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The Broken Promise of Philosophy?

Review: Paulina Sosnowska,
Hannah Arendt and Martin Heidegger: Philosophy, Modernity, and Education
(Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019), 251 pages.

What is the vocation of philosophy? Should it be defined in terms of political or economic needs, or rather should philosophy autonomously establish its own goals and norms? One might say that philosophy began with questioning the place and role of philosophical thought. It remains one of its most interesting – at least for philosophers themselves – issues. This kind of question constitutes the inevitable background of every research project that concerns the problem of the task of philosophy. The book written by Paulina Sosnowska could be viewed as another attempt to answer this question, but in a truly hermeneutical manner; in other words, via the historical study of the relationship between the philosophy of Hannah Arendt and Martin Heidegger. This historical research, it should be emphasized, takes into account not only the internal, purely intellectual dynamics of Heidegger's and Arendt's thought, but includes extensive research on the important events that shaped their lives as well as their thought. Therefore, history emerges here in its complex function: as a constitutive factor determining philosophy and at the same time (at least it is true in regard to Arendt's and Heidegger's *oeuvre*) the stake; the ultimate subject of philosophical activity. Sosnowska quite convincingly presents the dynamic interrelation between historical conditions shaping Arendt's and Heidegger's thinking and the active role they both attributed to thought. However, it should be underlined that the active role of philosophy should not be understood as a sort of particular philosophical campaign, but rather as an intervention via a redescription of reality.

From the outset, Sosnowska displays the stakes of her endeavor. On the one hand, she aims at shedding light on the continuous dialogue between Arendt and Heidegger and reinterprets their main ideas as results

of their intellectual exchange; this was an exchange that very often remained somewhat secretive, rather than expressed critique or discussion. On the other, in the last chapters, she draws some general conclusions concerning the possible practical, educational function of philosophy in contemporary society that apparently has been subordinated to the economic rationality. In sum, her book combines a detailed, critical analysis of two significant figures of twentieth century philosophy that serves as a point of reference for reflection on the present-day condition of Western culture, and more particularly, on the role of contemporary universities.

What makes Sosnowska's argument compelling is the manner of its presentation, which not only utilizes historical research but discloses the more fundamental intertwining of language and philosophical ideas. As a result, the whole structure of the book reflects and develops the most significant trait of Heidegger's and Arendt's thought, that is, the recognition that every philosophical stance is profoundly indebted to a tradition, and that this dependency should be grasped and problematized on various levels. On the most superficial level, this dependency may be identified with an inherited dictionary, determining the language of current thought and thus establishing the limits of what may be said and thought. On a deeper level, we inherit not only the language but the whole structure that permeates the latter and shapes the "character" of Western culture.

However, the sedimentation of philosophical language is only a part of the dynamics of the cultural inheritance. It is complemented by the opposite process, the critical modification of that language. Therefore this critical appropriation being the core mechanism of transmission in philosophy discloses another specific trait of intellectual succession: a contradictory – at least at first sight – attitude towards the past. The attitude combines the recognition of our belonging to the past with the necessary distanciation from it.

All abovementioned elements: the acknowledgement of the significance of tradition and the propensity to overcome the latter, are present in the complex and elaborate reconstruction of Arendt's and Heidegger's *oeuvre* provided by Sosnowska. The manner in which the book is written reflects this twofold, problematic relation to the philosophical past.

Sosnowska begins her research study with an analysis of Plato's allegory of the cave which serves as an example of her philosophical theme and expresses the main problem addressed in her book (i.e., the relation between philosophy and politics); and simultaneously is a point of reference for the analysis of the Heideggerian and Arendtian thought. The history of philosophy appears here as a series of readings of the same theme; subsequent reinterpretations of the same allegory addressing the problematic relation of philosophy and politics. Sosnowska starts with a classical presentation of Plato's allegory and attempts to show the core of the Heideggerian and Arendtian stance through their rereadings of Plato. Sosnowska does not restrain her analysis to a simple presentation of Arendt's and Heidegger's interpretations of Plato's stance but interprets them as a sort of indirect discussion between them. In sum, her analysis confirms that every philosophical discussion requires the past as a necessary mediator, a kind of inevitable detour.

This perspective is strengthened by the Herderian motif of "precedence" which she finds vital for her understanding of Arendt's stance. Nonetheless, as she rightfully notices, a similar approach to history may be found in the more contemporary *oeuvres* of Foucault and Agamben. Along with the theme of an ongoing transformation of natural life into the most important political aim, seeing history as a series of precedents seems to be a common ground for Arendt and the most renowned proponents of so called biopolitical thought.

