

Waldemar Bulira

A Good Man and a Good Citizen : The Problem of Morality in Public Sphere

Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska. Sectio K, Politologia 13,
133-141

2006

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

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WALDEMAR BULIRA

*A Good Man and a Good Citizen. The
Problem of Morality in the Public Sphere*

Dobry człowiek - dobrym obywatelem. Problem moralności w sferze publicznej

These two mentioned categories were introduced into philosophy of politics by Aristotle. The philosophical tradition of those notions is really huge. But now, in a contemporary discourse about politics - in a political theory and practice - they are seen as anachronistic. Such a situation is disputable. In this short paper I would like to compare very briefly two visions of the problem mentioned in the title: the first one by Hannah Arendt and the second by Agnes Heller. In other words, I would like to answer the following question: *is there any space for a good man in the political world?* For this purpose, my paper consists of three parts. In the first two I elaborate on the main thesis of the attitudes of each philosopher, and in the last one - conclusions - I try to point out the similarities and differences between them.

HANNAH ARDENDT'S SUGGESTION: A
GOOD MAN AS A THREAT TO PUBLIC DOMAIN

Hannah Arendt repeats the ancient distinction between private and public sphere of human life - the two fundamental aspects of being in the world. As we remember, for ancient Greeks the first one was a domain of necessity and the second one was a domain of freedom. It was the distinction between a household and *agora* - the center place of *polis*.¹ For Arendt it also means a quite clear

¹ H. Arendt, *Kondycja ludzka*, tłum. A. Łagodzka, Wyd. ALETHEIA, Warszawa 2000, p. 29. See e.g. Nina Gladziuk's commentary on this issue in her book *Cóż po Grekach. Archetyp polis w twórczości Hannah Arendt*, Warszawa: ISP PAN; Toruń: A. Marszałek 1991, pp. 14-15.

border between morality and politics; in other words, the border between an existence of a good man (private) and that one of a good citizen (public). In one of her essays the author of *The Human Condition* says that in the public sphere a category of good man loses its significance. The German philosopher sees the place for it outside of *agora*. The main reason for this is that for Arendt all notions of *goodness* are valid only in the private sphere of life and in the public world are not important as well as their opposites like *uselessness* and *evil*.²

In this context Arendt refers to Machiavelli. She emphasizes that the majority of interpretations of his position are incorrect. In her mind, Machiavelli's indifference to moral evaluations and his freedom from superstitions is amazing but it is not the point. These features of his philosophy brought the Italian thinker publicity, but it did not contribute to the understanding of his works. But when Machiavelli emphasizes, Arendt maintains, that in the world of public and political matters people *have to learn how not to be good, it does not mean that they have to learn evil*.³ Arendt's position is clear: a good citizen does not need to be a good man. Of course, it does not mean that he or she has to do evil.⁴

From this point of view, Arendt narrows down a scope of political domain. In her mind, politics is a sphere of "acting together and appearing in public", "of inserting ourselves into the world by word and deed". If we accept this definition of public we can see that it does not contain all of our existence and our world, Arendt says. "It is limited by those things which men cannot change at will. And it is only by respecting its own borders that this realm, where we are free to act to change, can remain intact, preserving its integrity and keeping its promises",⁵ she concludes. The philosopher calls for entering public domain without a superfluous luggage of our own prejudices, values, absolute morals, and so on and so forth. The main reason for this situation is that acting in public realm requires transcending "purely local ethics - 'moral standards, the rather contingent manners and mores of regular human intercourse - in the search for that which makes human living together not only possible but also meaningful'".⁶ This is why the political world becomes common for all of its participants despite their

² See H. Arendt, *Co to jest autorytet?*, [w:] *Między czasem minionym a przyszłym. Osiem ćwiczeń z myśli politycznej*, przel. M. Godyń oraz W. Madej, Warszawa 1994, p. 169.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 168. See also N. Machiavelli, *Książę*, tłum. C. Nanke, Wyd. ANTYK, Kęty 2004, pp. 64-65.

⁴ Marcin Król learns very similar lesson from Machiavelli's books. In one of his books we can read that "a notion of virtue has only political meaning. There is no correlation between virtue and political conduct and that is why the issue of morality for Machiavelli is not interesting. Because morality concerns the private sphere of human existence, and political actions, the activities of legislator, leader or a prophet concern only the public sphere. See M. Król, *Historia myśli politycznej. Od Machiavellego po czasy współczesne*, Gdańsk 1998, pp. 21-22.

