

VILNIUS UNIVERSITY

Simas

ČELUTKA

The Autonomy of Politics as an  
Ethical Project. A Study of H.  
Arendt's, M. Oakeshott's and C.  
Schmitt's Conceptions

**SUMMARY OF DOCTORAL DISSERTATION**

Humanities,  
Philosophy (H 001)

VILNIUS 2021

This dissertation was written between 2016 and 2020.  
The research was supported by the Research Council of Lithuania.

**Academic supervisor:**

**prof. dr. Alvydas Jokubaitis** (Vilnius university, humanities, philosophy – H 001)

This doctoral dissertation will be defended in a public meeting of the Dissertation Defence Panel:

**Chairman – prof. dr. Jūratė Rubavičienė** (Vilnius university, humanities, philosophy – H 001).

**Members:**

**assoc. prof. dr. Povilas Aleksandravičius** (Mykolas Romeris university, humanities, philosophy – H 001).

**prof. dr. Gintautas Mažeikis** (Vytautas Magnus university, humanities, philosophy – H 001).

**prof. dr. Vytautas Radžvilas** (Vilnius university, humanities, philosophy – H 001).

**prof. dr. Rein Raud** (Tallinn university, humanities, philosophy – H 001).

The dissertation shall be defended at a public meeting of the Dissertation Defence Panel at 2 pm on 8 January 2021 in the meeting room 201 of the Philosophy Faculty, Vilnius university.

Address: Universiteto street No.9, Room No. 201, Vilnius, Lithuania.  
Tel. +37052667600; e-mail: [fsf@fsf.vu.lt](mailto:fsf@fsf.vu.lt)

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VILNIAUS UNIVERSITETAS

Simas

ČELUTKA

Politikos autonomija kaip moralinis  
projektas. H. Arendt, M.  
Oakeshotto ir C. Schmitto  
konceptijų analizė

**DAKTARO DISERTACIJOS SANTRAUKA**

Humanitariniai mokslai,  
Filosofija (H 001)

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VILNIUS 2021

Disertacija rengta 2016 – 2020 metais Vilniaus universitete.  
Mokslinius tyrimus rėmė Lietuvos mokslo taryba.

**Mokslinis vadovas:**

**prof. dr. Alvydas Jokubaitis** (Vilniaus universitetas, humanitariniai mokslai, filosofija – H001).

Gynimo taryba:

**Pirmininkė – prof. dr. Jūratė Rubavičienė** (Vilniaus universitetas, humanitariniai mokslai, filosofija – H001).

**Nariai:**

**doc. dr. Povilas Aleksandravičius** (Mykolo Romerio universitetas, humanitariniai mokslai, filosofija – H001).

**prof. dr. Gintautas Mažeikis** (Vytauto Didžiojo universitetas, humanitariniai mokslai, filosofija – H001).

**prof. dr. Vytautas Radžvilas** (Vilniaus universitetas, humanitariniai mokslai, filosofija – H001).

**prof. dr. Rein Raud** (Talino universitetas, humanitariniai mokslai, filosofija – H001).

Disertacija ginama viešame Gynimo tarybos posėdyje 2021 m. sausio mėn. 8 d. 14.00 val. Vilniaus universiteto Filosofijos fakultete 201 auditorijoje. Adresas: Universiteto g. 9, Vilnius, Lietuva, tel. +37052667600, [fsf@fsf.vu.lt](mailto:fsf@fsf.vu.lt).

