

Hannah Arendt: Challenges of Pluralit.

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Hannah Arendt: Challenges of Plurality, edited by Maria Robaszkiewicz and Tobias Matzner, is a wonderful collection of essays on a central topic of Hannah Arendt's political theory—*plurality*. It appears at a time of growing interest in Arendt. And with this growing interest there is growing need for the elucidation and critique of the key concepts that enrich Arendt's writing and inform her unique account of politics. The volume delivers on both clarificatory and critical fronts.

As Linda Zerilli explains in the foreword to the collection, Arendt held plurality to be “the sufficient condition for politics” (xi). To eliminate plurality is to eliminate the possibility of politics altogether. And yet, despite its pride of place, Arendt is rarely clear about what exactly she means by the term. This lack of clarity is partly due to the fact that Arendt believed plurality ought to be treated as an ontological given, more like a key starting point or *arche* rather than an achievement or *telos*. As a result, she tended to avoid lengthy explanations and proofs, which can often get bogged down in disputation and detail. What she offers instead are some powerful, albeit vague, declarations: “Plurality is the law of the earth” (*The Life of the Mind*, 19) and “men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world” (*Human Condition*, 7).

While no doubt compelling, such statements can leave readers scratching their heads and speculating on their precise meaning. One of the primary goals of this collection, therefore, is to try clarifying and illuminating this otherwise fuzzy notion. The authors gathered here are engaged in a many-sided conversation, or *conversare*, turning the matter at hand, over and over, each in their own way, studying plurality itself from a plurality of perspectives, to eventually arrive at a clearer image. Out of this conversation, readers are offered insight into Arendt's understanding of what it means to live together with others, those who are not like us but who are nonetheless equal to us in their capacity to speak, act, and be worthy of recognition and consideration.

Though it is sometimes (mis)understood as akin to the notions of multitude and multiplicity, Robaszkiewicz and Matzner remind us that, plurality, for Arendt, is not a simple matter of being-more-than-one. Instead, plurality appears in the difficult pairing of *difference* and *equality*. There is a qualitative as well as quantitative dimension to plurality, that distinguishes it from other totalities and groupings based on notions of hierarchy and harmony. Grounding politics in this way, Arendt thus ensures that the political sphere will always be marked by ongoing tensions and conflicts, that it will forever be in a state of contingency, uncertainty, and flux. She rejects the notion, common among her philosophical forerunners, that harmony is the goal of politics. Being able to contend with this state of discordancy, without collapsing into the chaos of violent struggle, is, for Arendt, one of the central tasks of politics.

Taking this idea to heart, the authors of this collection do not settle for simple and disinterested explanations and applications of Arendt's notion of plurality and its implication. Instead, they strive to expose and engage the many challenges, problems, and difficulties, both political and philosophical, that accompany it. At times, this requires pushing back against Arendt, identifying flaws and shortcomings in her argument, trying to overcome them when possible, and parting ways when necessary.

Aptly titled, *Challenges of Plurality* makes clear to the reader just how challenging plurality can be for both the politician and the political scientist. Politics, as the coming together of distinct but equal individuals, all of whom have their own unique perspectives, values, and interests, will often make for a tense gathering, one that does not lend itself to the simple arithmetic of an accounting and ordering that is characteristic of traditional political science. As the authors of this collection show, the implications of Arendtian plurality are complex and multifaceted and deserving of slow careful examination.

In the spirit of plurality, therefore, *Hannah Arendt: Challenges of Plurality* is held together not by a harmonious vision as much as by common interest in a deeply divided issue. Readers should not expect totalizing agreement but should rather expect to find a rigorous work of what Arendt would have considered true political philosophy. As Arendt herself explains in a short, posthumously published, essay on Socrates:

If philosophers, despite their necessary estrangement from the everyday life of human affairs, were ever to arrive at a true political philosophy, they would have to make the plurality of man, out of which arises the whole realm of human affairs—in its grandeur and misery—the object of their *thaumazein*. (*The Promise of Politics*, 38-9)

This collection carries the spirit of such wonder as it explores the hidden depths of this deceptively simple concept.

After a brief foreword by Linda Zerilli and introduction by Robaszkiewicz and Matzner, the remainder of the volume is divided into four parts. Eleven chapters in total, each exploring a unique aspect of the main theme. The first three chapters are grouped under the title “Hannah Arendt and Philosophical Traditions.” The next three, “Hannah Arendt's Phenomenologies.” The next, “Political Practices—Political Judgments.” And the final section is titled, “Reflections Between Past and Future.”

