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Hannah Arendt's Conception of Conscience: Not Everyone Has a Conscience, Whereas Everyone Could Have One

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**Hannah Arendt's Conception of Conscience:
Not Everyone Has a Conscience, Whereas Everyone Could Have One**

Thesis MA Philosophical Perspectives on Politics and the Economy
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Abstract

This master thesis investigates Hannah Arendt's conception of conscience. The implicit scholarly consensus is that Arendt had only one conception of conscience. However, I will argue that Arendt developed two distinct conceptions of conscience and that the later conception should be favoured over her earlier conception. Arendt's first conception of conscience portrays conscience as the result of taking over societal values, which then make demands on us. However, according to her second conception conscience is not automatically active in everyone, instead conscience needs to be brought about by thinking.

To make my argument in favour of Arendt's second conception, I follow a dynamical, historical approach, according to which thinkers can change their minds. If later texts about the same subject (conscience) strongly contradict earlier texts, then we should look at which text fits better in the thinker's overall framework. In the case of Arendt and her conception of conscience, it is her second conception of conscience which can support her banality of evil thesis and her conception of thinking. Therefore, I am concluding that Arendt's conception of conscience as a by-product of thinking should be viewed as her most authoritative position on conscience. As a result, not everyone has a conscience, whereas everyone could have one.

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1. Introduction

Throughout Hannah Arendt's work there are many passages about conscience. However, several of the passages stand in contradiction with one another. For example, in "Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil," (published 1963) Arendt argues that conscience is dangerous because it can take on any content, and in the case of the Nazi Adolf Eichmann demanded him to kill.¹ This statement clearly contradicts her claim that conscience is possibly the only thing that can guard us against committing evil deeds.² The latter claim can be found in "The Life of the Mind" (published posthumously 1978). In the first book conscience is completely unreliable, whereas in the second book conscience carries a certain moral force. The property of reliability is only one aspect to assess conscience. With regard to other aspects, such as origin and nature, there are many further differences between the conceptualization of conscience in the two books. Therefore, I will distinguish two conceptions of conscience in Arendt's work, even though Arendt did not explicitly distinguish them. By distinguishing the two conceptions we can better understand the function of conscience in her work, and it becomes evident that conscience is not a minor issue in her philosophy.

Both conceptions of conscience are developed in connection with the banality of evil. Arendt developed the concept while attending Eichmann's trial. Eichmann was responsible for coordinating the trains that deported the victims of Nazi Germany to concentration and death camps. Arendt writes about Eichmann: "It was sheer thoughtlessness – something by no means identical with stupidity – that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period. And if this is 'banal' [...] if with the best will in the world one cannot extract any diabolical or demonic profundity from Eichmann, that is still far from calling it commonplace."³ Arendt analyses Eichmann as banal and thoughtless and thereby identifies a new type of criminal who lacks a motive. Instead of acting out of evil intentions, Arendt views Eichmann as obeying orders, without reflecting on their content. This observation of a banal form of evil went on to engage Arendt throughout her later work. In "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy" and "The Life of the Mind" Arendt reflects on what, if anything, could prevent human beings from committing evil deeds, under a system that legalized them. Her

¹ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 146.

² Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), 192.

³ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 287-8.

answer seems to be that thinking, with conscience as its by-product (which is her second conception), could possibly prevent us from falling prey to the banality of evil.

Several Arendt scholars such as Danielle Petherbridge, Dana Villa and Arne Johan Vetlesen, have combined Arendt's insights from both conceptions of conscience. My thesis is, however, that any combination of these views does not work, because Arendt's first conception of conscience is inconsistent with her conception of thinking and her concept of the banality of evil. Therefore, priority ought to be given to her second conception of conscience which follows from her conception of thinking and is consistent with the banality of evil.

In order to defend my thesis, I will first, explain Arendt's two conceptions of conscience. To do so, I will look at Arendt's two conceptions of conscience through the prism of different aspects that Thomas Hill discusses. If we analyse conscience with regard to its nature, reliability, importance, origin and function, the many neglected differences between Arendt's first and second conception will become apparent. Most importantly, I will ask: How valuable is conscience in our moral lives? Can a conscience prevent us from committing evil deeds? Furthermore, I will demonstrate why it would be problematic to hold both conceptions at the same time and point out what constitutes the conflict between them.

The second section deals with the interpretation of Arendt's conception of conscience by several Arendt scholars. Petherbridge and Vetlesen seem to combine both conceptions, whereas Villa opts for Arendt's first conception. By outlining their interpretations, I will establish the background to my third section.

The third section contains my argument in favour of the second conception of conscience as a by-product of thinking. If one follows Arendt's own logic rigorously, then only the second conception can be called a conscience. That is the case, because Arendt holds that Eichmann did not think and in her reflections on thinking Arendt claims that conscience is a by-product of thinking. Thus, contrary to her first developed conception of conscience, which held that Eichmann took over Hitler's conscience which demanded "Thou shalt kill," her second conception could explain the connection between Eichmann's non-thinking and him committing evil deeds better. The first conception views Eichmann as thoughtless as well, but it does not acknowledge that thinking causes conscience. Instead of viewing Eichmann as a robot that just followed orders or took over Hitler's conscience, it becomes apparent that Eichmann failed in his responsibility to think and therefore did not develop a conscience which could have stopped him from committing evil. Moreover, the possible objection that

Arendt held both conceptions at the same time (thinking of the first conception as a false, but after all, a conscience) will be addressed and refuted.

The last main section is concerned with demonstrating the relevance of Arendt's conception of conscience being able to explain the banality of evil thesis. Moreover, I will provide some implications of Arendt's conception of conscience and discuss possible criticisms of her conception.

In conclusion, Hannah Arendt's second conception of conscience should be prioritized. The relevance of this conclusion lies in its possible implications, which would be worthy of further exploration. The conclusion shows that, if Arendt is correct, having a conscience is not self-evident, because we need to think in order to develop a conscience. By implication it is likely that we have a moral duty to think. Does such a duty indeed exist and how exactly can we fulfil it? Is Arendt correct in assuming that it does not matter what topics we think about to reach a conscience as thought's by-product?

2. Arendt's Two Conceptions of Conscience

In Arendt's first books reflecting on Nazi Germany, totalitarianism, the holocaust and evil, Arendt develops a very pessimistic notion of conscience. Throughout "Totalitarianism and its Origins" and "Eichmann in Jerusalem," conscience works in favour of evil. Throughout her later works such as "The Life of the Mind" and "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy" a different conception of conscience arises. This second conception of conscience is not pessimistic at all. According to the later Arendt, conscience always carries a force for the good. In the following I, first, analyse her first conception. Second, I briefly explain her theory of thinking because it is essential for understanding her second conception. Finally, I will discuss Arendt's second conception of conscience.

2.1. Arendt's First Conception of Conscience

One of the puzzling results of the trial was that Eichmann did not feel guilty and insisted that he had not acted unlawfully and therefore not committed any crime.⁴ Eichmann knew that he was contributing to the murder of millions of people that had been declared unworthy of living by Nazi Germany. He visited concentration camps and could thus not claim that he did

⁴ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 148, 278.

not know about the gas chambers.⁵ How is it possible that his conscience did not make him feel guilty? As Arendt observes, Eichmann was not primarily motivated by hatred or antisemitism.⁶ Why would he then not feel guilty about organizing the murder of millions of people?

Origin and Nature

Arendt's first conception of conscience provides a possible answer to this puzzle. I believe that her first conception of conscience is similar to an "extreme cultural relativist conception" of conscience (ECR), which is one of the four conceptions of conscience that Thomas Hill (2002) discusses. The ECR: "[...] sees the promptings of conscience as nothing but feelings (1.) that reflect our internalization of whatever choice-guiding, cultural norms we have internalized and (2.) that serve to promote social cohesion by disposing individuals to conform to group standards."⁷ Thus, the nature of conscience involves a number of feelings. These feelings result from being committed to values of society. When values of society are at stake, feelings will be triggered, which promote and sustain these values. The conscience is culturally determined and habituated.⁸ Thus, instead of sharing an inborn conscience with humanity, there are several consciences. These consciences are determined by the cultural norms one ascribes to. Moreover, conscience is a matter of habituation, because one is socialized from an early age onwards to be in line with society's values, which one gets used to.

So far, I have assumed that Arendt's discussion of Eichmann's conscience tells us something about Arendt's general account of conscience. However, one could argue that whenever Arendt speaks about Eichmann's conscience, she is not giving a theory of conscience. There are two possible ways of making this argument. First, one could argue that Arendt speaks about *Eichmann's* conscience, that is, she is making a particular not a general statement about conscience. I would however disagree. Whenever Arendt talks about Eichmann's conscience, she is presuming a general understanding of conscience. This general understanding of conscience is relativistic, and thereby something like ECR. Indeed, if

⁵ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 89-90.

⁶ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 287-88.

⁷ Thomas Hill, *Human Welfare and Moral Worth: Kantian Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 286.

⁸ Hill, *Human Welfare and Moral Worth*, 286-88.

Arendt's conception would not be relativistic, Arendt could not possibly speak of Eichmann's conscience (for he was, according to any reasonable standard, an evil/immoral person).

This brings us to the second possible way of arguing that Arendt is not giving a general account of conscience in her writings on Eichmann. It could be argued that Arendt uses 'conscience' metaphorically. That is, whenever she talks about Eichmann's conscience, she means to use 'conscience' between quotation-marks. When someone, for example, says that 'an unjust law is not a law,' that person does not necessarily contradict themselves. For they use 'law' within 'unjust law' as if it is within quotation marks, that is, without its original meaning. Nonetheless, Arendt nowhere claims that conscience should be understood metaphorically. There is no textual evidence that Arendt uses the concept 'conscience' insincerely. If so, it is hermeneutically illegitimate to say that Arendt's writings on Eichmann's conscience do not reveal a more general theory of conscience.

Arendt observed that Eichmann: "[...] had a conscience, and his conscience functioned in the expected way for about four weeks, whereupon it began to function the other way around."⁹ Here, Arendt clearly contends that Eichmann had a conscience and even holds that it functioned in its expected way, thus against evil, in the beginning. The evidence that Eichmann's conscience at first functioned as we would expect a conscience to function is that he organized that the first train would go to the ghetto of Lodz, where, as he was aware, they did not murder yet, whereas he was ordered to arrange the deportation to either Riga or Minsk.¹⁰

This is the only time that Eichmann did not do exactly as ordered, apart from the time that Himmler ordered him towards the end of the war to stop deporting (and Eichmann continued).¹¹ What is this supposed to tell us about Eichmann's conscience? Arendt's first explanation is her first conception of conscience. According to this conception, conscience is a product of socialization and habituation. At first Eichmann had doubts about deporting people. That was the case, because it was something completely new to him that organising murder could be socially accepted. As soon as he found out that a new policy of mass murder was publicly supported, he became used to his new task and lost his doubts. By living together in a society, people influence each other and develop shared values. The voice and feeling of conscience can demand individuals to adhere to these values.

⁹ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 95.

¹⁰ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 94.

¹¹ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 137-38, 146-47.

A question can be raised. If conscience is culturally habituated does this not entail that people in the resistance in Nazi Germany were not following their conscience? If we would argue that people in the resistance in Nazi Germany did not follow their conscience, we surely end up with a rather counter-intuitive account of conscience. However, if we argue that people in the resistance did follow their conscience, then Arendt's first conception of conscience seems unable to explain this. In Nazi Germany people were culturally habituated to follow Nazi orders. Conscience thereby seems to demand obedience to Nazi Germany.

Arendt did not explicitly address the question of the consciences of good people resisting bad societies (at least not in connection with her first conception). Even though we will see later that there are good reasons to disagree with Arendt's first conception of conscience, I do believe that Arendt has the conceptual tools to tackle this particular problem. Conscience, according to Arendt's first conception, originates from the passive taking over of societal values. Due to there being several groups in society, people's consciences can also passively take over values of their main group of belonging. Depending on whether a person identifies more with the state or a smaller group, such as a religious community, that person will adapt to the values of the group they identify most with. In Nazi Germany most people identified with the state and the Nazis and thus their consciences followed the values of the Nazis. People whose consciences adopted different values than the Nazis, would for example identify more with communism or their church and therefore their conscience had a different content. However, according to Arendt's first conception, these people still did not choose their values, but simply belonged to a different group and took over their values.