Disertaciją galima peržiūrėti Vilniaus universiteto bibliotekoje ir VU interneto svetainėje adresu: <https://www.vu.lt/naujienos/ivykiu-kalendorius>

## SUMMARY

### **Thematical context and problem**

The relationship between politics and morality is a fundamental question in political philosophy that has been analysed since Antiquity. In Plato's dialogues, Socrates quarrelled with the Sophists regarding the foundations of politics: is it the power of the stronger, or rather virtue and justice? Plato, and later Christian thinkers, considered politics an integral part of a comprehensive cosmological and moral order. Modern political philosophy, inaugurated by Niccolò Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes, transformed understanding of the relationship between politics and morality. In their theories, the establishment of political order and the maintenance of political power are dissociated from the moral education of citizens. In the period of Enlightenment and the French Revolution, politics is once again subordinated to morality – only this time secular rationalist morality, rather than Christianity. This tendency is clearly detectable in the writings of liberal thinkers. In this regard, contemporary analytical political philosophy is an heir of the Enlightenment liberalism. Representatives of this tradition start from construction of abstract moral norms and theories that serve as a legitimating ground for political principles. Contemporary liberal political theorists, including early John Rawls, G. A. Cohen, Ronald Dworkin, Brian Barry, T. M. Scanlon and David Estlund, conceive politics as an instrument for realising liberal morality in practice (Rawls 1971; Cohen 2008; Dworkin 2002; Barry 1995; Scanlon 1999; Estlund 2020). In other words, politics is derivative from moral theory and is interpreted as “applied ethics”. This means that liberal political theories conceptualise politics not as an autonomous sphere of human conduct, but instead as an arena of application of *a priori* moral ideals, such as justice, human rights, tolerance or negative liberty. Many advocates of liberal theory believe in Immanuel Kant's dictum that states “all politics must bend its knee before right” (Kant 1996: 160). In this case,

analysis of the conditions of political action is preceded by formulation of abstract moral rules, that are subsequently applied in political practice. The basic premise of liberal political theory is that an object of inquiry (politics) must conform to theory (liberal conception of morality), not the other way around. Liberal political theorists believe that if politics is left unsupervised by morality, it is poised to become a mere technique to gain and maintain political power. These theorists adhere to the Enlightenment ambition to formulate an objective, rational and universal moral theory, which, when applied to politics, would guarantee universal peace, stability and order.

As a successor of the Enlightenment project, liberal political philosophy adopted some of its key characteristics, especially scientific outlook. Impressive progress in mathematics and natural sciences achieved since the 16th century encouraged modern thinkers to apply scientific methods to the realm of human affairs. Liberals and utilitarians began imagining that morality and politics can be reconstructed on a scientific basis. This view laid foundations for the development of technical, instrumental understanding of politics. When politics is interpreted instrumentally, it is no longer seen as an independent realm of human action, but as a tool for realisation of preestablished external goals. Instrumental rationality is dominant not only in utilitarianism, but also in egalitarian political theories such as propounded by the early John Rawls. These theories begin from abstractly formulating the main normative principle, e. g. social contract (Rawls), equal rights (Dworkin) or negative liberty (Robert Nozick), and only then move to the question of political institutions (Kymlicka 1990: 3). The influence of scientific worldview to moral philosophy is evident in the fact that theory is seen as much more important than practice. In this case, morality is interpreted not as an integral part of the daily practical experience, but as a field of construction of abstract moral ideals and rules. As natural sciences are based on a structural distrust of human senses, scientism gradually entrenched a distrust of ordinary citizens' practical understanding of

moral issues. Alienation with oneself and one's surroundings became a crucial premise of a theoretical understanding of morality. The requirement of neutrality and impartiality, which is dominant in theoretical explanations of morality, betrays an immense influence of scientific worldview in the sphere of human affairs (MacIntyre 1998: 508; Burrell/Hauerwas 1981: 76-77). Significantly, this requirement also necessitates an elevation of a third-person perspective. Distrustful of the first-person perspective and practical self-understanding, liberal theorists seek to find an ideally neutral "Archimedean point" which would allow them to construct a fully rational and objective theory of morality and politics.

