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Benjamin Aldes Wurgaft, *Thinking in Public: Strauss, Levinas, Arendt*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016. 312 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$65.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8122-2784-8; \$27.50 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-8122-2434-4.

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Newcomers to the history of philosophy may be surprised to find that the proper relationship between philosophy and the polis, thought and politics, has been one of its central concerns. Indeed, for much of its early existence, Greek philosophy had a quasi-sacred dimension, later augmented by the coalescence of classical thought with the Roman Catholic medieval synthesis. Is it best that philosophy “goes public” with its essential business, or is philosophy the proper business of special elites with a privileged relationship to authorized power? Is the idea of the philosopher king a goal or a warning? What is the relationship between political and ethical concerns? Political and religious values or institutions?

Intellectually, the French and Russian Revolutions also had to cobble together a version of these conundrums when they were confronted with the survival of religious institutions and groups. Much of the thinking in the areas of political religion was done by post-Idealist German thinkers and by post-emancipation Jewish thinkers and scholars. It is no accident that two of the three figures Benjamin Wurgaft subjects to scrutiny in his *Thinking in Public*—Hannah Arendt (1906-75) and Leo Strauss (1899-1973)—came through the German system. Carl Schmitt, an early theorist and jurist of political religion and a Nazi fellow traveler, and Max Weber, who explored the modern relationship between religious and secular values, were two of the most important thinkers in this tradition of political religion.

In turn, both Schmitt and Weber played a central role in shaping the thought of Leo Strauss, who fled Europe to the United States via Britain not long before World War II. Strauss shared Schmitt’s deep distrust of liberalism as unwilling to take up for itself or its supporters and never accepted Weber’s objections to value-free intellectual inquiry. Hannah Arendt kept her distance from Weber’s self-conscious German nationalism, even though her mentor, Karl Jaspers, was a great admirer of his. She also read Schmitt closely and objected to his emphasis on politics as “about” power and force, friends and enemies. Still, she hardly wrote *directly* about secular as opposed to spiritual matters at all, except for St. Augustine.

The third figure, Emmanuel Levinas (1906-95), is perhaps the least well-known of Wurgaft’s three thinkers. He came from Lithuania to study philosophy at Strasbourg after World War I. In fact, French thought had a sophisticated tradition of studying the relationship between politics

and religion, society and the sacred, beginning at least with Montesquieu, continuing with Tocqueville and Durkheim, and coming down to twentieth-century figures such as Raymond Aron.[1]

Actually, what the three figures shared most clearly was a philosophical education, particularly a passionate engagement with the work of Martin Heidegger. All three were Jews, with varying degrees of religious commitment, and each had undergone the refugee-émigré experience. Strauss and Arendt had known each other in Berlin, though she fled in 1933 to Paris just after the Nazis came to power. In the U.S., Arendt and Strauss also had an uneasy personal and philosophical relationship, to say the least. Arendt thought Strauss had taken the side of the Israeli government in the Eichmann controversy in the 1960s, and their followers had very frosty relationships for years. As young thinker-scholars, Strauss and Levinas attended the famous philosophical “summit” in the spring of 1929, which involved a debate-confrontation between Heidegger and Ernst Cassirer at Davos in Switzerland, the site of Thomas Mann’s exploration of the modern cultural crisis, as depicted in *The Magic Mountain*.

Strauss considered himself a Jewish thinker, though he was not a believer as such, having chosen, as he expressed it, “Athens” over “Jerusalem.” For Strauss, philosophers should properly be concerned with the truth rather than with power as such. There were complexities in Strauss’s thought due to the emphasis he placed on the “zetetic or skeptical character of philosophy and the solitary and non-political nature of philosophical life” (p.64). Because of their otherworldliness, philosophers needed the protection of the rulers/governors of the polis. As mentioned, Arendt was a resolutely secular thinker who wrote very little explicitly about religion’s relationship to politics and certainly elevated political action above religious faith or philosophical thinking. Yet, she was obsessed throughout her intellectual career with Socrates’s life and death as it revealed the problematic relationship of philosophy and the public realm. In that respect, as Wurgaft’s analysis suggests, Arendt’s work *was* all about the relationship of politics and philosophy, the demos and the philosopher.

