

Reflections to bring certain ideas of H. Arendt on thinking and personhood closer to Existential Analysis

Introduction

The intention with which I write this short essay is to contribute some reflections on the place of thinking for the development of personhood, within the framework of Existential Analysis (EA), in connection with some of Hannah Arendt's ideas. I am particularly interested in this because, except for some (psycho-)therapeutic schools with an emphasis on rationality, the place of thinking has been neglected –sometimes even devalued– in various ways, perhaps precisely because of the excessively rational nature of these other approaches, or because of the ill-conceived identification between reason and thought, or even because of a kind of psycho-analysis –erroneous, moreover– that reduces all thinking to a rationalization mechanism. Whatever the reason, I strongly disagree with the uncritically critical tendencies towards the issue of thinking and believe that, since AE, besides being an anthropology and a therapeutic method, is also a form of enquiry into human existence, it can be greatly enriched by certain of Arendt's considerations on the place of thinking in the constitution of the person, without however ignoring Längle's warning that "thinking (...) can assist, as well as hamper this process" (2003 p. 43). I will therefore make a few connections between Arendt's idea that thinking involves an inner dialogue and how this can favour the emergence of personhood.

Thinking and personhood

The *person* is a central concept of contemporary EA which describes the spiritual dimension of the human being and his specific way of being: *existence*. Person and existence are central concepts of EA, which seeks to situate the person in her constitutive authenticity so that she can make herself present in the context of her concrete existence. The original openness of the person, the fact that she is situated at the open boundary between the inner self and the external world –i.e. that her primary mode of being and self-constitution is *dialogue*– enables her to respond to the circumstances in which she is involved and, by means of the response itself and the taking up of a position that precedes it, to give herself the form that is proper to her, that of existence (Cf. Längle, 2003). In concrete terms, AE aims at enabling the person to live with inner coherence, with the inner consent in which her true selfhood and legitimacy is expressed, that is, to be herself within the open, dialogical exchange with the outside world and the inner world. This is where the human being's most authentic freedom lies.

According to Längle, the constitution of personhood requires the ability to self-distance and take up an existential position (Cf. 2003). If one is not able to create an inner distance from oneself, one ends up identifying oneself with every external content that makes an impression within and thus cannot access one's own criteria for determining what to do, what it means and what value is attached to that which is presented to one from the outside. If the fundamental ontic condition of the person is dialogue, the person must be able to self-distance in order to take up a position and transcend herself in the outflow towards the other which constitutes the intentional pole of the dialogical flow. She must also be able to come to a determination about her position *vis-à-vis* the factual and what is in process of becoming, a position that has her intimate consent, an *existential* position in its true form. In a certain sense, the person can emerge to the extent that there is self-distancing, since the person, being "*that which speaks in me*" (Cf. *ibid.*, p. 39), emerges in the space of self-constitutive appearing by means of an internal dialogue, that is to say, by speaking to herself in her innermost self. This undoubtedly suggests that the person is not something previously established but must be constituted as such. The person is not an essence to be developed but the being-in-becoming that is constituted by the internal dialogue and by the dialogue with the world.

A similar theoretical line is proposed by Arendt, for whom there is a direct relationship between thinking and personhood. In *The Human Condition*, she argues that personhood is precisely

an achievement, not a given condition; rather, it emerges through action. Later, in *The Life of the Mind*, she will seek to establish a connection between this idea and the conception that all true action must be preceded by thinking. The individual who renounces thinking abandons the very condition for obtaining personhood. The loss of the ability to think, which Socrates saw as one being present with oneself in inner dialogue, necessarily means "the loss of the self that constitutes the person" (Arendt, 2003, p. 101). Strictly speaking, it cannot be said that there is a person when there is no thinking, given that being a person is an achievement, not an essential condition provided by one's humanity. The individual who thinks constitutes himself as a person, that is, he establishes the limits of his world. As Arendt says, thinking "is the human way of striking roots, of taking one's place in the world into which we all arrive as strangers" (Ibid., p. 100).

What does it mean to arrive as strangers? In a sense, the outsider status of the individual with respect to his own existence means that all experience *a priori* to thinking is marked by external structures that are constituted around the individual and function through him. In psychoanalytic terms, one could say that the individual is nothing more than a tangle of introjects determined entirely by external conditions that function through him. When the *wind of thought* breaks through, inner experience ceases to be radically shaped from the outside. That is to say that the person emerges when she begins to set certain limits, when she inaugurates her own formulation of the world, either in an original way or by appropriating certain imperatives, rules, pre-given conditions in an authentic way. Or, also, by confronting them: by saying *no* to them. The person must be able to make it explicit to herself what the limits of her world are: "*this* is as far as I go; no more from *here*; *this* is what I regret, *this* is what I assent to, *this* is what I give my consent to, *this* is how I live, how I respond, how I act, *this* is how I judge such an action, such an idea". The constitution of personhood is intimately linked to the formation of the horizons of one's own world, but this requires a constant dialogue with the world, a fundamental openness.