In this dissertation, we question the dominant way of understanding the relationship between politics and morality. It is criticised from the perspective of the autonomy of politics. This perspective builds on a presupposition that politics is an independent sphere of human conduct that does not require validation from nonpolitical discourses, including the liberal moral theory. Some authors call the idea of the autonomy of politics an "autotelic" conception of politics (Parietti 2011). This term points to the fact that the meaning or *telos* of politics is located inside politics, not prior or beyond it. Politics is regarded as an inherently valuable activity whose worth is clearly identified in the daily actions of citizens (Newey 2001: 37). In other words, the advocates of the autonomy of politics interpret politics as a *non-instrumental good*. For this reason, the critique of instrumental reason forms an important part of this conception. Applied to politics, the logic of instrumental rationality distorts conditions of political understanding as it hampers our efforts to adequately grasp the presuppositions of political action. When liberalism subordinates politics to some substantive moral ideal or set of rules, it treats politics as dependent on the realisation of that ideal or set of rules (Parietti 2011: 66). The project of the autonomy of politics attempts to detach understanding of politics from realisation of any premeditated moral ideals which have been theoretically established before paying attention to the fundamental structures of political experience.

Supporters of this project claim that the meaning of politics cannot be reduced to the realisation of a single moral rule. Its meaning is revealed in the process of political action and the concurrently evolving self-understanding of the political subjects themselves (citizens). In order to understand politics, one ought to begin from the analysis of practical reason and relationships between citizens, instead of theories of justice or doctrines of human rights.

Among the most influential thinkers of autonomous politics in the 20<sup>th</sup> century are Hannah Arendt, Michael Oakeshott and Carl Schmitt. Their insights are a chief inspiration for contemporary political autonomy theorists. These authors tried to understand politics not from outside, but from the inside. They believed that the development of modern political thought prevents us from grasping the essence of political experience. In contrast to prevailing modern prejudices, they directed their attention not to the *a priori* establishment of abstract moral rules and their subsequent application to political practice, but to fundamental structures and preconditions of political action. Examining politics from the first-person perspective, these thinkers attempted to formulate authentically *political* conceptions of politics which would remain independent from pre-political or supra-political constitutive principles. Their conceptions are aimed at rehabilitating the authority of practical self-understanding of ordinary citizens. In this regard, they differ from liberal political theorists who search for the aforementioned “Archimedean point”. From Arendt’s, Schmitt’s and Oakeshott’s perspective, the dominance of the third-person perspective precludes from penetrating the self-understanding of political agents. These thinkers defend the autonomy of politics from explanatory discourses (liberalism, scientism, positivism, Marxism etc.) that seek to explain politics by employing theories and terms that misconstrue its nature.

Arendt, Schmitt and Oakeshott, in line with contemporary theorists of the autonomy of politics (Bernard Williams, Raymond Geuss, Richard Bellamy, Glen Newey, Mark Philp), were critical of liberal thinkers’ efforts to convert politics into an applied ethics. They argued



that by starting from an abstract, isolated individual and their rights, liberals are unequal to the task of explaining political factors that surpass the consciousness of a single individual and play an important part in shaping citizens' political identity, such as tradition (Oakeshott), the world as an intersubjective sphere of experience (Arendt), and group identity based on political friendship (Schmitt). Arendt, Schmitt and Oakeshott contended that the nature of political experience is ungraspable from the perspective of atomistic ontology, at the center of which stands an isolated individual. They claimed that politics is unimaginable without the care for public things (*res publica*), historic narratives that transcend the wishes and opinions of a single individual, commitments to the future and past generations, as well as encounters with collective enemies that shape one's character. These phenomena can only be explained by adopting the perspective of holistic ontology. Only in this way can a person be seen as rooted, embedded, intimately related to others and developing a self-understanding that is inherently intersubjective. This does not mean that persons need to completely identify with their political community, but it is important to understand that their self-knowledge grows out of relationships with other citizens, their communal horizons, traditions and civilizational inheritance. As a person is not and cannot be a *tabula rasa*, politics is misrepresented if it is interpreted through the lens of social contract, the veil of ignorance or similar hypothetical constructions. Humans are not only cold, rational egoists, but also parents, children, members of community, citizens and patriots. It is significant as a moral fact as well. Arendt's, Oakeshott's and Schmitt's supposition is that development of political friendship and the courage to leave the apolitical private realm is ethically consequential as it cultivates important moral qualities and virtues, such as responsibility, trust, solidarity, duty and sacrifice. Atomistic ontology, which grounds liberal ethics and politics, lacks intellectual resources to understand and explain the relevance of these moral dispositions for a flourishing human life.