Still, Arendt’s major philosophical work, *The Human Condition* (1958), scarcely mentioned the religious dimension of human activity (labor, work, and action). In the American context, Arendt’s *On Revolution* (1963) failed to explore the constitutional concern with the separation of church and state or the way that church *and* state policed the boundaries between religion and politics. Surely, if “thinking in public” was ever to be expected, it would have been in the founding years of the American republic. And sure enough, *The Federalist Papers*, written as daily newspaper pieces in defense of the new Constitution, was the very quintessence of thinking about the public realm in public. Here, it should be noted that the religion vs. politics relationship in America was originally a political-institutional one—or a legal-constitutional issue—not an ontological or philosophical one.

Of all the oppositions Wurgaft explores in his demanding book, the tension between ethics and politics seems to be uppermost, but also the hardest to get straight on. Levinas, for example, developed an ethic founded on the face-to-face relationship between two figures as the site and source of the ethical. Thereafter, he seems to have spent his efforts, Wurgaft suggests, in trying to infuse ethics with a universal dimension and also to give it some sort of political, i.e., worldly, underpinnings. Leo Strauss was a nonbeliever, yet kept the faith intellectually, as it were, with the traditions of Jewish thought *and* explored the special ethical and political vision derived from the classical natural right tradition. Strauss’s commitment was to a kind of metaphysical

“legalism,” not to an ethics as such (p. 228). By way of contrast, Levinas was concerned with our copresence “not in universal rules, but rather in the singularity and vulnerability of the other” (p. 94). Like the others, Levinas was deeply suspicious of the “values of rootedness” (p. 97) and of Heidegger’s “inability to make room for the dignity of the other person” (p. 100).

As a thoroughly secular thinker, Arendt was committed to the idea that human beings were capable of action, thought, and language. Beyond that, writes Wurgaft, her “central task” was “to recover the activities of the mind from the philosophers who had enjoyed the privilege of defining them for so long, and to offer a new understanding of their worldly function” (p. 198). With her democratic vision of thinking about public matters, Arendt believed that NO nation or race, class, or ethnic group had a monopoly on this or that human activity or thought. Specifically, the capacity for moral judgement was not confined to trained ethical experts, i.e., academic philosophers. It was rather a matter of learning to “think what we are doing,” which public intellectuals and academics were no better at than anyone else. Intellectually, Levinas found the relationship between modern ethical thought and Judaism extremely difficult to work out in the period of the Eichmann trial. Then, and for several years afterwards, Arendt was viewed with deep suspicion by the Jewish communities of Europe, Israel, and the United States. Emphasizing her surviving loyalties, Wurgaft refers to Arendt’s “archaic modernist recovery of the Greek polis” (p. 249) and also her position as a kind of “Jewish Socrates” (p. 217) during and after the Eichmann trial and the publication of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963).

Leo Strauss’s CV was very similar to Arendt’s, despite the disparity among their concerns. His commitment was ultimately to the supremacy of philosophical wisdom. The distinction between wisdom and knowledge was echoed in the difference between philosophers and intellectuals. Intellectually, traditional advisors to the rulers in political matters (what Strauss called the “gentlemen”) were supposed to advise the rulers on the governing of a polis. Their ultimate purpose was to produce philosophers, not just political advisors or intellectuals. Here, Wurgaft might perhaps have paid more attention to the similarities and differences between philosophers and intellectuals, wisdom and instrumental knowledge in Strauss’s thought. Beyond that, all three figures—Strauss, Levinas, and Arendt—were deeply suspicious of the “values of rootedness” (p. 97).

