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The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt
Dana Villa (ed.)
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This book officially announces Arendt's canonisation within the tradition of Western political philosophy with which she maintained an ambivalent relationship throughout her intellectual life. As one might expect, the list of contributors is impressive: Villa, Canovan, Beiner, Benhabib, Dietz, Kohn, Kateb, Euben, Taminiaux, Brunkhorst, Waldron, Wellmer, d'Entrèves, Dolan and Bernstein. This congregation of distinguished scholars lends its authority to her sanctification within High Political Theory. The companion is intended primarily for new readers and non-specialists. However, there is much to commend it also to advanced students and specialists.

The collection of essays Villa has assembled provides a fascinating introduction to the way Arendt conceived the dilemmas of twentieth century political life and, moreover, to the particular perplexities her ideas lead us into. In her doctoral study of Saint Augustine, Arendt observed that the most elucidating approach to the thought of a great thinker is to 'let the contradictions [of her texts] stand as what they are, make them understood as contradictions, and grasp what lies beneath them'. And indeed, the portrait of Arendt that emerges from these pithy interventions is that of a complex thinker who manages to somehow hold together a whole range of contradictions, tensions and unresolved dilemmas within her work. This seems to signal a shift in Arendt studies away from earlier appropriative readings which tended to emphasise only one aspect of her thought, such as her 'agonistic' or 'deliberative' tendency, while leaving other important aspects behind.

Dana Villa provides an invaluable schematic overview of the development of Arendt's political thought in his introductory essay. The rest of the book is loosely organised around this development, with sections on totalitarianism, the Holocaust, theory of action, classicism, constitutionalism and the life of the mind. The interpretative efforts of all the contributors appear to be animated by a common endeavour both to bring to light and to work through the implications of various tensions in Arendt's thought. For instance: between the need for foundation and the affirmation of contingency; between the opening up of possibility and definition through boundedness; between spontaneity

and durability; between spectator and actor; and between philosophy and politics.

While all the contributions are excellent, I will highlight a few that I consider outstanding. Most enthralling is Mary Dietz's discussion of the conspicuous exclusion and therefore saturating presence of the Holocaust as 'felt absence' in *The Human Condition* (p. 93). Dietz argues that Arendt's description of the polity as a space of appearance is an 'imagistic symbol' through which she provides a 'compelling counter-memory to the persistent spectre of the Holocaust' (p. 102). Arendt's theory of action thus offers a new beginning, a guide to lead Germans and Jews out of the 'factual territory of complicity and hatred' created by Nazi crimes (p. 102).

On a different note, George Kateb's concise restatement of his critique of Arendt's political morality remains compelling. Arendt's attempt to establish the autonomy of the political and to derive a morality inherent to this sphere of human interaction is, in part, misdirected due to her aestheticisation of action. Arendt neglects consequentialist considerations in order to free actors for the world and 'embraces moral inattentiveness' in order to secure the possibility of greatness in politics (p. 139). However, the moral restraints she places on action, which arise out of care for the world in its frailty, offer at most the 'outlines of a code for conduct' rather than a sufficient political morality (p. 143). Arendt's distinction between the moral and the political (in terms of care for the self versus care for the world) remains overdrawn and ultimately untenable since it 'threatens to efface concern for others — who are not me and are not the world — from morality' (p. 144).

Also, notable is Jeremy Waldron's discussion of Arendt's constitutional politics. In characteristically clear language, Waldron unpacks Arendtian jargon to demonstrate her careful attention to the importance of institutional and procedural arrangements. The institutional 'fences' she wants to erect create a space for politics at the same time as they set limits to the agon in political life. Especially illuminating is Waldron's discussion of Arendt's pragmatic recognition of the need for a constitutional referent to establish authority and, therefore, durability in politics. 'Respect for an established constitution does not mean treating *it* as sacrosanct and beyond change; but it means treating it as the object of change and augmentation, rather than simply purporting to *begin again* every time we suppose ourselves to have accumulated more wisdom than our ancestors' (p. 213).

Finally, Frederick Dolan's chapter sensitively explores Arendt's 'deep suspicion of and equally deep commitment to philosophy in the context of political reflection' (p. 261). The problematic relation between philosophy and politics within the Western tradition originates, for Arendt, in Plato's response to the trial and death of Socrates, which established the philosophic resentment of the world and its conditions. This was followed by withdrawal from its

affairs and the desire to substitute rule for action through the establishment of sovereignty. In a vein of argument similar to that adopted by Dietz, Dolan suggests that in the fable of Socrates as the philosopher of the polis who searches for truth in the opinions of its citizens, Arendt seeks to recover the possibility of a creative tension between philosophy and politics, between wonder and common sense. In contrast to Plato and the tradition, Socrates' 'way of being together with others is a form of political life that is faithful to both philosophic wonder and the anarchic plurality of an authentically political society' (p. 272).

Dolan's conclusions serve as an appropriate final word regarding Arendt's recent canonisation within the 'tradition' and why she is likely to occupy an uneasy though enduring presence there: 'Arendt is one of a select group of thinkers — Michel Foucault is another — who perceive that thinking and acting have become enigmatic in our time. Arendt's contribution is not to have set right the relationship between philosophy and politics, but to have shown what nourishing food for thought is to be had by reflecting on it' (p. 274).

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