

Call for Papers

**The Self and the Selfless:**

**Hannah Arendt and Simone Weil on Individual Action in Dark Times**

Online Conference from Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario

Conference Dates; April 15-17, 2021

Confirmed Plenary Speakers:

Dr. Lissa McCullough, California State University, Carson, CA

and

Dr. Elvira Roncalli, Carroll College, Helena, MT

“A life without speech and without action [...] is literally dead to the world; it has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men.”

Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*

“Political parties are a marvellous mechanism which, on the national scale, ensures that not a single mind can attend to the effort of perceiving, in public affairs, what is good, what is just, what is true.”

Simone Weil, *On the Abolition of all Political Parties*

“Perhaps it was because, as women and Jews, they had always been objects of potential violence that Arendt and Weil were capable of narrating the genesis and cancerous emergence of totalitarian power with a clarity that was lacking unto others. In this sense, notwithstanding their clear differences in frame and language, they end up converging frequently in their conclusions, and, in their moments of divergence, share the same original premises.”

Roberto Esposito, *The Origin of the Political: Hannah Arendt or Simone Weil?*

2020 has been a year of turmoil and all projections suggest that 2021 will bring more of the same. Beyond the pandemic we continue to face the harsh realities of climate change, the rise of authoritarianism, and the unending affliction of racism and structural oppression. We continue to witness starvation, drought, disease, unjust imprisonment, war, and genocide across the globe. There is no shortage of suffering nor of the machinations of evil that belonged to the era of Arendt and Weil. Though such suffering stretches across communities, societies, and nations, it nonetheless places demands on human beings as individuals. We are called to act, but the

question is: what can I do as an individual? Who am I to act? What does it even mean to act? What is the source, nature, and limit of individual action? These questions, explored by Weil and Arendt, remain startlingly relevant today.

The goal of this conference is to bring together the work of Hannah Arendt and Simone Weil under the guidance of the question of individual action. Both Arendt and Weil place great emphasis on the importance of action, yet each arrives at a drastically different conclusion about its nature.

For Arendt, action takes place as the free expression of a *who* as it inserts itself into the public world. While reliant on the support of labour and work, the boundlessness of action allows us to transcend the menial aspects of life and to become fully human. Politics, as the inter-action of a plurality of equals acting alongside and together with others, is the activity by which the human condition achieves its highest form.

For Simone Weil, truly ethical action only takes place in the void of self-negation as a matter of de-creation, or creative self-destruction. One must be willing to negate the self in order to open a space for grace and goodness to enter into the world. Action, then, is not something over and above the activities of labour and work, but something which can emerge through them.

We welcome abstracts of 250-500 words that engage both or either Weil and Arendt; and their conceptions of self, action, and how to comport oneself in dark times. Please send your abstract no later than December 6, 2020 as a word document cleared of personal data/metadata for blind review to [ArendtWeil2021@gmail.com](mailto:ArendtWeil2021@gmail.com) and include a brief bio including your name, institutional affiliation, position, and areas of specialization.

If accepted, conference participants will be expected to submit their pre-recorded 30 minute talk at least one month prior to the conference and to speak at a panel on their talk alongside two other conference participants with complimentary talks.

Additionally, participants will be expected to listen to the pre-recorded talks of other participants and to be available for lively and engaged debate on those talks during the conference dates.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact Joshua Livingstone ([18jdl@queensu.ca](mailto:18jdl@queensu.ca)) or Kathryn Lawson ([16kml4@queensu.ca](mailto:16kml4@queensu.ca)) and visit the conference website: [www.ArendtWeilConference2021.com](http://www.ArendtWeilConference2021.com)