⁵ H. Arendt, *Prawda i polityka*, [w:] *Między czasem...*, p. 308.

⁶ G. Williams, *Love and Responsibility: a Political Ethics for Hannah Arendt*, "Political Studies" 1998, nr XLVI, pp. 938-939.

differences, or maybe it is better to say that just **because** of this diversity. Such a world becomes unique: it has the same value for everybody, owing to the fact that none of the demonstrated positions at *agora* reaches the dominant position. In the public realm people are citizens. The very fact that they are good men as well is, at this moment, not important.

The world of politics differs from particular worlds of its participants - from professed systems of values, moral standards and so on. As Arendt writes, "in the centre of moral considerations of conduct stands the self: in the centre of political considerations of conduct stands the world".⁷ It is not a *self* (absolute concrete values - morality) which in the public domain does matter, but rather citizen's acting and appearing does. This is only the latter that creates a new, shared by all citizens, quality - politics. Shared by citizens but not by good men. Goodness is not necessary and sometimes could be dangerous for the common world.

In Arendt's philosophical output we can find few warnings against the threat of obeying to absolute norms in politics. She enumerates a case of Eichmann⁸ and another one of Billy Budd⁹, for instance. Eichmann was an official of Nazi's totalitarian state who was responsible for the practical realization of *the final solution of the Jewish problem*. For Hannah Arendt he is a symbol of a mindless obeying of binding norms and rules of political behaviour in his world. The problem is that the fundamental norm was: *Kill Jews!* Eichmann is an example of a very fact that absolute values are a threat to public domain, because, in Arendt's mind, their existence on *agora* dulls human ability to think. Eichmann was "the perfect mass man" as called him W. Allen¹⁰, who did not think and only obeyed official - absolute - rules. He had been given the only one true vision of the world and tried to act in the world according to it. That truth monopolized the public sphere, which, in this situation, was deprived of its essential diversity of opinions. Arendt distinguishes between the truth and an opinion. Only opinion does matter in the public domain.¹¹ Eichmann's world became homogenous and without other perspectives than his.

The famous character of Melville's novel, Billy Budd, was a sailor who had been accused by a bad man - Claggart. Budd could not prove his innocence and finally killed his accuser. That is why he was sentenced to death. Hannah Arendt

⁷ H. Arendt, *Collective Responsibility*, [in:] J. W. Bernauer, S.J. (ed.), *Amor Mundi: Explorations in the Faith and Thought of Hannah Arendt*, Boston, Dordrecht, Lancaster 1987, p. 47.

⁸ H. Arendt, *Eichmann w Jerozolimie. Rzecz o banalności zła*, Kraków 1998.

⁹ H. Arendt, *O rewolucji*, tłum. M. Godyń, Wyd. Kraków: X: Totus, Kraków 1991, pp. 82-88. See also H. Melville, *Billy Budd*, tłum. B. Zieliński, Wyd. Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warszawa 1978.

¹⁰ W. Allen, *Hannah Arendt and the ideological structure of totalitarianism*, "Man and World" 1993, no. 26, p. 116. J. Beatty calls him an "everyman". See J. Beatty, *Thinking and Moral Considerations: Socrates and Arendt's Eichmann*, [in:] L. P. Hinchman, S. K. Hinchman, *Hannah Arendt. Critical Essays*, State University of New York Press, New York 1994, p. 59.

¹¹ See more in:] H. Arendt, *Prawda i polityka...*

elaborates on his case in *On Revolution*. From her perspective, Budd was absolutely good man - he really was innocent - and the Claggart's accusation was something evil. But for Arendt Billy Budd was not a good citizen. He failed as a citizen - he could not prove his right and killed his opponent. In case of the lack of arguments he used his fillings for his defense - his only defense was a violent attack. In the public world goodness as well as evil is dumb. Both of them are connected with each other: they exclude dialogue. They are impulsive, as Arendt puts it, and as such connected with violence, which is dangerous for the very sphere of politics.¹² Politics is everything but violence. It does not matter what is the reason for that. Billy Budd broke the law and had to be punished. "Billy is moral in the way he is because he is a private man who is in but not of this world. [...] his moral nature is unsuited for the common world of politics in which all of us are obliged to live". The public world is something beyond privacy. On *agora* we "can only recognize Billy as a citizen and judge him as a citizen, not as a good and moral man".¹³ In this light, the very fact, that he was a good man has lost its importance. The lack of arguments and only the moral right (awareness of innocence) does not mean the right to kill. Morality does not matter in politics. The public world is a place for citizens, not good/evil men.