What happens when we think? In *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt points out that for Socrates, as he argues in the Platonic dialogue *Gorgias*, it is preferable for an individual to have many people disagree with him rather than to be in inner disagreement with himself (Cf. 1981, p. 181). That is, there must be a state of inner coherence, of harmony within the self. This situation can only take place when the individual is in *solitude*, which consists in the individual being with himself—different from *loneliness*, which corresponds to not being with others. This being with oneself is what allows the actualization of the inner difference between *me* and *myself* in consciousness; that is, entering into inner dialogue, asking questions and answering them. In essence, this is thinking: to actualize the inner difference that allows dialogue, to enter into discussion in the inner self that makes the disidentification from immediate contents possible. Only in thinking can one question and answer oneself. So to speak, it is thinking that actualizes the inner difference by which, to use EA's terms, the self-distancing necessary for the constitution of the person is produced. To think is to actualize this distance that emerges from the inner difference and breaks the uncritical identification with various mental contents, unrevised positions, preconceived ideas, monolithic assumptions or ideologies (Cf. Berkowitz, 2010, p. 241). To the above, we could also add introjects, projections, emotions, feelings or perceptions.

What is the point of actualizing the inner difference? If it is imperative that there be inner coherence, that the person can be in accord with herself and give consent, to allow the emergence of inner difference means to make the condition by which this consent can indeed be given possible. How can consent be given if there is no distance with the psychic content? Consenting is something one arrives at, it implies taking a free stance. Now, how is it possible to take a free stance if there is no previous disidentification from that with which one seeks consent? A simple example to understand this will suffice. Imagine that a man meets his father and the latter makes a politically biased comment: "the Russians are the evil of the world". Perhaps, because of family affinity, the son might uncritically pick up this comment and repeat it, without assessing its veracity. Does this mean that the incorporation of this content into his belief structure has his consent? Certainly *not*, since there has been no instance in which the son has reflected, distanced himself from the content of the

statement in order to evaluate it and take his own grasp on it. Inner harmony is not possible without the self-distancing split. Consent entails that one has disputed the content of consent first, to have distanced oneself from it, to have examined it, and to have arrived at a conclusion. This is the only way to consent. All human beings are, Arendt explains, two-in-one because they establish a silent dialogue, a constant conversation with themselves (cf. Arendt, 2003, p. 121). And the split that takes place in thinking is the necessary condition for the inner harmony of the two-in-one, which is the agreement between two parties in dialogue.

Since Socrates and Plato, this is what we have understood by thinking, an inner dialogue in which we speak to ourselves. The one who thinks is with himself, and it is precisely this presence of himself before himself that gives him the experience of being a person, since it is only in the inner difference that he perceives himself as the one who speaks and responds, and hears his voice within him. Since the person is that which speaks within oneself, I see thinking as at least one way of bringing one's voice into presence and making it present in a manner that the person is perceived as such in the inner experience of her speech. In a sense, bringing the self-voice forth into oneself is the way in which, by hearing oneself as speaker and responder, the person comes to herself as such and begins to constitute herself internally. After all, what can it mean that the person is that which speaks in me? I would like to suggest that one of the ways in which this can be understood is precisely this: thinking serves as a space of emergence for the speech that brings the person forth. However, this is not intended to conflict with EA's idea, inherited from Viktor Frankl, that the person cannot experience herself fully because her roots are unconscious; it should be noted that it is not the same thing for the person to experience herself and to be able to understand herself as person by the concrete manifestations of her way of being.

Therefore, I consider that Arendt's conception of thinking contributes to EA in at least three senses: first, because it opens a way to (partially) understand how self-distancing functions; second, because thinking has an unequivocal role in taking an existential position in the face of the factual and what is becoming, and; third, because what happens within the person in thought helps us comprehend what it means that the person is that which speaks within each one of us. And there certainly are other thematic lines to develop.

Conclusion

Thus, not pretending to offer a systematic exposition of the person in EA, much less in Hannah Arendt's work, I have provided some general lines that can be used for further development. I believe that a fuller view of this must present the relation between thinking and the emergence of consciousness and the faculty of judgement, since, for Arendt, judging and thinking are not the same thing, but thinking sweeps away the structures that make possible the emergence of a kind of judgement that does not subsume particulars under universal categories. It makes sense to affirm that the capacity for judgement, which arises because the *wind of thought* sweeps away the prejudices that prevent it, also bears a relation to the constitution of the person. However, this will be left for next time.

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Santiago de Arteaga Gallinal
Ph.D. Candidate in Philosophy – PUC / ANID
Trainee in Existential Analysis – ICAE
sdearteaga@uc.cl
Uruguay / Chile