The critique of instrumental rationality is an essential part of Arendt's, Oakeshott's and Schmitt's political philosophies. It is integral to their sweeping critiques of modernity. In their view, the loss of understanding of politics as an autonomous and unique form of human experience accelerated concurrently with the rapidly growing influence of natural sciences. Based on it, modern philosophers tried to reconstruct politics and morality on the premises of scientific worldview. In reaction to this, Arendt, Oakeshott and Schmitt critically engaged with several strands of modernist thought which construed politics instrumentally. First, liberal theories which subordinate politics to abstract rules of liberal ethics (Kant, Mill, Benjamin Constant, early Rawls, Dworkin). Second, liberal, utilitarian and positivist theories that derive political ideals from scientific, economic, or technical principles (Jeremy Bentham, Adam Smith, Henri de Saint-Simon, Marquis de Condorcet, Auguste Comte). Schmitt identified that liberal thinkers tend to flee from politics into two spheres, economics and ethics, so it is not surprising that he (as well as Arendt and Oakeshott) criticised both economic and ethical versions of liberalism (Schmitt 2007: 69-79). Third, Marxist, socialist, and communist theories which regard politics as a reflection of the societal forces of production and a mechanism of satisfaction of material needs (Karl Marx, Charles Fourier, Robert Owen, Michail Bakunin). Such a wide array of intellectual opponents reveals that Arendt, Oakeshott and Schmitt reject not just one or another ideological position, but the very modern logic of understanding the relationship between politics and morality, that starts not from the examination of political experience, but from theoretical abstractions.

The repudiation of instrumental rationality is evident in the fact that Arendt, Oakeshott and Schmitt rejected the various attempts to reduce politics to social, economic, scientific and technical principles. They argued that such a reduction undermines the possibility to recognise politics as an autonomous and unique form of human experience. They loathed Friedrich Engels' expectation that one day politics would become the "administration of things", as well as dreams of the

advocates of free market that societies would eventually self-regulate without any involvement of political will. Arendt, Oakeshott and Schmitt dismissed Enlightenment thinkers' belief that moral and political progress may be achieved by reinterpreting politics and morality on a scientific basis. As a result, they were skeptical of the modern processes of technocratisation and bureaucratisation which discouraged citizens from actively engaging in public affairs.

It is important to note that the critique of Enlightenment and instrumental rationality has an ethical side to it. In Arendt's, Schmitt's and Oakeshott's view, reduction of political experience to economic, technical, and scientific rules entrench an instrumental view of a human being. Economics, technology, and science are based on a deterministic outlook which does not qualitatively distinguish human beings from things, animals or numbers: they are controlled and manipulated in the same way. Arendt, Schmitt and Oakeshott opposed determinism and tried to view humans as capable of transcending their external determinants and as beings that are essentially different from things, animals and machines. When a person is seen only as an animal or an exemplar of the species, it becomes difficult to explain the specificity of his/her self-understanding as a moral and political being. In this way, defense of political autonomy consists not only of defending an innate worth of politics, but also defending the moral status of a human being.