The public sphere is a place where equal human beings appear. In Arendt's opinion if we want to support it we should keep our absolute truths out of it. In our private sphere. In a world of good men. If we want to understand Hannah Arendt's position well we have to remember this fundamental statement that not being good in the public world does not mean being evil. This is not what Arendt said. These two issues are just different, as well as public is something different from private, and a simple good man differs from a good citizen.

THE REHABILITATION OF A GOOD MAN - THE PROPOSAL OF AGNES HELLER

Agnes Heller rehabilitates Aristotelian categories of a good man and a good citizen. First and famous Hungarian philosopher says that "distinction between a good citizen and a good man" is for her "very important distinction for the modern world",¹⁴ that there is an elementary need for their coming into being in contemporary public discourse. In these words Heller follows rather Aristotle than Machiavelli or Arendt. From her point of view there is a real and substantial connection between a good man and a good citizen. Both of them are, in her perception, the two pillars of modern ethics and as such they can find place in the

¹² H. Arendt, *O rewolucji*, p. 88.

¹³ S. Dossa, *The Public Realm and the Public Self The Political Theory of Hannah Arendt*, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, Waterloo 1989, p. 118.

¹⁴ S. Torney, *Interviews with Professor Agnes Heller*, Budapest, 1st/2nd July 1998, "Daimon. Revista de Filosofía" 1998, no. 17, p. 46.

public domain.¹⁵ Despite many differences they share *loose ethos*. Modern philosophy of politics has made clear distinction between the private and public sphere of human existence. Heller does not want to abolish this border. She accepts the very fact of disparate character of the mentioned domains. But, as Aristotle did, she sees a common place in the public sphere for both: a good citizen and a good man. It means that for her there is a place for moral maxims as well. For Agnes Heller this is quite clear: a lack of *minima moralia* in politics is not a comfortable situation. But does it mean that our public life should be based on morality? Let me explain this vagueness.

Modernity is seen by Agnes Heller as an epoch which cultivates differences.¹⁶ If we accept such definition simultaneously we have to reject the postulate that politics should be founded on morality. Why? Let me quote the following passage of Heller's *The Power of Shame*:

A moralizing form of politics has the aim of improving mankind and the world. If one wants to improve mankind, one must have a clear conception of what true virtue is. True virtue relates to mankind as a whole, all aspects of man's behaviour both in public and in private life. Moralizing politics opts for a particular way of life and is prepared to demand its general adoption, at least within a given country or political movement. Modern society, however, is characterized by its heterogeneity. It contains a multiplicity of customs and individual options, which is increased further by the various cultural traditions within a country. Moralizing politics is antagonistic towards all cultures, movements, classes, even individuals, with divergent life-styles. It can, therefore, only achieve its goal - of improving mankind in accordance with its conception of virtue - by resorting to force. Moralizing and oppression go hand in hand in politics. The history of puritanical political systems, and particularly of Jacobinism (which openly declared its belief in morality and in terror), speaks for itself.¹⁷

This description of the role of morality in politics is very similar to Arendt's one. Does Heller agree with German philosopher completely? Does she want to eliminate moral maxims from public life? Heller is in favour of accepting "certain moral maxims for political conduct" but such a position is "far from being a plea for all politics to be founded on morality".¹⁸ She distinguishes between absolute moralizing politics and the politics founded on morals maxims. The Hungarian author requires obeying certain rules and norms in political conduct. That is why she formulates the so-called *principled politics*.¹⁹ In her opinion, principles of our

¹⁵ See A. Heller, *Dwa filary nowoczesnej etyki*, tłum. J. P. Hudzik, [in:] A. Heller, *Wykłady i seminarium lubelskie*, Lublin 2006, pp. 13-28, or A. Heller, *Ethics in the Contemporary World*, "Daimon. Revista de Filosofia" 1998, no. 17.

¹⁶ This is the main reason for disagreement between her position and Zygmunt Bauman's. See Bauman's critique of Heller's vision of modernity in Z. Bauman, *Narrating Modernity*, [in:] *The Social Philosophy of Agnes Heller*, ed. John Burnheim, Rodopi, Amsterdam-Atlanta, GA 1994, pp. 97-120.

