



Hannah Arendt: A Very Short Introduction

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Hannah Arendt's ambition (1958, p. x) was 'to think what we are doing', not to offer theoretical solutions to our predicaments. For Arendt, political theory takes place among and not in spite of others, and once we are willing to think with her, the notorious shortcomings of her work—from tensions between her categories to the inconclusiveness of her essayistic style—might also appear as strengths of a different kind. They point to the seriousness of her attempt to recover a political mode of thinking from the ruins of a Western tradition that had always construed plurality as a problem. Against philosophers' prejudices, Arendt insisted that acting in concert with plural others meant the very substance of freedom.

In writing *Hannah Arendt: A Very Short Introduction*, Dana Villa was confronted with the unique difficulty of summarizing an approach that values 'exercises in political thought' over ready-made take-aways. Given the voluminous output of what some have called 'the Arendt industry', he had to make a novel contribution that would cut through clichés while abstaining from an original intervention that would be unfit for the book's format. In the face of these challenges, Villa strikes a balance between concision and attention to the productive ambiguities of Arendt's thought.

For newcomers, chapter 3 (pp. 38–73), which walks readers through *The Human Condition*, offers a particularly helpful guide that is likely to become a standard resource for undergraduate instruction. At a salutary distance to the dichotomy between 'the social' and 'the political', Villa's presentation of *The Human Condition* attends to how 'the advent of the economic polity' (as he parses 'the rise of the social') not only undermined *action* but also posed unprecedented challenges to 'our apparently less threatened capacities for *labor* and *work*' (p. 52, emphasis added). Villa describes Arendt's tripartite—not dichotomous—distinction between

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human activities as a lens to reveal the modern age as one of crisis: ‘the evaporation of spaces for debate and deliberation, the replacement of durable artifacts (“the work of our hands”) with rapidly devoured consumer goods, and the accelerating automation of the labor process signal profound changes to the three activities that have traditionally comprised the *vita activa*’ (p. 52). In thinking through *The Human Condition*, Villa never loses sight of the political phenomena that animate Arendt’s categories, in difference to ahistorical ‘essentialist conceptions’ (p. 55).

Hannah Arendt: A Very Short Introduction is at its strongest when Villa is writing with some agonistic verve. The book consists of five chapters: one on Arendt’s biography (pp. 1–15), followed by overviews of *Origins of Totalitarianism* (pp. 16–47), *The Human Condition* (pp. 48–73), and *On Revolution* (pp. 74–97), as well as a final chapter that combines a reading of the Eichmann trial with Arendt’s accounts of judging, thinking, and willing in *The Life of the Mind* (pp. 98–124). Throughout the slim volume, Villa is refreshingly straightforward in questioning ‘misinterpretations’ that ‘have plagued the reception of her work in Anglo-American circles. Chief among these is the image of Arendt as an unabashed Grecophile’. Her project, Villa insists, was ‘to reconsider “the human condition from the vantage point of our newest experiences and our most recent fears”’, not to glorify Periclean Athens with its ‘heroic-masculine conceptions of politics’ (p. 50).

Villa frequently pauses to note the strangeness of Arendt’s concerns—the ways in which her distinctions must rub contemporary readers the wrong way—which then serves the book’s pedagogy: generating puzzlement, only to follow up with an exchange of questions and answers. How could Arendt write about the emergence of a ‘unitary macro-subject, Society’ as a modern phenomenon if it is so ‘difficult if not impossible for most of us to talk about anything that is not strictly personal without attaching the adjective “social” to it’ (p. 50)? ‘Why would we be worried’, ‘what, beyond conceptual clarity, is at stake?’ (p. 61). ‘Can Arendt really mean what she is saying’, given how ‘wildly implausible’ and ‘foreign to the presuppositions of most of us’ her distinctions might appear (p. 67)? If Western philosophy held “‘Truth” revealed by contemplation’ in such high esteem, ‘what’s the harm in that?’ (p. 116). Villa not only dedicates large sections to Arendt’s interest in Socrates (whose name is invoked no less than twenty-six times), showing how dialogical thinking differs from the ‘worldlessness’ of Platonic Truth and modern subjectivism (pp. 104–117). He also enacts a Socratic back-and-forth as an effective device to make Arendt’s categories speak to ‘our perception of the public-political realm’ (p. 55), disclosing how the force of concepts ‘limns its horizon of value and experience’ (p. 50).

