

# ESSAY

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TOPIC IV

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## Individuals and collectives. A philosophical fragment

Surprisingly, he was not a monster. Sitting there behind a wall of glass in a court of Jerusalem where Fritz Bauer and the Mossad had brought him, he did not have a horrific face with eight eyes and sharp, bloody teeth. He was remarkably ordinary, a diligent bureaucrat, a human like you and me. – Adolf Eichmann killed six million people. He organized the Shoah, the turning point of human history that, in Adorno`s and Horkheimer`s words (*Dialectic of Enlightenment*), “reversed civilization” and incorporated the superlatives of evil and brutality.

Nevertheless, Auschwitz, Buchenwald and Dachau were not only Eichmann`s work. There was a system behind him, the national-socialist ideology, the German people that did not intervene, the collective.

So, from the point of view of ethics and political philosophy, we must ask ourselves: What is the relation between masses and individuals in terms of guilt? Can collectives become guilty? What is the political responsibility of a collective in dark times of wars of aggression, human rights violations and state terror?

In her philosophical observations “Eichmann in Jerusalem. A Report on the Banality of Evil”, the political theorist Hannah Arendt comes up with two significant theses:

§1 Collective guilt does not exist.

§2 Collective political responsibility exists.

In the following, I will respond to both statements. Firstly, I will discuss the idea of collective guilt by juxtaposing the nature of individuals and collectives in a state system. I will use the correlation between freedom and responsibility to assess to what extent groups might become guilty. Secondly, I will elaborate on the idea of political responsibility of the masses, arguing with the specific sociological dynamic of groups and a perspective of modern natural law.

## §1

First, one has to ask: What is the nature of a collective? It's the concept of the plurality of people, masses of persons within a certain system, the sum of single personalities: You can dismantle a collective, a social institution, and break it down into its atoms, its core components – the individual as Aristotle's *zoon politicon*. There is no collective without an individual and there is no individual without a collective.

Individuals are natural persons and thus bearers of rights, especially of the right to make use of your personal freedom, as Arendt (*The Freedom to be Free*) would put it. The human right dogmatic of modern states is governed by Georg Jellinek's three dimensions of understanding liberty: 1) status negativus: the freedom from state interference, 2) status positivus: the freedom supported by the state, 3) status activus: the freedom by and for the state.

As we can see, the state-individual-relation is primarily dominated by a tremendously wide understanding of freedom – and so is human anthropology in general. It is the very heart of human nature to be free, to be autonomous and self-determined.

Using the phenomenological concept by Martin Heidegger (*Being and Time*), an individual is literally *thrown* into his being-in-the-world, into his arbitrary existence and environment. In the sense of existentialism, the existence thus precedes the essence, i.e. first we are, and then we define ourselves. We are what we do, so to speak. This understanding of human freedom indicates that man is indeed, with the words of Jean-Paul Sartre (*The Being and the Nothingness*), "condemned to be free".

The philosophical dimension of being condemned as if personal liberty was a sanction, a penalty, leads to the connection between rights and responsibilities. Since we must think persons as absolutely free beings, this necessarily implies that individuals are radically responsible for their behavior, their deeds, their who-they-are. In the words of Immanuel Kant (*Metaphysics of Morals*), the telos of legal norms is to balance the arbitrariness of persons in a way that optimizes the freedom of everyone. Thus, being a social being in a collective requires self-restraint of power. We are free what we want, but responsible for what we do.

This is where the ethical concept of guilt comes into play. Guilt, be it in its judicial or moral facets of meaning, can be considered a breach of a certain personal responsibility that is imposed on you by your own inner compass or outer societal standards. This violation is due to highly personal deeds, to the wrongdoing and misbehavior of a single personality: Eichmann

made the choice to organize the concentration camps of the Holocaust, he decided to be a war criminal, his freedom made him the monster, hidden behind the façade of the banality of evil. On the contrary, the siblings Scholl made the decision to resist the autocracy of Nazi Germany and to fight the crimes of II. World War, their free choice led to them standing up against the national socialism of the masses. This juxtaposition serves as an example to show the hypocrisy of collective guilt: It would mean outsourcing personal guilt, relativizing Eichmann's, Hitler's and Goebbels involvement in the atrocities of the Nazi ruling and at the same time relativizing the freedom and pacifist movements of single human beings in the autocratic system.

We conclude: Individual freedom is the source of individual guilt. As there is no such thing as collective freedom, there is no collective guilt.

## §2

Disagreeing with the concept of collective guilt is not equivalent to negating collective political responsibility. As Arendt argues, "there is such thing as *political* responsibility" which transcends individual members of the specific group.

What one must establish is the conception of a certain dynamic of masses that has already been described by Gustave Le Bon's (*The Psychology of the Masses*). In fact, from a sociologist perspective, masses are less intelligent, more drawn to thinking in black and white and prioritize simplistic answers. Due to the reduction of individuality in the group, a process of self-alienation starts to settle, leading to the dominance of a collective reason, thinking in dogmatic categories of truth, reversing enlightenment to mythology. It's the loss of the individual in the group.

Also, one can apply Jeremy Bentham's architectonical idea of a *panopticon*, used by Michel Foucault (*About Sanctions and Supervision*), to social processes. Given that in a group, an individual is under the constant threat of the omnipresent supervision of the masses, the human instinct to fit in is triggered, i.e. seeking social conformity and giving up one's own reflective thinking.

This dynamic of groups hence transcends a person because it cannot be controlled, but only accompanied and controlled by the reason of individuals. The prominent feature of these movements of the masses is that it forms the very basis of political systems. Paradoxically, the dynamic of a group is the reason for both democracies and

autocracies, i.e. the sociological processes incorporate a constructive and destructive potential, Hobbes` Leviathan as the principle of reasonable order and the Behemoth as the principle of chaos. The power of the masses can be applied to overthrow an autocratic regime and establish a participatory and democratic constitutional state. At the same time, the naivety and conformity of nameless masses can be abused to maintain the functioning of a dictatorship that understands itself as a homogenous biological, ethnical and cultural corpus.

This is where Arendt`s concept of *political responsibility* has to be established. It is indeed the task of the collective body to harness the constructive potential of group processes. This responsibility is insofar political since it affects the togetherness of people within a social construct; it affects the coexistence of individuals as social beings. It is not a matter of moral or judicial assessment because a violation of that responsibility does not fit in the category of guilt, but collective failure.

As an illustration, one can raise the question of civil disobedience in a totalitarian system. According to Ronald Dworkin`s argument against legal positivism, people are not marionettes of the state since they have human intrinsic value of dignity and freedom. This train of thought can be traced back to Locke`s state of origin, arguing with the natural rights to property, life and liberty that are facets of the human survival instinct (*Two Treaties of Government*). Therefore, it is the duty of the people to resist a government that thoroughly commits human rights violations. According to the modern social contractualists, the sole purpose of state is the protection of the core of rights of its citizens. Human rights violations by the state thus mean that state loses its foundation of legitimation. In the case of the Russian war of aggression against the sovereign state of Ukraine, it is the *political responsibility* of the Russian population to do everything in their means to turn down the Behemoth of Putin`s ruling and establish the Leviathan of a stable democratic state.

To recapitulate the essay:

**§1** Collectives consist of individuals. Individuals are absolutely free beings and thus radically responsible for what they do. Personal free choice is the cause of guilt. Hence, the concept of guilt is non-collective.

§2 *Political* responsibility transcends individual behavior due to the dynamic of masses. It is the political task of collectives to eradicate the discrepancy between the dignity of individuals and human rights violations committed by the state.