

## Being-with Others in Liberal Democracies: Heidegger, Arendt and Identity Politics

Kimberly Maslin: *The Experiential Ontology of Hannah Arendt*, Lanham: Lexington Books, 2020, 211 pp.

Touching some of the most important questions in the scholarly study of Hannah Arendt's political thought, Maslin's *The Experiential Ontology of Hannah Arendt* is an attempt not only to tell the story of Arendt's debt to her teacher from the University of Marburg but to illustrate the importance of reading both thinkers for the present political situation in liberal democracies. In this way, Maslin's book takes us on a journey beyond both Heidegger and Arendt and asks us to try to think together, with others and with ourselves, the meaning of our Being through our own experience of the world.

Maslin's first three chapters establish what she calls Arendt's "experiential ontology" by illustrating how Arendt, sharing Heidegger's concerns with modernity, criticizes his inadequate philosophical solutions to the existential problems of "being-in-the-world". Accordingly, the first chapter investigates Arendt's critical view of Heidegger's thought. By examining her "Heidegger the Fox" – a short piece from her *Denktagebuch* – Maslin emphasizes some themes in Arendt's critical understanding of Heidegger's philosophical conceptualization of Being. For Maslin, therefore, whereas Arendt criticizes Heidegger for falling into his own trap of an inauthentic kind of Being – himself isolated from all others and deprived of any ability to truly be with anyone – his thought eventually drove Arendt to fully realize the meaning of loneliness, worldlessness, and the stillness of thinking. Put simply, Maslin asks to show how Arendt came to understand that authentic Being is "*Being-with* others" in plurality against Heidegger's philosophical abstractness of Being.

In the second chapter, Maslin explores how the state of rootlessness plays a significant role in both Heidegger's and Arendt's critical perception of modernity. For both thinkers, since the modern age "we are all thrown beings" (p. 19), that is, we are all detached from our history, our tradition, and our memory. According to Maslin, for both Heidegger and Arendt one's roots are to be found in "deep thinking". However, as Maslin explains, since Heidegger thinks the roots of authentic Being are to be looked at in the origin of the collective past, his concept of "deep thinking" is at once and at the same time isolated and shared by others "who look and think like" oneself thinks and looks. Arendt, on the other hand, conceptualize deep thinking differently: for her, not only each and every individual thinks differently, in such a way we could not speak of one shared essence of a people, but thinking deeply, even though it is a solitary activity, is always shared by the company of one's self. Thus, as Maslin argues, while Heidegger's "abstract categories" leave us with "unsatisfactory possibilities" for authentic Being, Arendt takes us beyond this abstractness and back to the experience of a shared world rooted in different perspectives on the various aspects of history, by which a sense of belonging is attained in the present by truly being-with others.

Focused on Arendt's biography of Rahel Varnhagen, the third chapter proceed to demonstrate the "Heideggerian nature of Arendt's" answer to the existential crisis of humanity in Modernity. In this way, Arendt's biography is not only "understood as an ontological examination of rootlessness" but as an illustration of the importance of Varnhagen's "lived experiences" for recognizing both the existential crisis of modernity and the meaning of political action (p. 45). In this chapter, then, Maslin uses Arendt's *Rahel Varnhagen* to clarify her main argument about the way Arendt developed her experiential ontology against and beyond Heidegger's abstract and detached ontology: political action – that is, being-with others in plurality, revealing reality by sharing our different experiences in the world – is necessary for authentic Being in our modern time.

Chapters four to eight offer to illustrate once more the crucial role experiential ontology plays in Arendt's thought. Thus, Maslin addresses Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism* (in chapters four, five, and six), *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (in chapter seven), and *The Human Condition* (in chapter eight). Thus, she shows how Arendt "took more seriously than did Heidegger himself one of the basic [...] precepts of his fundamental ontology", which means, as Maslin explains right away, that "[o]ne can only approach the ontological through the ontic, which is to say the nature of being can only be understood (or perhaps even taken up) through the unconcealment of some concrete aspect of one's existence as it presents itself" (p. 60).

Chapters four, five, and six, then, try to describe the way Arendt reached her novel understanding of totalitarianism. Chapters four and five aim to understand, respectively, Arendt's first and second volumes of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. According to Maslin, by assimilating Heidegger's critical idea of historicity in her interpretation of history, Arendt moved in both *Antisemitism* and *Imperialism* beyond the superficial understanding of the simple facts of history and revealed the meaning of the occurrences as they had been lived and experienced by some people (e.g., Disraeli and Lawrence). In this way, as Maslin explains in chapter six, Arendt "has undertaken an unconcealment of some concrete aspects of [...] existence" – that is, superfluosness as a kind of thrownness – that had been crystallized to the form of totalitarianism as "a system in which 'genocide was the *raison d'être*'" (p. 109). Thus, chapter six argues that in her last volume of *The Origins* Arendt leaps ahead and begins "working through the relationship between the ontic and the ontological" (p. 109).

