

The Bloomsbury Companion to Arendt, edited by Peter Gratton and Yasemin Sari

Book review: The Bloomsbury Companion to Arendt, edited by Peter Gratton and Yasemin Sari (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 688 pp, \$154 (Hardback) / \$138 (PDF).

The work of Hannah Arendt (1906–1975) is notoriously difficult to categorize within a specific school of thought or academic discipline. Was she a philosopher? A political theorist? Both? Arendt identified herself as a political theorist, not because her writings lacked philosophical content, but rather on account of the skepticism she expressed toward the established philosophical tradition. Within this tradition, politics was considered inferior to philosophy and thus unsuitable as a subject for philosophical inquiry. Arendt's detachment from pure philosophy also stemmed from her personal experiences with friends such as Heidegger who, despite being highly esteemed philosophers, supported the Nazi regime in Germany. In a 1964 television interview with journalist Günter Gaus, Arendt attributes their failure in part to being trapped by their own ideas. Arendt's stance thus emphasizes the interplay between thought and personal experience. In the same interview, she states, "I don't think any thought process is possible without personal experience. That is, every thought is an afterthought, a reflection on some matter or event." Arendt's work is reflective of her personal experience of the Nazi rise to power, the horrors of World War II and the Holocaust, statelessness, migration, and radically different political regimes. Her definition of thinking, in contrast to that of specialized academic philosophers focusing on specific topics, positions her as one of the twentieth century's most original thinkers.

The impact of Arendt's personal circumstances – 18 years as a refugee and stateless person – is traceable in some of her works, but, despite her background, she also encapsulates the experience of an individual as such in the modern world. This is evident in one of her most fundamental works, *The Human Condition* (1958), which assesses the state of humanity by focusing on different types of human activities. Arendt employs philosophy not only to comprehend phenomena beyond her firsthand experience but also to explore their broader implications.

Arendt lived through a tumultuous period in history, marked by political and moral upheavals. Her diverse body of work, which loosely follows her concept of action, reveals who she was and how these events shaped her thought. Regardless of whether one agrees or disagrees with Arendt's ideas, the growing interest in her philosophical insights and her ongoing relevance position her within a circle of classic philosophers that cannot be ignored.

Arendt's importance within the field of twentieth-century philosophy is revealed by a growing scholarly interest in her work. *The Bloomsbury Companion to Arendt*, edited by Peter Gratton and Yasemin Sari, attempts to pursue this appeal by introducing different aspects of Arendt's philosophy. Sixty-seven international experts on Arendt's thought



have contributed essays, making it the most comprehensive companion to Arendt in terms of topic coverage. Unlike previous companions such as *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt* (2000) and *The Anthem Companion to Hannah Arendt* (2016), which primarily focused on Arendt's major books and associated themes such as totalitarianism, the problem of evil, and action, this book aims to be more inclusive. It covers Arendt's lesser-known texts, such as *Love and Saint Augustine*, and explores a wider range of topics.

The Bloomsbury Companion to Arendt is divided into three major sections. The first of these, titled "Sources, Influences, and Encounters," provides insights into Arendt's relationships with other philosophers and schools of thought across history, as well as with those whose work and ideas influenced her own. This section establishes the context for Arendt's thought, encompassing traditions and thinkers who played a role in shaping her ideas. Section Two on "Key Writings" introduces Arendt's essential work by discussing her nine books. The third section is titled "Themes and Topics: Ontology, Politics, and Society" and is subdivided by the themes outlined in the subheading. These subsections explore various topics within Arendt's thought, such as natality, feminism, and justice.

Although the book strives to be comprehensive, one notable shortcoming is the general brevity of the essays. With 67 essays included over 676 pages, most entries are inevitably somewhat limited in length. Consequently, the *Companion* does not fully succeed in familiarizing the reader with the state of the art, as in-depth discussions and diverse interpretations of Arendt's thoughts on various topics are lacking. Nevertheless, the essays do function as valuable starting points for those new to Arendt's work or those seeking insights on specific themes.

Despite its length, a number of topics are neglected in the *Companion*. For instance, the opening essay by Dean Hammer, "Arendt and the Roman Tradition," examines the influence of the Roman philosophical tradition on Arendt's thought. This is welcome given that less attention has been paid to it than to the Greek influence. One might then expect at some point an essay on Arendt's relationship to the Greek tradition and its philosophers, for some additional contextualization, but this is unfortunately not the case.

Such shortcomings can presumably be attributed to the editors' decision to offer a simultaneously comprehensive and concise book. Nonetheless, the book does address topics such as migration and climate change, thus demonstrating the relevance of Arendt's work in the contemporary world. The *Companion* proves to be a valuable resource for anyone hoping to gain some familiarity with Arendt's thoughts. The essays are engaging and accessible and would appeal to a wide audience owing to their topic coverage and overall accessible style.

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