Reliability

Following this logic, Eichmann first held the value that murder is generally bad and his conscience was at unease with the idea that he would arrange trains, which people would be forced to enter, to bring them to a camp where they would be murdered. That is why he arranged the first train to go to a camp, where they were less likely to be murdered.

However, shortly afterwards Eichmann's conscience adapted to Hitler's conscience. With Arendt's words: "And just as the law in civilized countries assumes that the voice of conscience tells everybody 'Thou shalt not kill,' even though man's natural desires and inclinations may at times be murderous, so the law of Hitler's land demanded that the voice of conscience tell everybody: 'Thou shalt kill' [...]"¹² Thus, the first four weeks Eichmann's

¹² Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 150.

conscience demanded that he does not kill, and therefore he redirected the train. But, when we recognized Hitler as his legal and moral authority, his conscience demanded that he should kill. For Eichmann to feel at ease with his adapted conscience only required that he: “[...] saw the zeal and eagerness with which ‘good society’ everywhere reacted as he did. He did not need to ‘close his ears to the voice of conscience,’ as the judgment has it, not because he had none, but because his conscience spoke with a ‘respectable voice,’ with the voice of the respectable society around him.”¹³

Since the nature of conscience is culturally determined, conscience is utterly unreliable as a moral standard for our actions. Conscience does not tell us anything about what is good or evil. Instead, conscience tells us what is socially acceptable or unacceptable. A conscience merely conforms to the custom of the time or the majority. Customs can be mistaken and therefore evil. In other words, conscience can support evil. If someone’s conscience commands a person to do what is good, it is only due to a contingent overlap between what is good and what is socially understood to be good. That is, there is no necessary or intrinsic relation between morality and conscience.

Importance

Conscience in Arendt’s first conception is philosophically relevant only because it can be dangerous. When people take on the racist conscience of the society around them, conscience can convince them to be violent or even to murder. The first conception can explain that Eichmann did not feel guilty, because he acted in accordance with his own conscience, which was identical to the conscience of the majority around him. This kind of conscience functions to effectively homogenize society, by condemning and favouring the same things. If Arendt’s first conception is correct, we have reasons to mistrust our conscience and not to rely on it in moral matters.

¹³ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 126.

2.2. Arendt's Second Conception of Conscience and Her Underlying Conception of Thinking

2.2.1. Thinking

In order to understand Arendt's second conception of conscience, one needs to understand her conception of thinking, because in her second conception, conscience is a by-product of thinking.¹⁴ Thus, conscience is caused by thinking. In "Thinking and Moral Considerations: A Lecture" Arendt wonders: "Do the inability to think and a disastrous failure of what we commonly call conscience coincide? The question that imposed itself was: Could the activity of thinking as such, the habit of examining and reflecting upon whatever happens to come to pass, regardless of specific content and quite independent of results, could this activity be of such a nature that it 'conditions' men against evil-doing?"¹⁵ Throughout her report on Eichmann's trial, Arendt had remarked that Eichmann's statements were full of contradictions, of which he was not aware. This showed that Eichmann did not think, because if he would have reflected on what he was saying he would have had to choose between contradictory statements. In her lecture, Arendt aims to examine whether Eichmann's non-thinking and his moral failure were connected.

To examine whether Eichmann's non-thinking and his evil deeds were connected one needs to examine what it means to think. In what sense did Eichmann not think? Some thoughts must have been required to organize the trains going to the concentration camps. When Arendt writes about thinking she does not mean the mere existence of thoughts, instead, she has a specific conception of thinking in mind.¹⁶

First, it is important to remember, that even if for something to count as thinking in Arendt's sense it has to fulfil some criteria, she did not hold that only a few chosen people are able to think. Instead, she was convinced that everyone holds the necessary faculty to think.¹⁷ This is important for responsibility. If only the very smartest philosophers were able to think, then we could not hold anyone else accountable for a failure to think.

Second, thinking, according to Arendt, is a soundless dialogue, which each individual carries out with themselves.¹⁸ For thoughts to count as thinking (instead of mere

¹⁴ Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 193.

¹⁵ Hannah Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations: A Lecture," 418.

¹⁶ Sonja Schierbaum, "Umgang mit Sich selbst Als Dialog: Hannah Arendts Modell des Denkens," *Zeitschrift Für Philosophische Forschung* 73, no. 2 (2019): 248.

¹⁷ Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 191.

¹⁸ Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 64.

consciousness), a person must think about something “[...] in the form of a silent dialogue.”¹⁹ Such a dialogue is possible, because of consciousness. When we are conscious of ourselves, we relate to ourselves as two-in-one. There is a part of us that remains in the first personal point of view, while the second part responds by taking a more objective point of view.²⁰ When we think we therefore encounter ourselves. It is inherently dialectical. For example, when I have the wish to steal sweets, I have a first-personal acquaintance with my wish. I naturally identify with my thought “I want to steal sweets.” Nonetheless, I can also start thinking about whether I should steal. Now I do not identify with my wish any longer. Instead, my wish for stealing becomes the object of my thought. When I do so, I split up into the one who wishes to steal and the other one who deliberates whether that is a good idea.

Such an encounter with oneself does not happen when we simply have thoughts to fulfil a task as efficiently as possible. For Arendt, there seems to be a distinction between on the one hand instrumental reasoning, and on the other hand thinking. This can best be explained in terms of the means/ends-distinction. Thinking is capable of both affecting the means and the ends of our actions, whereas instrumental reasoning can only affect the means of our actions. An efficient person might be capable of stealing sweets as fast as possible (e.g.: finding the best technique and going to a supermarket without video surveillance). An efficient person is, however, as such, not capable to reflect upon the question whether one should steal. Eichmann was efficient with his task to organize deportations to concentration camps. Yet he did not reflect upon the ends of his actions. Thinking includes reflecting on one’s ends, whereas mere instrumental reasoning is excluded from thinking. Eichmann organizing deportations does therefore not count as thinking in Arendt’s sense. In such a situation there is no dialogue and thus, it does not fulfil Arendt’s criteria for thinking.

Precisely because we encounter ourselves when we think, thinking incites us to reflect on the beliefs we hold and the acts we perform.²¹ The thinking person will critically question their beliefs and acts and aim not to contradict themselves. The non-thinking person, however, does not mind contradicting themselves, because they do not enter the soundless dialogue in which they would find out about their inconsistency.²² For instance, their inconsistency to only treat some human beings as an end in themselves and others as mere means. This is the junction where Arendt’s second conception of conscience enters the picture.

¹⁹ Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 187.

²⁰ Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 187.

²¹ Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 191.

²² Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 191.

2.2.2. Arendt's Second Conception of Conscience

Origin

Conscience, according to Arendt's second conception of thinking, is a by-product or side effect of thinking and thus originates in thinking. The following quote can illuminate how thinking leads to conscience as its by-product. Arendt states: "The partner who comes to life when you are alert and alone is the only one from whom you can never get away – *except by ceasing to think*. [italics added] It is better to suffer wrong than to do wrong, because you can remain friend of the sufferer; who would want to be the friend of and have to live together with a murderer?"²³ To be able to think we need to relate to ourselves in the two-in-one. Thus, when we think we necessarily encounter ourselves. This encounter can only be pleasant if we have not committed any serious immoral deeds, otherwise we will feel guilty and possibly terrible when we lead the thinking dialogue with ourselves.

By thinking on a regular basis, we will aim to correct and better ourselves when we notice that our conscience accuses us of something when we try to think. It seems that when people (who committed evil deeds) try to think, they will be distracted from what they originally wanted to think about. The distraction stems from disliking the self, with which one is having the conversation. If the self is a murderer, it is likely that one starts viewing it as an enemy and rationally debating with an enemy is at the very least unpleasant and difficult, but it is even likely to be impossible. Thinking requires a dialogue partner, with whom we are in relative harmony.²⁴ Therefore, conscience, as a side-effect or by-product of thinking establishes what it would mean for one to be in harmony with oneself. If someone committed a serious evil, they would not be able to encounter themselves any longer, and thereby they lose their ability to have a conscience. They lose their ability to have a conscience, because frequent thinking is needed to sustain a conscience. That is the mechanism of Arendt's conception of conscience.

Whether one will still be able to encounter oneself, thus actively live with oneself, depends on the gravity of the immoral deed. Arendt writes: "[...] there appears a distinction between transgressions, such as those we are confronted with daily and with which we know how to come to terms or how to get rid of either through punishment or through forgiveness,

²³ Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 188.

²⁴ Hannah Arendt, "Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship," in *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), 44.

and those offenses where all we can say is ‘This should never have happened.’”²⁵ For example, when someone talks badly about a friend behind their back they are likely to feel bad about it, when they start reflecting about their day. However, such a transgression can be dealt with. We are able to forgive ourselves and commit ourselves to a life without gossip. When it comes to bigger transgressions, like killing one’s friend in a moment of anger, it is much harder to forgive oneself. It becomes likely that one will not be able to enter the thinking dialogue. That is the case, because one is likely to feel immense hatred towards one’s own self. It is very difficult for a person to identify with oneself as a murderer. Such a person cannot face themselves in their thinking any longer. There are two possible ways for a person to stop thinking. First, one can continue living a life without reflection. On a practical basis one can live without thinking: sleeping, working and eating do not require self-dialogue. Second, one could start rationalizing one’s own behaviour to protect oneself against one’s conscience. That could lead to a dishonest rationalization of why one killed one’s friend. Such rationalization is however an escape from encountering oneself. It is thus not an act of real thinking.

Nature

The nature of Arendt’s second conception of conscience differs from the first conception, which was based on a feeling or voice that commanded its bearer to act or to refrain from acting in a certain way. Concerning the second conception, Arendt writes about the “[...] few, the very few, who in the moral collapse of Nazi Germany remained completely intact and free of all guilt [...]” that “[...] they did not feel an obligation but acted according to something which was self-evident to them even though it was no longer self-evident to those around them. Hence their conscience, if that is what it was, had no obligatory character, it said, ‘This I can’t do,’ rather than, ‘This I *ought* not to do.’”²⁶ Thus, the difference between the first and second conception is, that conscience obligates or demands one to act in a certain way, whereas Arendt’s second conception of conscience proclaims a *self-evident inability* to do something that is deeply immoral. This self-evident inability comes from a first-personal perspective. One might in an objective sense from an outsider’s perspective be bodily and mentally able to do what is immoral, but from one’s own view, conscience inhabits one from even considering doing it. Arendt compares that, just like we know that we cannot change the

²⁵ Hannah Arendt, “Some Questions of Moral Philosophy,” in *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), 109.

²⁶ Arendt, “Some Questions of Moral Philosophy,” 78.

truth of calculations, we also cannot commit certain grave immoral deeds, *if* we have developed an inhibition against them by thinking. This inhibition is the nature of conscience in Arendt's second conception.

This self-evidential nature of Arendt's second conception of conscience is due to the thinking from which conscience originated. Arendt claims: "If he is a thinking being, rooted in his thoughts and remembrances, and hence knowing that he has to live with himself, there will be limits to what he can permit himself to do, and these limits will not be imposed on him from the outside, but will be self-set."²⁷ For example, if someone is aware that they could not bear to live with themselves as a murderer, then such a person will not murder. The automatic "I cannot do this," thus, also implies "I cannot do this, because otherwise I could not live with myself." Moreover, these limits to immoral deeds will become self-evident, because these self-set limits enable one to be sufficiently in harmony with oneself to be able to think. Crossing these outer limits would mean to quit an active mental life, which also means to quit being a person, according to Arendt.²⁸ Such a loss, would be too high to accept.

Reliability

What does the nature of conscience tell us about its reliability? Even if someone is a thinking person, they can still be inclined to be aggressive or stingy, thus having a conscience does not make one into a good person.²⁹ But importantly, thinking will lead persons to develop borders of conduct. Behind such a self-chosen border of conduct, the person will not transgress. Because, like cited in the sections above, people with a conscience will be convinced that they are simply unable to do so. Therefore, thinking (and conscience as its by-product) can shield us from committing extremely evil deeds.

