means to have distance, to reflect, to interpret, and to judge, as Spectators do. The actors, or agents, cannot see the totality of the spectacle. The agents, like the ancient heroes, need the Spectators or poets who can give a testimony of the heroes' activity and who can interpret it in order to make "sense" of their activity in a story with a unique meaning (see: HC 185). "The hero ... needs no heroic qualities," Arendt says; "the word 'hero' originally, that is, in Homer, was no more than a name given each free man who participated in the Trojan enterprise and about whom a story could be told" (HC 186). Arendt says that the "heroic" way of being, and being courageous, just means leaving one's private hiding place and showing in public who one is. We can be the human beings, the "heroes" only in a world of many perspectives.

Stories, with their unique meaning, are "the results of action and speech." The agent (the actor) reveals the story but he (or she) is not an author or producer of it. The story arises thanks to the other people, thanks to the plurality of the Spectators and the storytellers. The hero of the story and the storyteller(s) are dependent upon each other in (co-)creating the story. The full meaning of the story "can reveal itself

only when it has ended” (HC, 192), when the activity of the hero – his (her) words and deeds – would no longer change the story’s plot.

Arendt refers to the ancient saying that “nobody can be called *eudaimon* before he is dead” and says that

eudaimonia means neither happiness nor beatitude.... It has the connotation of blessedness, but without any religious overtones, and it means literally something like the well-being of the *daimon*.... Unlike happiness, therefore, which is a passing mood, and unlike good fortune, which one may have at certain periods of life and lack in others, *eudaimonia*, like life itself, is a lasting state of being which is neither subject to change nor capable of effecting change. To be *eudaimon* and to have been *eudaimon*, according to Aristotle, are the same, just as to ‘live well’ (*eu dzen*) and to have ‘lived well’ are the same as long as life lasts.

The real “face” or maybe rather the “voice” of the *daimon* as the “unchangeable identity of the person” can come into being “only when life departs leaving behind nothing but a story” (HC 192-193).

Hence, although the *daimon*, as the essence of who someone is, appears in each of one’s words and deeds, the *daimon* “comes into being”, precisely speaking, when one’s human (bodily) life ends.¹

Here we see a paradox. On the one hand, the citizen is a free person who manifests his unique personal identity to others (and who cooperates with others in action). On the other hand, the citizen’s unique identity only really manifests itself in a meaningful story which arises after one’s death. To be called “human” the body needs to be the body “of the *daimon*”, but does *daimon* need a body to be a *daimon*, if the *daimon* appears in the strongest way when the human body no longer exists?! Where there can be only a *memory* of the body? (And this only if the body deserved it! For instance, Alcibiades’ body was famous because of his beauty and Socrates’ body was famous for its extreme ugliness, and Plato’s famous name is actually a nickname which comes from his broad shoulders). Of course, the story of the *daimon* also depends on the memory of the storytellers and other Spectators, other citizens. Arendt’s concept of the *daimon* is in general strongly connected with memory, especially the memory of the community (*polis*).

¹ Linda M.G. Zerilli in her essay on *The Arendtian Body* talks about *daimon* as about “man’s ethos.” In: *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt*, ed. B. Honig, Penn. State University Press, 1995, p. 181.

The political is not then only speech and action, but also the outcome of speech and action: the story, also as the history, which is a combination firstly of facts and secondly of the meaning and order attributed to those facts by the people (storytellers or historians).

Arendt writes that the story is the only possibility for immortality that mortals can achieve, namely, when the story become heroes' immortal fame. The source of this kind of immortality is the world of mortal human beings. It is immortality which has a political character, and is possible only thanks to the narrative aspect of the public sphere.²

In her book called *Thinking*, Arendt says that "*Being and Appearing coincide*" (19). There is no hidden "True Being", according to Arendt, as opposed to "mere appearance". That is why the political sphere of appearances is the same as the sphere of Being. Arendt quotes Aristotle: "for what appears to all, this we call Being" (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1172b36ff). "To be" for the human being means here to achieve the *eudaimonia*, to achieve the fame among "all". This was possible only in the political sphere (*polis*), for two reasons: firstly, it was the sphere where one could speak and act in such a way that it would be worth remembering, and secondly, this was the sphere where there was a chance that the deeds and words which deserved fame would not be forgotten, because there were both witnesses and great storytellers. Even Achilles "remains dependent upon the storyteller, poet, or historian, without whom everything he did remains futile; but he is the only 'hero', and therefore the hero par excellence" (HC 194).

On the one hand, Arendt says that to be a hero means just to appear in a political sphere, to show one's unique identity, and it does not mean to act in a "heroic" way, for instance with enormous courage. On the other hand, she says that Achilles was a hero par excellence, because he chose "a short life and premature death" and he did not survive his one supreme act. This made him a master of his identity and possible greatness. *Eudaimonia* can be achieved "only at the price of life and ... one can make sure of it only by ... summing up all of one's life in a single deed, so that the story of the act comes to its end together with life itself" (HC, 193-194).