The first section does an excellent job of grounding the collection by refining the Arendtian notion of plurality through an engagement with various philosophical traditions, setting it apart from other similar notions. The first essay, by Antonio Gomez Ramos, explores the tension between the concept of plurality and that of alterity or otherness. The second essay, by Jonas Holst, sets plurality apart from the opposing notion of singularity and traces a potential path from singularity to plurality using duality as the “middle term.” The third essay, by Alessandro Topa, brings Arendt together with C.S. Pierce to show how plurality can be conceived as a kind of Aristotelian *δύναμις*, a power/potential/ability of the human being.

The second section carries the discussion forward by exploring Arendt's phenomenological approach to understanding plurality. The first essay, by Aoife McInerney, brings Arendt together with Edmund Husserl to rethink the grounds for solidarity in the context of plurality, where the existence of others actively shapes the world we live in. The next essay, by Marieke Borren, brings Arendt together with Maurice

Merleau-Ponty and Judith Butler to reconsider the role of free bodily movement as a requirement and key element of political freedom in the context of plurality. Co-editor Maria Robaszkiewicz closes out the section with an essay exploring Arendt's use of the metaphors of light and darkness, which she then uses to develop a phenomenological account of the interspatial experience of migration.

What these discussions of intersubjectivity, the body, and the conditions of light and darkness offer is an enriched and tactile sense of Arendt's account of plurality and its concrete possibilities. They reveal the advances made by Arendt's thinking, as well as the limitations of it, and they attempt to show, if possible, how these limitations might be overcome.

The third section examines the impact that plurality has on the practice of politics and political judgement. The first essay, by Michael Weinman, considers the difficult challenge of legitimating leadership in the context of plurality. The second essay of the section, by Hla Hecker, explores the role of affectability in judgement in the context of plurality and uses the example of Arendt's misjudgement concerning Little Rock to show its possible challenges. Tobias Albrecht closes the third section with an essay that uses Arendtian insights into the nature of plurality and politics to help overcome the political blockages troubling the works of Theodor Adorno. Overall, the essays in this section represent the effort to confront and overcome the challenges of legitimacy, affectivity, and the impasses restricting plurality in the contemporary context of totalizing administration.

The final two essays of the collection come together under the theme "Reflections Between Past and Future." These essays, by Robert C. Kunath and Anya Topolski, return to old questions and concerns that have long troubled Arendt's readers—the Eichmann controversy and Arendt's emphasis on the secularity of the political. Kunath gives a reassessment and defence of Arendt's description of Eichmann as banal in light of critiques by Strangneth, Wolin, and others. Topolski, on the other hand, criticizes Arendt's affirmation of the secular myth and argues that her emphasis on secularity opens up an unfortunate blind spot that leads her to unwittingly perpetuate what she calls the race-religion constellation. Together, these last essays really emphasize the human side of Arendt. They acknowledge the fact that Arendt is but one voice in an ever-ongoing conversation, and they show the importance of returning time and again to go over the same ground.

Unlike similar volumes focusing on a single thinker, the essays included here do not seek to heap uncritical praise on the philosopher at the centre. In fact, not one of these eleven chapters mince words or spare criticism for the sake of protecting the public image of Arendt. She is not presented as a singular genius with a complete and totalizing vision of politics, but rather as an imperfect human being with a compelling but flawed outlook, someone whose thoughts and actions mattered, but who was not and never intended to be someone with the final say. In this way, we are reminded that the condition of plurality is one that calls for honest humility and the recognition of our individual limitations.

Two minor critical points could be made. First, the subtitles of the sections might have been more harmonized to help unify the collection. Second, it would have been helpful for the first essay in the collection to be one of pure exposition, offering a basic and non-

partisan overview of the debates on Arendt and plurality to orient the reader and provide a solid grounding for the rest of the collection. That said, I think the foreword and the introduction do a good job of this.

All considered, *Hannah Arendt: Challenges of Plurality* is exceedingly relevant to our time, as the challenges of plurality continue to be exposed as much more complex, concrete, and consequential than previously imagined. As a result, there is an intense and growing focus, across nearly all fields of study, on the questions that these challenges pose. The insight gained from this study on Arendt's understanding of plurality, its strengths, and weaknesses, is clearly needed now more than ever.

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