The following passage provides evidence that possessing a conscience does not turn people into morally praiseworthy beings, but it does guarantee that there will be limits to evil deeds a person with a conscience would be able to commit. In Arendt's words: "These limits can change considerably and uncomfortably from person to person, from country to country, from century to century; but limitless, extreme evil is possible only where these self-grown roots, which automatically limit the possibilities, are entirely absent."³⁰ Due to every person setting their own limits, there will be a variety of different limits. Some people will allow

²⁷ Arendt, "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," 101.

²⁸ Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 191.

²⁹ Arendt, "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," 100.

³⁰ Arendt, "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," 101.

themselves more immoral deeds than others. Therefore, conscience cannot be relied upon to prevent people from committing immoral deeds in general. Conscience can guard people against evil, in so far as they will reflect on their deeds and possibly forgive or punish themselves and prevent themselves from doing it again. However, with regard to limitless, extreme evil, conscience will reliably set a border, which individuals are very unlikely or possibly unable to transgress. Therefore, a conscience is not completely reliable, but more so with regard to limitless, extreme evil.

Importance

Even though conscience can only be relied upon to limit evil, conscience appears to be very important, in Arendt's second conception. Conscience automatizes us to disregard gravely evil deeds as an option, even if legality or authority demand them. In this conception of conscience certain orders would trigger one's conscience to proclaim: "I cannot do this." In a relatively well-functioning, just society, it is unlikely that someone will demand that one commits evil deeds. But concerning state of exceptions, Arendt states: "Morally the only reliable people when the chips are down are those who say 'I can't.'"³¹ Thus, contrary to the first conception, the second form of conscience is especially valuable under exceptional circumstances. That is the case, because under such circumstances listening to what the "respectable" society agrees upon, like Eichmann did, is likely to justify evil, instead of guarding one against it. The only way not to become a part of it, is to think for oneself, critically assess one's beliefs and thereby develop a conscience.

2.3. A Tension Between the Two Conceptions of Conscience

It is important to remind ourselves, that Arendt calls the two conceptions that I have distinguished both by the same name: conscience. Nonetheless, throughout the last subsections, it should already have become apparent that the two conceptions are in many aspects very different from each other. First, the origin of the first conception of conscience is the values of society, whereas the origin of Arendt's second conception lies in the thinking process. Thus, while conscience in Arendt's early account is a passive taking over of mores, which can be deeply immoral, Arendt's later understanding of conscience results from actively living together with oneself and will at least limit the amount of evil one would be

³¹ Arendt, "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," 78-9.

willing to commit. This means that Arendt must have changed her mind. Indeed, to hold that conscience is passive and active at the same time seems to be contradictory.

Someone might claim that the two accounts of conscience can be made compatible if one thinks about Arendt's first account of conscience as a false or mistaken conscience, and of her later account as a sincere or real conscience.³² However, Arendt herself did not call one of them false and the other one real. Therefore, it seems more plausible that she followed two different lines of thought concerning conscience. The first line of thought resulted in her understanding of conscience in her early works, which can explain how moral corruption spreads, but essentially means that a conscience is meaningless or even dangerous, because it does not work how it is supposed to work. The first conception depicts the idea of an innate voice that helps us to be moral, as an illusion. Applied to Eichmann, Arendt argues that he had a conscience, but that it was useless. The second line of thought, in contrast to that, depicts conscience as valuable, even though not completely reliable. However, it shows that we have to actively think in order to bring about a conscience.

Due to the many differences between the first and the second conception of conscience, there exists a tension. The main tension becomes clear when we answer the question whether Eichmann possessed a conscience. According to the first line of thought, Eichmann had a conscience, like everybody else. Whereas according to the second line of thought Eichmann did not have a conscience, because he did not think. Several Arendt scholars, however, for different reasons, have combined the two conceptions, nonetheless. We will look at why and how they combined the two conceptions in the following section.

3. Scholars' Interpretations of Arendt's Conception of Conscience

Throughout the previous section I gave my interpretation of Arendt's conception of conscience. I tried to stay close to Arendt's text and therefore, hopefully, true to her own thought. In this section I turn to the interpretation of Arendt's conception of conscience by three Arendt scholars. The three renowned Arendt scholars, Dana Villa, Danielle Petherbridge and Arne Johan Vetlesen, discuss evil, conscience and thinking and how they relate to each other. In general, the three scholars characterize Arendt's first conception of conscience in the same vein as I did, and they all acknowledge the value of thinking in Arendt's work. However, with regards to Arendt's second conception of conscience, their interpretations significantly differ from each other and from my own interpretation. One of the most

³² I will consider this objection in more detail in section 4.

important disagreements concerns whether the early and later conceptions of conscience are indeed two distinct conceptions.

Most scholars have tried to combine the two conceptions of conscience. They do not see the two different conceptions as distinct. Moreover, Villa and Petherbridge emphasize that conscience, according to Arendt, is unreliable and dangerous. Thus, they prioritize Arendt's earlier descriptions and remarks about conscience over her later conception. They, moreover, interpret Arendt's later remarks on conscience in light of her earlier conception of conscience. Vetlesen takes another approach. He prioritizes Arendt's later conception. That is, Vetlesen argues that if one follows Arendt's logic one would have to admit that only Arendt's second conception of conscience counts as conscience. Vetlesen, nonetheless, argues that Arendt's earlier remarks on conscience are still compatible with her later writings.

When looking at the different interpretations of Arendt's account of conscience, we can conclude that these three scholars take an ahistorical and inconsistent approach to Arendt's philosophy. Indeed, they seem to think that Arendt only has one account of conscience over all her years of philosophical reflection. However, I will argue that there is no convincing reason to believe that the two different accounts of conscience can somehow be reduced to one and the same account. Instead, I will argue that Arendt must have changed her mind. What is more, I think that Arendt had good reasons to change her mind. As I will argue in my next section, committing oneself to Arendt's conception of thinking and evil, necessarily disqualifies her first conception of conscience and supports her second conception. Therefore, Arendt's later conception of conscience should be prioritized over Arendt's account of conscience in her writings on Eichmann.

3.1. Dana Villa's Account

Dana Villa, the editor of the "Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt," devotes one complete chapter in his book "Politics, Philosophy, Terror: Essays on the Thought of Hannah Arendt" to Eichmann's conscience. Throughout the chapter, Villa clarifies Arendt's account of the banality of evil, with the aim to erase common misunderstandings about it.

Interestingly, Villa makes some thought-provoking suggestions. For example, Villa claims that Eichmann's banality does not (necessarily) apply to other Nazi officials as well.³³ Instead,

³³ Dana Villa, *Politics, Philosophy, Terror: Essays on the Thought of Hannah Arendt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 59.

he contends, that the report on Eichmann and therefore the “banality of evil” was an analysis of a particular case.

In his defence of Arendt’s account of Eichmann, Villa only refers to Arendt’s earlier remarks on conscience and thus follows, what I have called, Arendt’s first conception of conscience. Villa emphasizes that Arendt’s analysis of conscience shows that, contrary to a common popular conception, conscience is neither a God-given nor natural ability to know what is moral and immoral.³⁴ Nonetheless, human beings in general, and even Eichmann in particular, have a conscience. But instead of telling them what is right and wrong, people’s consciences simply take over the values of their society. However, society’s values are not necessarily moral.

Villa contends that if a society holds decent values, in line with morality, then the people living in that society will have a normally functioning conscience. However, if a moral collapse occurs, like in Nazi Germany, then: “[...] conscience, in such a context, is perverted: it no longer tells individuals what is right and what is wrong. But neither is it totally silenced, for it continues to tell people like Eichmann what their ‘duty’ is.”³⁵ Conscience in a morally collapsed society is perverted, because it tells people to do what is immoral and would make them feel bad about doing what is moral. Villa interprets Eichmann’s perverted conscience as stemming from a conflation of morality with legality.³⁶ Thus, Eichmann viewed what was legally demanded from him, under Hitler’s rule, as his “moral” duty. Due to conscience according to this first conception, being able to take on any values, Eichmann’s conscience could follow legal, instead of moral rules. That way murder seemed normatively justified to Eichmann. However, that murder is legal does not mean that it is moral nor does legalizing murder make it moral.

However, even if according to this first conception, Eichmann’s conscience did not try to stop him, Eichmann remains guilty and culpable, according to Villa’s interpretation.³⁷ That is the case, because there is a way to find out what is right and wrong. Listening to a societally determined conscience cannot inform us about morality, but thinking and independent judgment can. Villa writes concerning Eichmann: “To be a ‘law-abiding citizen’ under all circumstances, to reify duty as a moral category, is to reject *a priori* the arrogance necessary for independent judgment and (ultimately) morality itself.”³⁸ Thus, Villa contends that Arendt

³⁴ Villa, *Politics, Philosophy, Terror: Essays on the Thought of Hannah Arendt*, 53-4.

³⁵ Villa, *Politics, Philosophy, Terror: Essays on the Thought of Hannah Arendt*, 45.

³⁶ Villa, *Politics, Philosophy, Terror: Essays on the Thought of Hannah Arendt*, 51.

³⁷ Villa, *Politics, Philosophy, Terror: Essays on the Thought of Hannah Arendt*, 44.

³⁸ Villa, *Politics, Philosophy, Terror: Essays on the Thought of Hannah Arendt*, 55.

holds independent judgment to be necessary to find out what is moral and immoral. People who forego thinking and independent judgment also risk foregoing morality. Everybody ought to think for themselves instead of listening to their conscience, for conscience is only based on an arbitrary collection of societal values. We might be lucky and live in a society with moral values, but we will not know whether that is the case, until we think for ourselves.

To sum up, Villa's interpretation of Arendt's conception of conscience only takes her first pessimistic view into account. Thus, in his interpretation, conscience is unreliable. Thinking (together with judging), on the other hand, stands in opposition to conscience. We ought not to blindly listen to neither our conscience nor the law, because both are not necessarily moral. Therefore, we ought to bring up enough arrogance to think and judge for ourselves. This, however, raises questions. If Arendt's conception of conscience is antagonistic to thinking, why does Arendt later say that conscience is a by-product of thinking? Villa does not answer this question. He remains silent about Arendt's (supposed) change of mind.

3.2. Danielle Petherbridge's Account

In her article "Between Thinking and Action: Arendt on Conscience and Civil Disobedience," Petherbridge uses and defends elements from both conceptions of conscience. Moreover, Petherbridge also makes a distinction between conceptions of conscience in Arendt.³⁹ However, Petherbridge bases Arendt's first conception not on "Eichmann in Jerusalem" (like I did), but on Arendt's doctoral dissertation "Love and Saint Augustine" (published 1929). Her second conception of conscience is based on "The Life of the Mind." However, this need not entail that Petherbridge takes a historical approach. Even though Petherbridge distinguishes two different models of conscience, she does not contend that Arendt changed her mind. According to Petherbridge, Arendt only affirms one of these two different models.

In Petherbridge's interpretation, Arendt makes a conceptual distinction between two different models: "[...] from an Augustinian one to her own version of a Socratic model."⁴⁰ The Augustinian model views conscience as innate in the sense that each human being has the divine law within themselves. The divine law is given by God and entails what is right and wrong. Whenever we are about to do something wrong, or did something wrong, our conscience will make us confess. The Socratic model, in contrast to the Augustinian one, is

³⁹ Danielle Petherbridge, "Between Thinking and Action: Arendt on Conscience and Civil Disobedience," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 42, no. 10 (2016): 972.

⁴⁰ Petherbridge, "Between Thinking and Action," 972.

less hierarchical, and requires one to figure out what is right and wrong in a dialogue with oneself, instead of discovering the innate divine law.⁴¹

Petherbridge interprets Arendt's thoughts in "Eichmann in Jerusalem" mainly as an in-between step. Even though Arendt is already criticizing the Augustinian model of conscience, she has not yet fully conceptualised the Socratic model of conscience (as described above).⁴² This critique of the Augustinian conception of conscience, paves the way to Arendt's version of a Socratic conception.

Petherbridge's observation that Arendt criticized an Augustinian conscience, is coherent with Villa claiming that in "Eichmann in Jerusalem," Arendt argued against the widespread conception of conscience as an innate voice in every human being that can tell them what is right and wrong. The Augustinian conscience is a God-given voice, which Arendt came to view as falsified during Eichmann's trial. Thus, there seems to be a consensus among Arendt scholars, that Arendt did not hold an Augustinian conception of conscience.