For her part, Arendt shied away from an otherworldly conception of the truth and thereby modernized the classical tradition of thought. With that came her strong commitment to action and speech in public. By positing the centrality of the world in her extended sense, Arendt dropped the *metaphysical* distinction between “philosophical wisdom” and “instrumental knowledge” (p. 71), which Strauss seemed to want to retain. Arendt lacked a concept of wisdom, it might be said, but replaced it with the force of tradition. What she imagined in the collapse of tradition, according to Wurgaft, was the precondition for the modern threat of nihilism. He notes that Arendt translated and worked with the Kantian question about the compatibility of violence with the principles of revolution. “What you see here clearly is the clash between the principle according to which you should act and the principle according to which you should judge” (p. 204).

Still, Arendt’s thought has sometimes been identified with those who locate the origins of modern totalitarianism in the union of political with philosophical or religious power. But Wurgaft insists that, unlike Karl Popper, Arendt refused to locate the origins of totalitarianism in the “Platonic prejudices” of philosophers. Rather, it was related to the “breakdown of the traditional social and

political institutions” of modernity (p. 183). She always insisted that what she did was not in the tradition of the history of ideas. Rather, she contended that events took precedence in understanding the past. She also looked to Karl Jaspers’s work on communication, not Heidegger’s on Being, as “the route out of the problem of nihilism” (p. 185).

Finally, *Thinking in Public* conveys a lively and complex sense of the difficulties involved in thinking about the realm of action at any time. Wurgaft’s book is timely as well as stimulating. For one thing, it suggests that we are left with three sorts of intellectuals: the academic intellectual, the state-funded intellectual bureaucrat, and, most of all, the public intellectual. Yet, at the same time, he emphasizes the way that our three thinkers resist any easy identification of intellectual specialists with thinking about the nature of the public. Surprisingly, it is Strauss, more than Arendt or Levinas, who has been wariest of the public power of the intellectual as a type. Ironically, Strauss, with what seemed like a cult following committed to the instrumental power of ideas, could sound more skeptical about politically involved intellectuals than Arendt, who was herself decidedly ambivalent about the way intellectuals and thinkers used and abused power. Yet, she involved herself on numerous occasions in public affairs.

In the end, Wurgaft’s book offers renewed attention to the ethical, as opposed to the political, in the work of thinkers like Arendt and Levinas, and perhaps Strauss as well. Beginning roughly with the Eichmann case in the first half of the 1960s and the movements of political action and civil disobedience in the latter half of that decade in the U.S. and Germany, the eclipse of ethics under the conditions of modernity began to come under greater scrutiny. With modernity, there had been initially a reduction of ethics dictated by developments as various as the hermeneutics of suspicion (Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche), a class and historicist analysis of all moral values, and/or the positivist dismissal of ethical talk as lacking ontological or metaphysical status. Under the conditions of modernity, it has been hard to see ethics as much more than a smokescreen, a self-justifying attitude for the sake of self-interest or power.

With the loss of a foundationalist ethics, not many have followed the way Arendt defined the difference between ethics and politics.[2] For example, Arendt was impressed by the way the War Crimes trials of the postwar period forced individuals to assume responsibility for their actions. But this also meant that, for Arendt, the ethical was grounded in the individual dialogue with the self, whereas the political involved persuading others or being persuaded by others in *public* argumentation about courses of action. The problem was that political and ethical thought seemed to exclude one another. In Arendt’s terms, conscientious objection was a form of ethical, not political thinking, which suggests the difficulty in bringing together individual and group action, moral and political stances.

It is a measure of Benjamin Wurgaft’s achievement in *Thinking in Public* that he has presented an intellectually sophisticated and engaged study of three thinkers who sought to work out how to be thinkers about and in public. At the same time, he presents a much wider perspective on each of these figures than the book title indicates. In this, *Thinking in Public* delivers much more than the stated theme suggests and with that is always surprising us. This is a book we are lucky to have.

NOTES

[1] Readers should note that Wurgaft reviewed my *Arendt and America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016) in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, February 28, 2016.

[2] For a recent study of Arendt that focuses on her ethical thought, see Deirdre Lauren Aldes Mahony, *Hannah Arendt's Ethics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).

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