¹¹ A. Heller, *The Power of Shame. A Rational Perspective*, London, Boston, Melbourne, Henley 1985, p. 255.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 256.

acting in politics are not moral rules as such. They are political. Their moral dimension manifests itself in the form of "moral implication" to obeying them. Heller tries to enumerate the catalogue of such rules of political conduct, which could be useful for every form of democratic politics. It is possible, says philosopher, only if such norms would not be absolute. In other words, she is in favour of very formal vision of such rules, because only in this way mentioned rules could become binding to all participants of public life. At the same time, principled politics would not forbid people to choose their own unique way of life, to present their idiosyncratic opinion on agora, which, as we remember, was a fundamental aspect of the public sphere in Arendt's theory. In this sense, both European-American philosophers agree with each other: absolute moral rules - as Arendt would say, or moralizing forms of politics - as Heller would call them, are dangerous for public common life of community. But Arendt could not agree with Heller's statement that we - political actors - need some moral maxims and principles of political behaviour. For Arendt we should not enter into the public domain with ready interpretation of the common world, because in such case we are closed for other opinions.

A very formal character of mentioned rules, as Heller puts it, could help them to become universal. But if we want to achieve this universality we have to accept that (1) there is a necessity of considering "whether political decisions are in accord with those principles"; (2) there is "a readiness to base one's arguments for any political decision upon those universal principles"; (3) we have to "brand as illegitimate all political decisions taken by individual citizens (or nations) if it is proved that they contradict those principles".²⁰

In *The Power of Shame* we can find enumerated political principles and moral maxims of:²¹ (1) *liberty*, (2) *equality*, (3) *{rational} equality*, (4) *justice*, (5) and *equity*.

On the basis of such formulated catalogue of the political principles and moral maxims of political conduct, Agnes Heller creates *basic law of democratic politics*: "Act in a way which allows all free and rational human beings to assent to the political principles of your actions".²²

The efficiency of basic law of democratic politics mentioned by Heller depends on the very existence of a good citizen. He or she is the elementary condition of its realization. "The good citizen observes this fundamental law continuously and gives his or her consent only to actions and decisions that harmonize with the universal principles of democratic politics".²³ In this sense,

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 257.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 259-260. See also A. Heller, F. Feher, *The Postmodern Political Condition*, Cambridge-Oxford 1988, pp. 68-72.

²² A. Heller, *The Power of Shame...*, p. 260; and A. Heller, F. Feher, *The Postmodern Political Condition*, p. 70.

²³ A. Heller, *The Power of Shame...*, p. 267.

the Aristotelian category becomes, in its own peculiar way, a keystone between a theory and practice in Agnes Heller's philosophy of politics. It is precisely the good citizen, who is a criterion of this imperative. As we can read in her book "the precondition of realizing this fundamental law is citizenry comprised of good citizens".²⁴

For Agnes Heller, a citizen is "every member of modern democratic state",²⁵ which has specific citizen virtues. A virtue is a trait, which is perceived as a standard of behaviour by a community. One can reach it by practice. Virtues are closely connected with values, mean goodness, which has a contractual character. Goodness is defined by community. The main value conditioning "a good life" of the state is justice. Only citizens can decide which institution is just and which one is unjust. But, doing this they have to call other values than justice only: an absolute value of freedom and an absolute value of life. In the modernity those values are universal and as such they can be interpreted in many manners. Heller's proposition is: "equal freedom for all" and "equal life chance for all".²⁶ To such values are related the main civic virtues like: (1) radical tolerance, (2) civic courage, (3) solidarity, (4) justice, (5) intellectual virtues of readiness to rational communication, and (6) *phronesis*.

Simon Tormey in his monograph on Agnes Heller's philosophy, calls those virtues as "specific to the good citizen".²⁷ He claims that from Heller's point of view, the good citizen avoids treating other human being instrumentally - against Kantian maxim of *symmetrical reciprocity*. In this context, being the good citizen means a necessity of taking responsibility for the others. Tormey says one more thing. In his mind, Agnes Heller does not limit mentioned virtues of the good citizen only to public life, but also she sees their very connection with being a decent person in private sphere. This connection is mutual. As we read in his book:

"Heller does not (it should be noted) want to claim that there is a necessary link between being a good person and being a good citizen or vice versa; but the impression she gives is that within a modern setting it is comparatively rare for such virtues to become separated. Most decent people are also 'concerned' people, people that is, who share a 'care for the world'; and most concerned people are concerned not only to do good, but to correct injustice. Similarly, most good citizens are also good people, their desire to promote justice being in most cases a desire to promote the good".²⁸

In other words, Tormey emphasises, that in philosophy of politics of Agnes Heller there is one fundamental rule: we - no matter whether decent people or decent citizens - have to take responsibility for the other man. That is why goodness has not only private dimension. The condition of our *agora* depends on decency: as private as public one.