Interestingly, the main line of critique of Arendt's, Oakeshott's and Schmitt's interpreters is the apparent "amoralism", "nihilism" or "relativism" of their political conceptions. This type of charge is usually formulated by the advocates of liberal ethics or left-leaning thinkers (Benhabib 2000; Kateb 2001; Wolin 1976; Pitkin 1976; Scheuerman 1993; Wolin 1990). Their working assumption is that politics must be controlled by a non-political method or rule: abstract moral principle, knowledge of the laws of nature or technical expertise. Identifying the lack of such pre-political or supra-political methods, these critics contend that Arendt's, Oakeshott's and Schmitt's conceptions of politics are devoid of any moral grounding

and pave the way for the “anything goes” relativism (Habermas 1989; Holmes 1996; Crick 1963; Jay 1978; Benhabib 2001). We maintain that this interpretation is too one-sided. Indeed, Arendt, Schmitt and Oakeshott defend the autonomy of politics from depoliticising moral and technical discourses, but their analyses of the structures of political experience uncover *the moral sources inherent in politics itself*. Their investigations show that moral normativity of politics can be discerned while examining the inner structure of political action. In order to do this, one need not withdraw from politics into the realm of pure theory. Politics does not need to bend before morality because it is innately and essentially related to it. When investigating politics as a unique form of human experience, we inevitably raise ethical questions about the aims and ends of human life, moral dispositions that strengthen or weaken one’s character, the nature of human relationships and the moral qualities necessary for a flourishing human existence. In politics, we develop our moral dispositions not because moral philosophers demand us to do so, but because it is required by the very logic of political action.

### **Method: the conception of three levels of analysis**

The relationship between morality and politics can be fruitfully interpreted by employing a conception of three levels of analysis. The first level is ontological. It investigates the fundamental presuppositions and structures of human experience, especially those relating to intersubjective relationships. Ontological analysis identifies conditions, possibilities, and limits of practical human experience. For instance, in order to be able to act politically at all, we must understand ourselves and others as free and independent subjects. If we were only causally determined beings, we could not talk about responsible choices, decisions, or new political initiatives. The object of the second level of analysis is practical politics, in which citizens deal with everyday political issues. It comprises citizens’ practical reasonings, opinions, expectations, worldviews, and strategic

calculations. The third level is theoretical. On this level various theorists, philosophers, moralists, ideologues, and scientists endeavour to deduct abstract rules and establish universal truths which would then control the behaviour of citizens from above. Theoretical analysis begins not from the nature of the object one aspires to explore (in this case, politics and morality), but from the construction of prepolitical standards and rules which would later ensure the control of the examined object. For instance, the *a priori* conceived doctrine of universal human right is seen as a tool of control of political processes, as well as a criterion that allows one to criticise various political practices that conform to or stray from this doctrine. Politics as a field of human activity is hereby directly derived from abstract ethical theories or norms. The innate worth of politics, apart from references to the preestablished human rights doctrine, remains obscure.

In this dissertation, the main problem is the conflict between the theoretical and the ontological levels of analysis. The second, political level is underdeveloped for a specific reason. Arendt, Schmitt and Oakeshott try to restore the trust in the political actions and decisions of citizens themselves. Criticising the advocates of the theoretical level for their arrogant intention to impose certain rules of behaviour from above, these authors defend the conditions for citizens to participate in political life and to cultivate their sense of responsibility. The defense of citizens' power of self-determination is nothing else than the defense of the autonomy of politics. Arendt, Oakeshott and Schmitt assume that the primary political agents are citizens rather than experts with specific knowledge (economists, jurists, scientists etc.). Defending citizens' political subjectivity, these philosophers leave the second (practical) level of analysis intact, trusting citizens to decide for themselves. But that is not the end of the story. Exploring the fundamental structures of political experience, these thinkers achieve a significant philosophical goal: they reveal an ontological dimension of political experience. Notably, an ontological analysis does not undermine citizens' political subjectivity (hence, political

autonomy), because this form of analysis, in contrast to the theoretical one, does not attempt to impose any substantive moral or ideological views on citizens.