What seems to be the main goal of the book, apart from the attempt to reconstruct the Heideggerian and the Arendtian approach to the question of the bond between education and politics, is the problem of the relation between philosophy and politics. From the outset, the general perspective of the book is determined by the triad: philosophy, education and politics. Sosnowska suggests that the relation philosophy established with education was the only solution to the problematic bond between philosophy and politics. Moreover, as she suggests, this initial decision shaped the manner of apprehending politics in philosophy.

Moreover, because Western culture was founded upon a division separating the equally important but heterogeneous spheres of philosophy and politics, we are unable to unify them. Our culture oscillates between two solutions. Either the subordination of politics to philosophy or the acceptance of the superiority of politics.

One cannot argue against the fact that the conflict between philosophical reason, its inherent normativity, and the realm of political matters constitutes the central issue of contemporary reflection. Thus, it is an undeniable merit of Sosnowska's book that this problem is addressed but also is brought to the forefront of her interpretation of modernity. Yet, despite this advantage, the argument supporting the central thesis might be questioned, at least at some points.

Firstly, it must be noticed that Sosnowska's book fulfils two tasks: the first one is to provide a comprehensive analysis of Arendt's and Heidegger's philosophy, and specifically, their stance concerning the relationship of philosophy and the political sphere. The second is to exceed the frames of purely historical research and to treat the reflection on Arendt's and Heidegger's *oeuvre* as the necessary point of reference for more general reflection on the tension between philosophical reason and its bond with social life. She transgresses the sphere of her historical research by disclosing Arendt's diagnostic affinity to genealogies of modernity developed later by Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben. In other words, Sosnowska sees Arendt's thesis of a decline of politics as a harbinger of Foucault's biopolitical interpretation of modernity later adopted and developed by Agamben.

Although it is impossible to deny the thesis that the interference of social and economic life in politics constitutes the fundamental theme in Foucault's and Agamben's interpretations, there are very significant differences between these readings of modernity. Sosnowska, on many occasions, reminds that we should not see their work as a simple continuation of the theme introduced by Arendt. Yet, she omits the fundamental discrepancies in the way abovementioned authors perceive modernity.

Agamben deliberately wrote his reinterpretation of modernity as a reply to the partial character of Arendt's and Foucault's works. However, Sosnowska does not ask the fundamental question concerning the very possibility of such an interpretive combination. She instead accepts Agamben's point of view and limits her critique to some objections concerning discrepancies in his concept of contemporary power. Yet, the core problem of the coherence of Agamben's thought has not been addressed.

What seems to be strikingly absent from this book, despite its undeniable merits (mentioned earlier), is the complete omission of the central problem emerging throughout her analysis of Arendt's and Heidegger's thought, that is, the problem of truth in philosophy and specifically in the logic of politics. Sosnowska very often puts stress on Arendt's ability to grasp the uniqueness of political action and its inherent rationality. Regardless of various legitimate points, Sosnowska misses the crucial problem that might support her argument and shed new light on her thesis. Her strategic mistake was to privilege Foucault's concept of biopolitics. If she had used his late lectures from Collège de France, she would have found there a thorough analysis of the relation between philosophy and politics that might support the general conclusion of her work.

Moreover, Foucault's reflection concerning the opposition between the types of normativities characteristic of philosophy and politics might have provided a necessary link between her historical analyses and her final remarks. In the concluding chapters, Sosnowska addresses the role of contemporary universities, and according to the point of view of critical pedagogy, she criticizes a progressive subjugation of universities to market norms. This problem concerning the current transformation of this institution very often appears as the most decisive element of the diagnosis of modern societies. Suffice to mention Derrida's *University without Condition* or Brown's *Undoing the Demos* which interpret the present-day situation through the study of the inherent normativity of the university.

Sosnowska includes a chapter on the nature of thinking, or as one might say on the dignity of thinking. Still, instead of developing an argument concerning the type of normativity she finds constitutive for the univer-

sity, she uses widely accepted theses about the unique character of the university. It is very clear from her severe critique of the marketisation of higher learning that she is not a proponent of the ongoing transformation of the university. And although Sosnowska very clearly indicates that her criticism does not imply some form of nostalgia for the good old days, she does not say what she advocates for instead.

She approaches this problem via Arendt's critique of the banality of evil resulting from the domination of non-thinking. Yet, her further reflection on the condition of contemporary universities seems to be only partly connected to the general framework of her work. Perhaps the introduction of this theme, which she mentions, concerning the continuous conflict between philosophy and *polis* would provide a better opportunity to pose the problem of the role of the universities and answer the question governing her whole enterprise; that is, what is the educational promise of philosophy? For no one should doubt there is such a promise.