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

²⁵ A. Heller, F. Feher, *The Postmodern Political Condition*, p. 77.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

²⁷ S. Tormey, *Agnes Heller: Socialism, Autonomy and the Postmodern*, Manchester and New York, Palgrave 2001, p. 179.

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

CONCLUSIONS

In this really short paper I tried to outline the problem of morality in public sphere. As examples I used two theories of politics: Hannah Arendt's and Agnes Heller's. They are two thinkers - two women - in *dark times*, as Martin Jay called them.²⁹ In both cases there is a significant background of their philosophies: the serious warning against the threat of totalitarianism.

For Arendt, let me repeat it once again, goodness is useless in public life or even dangerous for it. Arendt says that agora is beyond particular visions of proper political behaviour, proper morality, proper systems of values. If we enter into the politics with complete idea of it, with concrete goals of our acting we dismiss our community. We want to achieve our own particular goals and not to act for common world. Each system of values destroys human diversity. It makes world homogeneous, inhabited by only one person - the believer -who considers his/her attitude as the only correct. And the public world is something beyond particularity. It should be seen from variety of perspectives. It does not matter if all or maybe only some of political actors are good men. This is not a case if we are talking about the public sphere. This really matters in privacy. Goodness and the truth monopolize something which has to be plural. Be good!, but keep your goodness for yourself, Arendt would say.

Agnes Heller could agree with her great adversary, but not entirely. Moralizing in politics could be really dangerous - we know that from the past events. But in modernity we need some moral maxims to act justly in the political sphere. Moral maxims do not dismiss pluralism in Heller's mind. They are not substantial, but formal. They are "crutches". Nothing more. The Hungarian philosopher emphasises that there are two fundamental values in the modern world of contingency: goodness and justice. The good man and the good citizen. They are the two pillars of our world. The very existence of decent people and just citizens proves that modernity can survive. There is a place for both of them in modern politics, in Heller's opinion, because the latter is about correcting injustice. If we want to correct injustice we have to distinguish between good and evil. That is why there is a correlation between the good men and the good citizens. They share common loose ethos. As we can read in one essay: "To stand firm, to carry the weight of a word which remains unfounded, they require the strength of an Atlas. The decent, upright men and women carry the weight of one of the pillars and the good citizens the weight of the other one. Both have something in common: they take responsibility".³⁰ We have to take responsibility for our world.

²⁹ See M. Jay, *Women in Dark Times: Agnes Heller and Hannah Arendt*, [in:] *The Social Philosophy of Agnes Heller*, ed. John Burnheim, Rodopi, Amsterdam-Atlanta, GA 1994, pp. 41-55.

³⁰ A. Heller, *Dwa filary nowoczesnej etyki*, p. 26.

STRESZCZENIE

Dobry człowiek i dobry obywatel to kategorie klasycznej filozofii polityki, po raz pierwszy użyte przez Arystotelesa. Ich status we współczesnym dyskursie filozoficznym jest dwuznaczny, czego najlepszym wyrazem są dwie skrajne postawy wobec problemu obecności moralności w świecie polityki, prezentowane przez Hannah Arendt i Agnes Heller. Arendt, za Machiavellim, stanowczo wyklucza potrzebę obecności dobrego człowieka w domenie publicznej, widząc jego miejsce w zaciszu gospodarstwa domowego - w sferze prywatnej. Obecność moralności w polityce wiąże ona z zagrożeniem dla wpisanej w „świat pomiędzy” różnorodności. Z kolei Heller zwraca uwagę na dwie zasadnicze wartości w wypełnionym przygodnością świecie post-tradycyjnym: dobroć i sprawiedliwość. Są to dwa filary, dzięki którym nowoczesność, pozbawiona absolutu, nie pogrąży się w chaosie i zniszczeniu. Fakt istnienia *dobrych ludzi* świadczy o tym, że nowoczesny człowiek potrafi rozróżnić pomiędzy dobrem, a złem; zaś to, że w sferze publicznej dążymy do korygowania niesprawiedliwości wpływa na konieczność wypracowania pewnych norm i zasad politycznego działania, które gwarantowałyby racjonalny i pozbawiony dominacji dyskurs.