The difference between theoretical and ontological approaches becomes apparent in the examination of the relationship between politics and morality. Since theoreticians distrust ordinary citizens and their moral-political opinions, they start from abstract *a priori* considerations of principles and concepts which are considered epistemically (hence also ethically) superior to the views of ordinary citizens. Theoreticians believe that when an ideal theory is applied to practice, the latter functions impeccably, like a flawless clockwork mechanism. By contrast, the advocates of an ontological approach turn attention to the moral premises that ground certain forms of political activity and structure political experience. They respect ordinary citizens' practical reason and strive to discern its philosophical and moral foundations. Examination of Arendt's, Oakeshott's and Schmitt's texts shows that the moral normativity of politics inheres in the ontological conditions of political experience that they uncover. According to Arendt, one of the key conditions of political experience is plurality, or "the fact that men, not Man inhabit the Earth", and that different men disclose different perspectives of the same world. Schmitt maintains that the criterion of all political experiences is the distinction between friend and enemy. Oakeshott argues that the crucial condition of all political experience is a presupposition of a free and independent person. These postulates are ontological and their affirmation in Arendt's, Schmitt's and Oakeshott's philosophies is closely associated with the duty to respect and foster those postulates. In this respect, an ontological perspective reconciles the modes of *is* and *ought to be* that are strictly separated in the modernist paradigm of thought. In other words, despite its explanatory nature, the ontological form of analysis is not morally neutral as it postulates certain moral dispositions directed towards the acknowledgement and cultivation of basic ontological conditions of political action.

Arendt, Oakeshott and Schmitt themselves did not develop the conception of three modes of analysis, but certain aspects of it have been alluded to Chantal Mouffe and Charles Taylor. Interpreting Schmitt's concept of the political and using Martin Heidegger's concepts, Mouffe distinguishes between two dimensions of political understanding: ontological and ontic (Mouffe 2005: 8-9). Ontic level comprises conventional and institutional practices which mirror the second level of practical politics in our conception, whereas the ontological level refers to deeper structures of human existence and communal identity. Similarly, Taylor makes a distinction between the levels of ontology and advocacy (Taylor 1998: 523-524). In his scheme, ontological questions touch upon the most important premises and postulates that constitute our common life, while advocacy involves conventional political or ideological views in the left-right spectrum. Taylor is right to point out that many controversies and misunderstandings in contemporary political philosophy arise from the confusion of these different forms of analysis. This confusion is clearly visible when Arendt's, Schmitt's and Oakeshott's interpreters criticise them for the apparent "amorality" or "relativism" of their conceptions of politics. Conspicuously, Taylor's and Mouffe's distinctions lack an important dimension – a third, theoretical level of analysis. Our aim is to show that misunderstandings in the explanations of the relationship of politics and morality stem from the confusion of three, rather than two levels of analysis.

### **Research aim and objectives**

The main aim of the dissertation is to demonstrate that the problem of the relationship between politics and morality can be solved by performing an ontological, rather than theoretical analysis. In order to excavate the moral sources of politics, one need not start from the construction of abstract ethical ideals or rules. The sources of moral normativity of politics reveal themselves when we conduct an ontological examination and inquire into the fundamental conditions

and presuppositions of political experience. If we switch from a theoretical to an ontological approach, the close connection between politics and morality will be established in a more substantial and convincing way. There are several advantages to an ontological perspective. First of all, it pays respect to the autonomy of politics as a specific and unique form of human activity. Second, it shows that moral normativity of politics originates in the very structure of political action. When citizens act politically, they inevitably practice some of the relevant moral qualities and capabilities. Politics does not need a moral sanction from above (theoretical discourses) to be intimately and essentially connected to morality.

The aim of the dissertation is achieved by pursuing these objectives:

1. To prove that the recognition of an inherent, ontological connection between politics and morality is hindered by the dominance of instrumental rationality and reductivism prevalent in the Western culture. First, it distorts the proper understanding of the nature of politics and undermines its autonomy, making it dependent on nonpolitical – economic, scientific, technical – principles. Second, the application of the natural scientific outlook in the realm of human affairs fosters an instrumental, manipulative attitude toward persons. It is ethically significant since the advocates of political autonomy strive to defend the conditions of citizens' liberty, self-determination and active political participation. Criticising the tendencies of technocratisation and bureaucratisation of politics, supporters of political autonomy defend the possibilities of citizens' freedom of decision and equal access to meaningful political engagements. In this way, we can discern an unambiguous ethical dimension in the critique of instrumental rationality. Notably, this critique is applied not only against scientism, Marxism, positivism and utilitarianism, but also against liberal moral theory. The reason is that a preestablished subordination of politics to abstract moral rules curtails the freedom



of nonliberal citizens, and this basic freedom is considered to be a key ontological condition of political experience.