The *disagreement* between Arendt scholars' concerns, first, the status of Arendt's conception of conscience in "Eichmann in Jerusalem." Villa interpreted the description of conscience as describing Arendt's view on conscience, whereas Petherbridge holds it to be Eichmann's mistaken take on conscience. Second, there is disagreement on how, if at all, Arendt's earlier work on conscience relates to her later writings (from "The Life of the Mind").

One could raise the question whether it would not be better to speak of three conceptions of conscience in Arendt. I distinguished the Eichmann-account from Arendt's later writings (which Petherbridge calls the Socratic model). Petherbridge distinguishes the Augustinian from the Socratic model of conscience. That is to say, we have a total of three different models of conscience in Arendt's philosophical works. However, we should not forget that Arendt's dissertation on Augustine is a dissertation first and foremost on Augustine. It does therefore not necessarily reflect Arendt's own thinking. From the fact that Augustine thought that conscience is God's voice in us, we cannot infer that Arendt ever thought that conscience must be understood in terms of God's voice.

Petherbridge interprets, what I have termed, Arendt's first conception of conscience, in a way so that it can be made compatible with the Socratic model of conscience. Petherbridge argues that Arendt merely discusses how Eichmann viewed and experienced his own

⁴¹ Petherbridge, "Between Thinking and Action," 972.

⁴² Petherbridge, "Between Thinking and Action," 973.

conscience. Petherbridge says that Arendt does not try to objectively describe how Eichmann's conscience in fact functioned under the Nazi regime. She describes conscience, in Arendt's discussion of the Eichmann trial, as "[...] conscience – in Eichmann's sense of the term – represented merely indoctrination or unthinking adherence to custom or duty, not morality or judgment."⁴³ Thus, Arendt's first conception of conscience does not constitute a conception of conscience in Petherbridge's interpretation. Instead, it is merely Arendt analysing and following Eichmann's mistaken view of conscience. Therefore, Petherbridge views Arendt's later definition of conscience as a by-product of thinking as standing in opposition to Eichmann's view on conscience (but not in opposition to Arendt's own earlier views).⁴⁴

Even though Petherbridge bases her interpretation of Arendt's second conception on "The Life of the Mind," like I did, her interpretation differs from mine. This is the case because she combines some of Arendt's insights from her discussion of "Eichmann in Jerusalem" (which I have interpreted as contributing to Arendt's first conception only) with insights about conscience from "The Life of the Mind."

First, our main disagreement concerns the reliability of Arendt's second conception of conscience. Petherbridge acknowledges that Arendt views conscience as important in times of emergencies. She even claims that *if* conscience has positive implications for political action, then only in times of emergencies.⁴⁵ The positive implication is that a conscience, which resulted from thinking, can resist co-option or habituation, and thus prevent people from simply doing what the majority does. However, Petherbridge, at the same time, contends that Arendt warns us of the unreliability of conscience during state of emergencies: "[...] via her discussion of Eichmann, she raises important arguments regarding the unreliability of conscience in 'dark times' that signal a cautionary note about conscience being viewed as the basis of political action."⁴⁶ Why would conscience not be reliable? It could, on the one hand, mean that conscience is not reliable, because only some will have developed a conscience by thinking. On the other hand, it might mean that conscience can be perverted, like in Eichmann's case. But it seems to mean the latter, since the negative remark on reliability is inspired by "Eichmann in Jerusalem," instead of by "The Life of the Mind."

⁴³ Petherbridge, "Between Thinking and Action," 973.

⁴⁴ Petherbridge, "Between Thinking and Action," 973.

⁴⁵ Petherbridge, "Between Thinking and Action," 974.

⁴⁶ Petherbridge, "Between Thinking and Action," 978.

Second, Petherbridge's Socratic model differs, with regards to the nature and as a result also the importance of conscience, from my interpretation of Arendt's second conception of conscience. According to Petherbridge's interpretation, the Socratic model of conscience is: "For Arendt, [...] largely divorced from action. It is rather an interior and reflexive space understood as the by-product of thinking, not one that directly leads to acting in public or to the outer world."⁴⁷ Certainly, having developed a conscience will not solely lead to performing moral acts. However, I disagree with Petherbridge's strict separation between conscience and action. As I explained in the previous main section, according to Arendt, conscience means having borders of conduct behind which the person will not go, because they will hold that they are unable to do so. In situations in which one is asked to do something immoral, having a conscience can make one refrain from acting. Under certain circumstances refraining from acting, for instance not telling the truth about where people are hiding, constitutes an action. Therefore, whether one has a conscience will be decisive for how one acts in the outer world.⁴⁸ This idea, which is central to my interpretation, is mainly discussed in Arendt's lecture "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy." Petherbridge does not make any references to this lecture, instead she relies on "The Life of the Mind" for Arendt's conception of conscience.⁴⁹ Therefore, Petherbridge interprets the Socratic model of conscience to be more divorced from action than I would agree it to be the case for Arendt.

Since conscience, in Petherbridge's interpretation, only influences action during emergencies *and* since conscience is unreliable during emergencies, Petherbridge seems to regard conscience as not very important for Arendt. Instead: "In the end, it is not conscience that Arendt privileges but thinking [...]."⁵⁰ Thus, even though Petherbridge discusses conscience, she concludes that what is actually valuable is the thinking done beforehand, not so much the conscience resulting from it. That seems to be due to her interpreting Arendt's conscience as a mix between societal indoctrination or influence and individual thinking. Concerning Arendt, Petherbridge states: "She privileges neither the solitary activity of the 'life of the mind' nor the persuasion of public opinion by others in the public sphere, but instead wants to maintain a space for each and an ongoing movement between them, without one being overdetermined or dominated by the other."⁵¹ The persuasion of public opinion or

⁴⁷ Petherbridge, "Between Thinking and Action," 974.

⁴⁸ Or at the very least, a conscience will directly influence how one does not act in the outside world.

⁴⁹ Neither Villa nor Vetlesen are referring to "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy." Possibly that is one of the reasons why our accounts differ.

⁵⁰ Petherbridge, "Between Thinking and Action," 972.

⁵¹ Petherbridge, "Between Thinking and Action," 978.

even indoctrination, together with a warning of conscience, is taken from “Eichmann in Jerusalem,” whereas conscience as thinking, is clearly taken from “The Life of the Mind.” In contrast to that, I view these two components as belonging to two distinct conceptions by Arendt, the first belongs to a pessimistic conception and the second to a more optimistic conception of conscience.

3.3. Arne Johan Vetlesen’s Account

The account of Arne Johan Vetlesen, former student of Jürgen Habermas, comes closest to my own account. This is the case, because Vetlesen seems to acknowledge that given Arendt’s account of conscience as a by-product of thinking, one must acknowledge that Eichmann does not have a conscience. He argues: “[...] when Arendt holds him [Eichmann] to be thoughtless, to not-engage in the soundless inner dialogue called thinking, then she is logically compelled to hold also that he has no conscience, that no authority of the type termed ‘conscience’ is operative in him.”⁵² It may look like as if Vetlesen is committed here to the view that Arendt is compelled to conclude that Eichmann did not have a conscience, because she defined conscience as the by-product of thinking.⁵³

Vetlesen, however, does not acknowledge that Arendt’s later work on conscience is incompatible with the thesis that Eichmann had a conscience. He therefore tries to interpret Arendt in such a way that we can still say that Eichmann indeed had a conscience. Vetlesen goes on to defend that it is implausible that Eichmann did not have a conscience at all. Therefore, he does not interpret Arendt’s later conception of conscience to imply that Arendt held that Eichmann does not have a conscience at all. In Vetlesen’s words: “But though logically consistent in this Arendtian sense, is not the notion suggested here – that Eichmann lacked conscience, and that this lack perhaps signifies the core of his moral failure – outright implausible? Doesn’t every individual have a conscience – a conscience of *some sort*, that is, be it a courageous and oppositional one (Socrates springs to mind) or be it a corrupt and conformist one [...]”⁵⁴ Due to holding it to be implausible that Eichmann did not have a conscience at all, Vetlesen interprets Arendt differently than I do. Instead of viewing Arendt as either having abandoned her first conception in favour of her second conception or at least

⁵² Arne Johan Vetlesen, “Hannah Arendt on Conscience and Evil,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 27, no. 5 (September 2001): 17.

⁵³ Vetlesen, “Hannah Arendt on Conscience and Evil,” 12.

⁵⁴ Vetlesen, “Hannah Arendt on Conscience and Evil,” 18.

as having to do so to be consistent, Vetlesen tries to combine Arendt's two conceptions of conscience.

With which justification and how does Vetlesen combine the two conceptions? Vetlesen's justification seems to be that it is simply implausible to hold that Eichmann did not have a conscience at all. Vetlesen does not elaborate on this claim in his article. But he does, later, state that Eichmann certainly did not have a conscience in the Socratic sense, as a by-product of thinking: "What Eichmann lacked beyond the shade of doubt, is conscience of the type epitomized in Socrates. His lack of such conscience dovetails with his lack of thinking; the two lacks are inseparable."⁵⁵ This raises new questions. If Eichmann did not have a conscience in the Socratic sense, why would it then be strange to claim that Eichmann had no conscience at all?

Either way, Vetlesen seems to mix Arendt's earlier conception of conscience with her later works. Even though Eichmann did not have a critical, autonomous conscience, Vetlesen suggests that every human being has a general conscience. This conscience can be critical and autonomous, if its bearer thinks and otherwise the conscience will simply take on the values that society holds in general. Instead of being autonomous, simple conscience means a lack of self-determination and moral autonomy.⁵⁶ Thus, Vetlesen combines the two conceptions by viewing them as two manifestations of general conscience.⁵⁷ Everyone has a conscience, but whether one's conscience will be critical and autonomous or uncritical and corruptible, depends on whether one takes the time to think for oneself.

Which form someone's conscience takes one, cannot be decided once and for all. That is the case, because autonomous conscience requires frequent, active thinking. One can thus transgress: I might have an autonomous conscience today, but if I stop thinking tomorrow my conscience might fall into simplicity. Therefore, Vetlesen supports Arendt's insight from "Eichmann in Jerusalem," according to which: "[...] it is perfectly possible for conscience to be so co-opted, so corrupted by (a corrupt) society, that it completely ceases to yield the kind of subversive authority ascribed to it in the Socratic model [...]."⁵⁸ Therefore, both manifestations – simple and autonomous – are consciences, in Vetlesen's interpretation of Arendt. Yet conscience can be corrupted. Furthermore, a general conscience can take on both manifestations and potentially switch from one to the other.

⁵⁵ Vetlesen, "Hannah Arendt on Conscience and Evil," 25-6.

⁵⁶ Vetlesen, "Hannah Arendt on Conscience and Evil," 20.

⁵⁷ This is certainly an aspect added by Vetlesen, since to my knowledge, Arendt does not explicitly combine the two with each other as different manifestations of a general conscience.

⁵⁸ Vetlesen, "Hannah Arendt on Conscience and Evil," 13.

When does general conscience become corrupted? Whenever people do not think for themselves, their general conscience can be filled solely with the values of society at large, according to Vetlesen's interpretation. If these values are immoral then people's consciences justify, instead of prevent evil. The next question is then: under which circumstances people do not think? To which Vetlesen responds that thinking and judgement: "[...] are precarious faculties, operative in the individual only when historic and socio-political conditions permit them to be developed – as was brought out so dramatically in the event of totalitarianism."⁵⁹ Our ability to think is dependent on certain political and social conditions. Vetlesen thereby seems to claim that a state has the power to simplify our conscience. Propaganda can destroy our capacity to think.

Certainly, social conditions influence our ability to think. Without education, and without free press, it becomes particularly difficult to think freely. However, I am convinced that Arendt would disagree with Vetlesen's view of general conscience. Instead of agreeing that whether we develop a proper conscience is determined by our surroundings, Arendt would point out that people who used their time to think, before their society turned totalitarian, will have a conscience, and not take over the values of the majority. Living in a totalitarian society does not excuse us from critical thinking. According to Arendt's second conception of conscience, it is precisely in state of exceptions that we find out who developed a conscience, because they will not become completely morally corrupted and commit limitless evil deeds.⁶⁰ Thus, Arendt would disagree that it is the circumstances that determine whether people will be able to develop an autonomous conscience.

