

Kathryn Lawson and Joshua Livingstone: Hannah Arendt and Simone Weil: Unprecedented Conversations

Review: Hannah Arendt and Simone Weil: Unprecedented Conversations, edited by Kathryn Lawson and Joshua Livingstone (London: Bloomsbury, 2024), 248 pp, £90.00 (hardback) / £28.99 (paperback) / £26.09 (ebook).

Hannah Arendt and Simone Weil: Unprecedented Conversations consists of twelve chapters, in which different authors compare the thought of Arendt and the thought of Weil. Each one of them does so with reference to a specific topic: power, bureaucracy, evil, violence, world, uprootedness, attention, storytelling, theatre, beauty, and the power of words. As far as I can see, nothing else than the possibility of making such comparisons holds this collection of essays together. But Arendt and Weil are similar and dissimilar enough to make such comparisons potentially fruitful.

A short reflection is enough to make these potentials evident. Arendt and Weil were born just three years apart, in 1906 and 1909 respectively. Nevertheless, the historical contexts of their writings are very different. Due to Weil's early death in 1943, her thought is placed firmly within the interwar period and in the first half of the Second World War, whereas Arendt's thought, due to her relative to Weil slow start, belongs primarily to the post-war era. Furthermore, very few of Weil's writings were intended for an academic audience, sometimes for no audience at all (since an important part of her legacy is her posthumously published notebooks), whereas Arendt, while writing in different forums, still must be said to have been part of academia. Especially the political contexts are important, for one evident similarity between Arendt and Weil is their way of philosophically reflecting on contemporary events, drawing conclusions from them that are both closely connected to these events and of obvious relevance also to us today.

To what extent does this anthology then succeed in realising these potentials? Being a collection of essays, the result is obviously mixed. I will come to the most successful contributions later in this review and start with a general description of the contributions.

As I see it, there are two reasons for comparing the thoughts of two philosophers. One reason would be in the context of a discussion of a specific issue. The two philosophers would then provide input to this discussion. In most cases, the contributors to this anthology do not structure their discussions in this way; they do not start with a question, the discussion of which Arendt and Weil could help them with, and accordingly they do not end with an independent answer to the question. Another reason for comparing two philosophers would be in the context of interpreting the thought of one of them. By placing the thought of this philosopher in an unfamiliar light we could come to see new aspects of it and come to understand it in a deeper way – and this unfamiliar light might be the thought of another philosopher. At best, this kind of comparison could shed new light on both philosophers, by letting them be seen in the light of each other. This is,

I would say, what most contributors to this anthology try to do. To what extent do they succeed?

The paradigmatic contribution to this anthology looks something like this. Starting out from a specific concept, “violence” say, the contributor in question first summarises Weil’s discussion of the topic and then Arendt’s (or vice versa), after which a relatively short concluding discussion follows. The two parts of the chapter do not as such contain anything remarkable; someone who already knows Arendt (or Weil) will not find anything new here. Are they then intended for people who do not already know Arendt? Perhaps, but reading Arendt herself would be my first advice in that case, her essay “On Violence” in the case of the topic of violence. After having read it, a paper discussing difficulties of interpretation, potential problems in Arendt’s way of approaching the issue, and so on, might be helpful. But this is not what we get in this volume. Since most of the contributors do not compare Arendt and Weil throughout their papers but present Arendt and Weil side by side, and since the concluding discussions are so short, they fail in realising the potentials comparing Arendt and Weil could have.

One, short example of what I am after would be this. As an interpreter, I must see to it that the two philosophers I compare do not talk past each other but to each other. The two philosophers might say things that superficially considered seem very similar, but the meaning of which is far removed on account of the different contexts. Or they might say things that on the face of it do not seem to have much in common, but which hide a deeper laying similarity, an implicit similarity that contradicts the explicit disagreement. In other words, the interpreter must be able to express the thought of the philosopher discussed in a different idiom than the original one. And this means that trying to come to a deeper understanding of someone else’s thought is closely related to thinking through the issue oneself, since to be able to express the thought of the philosopher discussed in a different idiom than the original one, one must be able to see the philosophical importance in it. Such substantial comparisons are mostly missing in this volume.

There are however two papers in this collection that really do manage to realise some of the potentials of comparing Arendt and Weil, the papers by Pascale Devette and Ian Rhoad. The strength of Devette’s paper is the result of the way in which she asks a distinct question of her own, concerning storytelling, specifically testimonies of suffering. This makes it possible for her not just to compare Arendt and Weil but to discuss in which ways Arendt’s and Weil’s writings can contribute to a better understanding of the problem Devette herself is occupied with. Her paper is thus an excellent example of the first reason I suggested above for comparing two philosophers.

Rhoad’s paper, by contrast, could be read as an example of the second of the two reasons I mentioned. For the power of words, the topic of his paper, is not the most obvious point of comparison when it comes to Arendt and Weil, and Rhoad’s comparison thus succeeds in finding an unfamiliar light to place Arendt and Weil in.

All in all, this volume thus shows both that comparing Arendt and Weil might be fruitful and that the possibilities of such comparisons have not yet been exhausted. From the point of Arendt scholarship, such a comparison would be important, for it would confront Arendt’s philosophy with an alternative that is similar enough to be relevant and dissimilar enough to create interesting friction. I am here primarily thinking of Weil’s

vision of politics in the light of the Good, in a religious, specifically Christian, spirit. At least on the face of it, this is obviously foreign to Arendt. An Arendtian encounter with Weil's political thought might make it possible to sharpen her criticism of such an approach or show that there are possibilities that Arendt was blind to, possibilities that would require central elements of Arendt's philosophy to be rethought. Questions such as these are only touched upon briefly in this volume and a comparison with reference to them thus still remains to be made.

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