Chapter seven takes a somewhat similar course to the three chapters that preceded it. There Maslin asks to investigate Arendt's understanding of Evil by examining her *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, specifically by looking into the stories of Eichmann himself and Anton Schmidt. For Maslin, their stories present different ways of both being-with others and with themselves in Arendt's thought: against the story of Eichmann's twofold inability being-with others and himself – neither to understand anyone nor to think what he was doing – the story of Anton Schmidt present a manner of being-with others and himself that drove him to try to act and help others. These ways of being-with, according to Maslin, shaped Arendt's normative experiential ontology and her understanding "that, ontologically speaking", under totalitarianism humanity "experienced and exhibited a manner of being in the world that was deficient in" both being-with others and with one's self (p. 128).

Theoretically speaking, chapter eight is Maslin's book culmination, as it brings her argument about Arendt's revision of Heidegger's fundamental ontology to its fullest. Here, Maslin asks not only to show how Arendt politically revolutionized Heidegger's philosophical understanding of authentic being but to argue that this revolution contribute to our understanding of democratic theory (a contribution that she examines more carefully in chapters nine and ten). Therefore, the core argument of this chapter is that upon her perception of the ontic aspects of totalitarianism Arendt obtains the meaning of the ontological state of loneliness as the anti-political experience of Being, and which against it she developed her concept of action as an "authentic connection", that is, of being-with others in a shared sphere where each of the participates appears to others in words and deeds.

Arendtian scholars will be satisfied at the end of chapter eight, as it not only offers a deeper understanding of Heidegger's influence on Arendt but it opens some crucial questions surrounding her thought. Maslin does not mention them explicitly – and in her own Arendtian way she leaves us to consider them alone – but chapters nine and ten are certainly engaging implicitly with at least two of the most interesting ones: Arendt's thought relevance to the range of political problems today and the meaning of the practice of action in Arendt's political realm. Accordingly, in these chapters, Maslin discusses the importance of Heidegger and Arendt to democratic theory by relating their thought to one of the most controversial phenomena in so-called "modern liberal democracies" – identity politics.

For this reason, in chapter nine Maslin looks into Jean-Luc Nancy's, Judith Butler's, and Adriana Cavarero's understandings of Arendt's political thought to offer different ways of being-with others: Nancy teaches us the importance of listening to the other; with Butler "*Being-with* other" becomes an ethically protective manner of performing one's own ever-changing identity; as in Cavarero action becomes silent since for being-with others means to become a listener to others telling my own story.

Using Nancy's, Butler's, and Cavarero's understandings, chapter ten moves to theorize #MeToo and thus "re-imagine democratic theory" (p. 168). This seems necessary as Maslin thinks of #MeToo as a "moment of political transformation" while she finds "the future direction of the movement [...] ambiguous" (p. 168). Nancy, Butler, and Cavarero, therefore, offer us "to move beyond the Self-Other dichotomy by taking seriously the notion of *Being-with* as a constitutive feature of *Being*" (p. 168). With those thinkers, then, Maslin's discussion leads us through some of the well-known stories of #MeToo. She does not focus her attention on the victims alone and she offers that for perceiving the full meaning of the story we must listen to all sides of it, accuser and accused; we must give a place for both if we wish to create ethical ground for acting together; we must encounter others narrating stories, even our own stories – that is the only way to understand our own identities.

Maslin's last two chapters are thought-provoking. Scholars of Arendt's political thought will find in them new directions to think why and how Arendt's action might make a difference in our shared world. For those who are less interested in Arendt's thought, however, the last two chapters will prove the importance of rethinking our current crises anew. There Maslin touches implicitly a complicated issue that seems to be

undertheorized when her discussion shows both the mutual dependency and tension between the unique identity of the individual and the shared identity of the community of people. Unfortunately, I am not sure Maslin acknowledges that enough, and I wished she had written about it more, as it seems to me she has much more to say about that issue as well as gender, feminism, identity politics, and democratic theory. After all, in her bold argument for identity politics, Maslin's compels us to think again what so many of us find to be so wrong in identity politics; she urges us to think anew the crises of liberal democracies; she, furthermore, does it smartly and eloquently. Anyone interested in political theory will find in her book an important Arendtian move to rethink not only what we are doing but what we think as well.

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