There is another sense in which Arendt's two different conceptions of conscience are combined (or mixed) in Vetlesen's understanding. Vetlesen's final conclusion, concerning Arendt's conception is that: "[...] what is required of the individual is that he or she, by trial and error, develop his or her peculiar *modus vivendi* between the two [thinking and society's values], that is to say, the optimal *balance* to be attained in a life of going back and forth, again and again, between the silence of the inner dialogue that one is, and where the voice of Socratic conscience has a prospect of being heard and heeded, and the noise emanating from the public(s) formed by the plurality of men [...]."⁶¹ Thus, following Vetlesen, it is inevitable and good that everyone is influenced and shaped in their values by society. Conscience is the

⁵⁹ Vetlesen, "Hannah Arendt on Conscience and Evil," 29.

⁶⁰ Arendt, "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," 101.

⁶¹ Vetlesen, "Hannah Arendt on Conscience and Evil," 31.

inner dialogue between one's society and one's autonomous self. Therefore, everyone's conscience will include – or so it is argued – some values from society.

To achieve a conscience that is not blindly following society's norms, one also needs to achieve conscience in its critical manifestation by thinking. A relatively autonomous conscience (i.e., Arendt's second conception) needs to outbalance the potential risks of what Vetlesen calls 'simple conscience.' But, Arendt's earlier conception of conscience, which supplies one's conscience with societal values, is needed as a source of inspiration.⁶² Each and every conscience has thus a dual content: on the one hand it expresses the values of society and on the other hand it expresses critical thinking. Therefore, in the end, Vetlesen mixes Arendt's earlier and later writings. Vetlesen combines Arendt's different conceptions of conscience by talking about people's general conscience. To have a well-functioning, reliable conscience, everyone ought to develop a well-functioning conscience composed of both manifestations, making a practical compromise.

On Vetlesen's account, Arendt can hold Eichmann to have a conscience, which was only manifested in its first form (only taking over societal values, without any critical thinking). Moreover, because the values under totalitarian Nazi Germany were immoral, his conscience worked in favour of evil. However, in the coming section I am going to show that only having conscience in its first manifestation would mean not having a conscience at all. But first I will provide a general two-fold criticism of Villa, Petherbridge and Vetlesen.

3.4. My Criticism of the Accounts by Villa, Petherbridge and Vetlesen

First, the accounts of all three Arendt scholars are not sufficiently historical. Even though the scholars, apart from Villa, quote from "Eichmann in Jerusalem" and "The Life of the Mind," they do not view conscience in her later work as distinct from her first conception. Instead, as demonstrated in the above sections, they mix insights and descriptions from both conceptions together.

People change their minds; philosophers are no exception. When we however pretend such a change of thought did not occur, we confuse someone's thoughts. For several reasons it makes sense, from a dynamical, historical perspective, that Arendt changed her view. First of all, twelve years passed by between the two works. Thus, Arendt did not neatly continue writing about conscience. Moreover, due to Arendt's remarks on conscience differing greatly

⁶² Vetlesen, "Hannah Arendt on Conscience and Evil," 30.

in her later work “The Life of the Mind,” the impression that she changed her conception gains credibility. Interpreting Arendt’s work from a dynamical, historical perspective means taking seriously the differences between Arendt’s different discussions about the nature of conscience.

Villa, Petherbridge and Vetlesen do not seem to take such a dynamical, historical approach. At the very least, the differences in the conceptions would have urged one to conclude that Arendt *transformed* her view on conscience. Especially Arendt’s lecture about moral philosophy strengthens this suggestion. This is because Arendt describes conscience as explicitly normative throughout this lecture. Moreover, she connects non-participation in the Nazi regime to conscience, which clearly contradicts the first conception, according to which conscience made people comply. But since the three authors do not take into account her lecture on “Some Questions of Moral Philosophy” this conclusion seems less salient to them than it should.

Second, Arendt’s first conception of conscience is descriptive whereas her second conception is normative. Arendt’s earlier account of conscience gives a description how consciences are presumably only a reflection of society’s values. Arendt’s account of conscience is psychological. Eichmann’s conscience is explained by Arendt with reference to feelings and the events that caused such feelings. Arendt can describe and analyse Eichmann’s conscience. But Arendt does not allow for a first personal perspective on conscience. Conscience, for the early Arendt, is a matter of fact and does thereby not bear any evaluative force. To elaborate, psychology is conceptually distinct from logics. If so, when we investigate the laws of thinking, we distinguish two perspectives. On the one hand, we can take a psychological approach and describe the ways we generally think. On the other hand, we can take a first personal logical approach and think about how we ought to think. We might say that Arendt’s earlier account of conscience is strictly a psychological account. That means that, the fact that our conscience says something, does not give us – as such – reasons to believe it.

In comparison to that, Arendt’s second conception of conscience does make a normative claim on her reader. Conscience is the product of an inner dialogue. Such dialogue aims at resolving contradictions. Whereas theoretical judgement aims at truth, conscience aims at goodness. Conscience is then not any longer something we describe from a distance. Instead, conscience is a first personal commitment to the process of thinking itself. When Arendt characterizes conscience, in her later work, as the by-product of thinking and claims that the few who did not obey the Nazis had such a conscience, she makes conscience normative.

Arendt does not use 'conscience' any longer as a psychological concept about how we make moral judgements. She now uses 'conscience' as an ethical concept: i.e. conscience helps us to become better persons.

The normative appeal is that, because one has to actively think to bring about such a conscience, one ought to think. Arendt's second conception stipulates how one ought to behave. One ought to actively live with oneself and be in dialogue with oneself to ensure that one will attain a conscience. Moreover, having a conscience is needed, because according to her second conception, conscience can guard one against committing limitless evil.

Arendt's normative and her descriptive conception are very different approaches because they are qualitatively different from another. The former conception claims to be useful to understand conscience, whereas the latter makes a moral appeal to her reader to do something. The first conception essentially teaches the reader that conscience is simply a psychological phenomenon, whereas the second conception holds that attaining a conscience is good. Therefore, one cannot simply combine Arendt's insights from her two conceptions.

To sum up, Petherbridge's, Villa's and Vetlesen's accounts are not historical enough, because they either exclude later work (like Villa) or mix up earlier and later work (like Vetlesen and Petherbridge). Moreover, that Arendt's first and second conception are qualitatively different from another provides another reason to not combine them into one conception. Thus, my critique of the three is that they do not properly appreciate the distinctiveness between the normative and descriptive conception.

4. Why Should Arendt's Second Conception Be Favoured?

I will argue that Arendt's normative account should be favoured over her descriptive account. To make my argument I will elaborate further on the claim that Arendt's two conceptions of conscience are incompatible. The two conceptions are incompatible, because following both conceptions at the same time would imply that Eichmann both have and did not have a conscience. Thus, my argument excludes the option to combine elements from both conceptions into a merged conception of conscience, like Petherbridge and Vetlesen did. Due to the two conceptions of conscience being incompatible, one has to choose one of them.

Moreover, I will consider the objection that the first conception could be considered as false conscience, which could co-exist with the second conception (a well-functioning conscience). This is an objection that Vetlesen would be likely to raise. I aim to refute this objection by defending the following two claims. On the one hand, I have already shown that

Arendt's first conception of conscience entails that false conscience must be understood as real, although faulty, conscience. That is a problem for the false conscience objection, because, on the other hand, I will argue that Arendt's second conception of conscience can only make sense of false conscience as illusionary. That is, false conscience is no conscience (in the same sense as a fake friend is not a friend). To both claim that a false conscience is a reality and an illusion at the same time would be contradictory.

I will, furthermore, argue why Arendt's second conception should be favoured. What makes Arendt's second conception better than her first? What can Arendt's second conception explain that her first conception cannot? My hypothesis is that Arendt developed a new conception of conscience, because her banality of evil thesis was in tension with her first conception of conscience. In the following section, I will explain in what way the first conception is inconsistent with the banality of evil thesis. The first conception fosters the idea that the evil of an evildoer is something positive instead of a privation of what is real, which Arendt rejected.

In contrast to that, normative conscience supports the banality of evil thesis and can explain it well. This should count in favour of letting Arendt's second conception of conscience supersede her first conception. Finally, of course, it is impossible to find out with absolute certainty whether Arendt changed her conception of conscience and would disregard her first conception entirely. However, there is some evidence in favour of this, throughout her lecture on "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," which none of the three Arendt scholars used as a source for their own accounts. I am going to interpret the relevant passage that provides evidence that Arendt abandoned her first conception of conscience in favour of her second conception.

In summary, Arendt's second conception should be favoured over the first, because it is inconsistent to hold both conceptions of conscience at the same time, and the second conception fits better with the banality of evil thesis. Above that, Arendt's second conception should be favoured, because Arendt came to favour the second conception herself. Arendt must have noticed that she ought to change her mind about conscience in order to make her body of ideas more coherent. I assume Arendt started favouring her second conception, because she emphasizes the connection between thinking and conscience in her later work, like in "The Life of the Mind" and "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy."

4.1. The Need to Choose Between the Two Conceptions

4.1.1. Incompatibility of Arendt's First and Second Conception

At the end of section two I already showcased the tension between Arendt's first and second conception of conscience. Now, however, I will demonstrate why the two conceptions are incompatible with each other. If the two conceptions are incompatible with each other, we have a reason to believe that Arendt favoured one of the conceptions. The reasons why the second conception should be favoured and was most likely favoured, will be discussed in the second half of this section.

How come the two conceptions are incompatible? The main reason is that they offer different answers to the questions what Eichmann's banality consisted of and when someone has a conscience. According to the logic of the first conception of conscience, Eichmann was banal, because he simply followed his conscience. He followed his conscience, based on society's values, which demanded him to kill. In order not to be banal he would have had to make independent moral judgements. The explanation that Eichmann was banal because he followed his conscience is incompatible with the second conception's explanation that his banality was due to a *lack* of conscience.

The incompatibility arises, because the first conception characterizes conscience as heteronomous, while the second conception views conscience as a result of autonomous thinking. On the one hand, conscience is heteronomous when the content of one's conscience is not the product of one's own thinking but when it is the product of a standard outside of one's self. Arendt portrays, in her first conception of conscience, Eichmann as having a conscience whose standard mirrors the values of society at large. That is, Eichmann's conscience failed to be autonomous. On the other hand, Arendt's second conception of conscience portrays conscience as a by-product of thinking. Conscience is therefore the product of one's own thinking process and is thereby necessarily autonomous. If conscience is a by-product of thinking (and able to stop people from doing evil) it is unthinkable that the idea "thou shalt kill innocent persons" could become anyone's conscience. Because Eichmann unthinkably submitted his own thinking to that of Hitler, Arendt's second conception of conscience is bounded to the claim that Eichmann has no conscience at all.

Moreover, it is entirely incompatible to claim both that conscience could come about only through thinking (second conception) *and* that everyone unthinkingly has a conscience (first conception). If the two conceptions of conscience are incompatible, we have to choose one of

them. Therefore, Petherbridge and Vetlesen make a mistake by trying to combine the two conceptions.

4.1.2. A Possible Objection: Interpreting the First Conception of Conscience as a Conception of a False Conscience

One might claim that the first conception of conscience is meant to be understood as a conceptualisation of conscience in terms of a false conscience. A false conscience would still be a conscience. Take, for example, a guy named Jack. He is a terrible dancer. Yet, when Jack dances, he dances. His dancing might be bad but not necessarily illusionary or fake. Similarly, Eichmann had a conscience, but it was, as Arendt also formulated it in “Eichmann in Jerusalem,” perverted. Therefore, usually people’s consciences would function in accordance with morality, but under certain circumstances their functioning conscience can, through perversion, turn into a false conscience.

