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The Self and the Selfless:

Hannah Arendt and Simone Weil on Individual Action in Dark Times

Conference Report

Queen's University , April 16-18, 2021

The Self and the Selfless: Hannah Arendt and Simone Weil on Individual Action in Dark Times was held from the 16th-18th of April 2021. Hosted by Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, Canada, the conference gathered 19 international scholars in virtual space to explore the many connections and divergences across the work of Hannah Arendt and Simone Weil. Plenary talks were given by Dr. Lissa McCullough (CSUDH), Dr. Marie Meaney (International Theological Institute), and Dr. Elvira Roncalli (Carroll College).

The conference was designed with an emphasis on dialogue. All talks were pre-recorded and uploaded to the conference website (https://www.arendtweilconference2021.com) where they will remain for at least another month for interested parties to view. Participants were asked to watch the talks and come prepared for discussion. What emerged was a generous and lively conversation oriented around the theme of individual action in dark times, something Hannah Arendt and Simone Weil understood intimately.

Born in the first decade of the twentieth century, both Arendt and Weil experienced, first-hand, the immense suffering of two world wars, the political upheaval of totalitarianism, and the unspeakable evil of the holocaust. As both Jews and women, they endured much in their time. Yet, it is perhaps also this experience that helped them to develop keen eyes capable of seeing through the dark towards hidden sources of light.

Hannah Arendt tells us that darkness falls with the loss of the public realm as a space of plurality, equality, and freedom. It is by our appearance in public that we emerge as unique *whos* to begin something new and to weave together webs of relations that give shape and meaning to our lives. Arendt implores us to work tirelessly to promote initiatives of forgiveness and uphold collective promises in order to maintain the integrity of the public realm and to safeguard against darkness. For Simone Weil, on the other hand, dark times are part of our material condition and, as such, are an inescapable aspect of human life. Dark times, she tells us, bring with them the existential force of *malheur* and affliction, revealing the staggering absurdity of existence and the absolute absence of God through the material suffering of the oppressed. Though dark times are

inevitable for Weil, we can nonetheless choose how we react to them. Through the cultivation of attention and the process of decreative self abnegation, we have the potential to live ethically even in darkness.

Despite Arendt and Weil's emphasis on the pervasive and seemingly inescapable nature of dark times, both thinkers find reason to act even (and perhaps especially) in the face of overwhelming suffering. One of the major themes of the conference, therefore, was the possibility for *hope in action* and emphasis was placed on the fact that darkness can act as a meaningful catalyst for social political actions in both Arendt and Weil.

Contributors found hope, for example, in actions that transcend violence and force to express a kind of moral power rooted in empathy and friendship (Shodjaee-Zrudlo), or in words imbued with silence that allow for the cry of the other to be heard (Rhoad). Hope also abides in the development of communities of identity, solidarity, and relationality (Hajkova, Lademacher); and in the potential to reimagine "human rights" through a critical lens that relies upon justice and not upon the state (Davis). There is hope even in moments of powerlessness when every possibility seems dark (Enns).

In order to unlock these hopeful possibilities, however, an emphasis was placed on the need to cultivate our capacity for thinking and attention. As Arendt acknowledges in her coverage of the Eichmann trial, thoughtlessness is not innocence, and the most heinous crimes can arise in the most banal circumstances. Eichmann's malfeasance springs not from an innate evil in his heart but rather from an inability or refusal to critically think for himself. Looking to the atrocities of a much earlier war, Weil notes the human refusal to pay attention and the hubris of assuming that force will also be on one's own side is evident from Homer's account of the Trojan War in *the Iliad*. When we fail to cultivate a recognition for that which is around us and beyond us as individuals, we make the mistake of assuming that we are the center of existence and thereby misread our ethical duties. Careful attention, therefore, can serve as a site of resistance (Monti). Whether we direct our attention to the poets and philosophers at the gate of literature (Panizza & Wilson); toward the inherent contradictions of existence (Owen, Thomas); or toward the dialectic sway of detachment and participation in political action (Sojer); attention can allow for action that avoids the dangers of thoughtless habit and the objectification of alterity.

Building on the theme of hope, contributors also applied the insights of Weil and Arendt to contemporary political struggles, such as the polish feminist protests (Robaszkiewicz), the refugee crisis (Ritner), and the prison abolition movement (Sokolsky-Tifft). In so doing, the often abstract and challenging ideas of these two thinkers were brought to life in a profoundly important way. Both Arendt and Weil balked at the idea of being solely "philosophers" or professional thinkers cloistered in an ivory tower. These papers and discussions recognized that Arendt and Weil were more interested in philosophical thinking that necessitated worldly ethical action and as such, they worked within those philosophical frameworks to suggest meaningful action.

Despite their similarities, however, one clear distinction between Arendt and Weil that arose in conversation was the way in which they ground their hope in action. Arendt's secular humanism, which binds the fate of the world to human action (Roncalli), is crucially divergent from Weil's spiritual approach, which rejects the individuated human will as a possible remedy to the evil of dark times (Meaney).

For Arendt, it is to humanity that we must turn for salvation. To act is to emerge from the darkness of privacy, necessity, and solitude to undergo a second birth, a spontaneous and unexpected event that offers both freedom and redemption. Human action is the "miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, 'natural' ruin" (*The Human Condition*, 247). Weil's religious approach, on the other hand, finds hope for salvation in the unlikely and unexpected emergence of grace. It is in our darkest hour, when we stand absolutely open to the cruelty of force and riddled with affliction, that we can be offered hope through grace. Here it is our internal state that grace can save from the touch of force and not our material body: "grace can prevent this touch from corrupting him, but it cannot spare him from the wound." (*The Iliad or the Poem of Force*, 214). It is through impersonal faith in the Good and self-renunciation (Calcagno) that we can prepare to be saved. Truly ethical action emerges in the void of self-negation as a matter of de-creation, or creative self-destruction. From this process one sets aside the human will, which at best hinders and worst encourages the propagation of force, in order to develop a new saintliness (McCullough).

The conference was funded by the Queen's University department of philosophy in Kingston, Ontario and was organised by Joshua Livingstone (Queen's University, PhD Candidate) and Kathryn Lawson (Queen's University, PhD Candidate).

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