Sometimes this Socratic questioning still ends up with a philosophical slant. To be sure, Villa should be applauded for clearly setting political freedom as a collectively organized ‘activity of self-government’ apart from a liberal ‘freedom from politics’ (pp. 48, 49). Villa explicitly opposes Arendt’s emphasis on republican citizens as Jeffersonian “‘participants in the government of affairs”” to ‘the ideological identification of American freedom with the “free enterprise system” that was typical for Cold War liberals (p. 84). But if it is true that ‘the civic republican tradition has provided a robustly political counterpoint to the market- and rights-based individualism that underlies much of the liberal tradition’ (p. 50), what is more doubtful is whether Arendt can so easily be grouped with this ‘second most



influential tradition' (p. 49). If Arendt (1978, p. 211) called it 'the basic assumption' of her work, 'that the thread of tradition is broken and that we shall not be able to renew it', then republicanism is by no means exempt from this break. In Villa's account, Arendt is placed alongside Tocqueville (pp. 38, 39, 44, 45, 73, 84, 85) within a republican tradition that opposes Platonic hybris and modern mass society alike.

While this approach has merits for critiques of Grecophilia and liberalism, it occludes Arendt's debt to Walter Benjamin's perspective on the irreparable break in tradition and the 'lost treasures' of revolutionary struggles. Benjamin is mentioned only once (p. 9), in the short biography of Arendt, which as a whole is detached from the theoretical sections of the book. That is a questionable choice in itself, as it bifurcates life and work. But it is all the more unfortunate if one considers the importance of Arendt's own biographical essays, from *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewish Woman* (2022 [1957]) to *Men in Dark Times* (1968), which Villa does not discuss and only cites twice, both times in reference to Heidegger (pp. 4, 70), whose 'general approach' Arendt is said to have 'imbibe[d]' (p. 4).

The relative neglect of the 'break in tradition'—not as a retreat of metaphysics 'restricted to those who made thinking their primary business', but a 'tangible reality and perplexity for all' (Arendt, 1961, p. 14)—feeds into a regrettably depoliticized picture: one cannot help but hear relief in Villa's contentious claim that 'in her last years, Arendt turned from political theory back to "philosophy proper"' (p. 13). While Villa unpacks *The Human Condition* and *The Life of the Mind* with care and erudition, his interpretations of more immediately historical writings too often feel rushed and imprecise. The crucial chapter on the Dreyfus affair in *Origins of Totalitarianism* is condensed to a single sentence (p. 44). *On Revolution* is misconstrued as a search for 'the criterion of the relative success or failure' of the American and the French Revolution (p. 94), when Arendt wished to recover 'lost treasures' of revolutionary experience in ways that unsettle precisely this kind of historical process-thinking. Arendt's concept of power is directly thematized in one paragraph (p. 84), authority as augmentation goes unmentioned, and Arendt's critique of sovereignty is only noted in passing in a brief discussion of council democracy (pp. 94–97).

As far as the French Revolution is concerned, Villa rehearses familiar readings of 'the social question' as a problem of 'enslavement to necessity' (p. 86) without commenting on Arendt's challenge to the political theology of the nation-state. Most blatantly, such a metaphorical evocation of 'enslavement' stands in contrast to the book's silence on Arendt's views on slavery and anti-Black racism. Although Arendt herself (2013 [1964], p. 3) understood 'the race question' as 'the social question in its worst and most dangerous form', her central writings on the issue are omitted in this *Very Short Introduction*, which does not engage with *Crises of the Republic* (1972), let alone *Reflections on Little Rock* (2000 [1959]). Such side-stepping is also reflected by a list of 'further reading' (pp. 125, 126) on which the latest monograph dates back to 1996.

Hannah Arendt: A Very Short Introduction will be of much use to students of philosophy, as it charts a path into an activity of thinking for which inherited categories 'impede rather than facilitate our attempt to *understand*' (p. 17). Yet



politically minded readers will also walk away with puzzlement at the book's attempts to *not* bring parts of our world—and parts of Arendt—into view.

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