To this extent, I would agree that the early-Arendt is committed to the idea that Eichmann indeed had a false conscience. Eichmann was very bad at being good. In a sense, Eichmann was trying to be good just like Jack was trying to be a dancer. Yet Eichmann fails to be good because his conscience tells him to follow Hitler’s orders. There is however a question about the merit of such an insight. Indeed, it is actually a bit mystifying. Assume I call the Dutch prime-minister Rutte a false prime minister. This might sound thought-provoking. Someone might ask “Do you then believe in conspiracy theories?” Yet if I would only answer with “Not at all, I only mean to say that prime minister Rutte is a bad prime minister” then you have every right to ask why I did not say so in the first place.

There is however also another way to understand the claim that Eichmann had a “false conscience.” It could also be the case that Arendt meant to claim that Eichmann had a “false conscience” in the sense that Eichmann’s conscience was “illusionary” or bluntly “fake.” Indeed, sometimes we talk about “fake friends” or “fake meat” or “false gods.” If so, it seems that we talk about a friend that is fake, meat that is fake, and gods that are not real. Yet, actually, we do not talk about a friend, meat or gods. Actually, a fake friend is no friend at all. Similarly, it might be argued that when Arendt talks about “Eichmann’s conscience” she means to say, “Eichmann’s false conscience” which is to say, “Eichmann’s fake conscience,” which is to say, “Eichmann’s no conscience at all.”

The principle of charity means to interpret someone’s thoughts as coherent as one can. If so, the principle of charity seems to require me to hold the view that Arendt claims that

Eichmann's conscience is illusionary. Because such an interpretation of Arendt would have the implication that Arendt's two conceptions could exist next to each other in her framework. People who think, would then have a well-functioning conscience, whereas people who do not think would have a false conscience. This false conscience could take on any content, thus also immoral content. That would be the case, because the conscience of people who do not think, would uncritically accept any change in values. Whereas the well-functioning conscience as a by-product of thinking would have moral content. This co-existence of both conceptions would be a problem for my thesis, since I contend that Arendt's first conception should be abandoned.

Nonetheless, the principle of charity also holds that one must give the most favourable interpretation of *a text*. This is to say, the principle of charity requires us to give the best integral reading of a text. However, Arendt does not talk about "illusionary," "false" and "fake" consciences in her earlier writings. Indeed, Arendt never speaks of Eichmann in terms of a "false" conscience. Instead, she goes on to simply call it "conscience." Surely, Arendt continuously emphasises that Eichmann's conscience is morally flawed, but she does not call it false. In other words, there is no textual evidence for the claim that her account of conscience (in her earlier writings) already resembles her later normative interpretation of conscience.

Arendt's first conception of conscience is best understood as an inner voice. This voice tells us what to do. It whispers the values that mirror society. That is, conscience is the voice of conformity. Yet conformity is in and of itself neither good nor bad. Moreover, in the case of Nazi Germany conformity is very bad. Conscience, for the early-Arendt, can generate very flawed imperatives. But a morally flawed conscience is still a conscience. Whereas, in reality, it is only our eagerness to conform to society's values that makes us worry about how we act, not an objectively moral voice.

Arendt wanted to make the provocative point that psychological conscience, the taking over of values (which is not morally reliable), was all that there is to conscience. Conscience was for Arendt thus not a moral concept. If she were to call conscience in her first conception illusionary, then she would affirm a distinction between illusionary and real conscience. I believe that such a distinction would be a moral distinction. Since she used 'conscience' as a psychological/descriptive concept, she does not use a distinction between 'real' and 'fake' conscience.

From the perspective of the second conception of conscience, however, Eichmann's conscience depicts not a real, but an illusionary conscience. Moreover, an illusion of a

conscience is *not* a conscience. The two conceptions cannot exist next to each other, because the first conception denies any moral significance of conscience, whereas the second one affirms moral significance.

If Arendt's second conception of conscience is correct, it does not mean that Arendt's earlier works are without value. From the perspective of Arendt's second conception, it is certainly useful to read Arendt's earlier passages about conscience, to be reminded that what we commonly experience as conscience might be an illusion. However, in what follows, I will argue that in order to discuss Arendt's theory of conscience, her second conception has more merit.

4.2. The Tension Between the Banality of Evil Thesis and The First Conception of Conscience

In this sub-section we will see why Arendt's first conception is in tension with the banality of evil thesis. That is a problem, because Arendt thinks about conscience in relation to evil. Accordingly, one reason why Arendt investigates conscience is to make sense of how so many people could have taken part in genocide and how one can ensure to never take part in such evil oneself.

According to Arendt's banality of evil thesis, the idea of the malicious genius committing the biggest evil crimes is mistaken. It is not the case that the biggest evil requires a lot of intricate reasoning and planning, motivated by a demonic motivation to do as much evil as possible. Instead, Eichmann as an exemplar for someone who committed such immense evil, was characterized as rather thoughtless, incoherent and motivated primarily by his career advances.

Let us compare the banality of evil thesis with Arendt's first conception of conscience. As a reminder, Arendt wrote about Eichmann's conscience: "And just as the law in civilized countries assumes that the voice of conscience tells everybody 'Thou shalt not kill,' even though man's natural desires and inclinations may at times be murderous, so the law of Hitler's land demanded that the voice of conscience tell everybody: 'Thou shalt kill' [...]"⁶³ If someone's conscience orders them to do whatever most people agree on (in this case to follow Hitler), that means that the first conception is in line with thoughtlessness, which is an

⁶³ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 150.

element of the banality of evil. It does not require any thoughts to have such a potentially immoral conscience.

However, Arendt's first conception is in tension with the banality of evil thesis in so far as the banality of evil thesis holds that perpetrators of great evil do not have to be malicious. To contend that Eichmann took over Hitler's conscience which demanded that he kills, seems to add an inner voice of malicious motivation and hatred to his character. The first account of conscience commits Arendt to the idea that Eichmann does not only follow orders but that he feels morally obliged to follow those orders. Thus, Eichmann must be pictured as a man that contains an inner voice that tells him to follow Hitler's orders. When Eichmann fails to follow Hitler's orders, Eichmann feels guilty. For Eichmann's inner voice tells him that he is morally obliged to do what Hitler tells him to do.

Is such a picture however truly compatible with the banality of evil thesis? I do not think so. The banality of evil thesis entails that evil is nothing positive. Evil is nothing but the absence of goodness. The banal person is someone who lacks something. That is, the banal person does not think. Thus, the banal person lacks the encounter with themselves in the thinking dialogue. To illustrate this, it might be helpful to look at an analogy. We might say that the banal person is to a normal person what a blind person is to a seeing person. Being blind is not something positive, instead, it is the absence of seeing. Likewise, being banal is not something positive but only the absence of thinking. If so, there is a tension between Arendt's first conception of conscience and Arendt's adherence to the banality of evil thesis.

One might still question the importance of the banality of evil thesis in Arendt's work. Arendt's understanding of evil as being defined by what it lacks is picked up by Arendt throughout several works. Let me quote two passages from different works to demonstrate this point.

“Evil, as defined with respect to the self and the thinking intercourse between me and myself, remains as formal, empty of content [...]”⁶⁴ (Some Questions of Moral Philosophy)

“It is indeed my opinion now that evil is never ‘radical,’ that it is only extreme, and that it possesses neither depth nor any demonic dimension. It can overgrow and lay waste the whole world precisely because it spreads like a fungus on the surface. It is ‘thought-defying,’ as I said, because thought tries to reach some depth, to go to the

⁶⁴ Arendt, “Some Questions of Moral Philosophy,” 108.

roots, and the moment it concerns itself with evil, it is frustrated because there is nothing. That is its 'banality.' Only the good has depth and can be radical."⁶⁵

(Arendt's letter to Scholem)

The passages quoted above characterize evil as an absence. Evil does not have an essence by itself, instead it is characterized by a lack of goodness. Evil, in contrast to the good, does not have depth. Evil has no layers that someone could contemplate. Thus, compared to the idea of "radical evil," banal evil means that evil is not intricate, but shallow. Therefore, one cannot think – in Arendt's sense of the word – about evil, because there is nothing that thought could get hold of.

Arendt's first conception allows for people to develop an immoral conscience, but the banality of evil thesis requires us to believe that evil is an absence (the privation of goodness). Due to evil having no depth, no real content, there is *nothing* to think about. Consequently, it would be contradictory to think (in Arendt's sense of thinking) about evil, simply because evil is thought-defying. Therefore, nobody could build up an evil conscience, since creating a conscience as a by-product requires thinking. An evil conscience is an impossibility. If one has a conscience, it will be limited (not all-knowing), but in so far it exists it will be moral. People who commit the worst evil do not have a conscience. The biggest amount of evil is done by people: "[...] who never made up their minds to be or do either evil or good.)"⁶⁶

There might be a possible objection. If one starts from the premise of the first conception, that conscience originates from societal values, then not being able to think about evil does not seem to constitute a problem. After all the first conception does not hold that perverted consciences are due to contemplating evil. However, Villa, Petherbridge and Vetlesen are all three committed to Arendt's theory of thinking. They all agree on important thinking is within Arendt's framework. If that is the case, then they cannot ignore that Arendt contends in her main work on thinking ("The Life of the Mind"), that thinking results in having a conscience. Arendt's theory of thinking is directly connected to Arendt's second conception and excludes her first. The first conception of conscience is logically refuted if one subscribes to Arendt's banality of evil thesis and her theory of thinking. That is the case, because thinking about evil is impossible and to attain a conscience one needs to think. Therefore, a false or evil conscience cannot come about.

⁶⁵ Hannah Arendt, "Eichmann in Jerusalem' An Exchange of Letters Between Gershom Scholem and Hannah Arendt," in *The Jew as Pariah: Jewish Identity and Politics in the Modern Age*, ed. Ron H. Feldman (New York: Grove Press, 1978), 250-51.

⁶⁶ Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 180.

Moreover, if evil is the absence of goodness, how could an absence (like evil) produce a *presence* (like a perverted conscience/inner voice)? The possibility that an absence can produce a presence seems counterintuitive. Therefore, it is more convincing and consistent to argue that just like evil is the absence of goodness, the absence of thinking leads to the absence of conscience. Thus, an evil or perverted conscience does not exist, instead a banally evil person should be characterized by their lack of conscience. Because evil lacks content, it cannot be thought about and thus no conscience can result from it.

4.3. The Second Conception of Conscience Supports the Banality of Evil Thesis and Can Explain It Well

After having demonstrated that Arendt's first conception is in tension with the banality of evil thesis, the question becomes how well normative conscience can explain the banality of evil. Normative conscience fits neatly with the banality of evil thesis.

To put it simply, because Eichmann did not think, he did not develop a conscience. The following quote from "The Life of the Mind" captures this relationship between evil and conscience as a by-product of thinking well: "This [whether one has a conscience] is not a matter of wickedness or goodness, as it is not a matter of intelligence or stupidity. A person who does not know that silent intercourse (in which we examine what we say and what we do) will not mind contradicting himself, and this means he will never be either able or willing to account for what he says or does; nor will he mind committing any crime, since he can count on it being forgotten the next moment."⁶⁷ The banality of evil thesis is acknowledged in this quote. Evil is not done out of mere wickedness. Above that, committing evil is also not prevented by being born with a good temper. Instead, someone who does not think, does not develop a conscience and thus, is not going to evaluate their deeds. Therefore, Eichmann, who did not think (in Arendt's sense) was not limited in his crimes by a conscience. He did not struggle with a guilty conscience for committing evil deeds, because he lacked a conscience entirely.

The normative conception of conscience (Arendt's second conception) can explain why Eichmann did not have a bad conscience and did not feel guilty about his deeds. Eichmann did not experience a bad conscience, because only people who have a conscience in the first place can experience a bad conscience. If one does not talk to oneself in one's thoughts, there is nobody *within* oneself who could hold one accountable. Eichmann's feeling of unease at the

⁶⁷ Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 191.

beginning of the deportations was merely due to Eichmann's initial uncertainty about whether society at large would support mass murder. As soon as he found out that it was widely supported, he stopped to worry.

Moreover, Arendt's second conception of conscience as opposed to her first conception supports the "banality" of evil well. Someone who never takes the time to think and reflect lives a shallow life. In addition to that, without thinking one does not actualize one's potential as a human being. Instead of having only disconnected experiences throughout one's life, being in dialogue with oneself can ensure that one is able to lead a fully alive life as a person.