In this respect, Socrates' story (of life and death) was like Achilles'. Socrates refused to escape the death sentence of the Athenian tribunal, and in this way he "summed up all of his life in a single deed" (in this refusal). He refused to escape it because of his principal belief that: "It is better to be wronged than to do wrong" and that "It would be better for me that my lyre or a chorus I directed should be

² See J. Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt. Life Is a Narrative*, University of Toronto Press, 2001.

out of tune and loud with discord, and that multitudes of men should disagree with me rather than that I, *being one*, should be out of harmony with myself and contradict me” (*Thinking*, 181).

Socrates is a special thinker for Arendt because he “practiced” philosophical truth. He did not keep his truth private, but manifested it in public. He was a hero in two meanings of this word: firstly, a hero as an agent who appears in public life; secondly, a hero as the person who sets the kind of example that teaches and inspires action “without violating the rules of the political realm” (*Truth and Politics*, 248).

I want to quote here a long passage where Arendt describes Socrates as a thinker-citizen. She says that he was

an example of thinker who was not a professional, who in his person unified two apparently contradictory passions, for thinking and acting ... in ... the sense of being equally at home in both spheres and able to move from one sphere to the other with the greatest apparent ease, very much as we ourselves constantly move back and forth between experiences in the world of appearances and the need for reflecting on them ... [he was] a man who counted himself neither among the few ..., who had no aspiration to be a ruler of men, no claim even to be particularly well fitted by his superior wisdom to act in an advisory capacity to those in power, but not a man who submitted meekly to being ruled either; in brief, a thinker who always remained a man being among men, who did not shun the marketplace, who was a citizen among citizens, doing nothing, claiming nothing except what in his opinion every citizen should be and have a right to (*Thinking*, 167).

Arendt understood Socrates’ death sentence. She shows that Socrates’ thinking was destructive for the customs and rules of the *polis*. She says that thinking in general has a destructive, undermining effect on all established criteria and values. Scepticism, nihilism or tyranny do not however arise directly out of this destructive character of thinking. On the contrary, they arise – as Arendt says – out of the “desire to find results that would make further thinking unnecessary ... thinking means that each time you are confronted with some difficulty in life you have to make up your mind anew” (*Thinking*, 176-177). Thinking as making every time the “mind-anew” is destructive and confusing. The greater part of Plato’s dialogues is aporetic. At the end of them we do not know who was right and who was wrong. Instead of answers, more and more questions appear.

Although Socrates' dialectical thinking did not bring any positive solutions, any new answers or values to the people he was talking with, it was meaningful in this special way of "nursing" other's people thinking. He used to describe himself as a midwife: he knew how to deliver others thoughts, and he also could see and show whether "the child" is a real child or a "mere wind-egg" (Arendt adds here with an irony that in Plato's dialogues "hardly anybody among Socrates' interlocutors has brought forth a thought that is not a wind-egg"). Another time he described himself as a gadfly who does not let people live in a peaceful dream (*Apology*); elsewhere in Plato's dialogues Socrates is described as an "electric ray", a fish that paralyzes and numbs by contact, and Socrates adds that he agrees with it if it means that "the electric ray paralyzes others only through being paralyzed itself... It isn't that, knowing the answers myself, I perplex other people; the truth is rather that I infect them also with the perplexity I feel myself" (*Meno*, 80c). (Arendt comments, "It seems that he, unlike the professional philosophers, felt the urge to check with his fellow-men to learn whether his perplexities were shared by them – and this is quite different from the inclination to find solutions for riddles and then demonstrate them to others" (*Thinking*, 172)). Socrates was not a philosopher, who would teach other people, and he was not a sophist, for he did not claim to make men wise. He was showing to the people that the answers they had and understood as obvious were actually neither obvious nor unproblematic.

Socrates is important to Arendt for another reason: because his concept of virtue was connected to the question of knowledge and thinking. As we know, Arendt was astonished at the thoughtlessness of a person who seemed to be an embodiment of evil: Adolf Eichmann. Arendt's work on *Thinking* is strongly connected with Socrates' question: "If there is anything in thinking that can prevent men from doing evil, it must be some property inherent in the activity itself" (*Thinking*, 180).

In Socrates' rule: "Do not contradict yourself", Arendt sees the attempt to answer the question of what it is in thinking that could protect men from doing evil. She connects this rule with Kant's formula of the so-called Categorical Imperative: "Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time *will* that it should become a universal law." A murderer, for example, could not will that "Thou shalt kill" be a general law, since he naturally fears for his own life. If somebody makes himself an exception, he contradicts himself. If we contradict ourselves we can then have an enemy inside of us, like Shakespeare's Richard III, who had an enemy inside himself after his crimes. He tried but could not escape his own frightful company. It is better to be wronged than to do wrong because it is also easier to remain

a friend of the sufferer (in us) than of the wrong-doer, for instance of the murderer (in us).