2. To demonstrate that the modern way of explaining the relationship between politics and morality distorts the acknowledgement and understanding of political autonomy. In modernity, the prevalent type of explanation of this relationship is theoretical, according to which the meaning of politics is established prior to the start of political action, constructing a set of universal moral rules that justify and legitimise politics. The ontological form of analysis of the link between politics and morality surpasses the theoretical one, because it establishes an *intrinsic connection* between them. By investigating foundational conditions of political experience, ontological analysis acknowledges the autonomy of politics, but also finds an inner link between politics and the ontological sources of morality. In other words, the moral content of politics resides in the very logic of citizens' political participation, not before or beyond it.

## **Theses**

1. Arendt's, Oakeshott's and Schmitt's conceptions of political autonomy are inconceivable without the moral premises that constitute them. The dissociation of politics from other spheres of human life are inevitably based on a certain moral worldview. In the notions of political autonomy one can always distinguish a particular moral outlook of the world, a specific understanding of the human status and preferred forms of human relationships. Considerations of the place and meaning of politics in human life and its differences from other areas of human activity always refer us to the fundamental ethical question: how one should live? The ontological elements of political experience, such as freedom, plurality, natality and friend-enemy distinction, reveal the significance of such politically important moral capabilities as forgiveness, promise, courage, sacrifice, responsibility, solidarity, trust, and respect. These moral qualities and virtues belong

to the very structure of political experience. Their acknowledgement does not require abstract, *a priori* theoretical justification.

2. Arendt, Oakeshott and Schmitt autonomise politics not from morality *as such*, but from a specific, rationalist Enlightenment conception of morality. This conception is rejected as a depoliticising intellectual force that prevents us from appreciating the distinct, autonomous nature of politics. Politics is autonomised only from this particular understanding of morality, not from morality *per se*. Arendt, Schmitt and Oakeshott move away from the dominant theoretical, rationalist understanding of the connection between morality and politics, but that is not their last word on the matter. In place of it, they seek an alternative and propose a different, more adequate conception of this intricate relationship which would recognise and respect the distinctiveness of the ontological conditions of political experience. An ambition to completely sever links between politics and morality is unrealisable, because this very ambition is inevitably motivated by certain moral dispositions. The creation of conceptions of politics unavoidably stems from more general postulates of the nature of human life and human relationships, and directly or indirectly points toward moral virtues that are vital for the *good* life. These postulates can be adequately conceptualised only by looking at politics from within, not from an external point of view.

## THE LIST OF PUBLICATIONS

Čelutka, S. (2020). Moraliniai Arendt politikos sampratos pagrindai. *Problemos*, 97, 75-86.

Čelutka, S. (2019). Politikos prigimtis ir moralė. *Politologija*, 96, 38-59.

## CURRICULUM VITAE

Simas Čelutka is a lecturer at Vilnius University. His research interests include political philosophy, history of political thought and moral philosophy. He obtained an MA in History of Political Thought and Intellectual History at the UCL / Queen Mary, UK (2014-2015) and BA in Philosophy at Vilnius University (2010-2014). Currently, Simas works as a host of the radio talk show “Between Past and Future” at the Lithuanian National Broadcaster, which is focused on interpreting political and social phenomena from philosophical and historical perspectives. At the Institute of International Relations and Political Science, Vilnius University, he teaches an MA course on the complex relationship between morality and politics.

Vilnius University Press  
9 Saulėtekio Ave., Building III, LT-10222 Vilnius  
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Print run copies 35