4.4. Evidence that Arendt Changed her Conception of Conscience

There is some evidence throughout Arendt's several lecture series, published in "Responsibility and Judgement," that Arendt actually changed her mind concerning conscience. Thus, I will present evidence that Arendt abandoned her first conception, in favour of her second conception. Let me quote the most relevant passages, for giving evidence that she changed her mind, at length:

"[...] conscience, whose very existence has become questionable through our more recent experiences. Conscience supposedly is a way of *feeling* beyond reason and argument and of knowing through sentiment what is right and wrong. What has been revealed beyond doubt [...] is the fact that such feelings do indeed exist [...] but that alas, these feelings are no reliable indications, are in fact no indications at all, of right and wrong."⁶⁸

"Insofar, however, as conscience means no more than this being at peace with myself which is the condition sine qua non of thinking, it is indeed a reality; but this, as we know now, will only say, I can't and I won't."⁶⁹

The first passage is concerned with the common conception of conscience and Arendt's first conception of conscience, while the second passage passes judgement on Arendt's second conception. These two passages taken together draw an implicit conclusion on which conception of conscience is correct/useful. The implicit conclusion is that only the second conception of conscience is correct. Arendt's criteria for whether a conception of conscience is correct is whether such a conscience exists in reality and whether it points to something that

⁶⁸ Arendt, "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," 107.

⁶⁹ Arendt, "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," 108.

is right or wrong. Thus, Arendt here revives the idea that conscience is connected to morality, which she rejected in “Eichmann in Jerusalem.” If feelings, which are normally attributed to conscience, do not point to what is right or wrong, then they are not part of a conscience.

Arendt confirms here that only the second conception of conscience actually constitutes a conscience. That is the case, because only her second conception of conscience fulfils the criteria to exist in reality and to have something to say about right and wrong. In the first passage Arendt attacks the common and the first conception of conscience. After the holocaust the idea that every human being has a conscience has become highly questionable, according to Arendt. The common conception of conscience, which meant that everyone naturally and automatically knows what is right and wrong, has been proven wrong. However, during the Eichmann trial, Arendt concluded that even Eichmann had such feelings of guilt. Arendt attributed these feelings to conscience, in her first conception. These feelings and a commanding voice were the result of society’s values and neither connected to thinking nor morality. Precisely, because these feelings do not distinguish between right and wrong, does the later Arendt disqualify the first conception.

To sum up, Arendt, in her later works, disagrees with the common conception of conscience and she disagrees with her first conception of conscience. Moreover, conscience in Arendt’s first conception does not sign to what is right or wrong. The later Arendt would therefore disagree that Eichmann’s conscience deserves to be called “conscience” at all. That is the case, because conscience is supposed to have at least some moral significance. Eichmann’s feelings of guilt or obligation only: “[...] indicate conformity and nonconformity, they don’t indicate morality.”⁷⁰ Thus, the first conception of conscience fails with regard to explaining the intrinsic dependency of conscience on morality.

In contrast to that stands the second conception of conscience, which is a by-product and condition for thinking,⁷¹ and it is connected to morality. Moreover, as clearly stated in the second passage above, Arendt holds this normative conscience to exist. This conscience according to the second conception provides moral knowledge. Namely, conscience

⁷⁰ Arendt, “Some Questions of Moral Philosophy,” 107.

⁷¹ Arendt’s claims that conscience is a by-product and a condition of thinking seem to be in tension with each other. How can conscience be caused by thinking and at the same time condition thinking? Someone who thinks for the very first time, might not be able to continue thinking, if they realize that their dialogue partner has committed some unforgivable evil deed. According to Arendt thinking with oneself is not possible if one despises oneself. The thinking dialogue will cause a conscience and the conscience will disrupt the dialogue, if something unforgivable has occurred already. My interpretation favours conscience as caused by thinking over conscience as the condition of thinking. However, to fully resolve this tension would require a longer investigation.

(according to the second conception) gives people moral knowledge about what they should not do. Such a conscience exists in people who hold themselves accountable and question their own beliefs and thereby create borders of conduct. These established borders of conduct demarcate what kind of person one would not be able to live in peace with. Due to the person in question sincerely believing in their own moral border, their conscience will proclaim that they cannot, and I will not cross this self-chosen border.

Arendt uses the word “only,” probably because the actually existing normative conscience, compared to the imagined common conscience, does not tell us what to do, it only tells us what we should not do. But this normative conscience can only tell people what they cannot do, who are actively engaged in a thinking life, because those not involved in thinking do not even have a conscience.

The passage proves that Arendt believed in a morally relevant conscience. Conscience, according to the second conception, is less impressive than the common conception that everyone knows automatically what is right and wrong. However, according to this second conception, conscience is still the entity that can stop people from committing evil. Since Arendt clearly argued in favour of such a normative conscience and holding conception two excludes holding conception one, I conclude that we ought to favour conception two.

5. The Relevance of Favouring Arendt’s Second Conception

If the two conceptions are incompatible and the second conception fits Arendt’s framework better, that shows why Arendt probably changed her mind. But that does not show that the second conception as such is better. Throughout this section, I will justify that ‘fitting well with the banality of evil thesis’ is a good criterion to assess the conceptions of conscience. That is why we will look at the value of the banality of evil thesis and the second conception of conscience in this section concerned with relevance. Why is it relevant that Arendt’s conception of conscience fits well with the banality of evil thesis? The value of the banality of evil thesis is that it sheds light on misconceptions about evil. By explaining the importance of the banality of evil thesis, it should become apparent why Arendt’s conception of conscience should be able to explain it further. Instead of being in tension with it.

Moreover, I will present the general relevance of Arendt’s second conception of conscience. Arendt’s second conception provides us with a take on what conscience is and what it is not, what we can expect from it and what it is wrongly believed to achieve. She teaches us that not committing any crimes while living in a decent society is no guarantee that

we will remain relatively moral in case our society collapses. We are not born with a conscience but have to achieve and sustain it. Only when we achieve a conscience through thinking, we can prevent ourselves from immorality in demanding times. Arendt's second conception of conscience provides us with a moral obligation to achieve a conscience.

5.1. The Relevance of the Banality of Evil Thesis

Why is it so important that Arendt's conception of conscience fits with her banality of evil thesis? First, because it is in the context of thinking about evil that Arendt develops her conceptions of conscience. Therefore, conscience is supposed to clarify some questions about evil. The banality of evil thesis is supposed to solve a puzzle that a conception of conscience can help to make more intelligible. The puzzle consisted of how someone who is not wicked is able to commit limitless evil. Even though the answer entailed in the banality of evil thesis already proclaimed that it was due to thoughtlessness, one puzzle or question remained. In particular: even if a person does not think, we commonly expect them to be warned by their conscience. Why did such a warning not take place in Eichmann's case? The answer according to the second conception is that conscience and thinking are connected. If one does not actively encounter oneself while thinking, one will also not build up a conscience.

With her first conception Arendt tried to resolve the puzzle by arguing that conscience, like we commonly imagine it as a moral guard simply does not exist. However, this leaves open why some, very few people, were able to resist the Nazi regime or refused to participate. Arendt observes that many of the non-participants simply said that they were unable to participate. This inability, Arendt later attributed to conscience. Therefore, the second conception can explain why some people were able not to participate in evil. The people who thought, developed borders of conduct, which meant that they were convinced to be unable to participate in evil. What does this mean? Sometimes conduct and identity go together. For example, a cook cannot be a cook if it was not for cooking. Similarly, some persons, Arendt seems to argue, might think that they cannot be who they are if they would allow themselves to do something they consider evil. They are unable to participate in evil, which would have made it impossible for them to go on identifying and living with themselves.

Second, one main reason why the banality of evil thesis is of great value is that it does not mystify evil. That evil should not be mystified becomes clear in Arendt's correspondence with her friend Karl Jaspers. Let me quote a passage from a letter that Arendt wrote in response to Jaspers:

“I found what you say about my thoughts on ‘beyond crime and innocence’ in what the Nazis did half convincing; that is, I realize completely that in the way I’ve expressed this up to now I come dangerously close to that ‘satanic greatness’ that I, like you, totally reject. [...] One thing is certain: We have to combat all impulses to mythologize the horrible and to the extent that I can’t avoid such formulations, I haven’t understood what actually went on.”⁷²

In this passage, Arendt agrees with Jaspers, that evil should not be mystified or connected to the devil. The problem is that if we mythologize evil and evil-doers, we thereby present it as something otherworldly. Human beings who are presented as having committed satanic deeds, thereby appear less like human beings and more like demons. Problematically, such mystification makes it easy to imagine evil-doers as essentially different from common human beings. Thus, it presents evil as if there is something mysterious to it that we, as normal people, cannot quite grasp.

In addition to that, mystification also romanticizes evil and evil-doer. If people who committed evil are viewed as having done something of ‘satanic greatness,’ they are presented as if they achieved something extraordinary. Doing evil then seems extraordinary, because it is something that “normal” human beings could not do. Moreover, the ‘greatness’ implies that doing evil is something difficult or hard to do. All these things romanticize evil and evil-doer as intricate, mysterious and different.

However, as Arendt argues with the banality of evil thesis, evil is not profound and therefore evil is not intricate either. Evil is neither creative nor different. It cannot produce anything new, instead, evil is destructive and banal. Evil-doers can commit evil without aspiring to do as much evil as possible. Banal evil is committed by people who do not think, which stands in opposition to the idea of the evil mastermind.

Finally, regarding evil as only concerning demonic or wicked people, completely distracts from the fact that ordinary people are able to commit evil. Therefore, mystification fosters the misconception that we will be able to predict who could commit evil. In “Eichmann in Jerusalem,” Arendt counters this misconception by stating: “The trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal.”⁷³ Because normal people are

⁷² Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers, “Letters” in *Correspondence 1926-1969*, ed. Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1993), 69.

⁷³ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 276.

able to join evil, we cannot reassure ourselves that we would never become part of evil, simply because we are normal.

Therefore, the banality of evil thesis does not mystify evil by viewing it as something other-worldly, satanic. Nor does the banality of evil thesis glorify evil by making it look creative, inventive or extraordinary. Instead, the banality of evil shows how shallow evil and evil-doer are. It does not make evil look attractive. Thereby, the banality of evil thesis captures, that evil deeds are horrible, but after all committed by human beings, instead of satanic creatures. Therefore, we are not naturally incapable of committing evil ourselves.

If the banality of evil can make evil intelligible and shed light on some important misconceptions, then it is justified that Arendt's conception of conscience should be able to explain it further, instead of being in tension with it. If so, we ought to favour the second conception of conscience over the first.

5.2. The Implications of Arendt's Conception of Conscience

With regards to relevance, it also matters how useful Arendt's conception of conscience is. I will not fully evaluate this question, but I will make some suggestions about it. The relevance and implications of Arendt's discussion of conscience are manifold.⁷⁴ Let us first look at positive implications and towards the end at possible weak points of Arendt's conception of conscience.

First of all, it is important to become aware that there is no general conscience that can prevent us from committing grave injustices or evil. In a well-functioning society, most people would not simply start committing evil, however in the case of exceptional circumstances we cannot count on an inner objective voice holding us back. Arendt teaches us that we cannot rely on such a general, natural conscience present in everybody.

But Arendt also teaches us that the pessimistic idea that "conscience" proclaims whatever society values, is also mistaken. This pessimistic view, which Arendt initially ascribed to in her first conception, is still supported nowadays. For example, by Villa. However, Arendt's second conception demonstrates that we are not helplessly determined by society. Instead, we have to actively do something to develop a conscience: think for ourselves.

⁷⁴ The relevance would of course be diminished if we were to find out that Arendt was mistaken about conscience. However, to find out empirically whether a conscience exists and how it functions is beyond the scope of this thesis.

This last lesson is the most important one, because it implies a moral duty to think, in order to develop a conscience. Arendt makes it explicit that she agrees with this implication at the beginning of her lecture on conscience. She states: “If the ability to tell right from wrong should have anything to do with the ability to think, then we must be able to ‘demand’ its exercise in every sane person no matter how erudite or ignorant, how intelligent or stupid he may prove to be.”⁷⁵ Arendt’s affirmation later on that a conscience as a by-product of thinking exists, thus implies that we are obliged to think.