Arendt argues that Socrates' rule: "do not contradict yourself" is possible only if the human identity is not total "Oneness". Socrates' thesis about harmony in "being one" is, however, constructed in a paradoxical way. Being in harmony or in discord is possible, as Arendt argues, only when there are at least "two tones". "One" in its absolute identity cannot be in harmony or in discord. Hence, Socrates' speaking about harmony bears witness to the original Difference included in human Identity. Socrates discovered this "two-in-one", as Arendt calls it, to be the essence of thought. (Plato translated it into "the soundless dialogue between me and myself"). The activity of thinking is the origin of this division of One into Two. The unity, when the two-in-one become One, unifies, according to Arendt, thanks to the world and our activity among people. We appear to other people as One concrete person, who has one's own name and who is recognizable to others. "So long as I am together with others, barely conscious of myself, I am as I appear to others. We call *consciousness* ... the curious fact that in a sense I also am for myself, though I hardly appear to me ...; I am not only for others but for myself, and in this latter case, I clearly am not just one. A difference is inserted into my Oneness" (*Thinking*, 183).

This is what indicates in the strongest way that man "exits *essentially* in the plural". Even solitude manifests this duality of "one's self". We meet "the others" at the marketplace, but when we are alone we are with "the other" in us. In this duality of me and myself, and in me-asking opposed to me-answering myself.

The structure of "Two-in-One" can recall Socrates' internal voice (*daimon*). Socrates mentioned in one of Plato's dialogues (*Hippias Major*) that even at home he was not alone. He was awaited there by someone who was called "a very obnoxious fellow", "a close relative", who cross-examines Socrates' argument, for instance "whether he is not ashamed of talking about a beautiful way of life, when questioning makes it evident that he does not even know the meaning of the word 'beauty'" (*Hippias Major*, 304d). This is one of the passages in Plato's dialogues where the word *daimon* appears. Socrates says that there is a kind of devil (*daimon*) inside of him which does not let him stop thinking, does not let him stop asking questions when he finds himself in a situation described by his next famous maxim: "I know that I do not know".

Arendt does not refer to Plato's understanding of the *daimon* as an internal spirit. As we saw before, in her thought *daimon* means an appearance of the unique personal identity, which can be seen (only!) by the others, not by one's self. In dia-

logues of Plato Socrates' *daimon* is the opposite. It is an internal spirit, or voice, which does not appear to others, but only to the thinker himself. It is also the spirit which talks to Socrates only in a negative way, for instance: "do not do it", "it is not true", and so on; for instance, it was the voice which told to Socrates that he should not escape the death sentence (in *Krito*).

Arendt refers to the Greek religious tradition, where the *daimon* has an intersubjective character. The *daimon's* native domain is the world of appearances. "It" ("He" or "She"?) cannot show up in a private sphere, in solitude. *Daimon* is not, according to Arendt, the soundless dialogue of the "two-in-one". *Daimon* cannot "feel-well", it cannot achieve *eudaimonia* without the Spectators and the storytellers.

Of course, Socrates' *daimon* in Plato's dialogues is connected with the *daimon* understood in Arendt's way because we know about Socrates' inside voice only from the written stories, namely, Platonic dialogues. Socrates' *daimon* as a negative internal spirit is still not the same as the *daimon* understood as the appearance of a unique identity. Hence, Socrates "had" two *daimons*, firstly, according to Plato: as an invisible, negative voice and secondly, according to Arendt: as a public appearance of his unique identity.

In a couple of important matters Arendt disagrees with Plato's picture of Socrates. One disagreement I have already mentioned: the character of the *daimon*. A second disagreement is connected with Arendt's notion of Socrates' political activity. She says that Socrates' statement in Plato's *Theaetetus* that "great philosophers ... from their youth up have never known the way to the marketplace" is an anti-Socratic statement "if ever there was one" (*Thinking*, 168). In Arendt's opinion, Socrates, unlike Plato, would not have believed that only a few people (professional thinkers) are capable of thought. He talked with everybody. He was touching upon all questions and not just certain objects of thought, which would be visible only to "the eyes of a well-trained mind" (*Thinking*, 180).

Unlike Plato, Socrates did not make a strong opposition between the *vita contemplativa* of the "few" (philosophers) and the *vita activa* – the political life of the "many" citizens. His *daimon*-ical inside voice was a source of his ability to judge in Arendt's understanding of this term. She says that "it is a faculty that judges *particulars* without subsuming them under general rules which can be taught and learned until they grow into habits that can be replaced by other habits and rules ... judging [is] the by-product of the liberating effect of thinking, realizes thinking, makes it manifest in the world of appearances.... The manifestation of the wind of thought is not knowledge; it is the ability to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly" (*Thinking*, 193). Arendt says that judging is the "most political ability". Citizens are

the people who in words and deeds show who they are, show their unique identity (the *daimon*), cooperate with each other and are able to judge, which would not be possible without thinking anew every time – thanks to the *daimon*...