Moreover, this obligation to think is able to answer a common criticism against Arendt’s description of Eichmann. The critics contend that if Eichmann was thoughtless and did not know how evil his everyday tasks were then it seems that Arendt pleads him free from guilt and responsibility. Someone who does not know that what they do is immoral, and is not warned by their conscience, is not culpable.

Concerning Arendt’s first conception the criticism seems reasonable. If conscience was simply a matter of habituation (in accordance with the first conception), then everyone would be at risk of taking over evil values, whenever society becomes evil. However, that would imply that it is a matter of bad luck, whether someone holds good or bad values. Nobody is responsible or guilty for being born into a corrupted society. I think that Arendt might have changed her mind about conscience in light of this criticism. Arendt, surely, wanted to hold war criminals and Nazis responsible for their evil deeds. If conscience is, as Arendt’s second conception of conscience entails, a faculty that needs to be nourished by thinking, then it becomes immediately clear that everyone is individually responsible. Namely, everyone has the responsibility to critically think for themselves and that way to hold themselves accountable. Therefore, people who commit evil (without being aware of it) are culpable, because they did not fulfil their obligation to think. Fulfilling that obligation would have made them aware of the immorality of their deeds.

Lastly, Arendt’s second conception also has implications concerning education. It implies that it is not enough to teach people good values. What needs to be trained is thinking. The following quote shows the importance of thinking for oneself, in contrast to taking over values from society. When asked why she is not promoting a particular ideology or values, Arendt states: “And I am afraid of this [of telling people what to value] because I think that the moment you give somebody a new set of values you can immediately exchange it too.

⁷⁵ Arendt, “Thinking and Moral Considerations: A Lecture,” 422.

And the only thing the guy gets used to is having a set of values, no matter which ones.”⁷⁶ Only by thinking in dialogue with oneself one can make values into one’s own, which means to actually commit to them. Really committing to values that one arrived at oneself, leads to attaining a conscience and being unable to act against deeply held convictions. But at the same time, by critically thinking one also remains able to criticize and potentially change one’s values, during the next thinking session. By actively engaging with one’s own thoughts, one will always have an incentive to re-evaluate one’s beliefs and to further develop one’s conscience.

5.3. Possible Criticisms to the Relevance of Arendt’s Conception

Let us now turn to possible criticism of Arendt’s conception. One way of distinguishing accounts of conscience is to differentiate between rationalist and sentimentalist accounts.⁷⁷ While rationalists contend that conscience is connected primarily to reason, sentimentalists connect conscience mostly with moral feelings. Rationalists generally view conscience as providing moral knowledge of what is good or bad, whereas sentimentalists generally hold conscience to provide moral feelings and thereby motivations.

Hannah Arendt’s account of conscience seems to be a rationalist approach. Indeed, Arendt thinks of conscience as a by-product of thinking. A person without a conscience thereby lacks first and foremost the ability to think. Arendt implicitly characterizes a person without a conscience as a person who cannot think morally. In other words, a person without a conscience is unable to distinguish through reasoning right from wrong. The later Arendt would argue that a person without a conscience is a person that fails to think coherently, and thereby, fails to think at all.

Arendt’s conception of conscience as a by-product of thinking is likely to be criticized by sentimentalists for underestimating the role of feelings for conscience. When conscience is understood as caused by thinking and characterized as self-evidently knowing that one cannot do something (because it is evil), then the role of feelings is relatively small. We will discuss three possible sentimentalist criticisms of Arendt. I do not have the knowledge (nor the space) to answer these criticisms properly here. I do however believe that Arendt might have the

⁷⁶ Hannah Arendt, “Hannah Arendt on Hannah Arendt,” in *Thinking Without a Banister: Essays in Understanding, 1953-1975*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2018), 454.

⁷⁷ Marijana Vujošević, “Conscience as The Rational Deficit of Psychopaths,” *Philosophical Psychology* 28, no. 8 (2015): 1220.

resources to answer them. Yet whether (and if so, *how*) this is the case needs to be further investigated.

Conventions

Why would excluding feelings from one's conception of conscience be a problem? According to the sentimentalist Shaun Nichols, we need to be capable of having affective responses to the suffering of others to be able to distinguish morals from conventions.⁷⁸ If he is correct then a conscience would not be possible without feelings, because if someone is not emotionally affected by how others feel, they will not care to hurt them.

Distinguishing mere conventions from morals is essential in all of Arendt's thinking. One of the biggest threats to society is that people merely follow conventions. If so, they fail to meditate on their own thinking, and thereby fail to assess themselves. However, Arendt believes that the difference between morals and conventions is made primarily through a certain kind of thinking and not through feelings. One can only escape conventionalism when one becomes able to think about one's own thinking. That is, for Arendt morals are the result of self-assessment. In other words: the sentimentalists beg the question as long as they do not explain why feelings are so important for the distinction between morals and conventions.

Motivations

Nichols tries to explain why moral feelings are necessary to have conscience. He argues that we need moral feelings to be motivated to act on our moral beliefs.⁷⁹ Why would this be the case? There is a distinction between motivations and beliefs. Even though I believe that giving money to the poor is good, and that without too much trouble I can give money away, this, as such, does not necessarily motivate me to do it. To be motivated, we need to have a desire to do good. That is, we need feelings.

According to Arendt's account we establish our own moral borders of conduct when we think. She assumes that people will not be willing to become a murderer, because then they would have to enter the thinking dialogue with a murderer. However, if Nichols is correct then thinking alone will not lead to being unwilling to become a murderer. Instead, one needs

⁷⁸ Shaun Nichols, "How Psychopaths Threaten Moral Rationalism: Is It Irrational To Be Amoral?," *The Monist* 85, no. 2 (2002): 300.

⁷⁹ Nichols, "How Psychopaths Threaten Moral Rationalism," 295.

to be capable of morally relevant feelings to care about who one leads the thinking dialogue with.

Developing borders of conduct only requires knowing with what kind of person one could not live together. But it does not seem to require feeling any empathy towards others. That might be a problem, since why would someone who does not feel any empathy care about living together with an evil-doer (e.g., murderer)? This point is also made by philosopher William Lyons. Lyons states: “And conscience can only arise if and when we are capable of sufficient empathy with others to be distressed when our actions are harmful to them [...]”⁸⁰ Arendt’s conception of conscience possibly underestimates the vital role of feelings regarding forming a conscience.

Even though Arendt’s account is closer to the rationalist than the sentimentalist account, she does not completely exclude feelings. Therefore, Arendt’s account might be more hybrid than it seems. Moral commitments must come about by thinking, if one would simply act on feelings of guilt, one risks merely acting in line with society’s standard (which does not have to be moral). However, feelings do enter the picture in Arendt’s description of motivation. One will be motivated not to commit evil deeds, because otherwise one would not be in harmony with oneself anymore. Thus, if one commits evil deeds that one’s conscience forbade, one will develop feelings of hatred towards oneself, which if they become extreme enough, will make it impossible for one to be in dialogue with oneself.

According to Arendt scholar John Kiess: “[...] it is striking how central a role the affections play in her understanding of what makes us think. Indeed, Arendt rejected any strict separation between the two, preferring instead to speak of what she called ‘passionate thinking’ [...]”⁸¹ Arendt’s conception of “passionate thinking” might help us to develop a new understanding of conscience that can explain both its objectivity (that it gives us true beliefs about morality) and its force (that it motivates us to act in accordance with what is moral).

Thinking

There is one final sentimentalist criticism that might attack Arendt’s thinking on conscience. Psychologists have tried to map and test people’s skills in moral judgement. Most famously, Kohlberg has made surveys to test people’s capacities to determine what one ought to do in a

⁸⁰ William Lyons, “Conscience – An Essay in Moral Psychology,” *Philosophy* 84, no. 330 (October 2009): 490.

⁸¹ John Kiess, *Hannah Arendt and Theology* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 197-78.

certain scenario. Problematically, people without a conscience seem to score no worse than people with a conscience. To illustrate, Link, Scherer and Byrne state that psychopaths gain even higher scores than normal people on Kohlberg's survey for moral judgement.⁸²

This result could, of course, be interpreted in many ways. First, one could question the quality of the survey when psychopaths score higher than normal people. Kohlberg might have been mistaken about his moral assessments. Second, one could argue that psychopaths should not be identified with people without conscience but as people without empathy. Indeed, the meaning of 'conscience' is primarily a conceptual issue, not an empirical one. Third, one could argue that since psychopaths lack conscience, and since psychopaths seem to be capable of moral reasoning, we must understand conscience not any longer in terms of thinking but in terms of feelings.

The third line of interpretation might seem disastrous for Arendt's conception of conscience. If conscience is the result of thinking it should be impossible for people without a conscience to pass the Kohlberg survey. However, I still believe that Arendt has the resources to answer this sentimentalist criticism. For Arendt, the thinking that is necessary to have a conscience is not just any thinking. It is a first-person way of thinking, that is, a thinking that is about one's own thinking and doing. In other words, the person without a conscience might be able to reproduce moral theories. They might also know what to do in hypothetical scenarios. However, as long as such a person fails to assess those theories and make them their own, they will be incapable of cultivating a conscience.

In summary, Arendt might be criticized from a sentimentalist approach. It seems to me that such criticism will fail. However, it will also give rise to new and interesting questions for further research: How does Arendt conceptually distinguish morals from conventions? Can Arendt's account of "passionate thinking" help us construct a hybrid theory of conscience? And how should we understand Arendt's first-personal conception of thinking?

6. Conclusion

Throughout my thesis, I first showed that Arendt has two conceptions of conscience and that holding both conceptions at the same time would be contradictory. Afterwards, I demonstrated that her second conception explains the banality of evil thesis well, whereas the first conception is in tension with it. Finally, I argued that it is important that Arendt's

⁸² Nancy Link, Shawn Scherer and Niall Byrne, "Moral Judgment and Moral Conduct in the Psychopath," *Canadian Psychiatric Association Journal* 22, no. 7 (November 1977): 341-46.

conception of conscience fits with the banality of evil thesis. Therefore, I conclude now that Arendt's second conception of conscience should be viewed as her official conception of conscience, whereas her first conception should be regarded as superseded by the second conception. Conscience, according to Hannah Arendt's thought, is a by-product of thinking.

My conclusion implies several things. First, my conclusion implies an answer to the puzzle how an average and normal person such as Eichmann could become one of the worst criminals. That is, no evil conscience whispered into Eichmann's ear that he should kill. Such a depiction would mystify evil, which contradicts the banality of evil thesis. Instead, Eichmann did not attain a conscience, because he did not think. Because he never met himself in the thinking dialogue, he did not establish borders of conduct. Therefore, he was able to commit limitless evil, without feeling guilty.

Second, having a good temper or normal psychological condition cannot guarantee that such a person will not be able to do evil. Instead, conscience is the only thing that can ensure that someone will be unable (in their own experience) to commit certain evil acts.

Third, I take it to be generally agreed upon that we ought to act morally, instead of immorally, and at the very least that we ought not to contribute to evil. If so, we all have a duty to think for ourselves, and more specifically, we have a duty to think about our own commitments and values.

In addition to that, it seems to be important to find out whether Arendt is correct and whether thinking leads to conscience as its by-product. My conclusion is limited in that regard, because it does not prove that Arendt's second conception is correct. I only showed that within Arendt's framework her second conception is superior, and I gave some reasons why such a conception of conscience is relevant.

If Arendt's second conception is nonetheless correct, then that means that conscience possesses moral authority. When someone's conscience tells them that they are unable to do something, it is also something that would be immoral to do. To encounter ourselves in the thinking dialogue will be our best shield against falling prey to the banality of evil. Thinking about our own thinking will enable us to set boundaries for our own conduct. If we do so, we will achieve a conscience. Such thinking, I believe, will not only make our conduct more moral. Instead, it will also make our lives more meaningful, more active, and of greater happiness. Or as Simone Weil, a contemporary of Arendt, once wrote: "Imaginary evil is

romantic and varied; real evil is gloomy, monotonous, barren, boring. Imaginary good is boring; real good is always new, marvellous, intoxicating.”⁸³

⁸³ Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Emma Crawford (London: Routledge Classics, 2002), 70.

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